

## “SO IT REALLY DOES EXIST—THE SEA-SERPENT WE’VE NEVER BELIEVED IN!” FERENCZI’S INFLUENCE ON FREUD REVISITED\*

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In the last phase of his work, Ferenczi created a new language for trauma, based on the fragmentation of mental life. In the paper on “The principles of relaxation and neocatharsis,” Ferenczi reformulated the goal of analysis by proposing that “no analysis can be regarded ... as complete unless we have succeed in penetrating the traumatic material”, where the “traumatic material” was not to be sought in the neurotic reactions and adaptive solutions of the ego but in more primitive reactions, such as the psychotic turning away from reality, splitting, and fragmentation. This was exactly the material that Freud assimilated in the essay “A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis”, after the death of Ferenczi. Freud visited Athens in 1904, and the walk up to the Parthenon represented the successful coronation of his self-analysis. Actually, the hallucination turned out to be so uncanny that he never again visited Athens. In a letter to Fliess, written shortly before the meeting in Nuremberg, on January 24, 1897, Freud reported on a case history turning on a “scene about the circumcision of a girl,” who later was convincingly identified by Schur as Emma Eckstein. Did Freud have the germinal idea that Emma Eckstein’s hallucination of the penis contained the wish to overcome her trauma and the hope to have a restored genital? Is this the holy visitation, which haunted him on the Acropolis? Why did he give up the profound insight that the dreams of gigantic snakes had a traumatic origin?

**KEY WORDS:** autotomy; Emma Eckstein; genital mutilation; narcissistic split of the self; self-castration; traumatic insensitivity; Freud; Ferenczi

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### WHICH LANGUAGE FOR TRAUMA?

In the final years of his life, Ferenczi made a tremendous effort aimed at reorganizing psychoanalysis as a whole. His wide, articulate, and consistent revision was essentially based on one single factor: his hope for a less defensive and more open attitude by analysts toward the traumatized patient.

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We are by now used to saying that Ferenczi had rediscovered the theory of trauma abandoned by Freud. This, however, is not entirely correct, for it is not clear what exactly it was that Freud abandoned. According to Ferenczi, it was ultimately the patient who was abandoned. It was certainly not the trauma, which, located in a primeval past, was distanced from the patient and made the object of restless fantasizing by highlighting the brutality of origins. As is well known, Freud's (1915) "Phylogenetic Phantasy" became the cradle of the traumatic scenes that were then postulated as "an inherited endowment, a phylogenetic heritage" (Ferenczi, 1918, p. 97). The contents of these scenes were parental coitus, the sexual seduction of a child, and castration. As an attack on the genital organs was the common element, "castration" was implicitly assumed to be the *universal language of trauma*. After Otto Rank wrote *The trauma of birth* (1924) with the purpose of bringing trauma back to concrete life, Freud reformulated his theory by postulating castration as the synthetic *apriori* of trauma: whatever the danger experienced by the ego may be, argued Freud (1926), the unconscious represents it in the form of castration (pp. 129–130). This simple notion runs throughout the entirety of Freud's work and has a systemic and all-embracing structure impermeable to compromises: one is forced to either accept it or reject it, to remain in or outside the system.

Ferenczi was very much in. He was so "in," in fact, that it led him to work on the "Phylogenetic Phantasy" for about 10 years, slowly developing his argument into the Theory of Genitality that later became known under the name of *Thalassa* (1924). After his enormous effort, however, Ferenczi was "out." He slowly began to disidentify from Freud and to assume a less frightened and more receptive attitude toward analysis. At this point, concealed behind the masculine protest of the defiant child, he found an underlying demand for love and tenderness (Ferenczi, 1927, p. 84). After modifying the technique of psychoanalysis, a completely new universe opened up for Ferenczi, one in which the psychotic fragmentation of mental life appeared before him (Ferenczi, 1929, 1931). It ultimately led him to formulate and create a new language for trauma. In previous works (Bonomi, 1994, 1996), I have attempted to show that this was the final product of a very long and articulated process that had passed through the incorporation, working through, and reformulation of the trauma recorded in Freud's self-analysis.

### THE REFORMULATION OF THE TRAUMA OF FREUD

The first edition of *The interpretation of dreams* (1900) was almost entirely based on Freud's dreams, and the most shocking and enigmatic of these is

Freud's dream of the self-dissection of the pelvis. In it, the fragmentation of the body and a split of the self, interpreted by Freud as symbol of his self-analysis, are staged. My claim is that the traumatic content of Freud's dream was first incorporated in the dreams dreamt by Ferenczi before it was worked through emotionally into his *Theory of Genitality* (Ferenczi, 1924) and reformulated into his new language of trauma as "narcissistic split of the self." I will here present a few selected elements that will illustrate each of these phases.

