

Carlo Bonomi, *Sulla soglia della psicoanalisi. Freud e la follia infantile. (On the Threshold of Psychoanalysis. Freud and infantile Folly)*. Presentation by E. Roudinesco. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007, pp. 295, € 22,00.  
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Psychoanalysis has already completed a century of life and during this long time span its various historical, theoretical and technical aspects have been studied and explored by a great number of authors. But when it falls under the magnifying glass of a precise and cultured scholar such as Carlo Bonomi, who wrote this splendid book, our discipline opens up to unexpected and new interpretations. What do we find there “on the threshold of psychoanalysis”, that is, in the place from which the author invites us to reason from the very beginning with his title? We find the opportunity to see that Freud actually “discovered” very little in his epic work of foundation of his doctrine, so numerous were the contributions of his predecessors on which he based his work as he proceeded to give life to his thoughts and intuitions. Some of these contributions are relatively well known (for example, the concept of “Unconscious” had been already introduced by the philosopher Herbart more than fifty years before Freud used it as the stronghold of his theory), but many escape recognition by even expert readers; thus Bonomi accompanies us towards these more sophisticated items with his fascinating narrative style and methodical determination, which inspired Elisabeth Roudinesco – in her beautiful introduction – to equate him to a modern Conan Doyle.

Bonomi’s first problem was a methodological one, and the way he resolved it is most elegant, because he needed to show us how it is possible to “locate the Freudian discovery in the historical context without flattening its borders” (p.27) and how it is possible to solve the question of the relationship between psychoanalysis and common sense when choosing concepts and terms, an inevitable problem for a century-old discipline. The author manages to move with enviable equilibrium and a rare patience in the attempt to remain completely central between the risk of Freud-bashing and the danger of sanctifying him. The success of this almost surgically precise work seems to be based upon the author’s sensitivity, along with his understanding that in order to comprehend Freud “we have looked too much to the books on his desk (..) and too little to the air he breathed in the clinics he visited” (p.34). Taking advantage of his vast and well known ability as historian, Bonomi recreates the path Freud followed through these clinics and with great originality and profound realism he presents us with Freud’s movements during the fundamental period of 1885-1900, when the founding father made his most crucial theoretical choices.

The book I am describing here unfolds like a symphony in four movements, each dedicated to the historical reconstruction of events that were destined to have a key role in defining the theoretical and ideological positions and the mental and emotional states of the young Freud, ready to give birth – in those very years – to his celebrated creature. The first movement focuses on childhood, giving us a historical reconstruction of the way the many authors who studied the child, through the entire nineteenth century, portrayed him: first as a soulless, passionless creature, thus invulnerable to folly and evil; then – from the middle of the century on, following the ever-growing clinical descriptions of cases of infantile folly and of infantile suicide – as a victim of violence and abuse by adults; and finally as a naturally perverse subject. In this passage, the author manages to show us with undisputable clarity how Freud’s so-called discovery of infantile sexuality should be permanently retired as a myth created by his adoring disciples, since the question of infantile sexuality (even if variously interpreted and understood) was already popular for at

least fifty years when Freud chose it as the foundation of his theories. Without a doubt, Freud must be recognized as the one who structured and organized this concept at a theoretically coherent level, transforming what was volatile and elusive in the work of other authors, into an easily detectable and definable element; but to call him “the discoverer” is too great a leap. Furthermore, and not less important, this oscillation between child as victim and child as seducer is crucial, and Freud himself is immediately entrapped and almost paralyzed by it, as he demonstrates with his own oscillation between the intention to embrace a theory of seduction and trauma (officially inaugurated in April 1896), and his distrust of his patients’ honesty in their accounts ( it is in September 1897 – just one and a half year later – that he writes to Fliess: “I don’t trust my *neurotica* any longer”).

The second movement of the text is dedicated to fear, and in these pages Bonomi does the work of a *virtuoso* with his exhaustive reconstruction of the history of the studies on masturbation, starting with when it was first “scientifically” addressed (that is, around the beginning of the XVIII century). Here we are saddened to discover that masturbation was actually reclaimed only during the sexual revolution of 1968, continuing to be condemned for more than two centuries as a social catastrophe and a disease that required drastic remedies, often surgery. From the middle of the 1800s on, a great number of doctors started suggesting specific surgical treatments to heal masturbation, including circumcision as well as a series of more or less complicated contraptions for boys, and ablation and excision of clitoris for girls. Here we find Bonomi expressing a great intuition, suggested by him from as early as the mid ‘90s and recently elaborated to the point he develops in this book: Freud was surely an active and conscious witness of these practices early on when in 1886 he spent some weeks at Adolf Baginsky’s Pediatric Clinic in Berlin, and even more so when for ten years (ten years!), from 1886 to 1896, he directed the Institute of Neurology for childhood disease opened by his colleague Kassowitz. It is impossible to think that during all this time Freud did not have contact with the question of infantile masturbation and did not witness the violent extremes which were reached in the so-called treatment of this “illness”. The thing that puzzles Bonomi and to which he never tires of calling our attention to, is the way in which Freud always sought to deny his competence in the field of infantile diseases and of treatment of children: this denial is repeatedly stated in more than one of his books (clearly an untruth) and readily confirmed by his loyal bodyguard, the terrible Ernest Jones, zealously claiming that Little Hans (1908) was the first child to be treated by Freud. For the ends of the reasoning that is a mainstay in the conception Bonomi offers in this book, we must remember that also in the case of the etiology of masturbation, as in that of infantile folly, it seems almost impossible to understand whether masturbation is the result of sexual trauma by an adult, or an evil expression of the endogenous perversion of the child.