### The incorporation

In November 1912, Freud had his second fainting spell in Jung's presence (Jones, 1953, p. 147). Ferenczi was so attuned to Freud's unconscious that he had managed to forecast the event in advance. Shortly afterwards, in a letter on December 9, 1912, Freud informed him that his dizzy spell had been settled self-analytically (Freud and Ferenczi, 1908–1914, pp. 440–441).

On Christmas 1912, Ferenczi had the following dream: a cut-off penis, horribly mutilated but firmly and fully erect, was brought in on a breakfast tray. The dream was reported to Freud in a very long letter on December 26, 1912, which began with a harsh condemnation of the idea of "mutual analysis" and included Ferenczi's demand to enter analysis with the master. "Everyone," he wrote, "must be able to tolerate an authority over himself." Ferenczi quickly proceeded to recognize Freud as "the only one who can permit himself to do without an analyst." "Despite all the deficiencies of self-analysis," he added, "we have to expect of you the ability to keep your symptoms in check" (Freud and Ferenczi, 1908–1914, pp. 449–455).

The dream was presented by Ferenczi to Freud as a visible sign of subjugation. However, there are many elements within it that suggest that Ferenczi did not really trust Freud's ability to keep his symptoms in check, split himself in two, and further, that he represented the split by using the mark of the failure of his self-analysis — the dream of the self-dissection of the pelvis. In other words, Ferenczi's dream was not only a dream of self-castration but was also a dream *on* self-castration, to be more precise, on self-castration as a mark of the trauma memorialized in Freud's self-analysis.

The dangerous incorporation was staged in the dream that Ferenczi had experienced when he was finally accepted into analysis by Freud. Ferenczi dreamt that he had stuffed an occlusive pessary into his urethra. He was very frightened and attempted to force it back. On that occasion, he sent to Freud the analysis of the dream in the form of manuscript written for publication (Ferenczi, 1915). In it, Ferenczi managed to cast himself not in the role of the patient but of the doctor. Thus, as Falzeder (1996) notes, the article resulted in a "masterpiece of ambivalence, meta-discourse and hidden messages"

(Falzeder, 1996, p. 7) about the dissected pelvis as the symbol of Freud's self-analysis: In both dreams, "there is an operation, performed by the dreamer on the lower part of his own body, in both cases the associations link the operation with self-analysis" (p. 9).

### The emotional working through

What was the fate of the occlusive incorporation? For many years, Ferenczi was obsessed by physical wounds to genital organs. He engaged in research and published papers on this topic (Ferenczi, 1917a, b). The horrible vision of the cut-off erect penis was worked out, however, in *Thalassa*. The theory of genitality presented by Ferenczi in this work was eventually renamed by him *Katasztrofák*, Hungarian for "catastrophes." Ferenczi conceived the idea for this work immediately after the dream; he was, however, unable to put his thoughts down on paper for many years. Every time he tried to fix his ideas in writing, he found himself impeded by back pains, psychosomatic disturbances, and anxiety crises.

Ferenczi finally published the text containing his new theory in 1924. The central idea he presented in it is that the erect penis is the memorial of a great catastrophe that is repeated again and again through the tendency to "autotomy"—a Greek neologism which means self-dissection. I will not enter into all of the details of Ferenczi's highly speculative thesis here, suffice it to say, however, that set free from its biological shell, *Thalassa* emerges as the poetic transformation of the paralyzing vision of the cut-off erect penis and that it offers a cathartic outlet for the occlusive incorporation.

### The creation of a new language for trauma

A few years after this effort at reparation, Ferenczi created a new language for trauma. The symbol of that new language was the notion of "narcissistic split of the self" (Ferenczi, 1931). I claim that it represented Ferenczi's final interpretation of Freud's dissection of the pelvis dream. Freud, in that key and most revealing of dreams, is in fact divided and split in two and observes himself from outside without any feeling. What he sees is the split off lower part of his body completely eviscerated (Freud, 1900, p. 453). This *traumatic insensitivity* was identified by Freud as involving the "suppression of affects" and was also interpreted by him as a neurotic attempt at defense. Freud does so despite the fact that in another point in his dream book, he had described it as "the peace that has descended upon a battlefield strewn with corpses" with "no trace" being "left of the struggle which raged over it" (p. 467).

In the paper "Child analysis in the analysis of the adult," Ferenczi (1931) provided a new reading of this *traumatic insensitivity*, tracing it back to the

splitting of the self into a “suffering brutally destroyed part” and a “self-observing” part that “knows everything but feels nothing” (Ferenczi, 1931, pp. 135–136). Let me also recall here the fact that Ferenczi, in his *Clinical Diary*, not only described Freud as a narcissistic personality but also traced back his theory of castration to the disavowal of “the traumatic moment of his own castration” (Ferenczi, 1932, p. 188).

### Dragons and snakes

How did Freud react to Ferenczi’s deconstruction of the pillar on which the theory that castration is the universal language of trauma was based? Despite expressing some reservations, to which we will soon return, Freud’s initial reaction to the “new views about the traumatic fragmentation of mental life” was positive and enthusiastic (see Freud’s letter to Ferenczi dated September 16, 1930, Freud and Ferenczi, 1920–1933, pp. 399–400). Shortly thereafter, there arose the well-known conflict between the two men. It was only after Ferenczi’s death that Freud began to assimilate his views. His effort informed many of his most important works and is especially visible in the passage on trauma found in “Moses and monotheism,” where Freud speaks of sequestration and fragmentation of the ego (Freud, 1939, pp. 76–78). In this passage, Freud did not ascribe the splitting directly to trauma, but to the inability of the weakened ego to withstand the conflict between instincts and the external world; however, he partly reconsidered this point in his unfinished note on the “Splitting of the ego in the process of defence” (Freud, 1938, p. 276). In brief, despite the fact that the trauma of castration remained the pillar of his system, Freud tried to incorporate and absorb Ferenczi’s language of fragmentation within it.

Freud had previously done the same when confronted with the new views of Adler, Jung, and Rank; however, this time the system risked breaking apart, with the crisis forcing him to meditate and ponder the failure of his self-analysis. Freud did it according to his usual discrete style—that of “a great self-revealer, but also ... careful concealer” (Freud, 1930, p. 212).

In his paper on “The principles of relaxation and neocatharsis,” Ferenczi reformulated the goal of analysis by proposing that “no analysis can be regarded ... as complete unless we have succeed in penetrating the traumatic material” (Ferenczi, 1929, p. 120). According to him, the “traumatic material” was not to be sought in the neurotic reactions and adaptive solutions of the ego but in more primitive reactions, such as the psychotic turning away from reality, splitting, and fragmentation. Now, this was exactly the material that, after the death of Ferenczi, Freud chose to review in the essay “A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis” (1936). Freud carried out his task then in a narrative style elegantly adorned with metaphors; the

phenomena that he reviewed in it, however, were far from being innocuous. Ultimately, they concerned the validity of his self-analysis.

As is well known, the focal point of Freud's self-analysis was his "neurotic longing for Rome." Rome was, first of all, the symbol of the Roman Catholic nursemaid whom Freud described and fantasized as both seducing and castrating. It was by analyzing his inhibitions in the face of "Rome" that he made his great intellectual conquests. Freud finally overcame his phobia in 1901: he entered Rome and, sensing the absurdity of his neurosis, wrote to his wife on September 3: "So this is what I had been afraid of for years!" (Freud, 1873–1939). But Rome was not all: there was also Athens.

Freud first visited Athens 3 years later, in 1904. The walk up to the Parthenon represented the successful coronation of his self-analysis; yet the pleasure was spoiled by the nightmarish feeling that what he was seeing was not real. Such feelings of derealization, he explained, "arise very frequently in certain mental diseases, but they are not unknown among normal people, just as hallucinations occasionally occur in the healthy" (Freud, 1936, p. 244). Actually, the hallucination turned out to be so uncanny that Freud never returned to the Greek capital. The "incident"—as Freud called it—troubled him for the rest of his life (Freud, 1936, p. 248). The German expression was *heimgesucht*, which, according to Niederland (1969), indicated a much more painful affect such as "tormented or tortured," while, according to Bettelheim (1982), it carried a religious connotation, as *Heimsuchung* is also the Viennese term for the holy Visitation of the Virgin Mary.

This religious connotation of this uncanny incident is reflected in the initial title chosen by Freud: "Disbelief on the Acropolis." A third and broader meaning was suggested by André Haynal in the discussion that followed the presentation of this paper at the International Ferenczi's Conference, *Faces of Trauma* (Budapest, May 2012): "searching for" or coming "home" (*Heim*). This reading has the advantage of emphasizing the link between the essay on the Acropolis and Freud's final meditation on Moses, which, according to Rice (1990), was a main expression of Freud's "long journey home." If we consider that the crucial element of Freud's "family romance" was the substitution of his Jewish mother with the Roman Catholic nursemaid, we can easily recognize in the meditation on the "holy Visitation of the Virgin Mary" experienced on the Acropolis a tribute to the latter.