The third movement of Bonomi’s book concentrates on reconstructing the history of how trauma was conceived by psychologists and psychiatrists, from the beginning of the nineteenth century on. Starting from a certain point, through the powerful influence of Charcot, Janet and Oppenheim, the hysterical patients were finally freed from the accusation of being fakers, and something as a “traumatic neurosis” began to be addressed. The author gives a good amount of attention to the seismic role this movement had in terms of legal medicine and the insurance system (finally leading us to the current concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the endlessly debated and unresolved question of the role that trauma plays as the basis of psychic illness); he then points out precisely another phenomenon of huge cultural and theoretical relevance, that is the paradoxical movement which led psychoanalysis to be officially accepted in the rank of medical disciplines (after many years of being banned) only when First World War erupted, allowing psychoanalytic therapy to finally become very popular thanks to its ability to cure traumas the soldiers suffered on the front lines and to read them as external and irrelevant

events that awakened another former internal trauma. And here, even in the case of trauma, we step on the same unresolved dichotomy that we already found with infantile folly and masturbation: must we consider the development of traumatic neurosis a consequence of an early violation and abuse committed by an adult seducer, or is it the invention and the manipulatory fiction of an adult patient suffering from a hidden psychopathology? It is shocking to see how ancient the roots of this discourse are, a discourse that remains open even today (consider the fact that in recent years publications on these topics have mostly served to reopen the debate on the question of trauma: Shengold and Brenneis stand out from the many authors who come to mind).

And here we are at the fourth movement of this impassioned and convincing symphony: we are at the rondo, if you will, the most brilliant and captivating part, where the crescendos and accelerandos make us dance in our seats with enthusiasm. We are now at the examination of the role of the cosmogony, that is the reconstruction of Freud's treatment of the question of myths and their relationship to the psychic structure of the individual and to psychopathology. This is the most consuming part of the book, where Bonomi lays out his most original and fertile hypothesis, even if I must say that I found it almost unforgivably limited that the author all but ignored the role of Jung in this same field and the way in which studies on mythology ignited the explosion of the deadly rivalry between Freud and Jung (to explore this other complex page in the history of psychoanalysis, *A Most Dangerous Method* by John Kerr seems to be an unsurpassable reference). So, with great elegance and true originality Bonomi tells us that Freud's interest in mythology seems to be his chosen way of handling the unresolvable ambiguity between the roles of real trauma and psychic trauma, an ambiguity that concretely and violently imposed itself on him during the course of his ten years of working with children. Bonomi feels (and I am in total agreement with him on this point) that the entire question of the death of Freud's younger brother Julius and of the role that it could have played to foster his oedipal intuition – so dear to the Freudian hagiographers – is irrelevant. What is much more credible and striking to the author, however, is that the observations Freud made in Baginsky's pediatric ward in Berlin in March 1886 and his visit to the altar of Pergamon, whose triumphant exposition had just been inaugurated at the Berlin Pergamon Museum and of which Freud – deeply moved – spoke in a letter to his then fiancé Martha, occurred in the very same days. The vision of the *Gigantomachia* represented on the altar, where the gods annihilate the giants, is suggested by Bonomi as the incubator of the concept of the primal scene and of the Oedipus complex, already shockingly evoked in Freud by the terrible images of abused children that he surely observed, perhaps even in autopsies, in the pediatric department of his Berliner colleague. The attention Freud devoted to the search for an omniexplicative anthropological hypothesis of these same mechanisms (pursued by him in *Totem and Taboo*) goes in this same direction, and even more so does his almost obsessive love for Michelangelo's Moses, that we can thus interpret as a reflex of the joy that Freud experienced at finally discovering a way to freeze order and chaos in a static balance, as in the Michelangelo statue, eternally immutable in its two halves, one aggressive and agitated, and the other neutralized and still.

Bonomi wishes to convey that this complex story seems to be the story of a long unresolved ambiguity that Freud managed to magically bring back to a coherent whole, gathering in a *unicum* more than one hundred years of history of anthropological, psychological and psychiatric thought: the ambiguity between the idea of conceptualizing the child as an innocent and defenceless victim of the violence and the abuse of a castrating and homicidal adult, and the idea of the child as a lying seducer who entices the adult to play the role of the violent agent. In the *humus* produced by this ambiguity psychoanalysis was born and in it psychoanalysis prospers, as confirmed by the fact that

Freud himself never made an ultimate decision about where to find this balance, always oscillating between the pre-eminence of the theory of seduction and trauma, and the pre-eminence of the theory of the primal fantasies (this same oscillation reflected itself on the latter history of psychoanalytic thought, considering the evolution of the Klein-Bion theory on one hand, and that of Kohutian Self-Psychology on the other). The only place where it is possible to put this ambiguity, Bonomi says, is the Unconscious. And the fundamental error of Masson (who in the '80s – inaugurating the movement that in a few years was destined to rejuvenate the theory of trauma – accused Freud of having deliberately and fearfully buried the primacy of the theory of trauma to guarantee an easier “political” future for his nascent creature) is in the opinion of Bonomi to be precisely his incapacity to understand and to tolerate this ambiguity, moving the hub of his discourse to a reductive and miserably reality-centered dimension.

Carlo Bonomi gave life to a splendid book that is not only brilliant and erudite, but also entertaining; its translation into English seems to me an auspicious and necessary operation, so it may flank the numerous contributions he has already made to international literature.

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