In the Acropolis essay, Freud's "disbelief" was conveyed with a provocative simile: it was as if, Freud wrote, while standing on the Acropolis, he had been forced to believe in something the reality of which had seemed doubtful, just as if walking beside Loch Ness the sudden sight of the famous Monster would force the startled walker to admit: "So it really does exist—the *sea-serpent* we've never believed in!" (Freud, 1936, p. 241).

Freud's meditation is extremely articulated and dense in metaphors. I will only focus here on his placing the Scottish dragon in the midst of classical Greece. Immediately after his meditation on the Acropolis, the same "dragon" would resurface in his "Analysis terminable and interminable." It would do so, tellingly enough, at the precise juncture in the text where Freud cautions against Ferenczi's belief that traumatic memories are accessible. Discussing the persistence of libidinal fixations and superstitious beliefs, he wrote: "One feels inclined to doubt sometimes whether the dragons of primaeval days are really extinct" (Freud, 1937, p. 229). Mark the wording: Freud does not say "extinct dinosaurs" or "non-existent dragons" and instead speaks of extinct dragons, blurring the distinction between the real world of dinosaurs, which is testified to by fossils, and the fantasy world of dragons. This is a dramatic way of asserting that the interplay between reality and fantasy, trauma and defenses, cannot be disentangled. It obviously manages to offer a precise response to Ferenczi. The elements that contribute to the formation of these entanglements are many. Here again I will select only a single thread.

In the work of Freud, the image of the dragon was used by him as a metaphor for the penis of the woman. In order to gain their charm, Freud argued, female children must jettison their masculine sexuality. In his paper on "The disposition to obsessional neurosis," Freud (1913) came to the conclusion that when, later in life, women age and transform into "old dragons," they regress to the illusion that they once had a penis. Note that this is the very topic that Freud (1937) addressed in "Analysis terminable and interminable": the difficulty or, rather, impossibility, of convincing a female patient to give up on the wish for a penis.

The image of the dragon epitomized the story of Freud's own libidinal fixation as well. As a young man, Freud once called his future wife Martha "Melusine": woman from the navel up and serpent from the navel down.<sup>1</sup> As a young adolescent, Freud called the object of his first infatuation *Ichtyosaura* (fish-lizard), as a child the initial moment of his sexual life was marked by the prototype of all disapproving objects of love and "prehistoric old dragons"—a reference to his seducing and castrating nursemaid.

This allows us to reach an initial conclusion: if a dragon becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of undoing the tangle between trauma and fantasy, it is because the illusion that female patients have a penis resonates with Freud's own castration anxiety. Significantly, in "Analysis terminable and interminable," Ferenczi is mentioned only once, namely, when Freud addresses the "requirement that in every successful analysis those two complexes [of penis envy and castration anxiety] must have been mastered." Freud, in that context, also took steps to point out that Ferenczi had been "asking a very great deal." The imaginary interchange that Freud carries out

with Ferenczi in "Analysis terminable and interminable" apparently ends at this point. "We often have the impression—Freud wrote—that with the wish for a penis and the masculine protest we have penetrated through all the psychological strata and have reached bedrock, and that thus our activities are at an end" (Freud, 1937, pp. 251–252). Despite Freud's declaration, his very meditation on these themes allows us to penetrate and gloss the question further.

### The great Lord Penis

Exploring "The background of Freud's 'disturbance' on the Acropolis," Max Schur felt that the element that had precipitated the experience of derealization was the letter that Fliess had sent about his priority in the discovery of persistent bisexuality and Freud's repression of what Fliess had communicated to him, this despite the fact that Freud had received the letter "only a week or so before" he "started his trip" (Schur, 1969, p. 130). Strangely enough, however, Schur failed to consider the fact that in the same letter Freud had also been reminded of the case history of a "woman who had dreams of gigantic snakes." I quote from Fliess's letter to Freud (July 26, 1904):

We talked about it for the first time in Nuremberg ... and you told me the case history of the woman who had dreams of gigantic snakes [riesigen Schlangen]. At the time you were quite impressed [*sehr betroffen*: very struck] by the idea that undercurrents in a woman might stem from the masculine part of her psyche. For this reason I was all the more puzzled by your resistance in Breslau to the assumption of bisexuality in the psyche. (Freud and Fliess, 1887–1904, p. 465)

Could this "gigantic snake" be "*the sea-serpent we've never believed in?*" Who was the phallic Dragon Lady? And why was Freud's own castration anxiety so deeply tied and entangled with the genital hallucinations of his female patient? What was it exactly that Freud "never believed" in? And, to pose yet another question, how was this case history related to the internal debate with Ferenczi on the possibility of accessing traumatic memories?

The answer to these questions may once again be found in "Analysis terminable and interminable" where, apart from Ferenczi himself, and the critique of Rank's theory of the birth trauma found in its opening chapter, Freud referred to two other significant persons during his life as an analyst.<sup>2</sup> One was Wilhelm Fliess, mentioned by Freud precisely as the one who had called his attention to the fact that undercurrents in a woman might stem from the masculine part of her psyche (Freud, 1937, p. 251), the other was Emma Eckstein, whose case history is mentioned by Freud without calling her by name (p. 222).



Emma had been in analysis with Freud during the crucial years when he was founding psychoanalysis. She had been operated on her nose by Fliess in February of 1895 and nearly bled to death as a result of his medical malpractice. Schur (1966), who was the first to disclose the incident of the botched operation, advanced the hypothesis of a connection with the dream of Irma's injection in July of 1895, the dream that precipitated Freud's self-analysis. The fact that "Analysis terminable and interminable" was in large part based on the case history of Emma Eckstein and the theories of Fliess—as though nothing else, apart from the challenges posed by Ferenczi, had occurred in the intervening 40 years—should lead us to carefully reconsider Schur's thought provoking hypothesis.

In a letter to Fliess written just shortly before the meeting in Nuremberg that took place on January 24, 1897 (Freud and Fliess, 1887–1904, p. 227), Freud wrote to Fliess to report on the case history of a patient, which turned on a "scene about the circumcision of a girl." The girl in question has been convincingly identified by Schur (1966, p. 114) as Emma Eckstein. This letter is the only place in all of Freud's work where he refers to the phallus as "the great Lord Penis." It is as if Freud was associating the dreams that his female patient had dreamt of the holy snake to her genital mutilation (Bonomi, 2013).

Here I can formulate and pose only some tentative and fragile questions. Did Freud have the creative idea that Emma Eckstein's hallucination of the penis itself contained the wish to overcome her trauma and the hope to have a restored genital? Was the holy visitation scene that haunted Freud on the Acropolis somehow related to this? If so, why did Freud give up on the profound insight that dreams of gigantic snakes might have originated as products of a traumatic origin? Why did Freud not believe what he actually saw? Why did he embrace, once again, the view by Fliess that these dreams were simply the expression of an inborn bisexual predisposition? Or, rather, did Freud split himself in two and identify with Fliess and Emma Eckstein, the first a perpetrator the other his victim?

According to the teachings of Ferenczi, in order to believe in what we see, we must first share it with someone. Now, the only person with whom Freud could share the germinal knowledge about the holy snake at that time was Fliess, but Fliess was also the man who had been responsible for repeating Eckstein's trauma. It was as such impossible for Freud to share with him his fragile and embryonic ideas. In fact, Freud apparently never revealed to Fliess that the patient who had dreamt of "gigantic snakes" had been Emma Eckstein herself, their former patient. However, by keeping the secret from his friend and "supervisor," his identification with the castrated female patient had been sequestered and locked away and thus made inaccessible to self-analysis. As staged in the paradigmatic dream of the self-dissection of

the pelvis, Freud managed to split himself into a “suffering brutally destroyed part” identified with Emma Eckstein, and a self-observing part.

Later, the psychoanalytic movement became a space where it became possible for Freud to share the shocking and disturbing visions of psychic reality. The unresolved transferences to Fliess and Eckstein, however, stood as lasting scars that prevented Freud from ever disclosing himself to another person. Among the inner circle of his followers, Ferenczi stood as Freud's most intimate colleague, the analyst whom Freud most trusted. To be sure, Ferenczi was not trusted enough to allow Freud disclose himself to him, but after his death (in 1933), Ferenczi and his ideas accompanied Freud in a wide, articulated, and consistent meditation on the origins of psychoanalysis that runs through many works that become even more illuminating if they are read from the perspective that I have attempted to delineate here.

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#### NOTES

1. See Freud's letter to Martha date June 19, 1882 (Freud, 1873–1939, pp. 7–10). See also Fried (2003, pp. 419–422), as well as the excellent treatment of the Melusine fantasy offered by Rosenberg (1978). For comments on both *Ichtyosaura* and *Melusine*, see Eissler (1978), Abraham (1982), Harrison (1988), and Doria-Medina (1991). In his excellent essay “Nakedness in myth and literature,” Rank (1913) drew attention to the Melusine saga and traced back the motive for the transformation of the lower half of the body into a serpent to the repulsion felt towards the female genitals by males at a certain times as well as to the hallucination of the woman's penis.
2. Freud also mentions Alfred Adler, crediting him for having brought the term “masculine protest” into current use.

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