

Introducing *Thalassa*ⁱ

The Book

The book that the French reader holds in his hands is one of the century's most fascinating and liberating. It does nothing less than instigate the psychoanalytic approach as a universal method of investigation that could complement the natural sciences, biology, palaeontology, medicine, or, pushing its insights far enough, even chemistry and physics. We find it difficult to believe that such an enterprise will be possible or what fruit it will bear, and so we must closely examine Ferenczi's proposal concerning the specific biological problem of the evolution of genital sexuality; the object of *Thalassa*. Reading this text is at first disconcerting, but if we persist, we gradually enter a strange and engaging universe.

On each page, unexpected evidence emerges that responds to other authors, both reconfirming insights and opening new meanings. We end up convinced, suspending our long-held beliefs and ready to join the author in an exhilarating dive into the deepest aspects of ourselves. Ferenczi confronts us with what is inscribed in our bodies, our gestures and our myths, such that biology, natural history, embryology and physiology come to life with meanings that link us to the most remote history of our species. Sometimes we are rightfully suspicious; is the net of some metaphysical seduction enclosing us? Ferenczi assures us this is not the case and that the meanings he reveals are anything but verbal sustenance designed to feed our need for unity. They are intended to work scientifically, to propose hypotheses, construct

research plans and discover new facts. What surprises us, furthermore, is that an authentic science of “first things” is also, unwittingly, poetry.

Freud’s Disciple

“An Outline of a Theory of Genitality,”ⁱⁱ as *Thalassa* was first titled, claims strict adherence to Freudian orthodoxy. Sándor Ferenczi, the expert psychiatrist of the Budapest Assize Court, was Freud’s faithful friend, companion and disciple. He bonded with the founder of psychoanalysis in 1906 and assimilated his doctrine with prodigious speed, publishing paper after paper of his clinical and theoretical work. Alongside his mentor, Ferenczi founded the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) and devoted his enthusiasm and creative spirit to the psychoanalytic cause until his death in 1933. He exerted an influence on Freud himself, and his original contributions continue to fuel post-Freudian elaborations.

Ferenczi was one of the first to be convinced by the pre-eminence of psychoanalytic research over other psychological and medical approaches, whose failures were consolidated in the enigma of hysteria. Only Freud could produce genuine insight on this matter as psychoanalytic questions discredited these modes of thought. It was necessary, however, to remain composed, and Freud recognised that modesty and discretion were needed to carefully negotiate criticism. Despite this, the impetuosity of Ferenczi’s belief too often got carried away:

For a long time, [Ferenczi writes in 1913] before Freud's psychoanalytic method came to breathe new life into them, advancement in psychology and neurological science was stagnating. Brain anatomists cut and stained thousands of specimens with unmatched patience yet found nothing new or interesting. Similarly, experimental psychologists, with a zeal worthy of a better cause, measured reaction time to the nearest thousandth of a second, but had no idea what should be done with the accumulated data. In their fanaticism, natural philosophers—the so-called materialists—refused to acknowledge psychical realities and contented themselves instead with denying the existence of the soul until an appropriate biological basis could be found. On the other side of the debate, metaphysical speculation closed its eyes to the obvious primacy of instincts in the processes of life, and approached the soul, agitated by passions, through logical conjecture. “Clinical” neurologists had already limited themselves to simply locating cerebral tumours in different brain areas, and prescribing bromides. Finally, psychiatry had exhausted itself through describing symptom clusters and examining their variation and combination. The laziness of human thinking is such that even today many researchers are keen to pursue these sterile and monotonous activities and close themselves to progress. This is in spite of Freud’s revolutionary ideas opening the whole field of psychology and psychopathology.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ferenczi’s enthusiasm for psychoanalytic doctrine knew few bounds. Where its originator was cautious of the audacity of his ideas, the successor had no such

reservations. Freud had inherited a “scientific superego” from his medical education and wanted to be accepted in this context. Is it not the case, for example, that just before the publication of *Thalassa*, he sought confirmation for his theses in biology?^{iv} In this specific argument, he explains the compulsion to repeat traumatic experience (in dreams, traumatic neuroses and the play of children) by introducing a principle that is foreign to his original vision and borrowed from biology: “the elasticity of living matter”? This was despite already fully explicating this key problem as early as 1900 in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.^v Here, psychoanalysis was based on an original theory derived from neurotic symptoms and dream symbolism, which were each considered as compromise formations mediating between a repressed desire and a repressing force. The process of symbolization is governed by the pleasure principle (and its derivative, the reality principle) and tends towards discharge and the reduction of tensions. This was a central point that there was no reason to revise. The resolution of a conflict, no matter how bad, brings relief, even if this is only partial. As a symbolic solution, the compulsion to repeat is far from being “beyond” the pleasure principle—as the later Freud would have it—and conforms to this principle instead. This is also Ferenczi’s thesis, which on this central point is closer to Freudian orthodoxy than Freud himself. More specifically, pleasure through symbolic repetition is inevitable, in the same way as ritual celebrations commemorate some enjoyable release of tension.

The disciple’s vocation is to prolong, while preserving, the thought of the master. Against Freud’s will, Ferenczi sought to protect the most fundamental and original aspect of his thought; the theory of the symbol and its indissoluble link with the pleasure principle. Pushing this to its limit, he took the first steps towards realizing

the dream of psychoanalysis as creating *the* universal science. He attempted to integrate biology and psychoanalysis like Freud never dared.

A Unique Venture: The Psychoanalysis of Origins

Can we psychoanalyse biological facts? To answer this, we first need to suspend philosophical prejudices, whether this is the naïve dualism which sees “organism” and “psyche” as separate realities and not two modes of approach, or the incomplete monisms of materialism and spirituality, which are considered dead-ends.^{vi} Instead, we must restore our understanding of the entirety of the living being’s reality. With this accomplished, phenomena such as “hysterical materialization,” which evoke a “mysterious leap from the psychic into the organic” ceases to scandalise reason.

Ferenczi deepened the investigation of these phenomena in his celebrated studies.

For him, the “expressive” phenomena of conversion hysteria and of manifest emotions in general can be reduced to their symbolic (or fantastical) use in satisfying some repressed desire inscribed in the phylogenetic possibilities of our bodies.^{vii}

Take the case of blushing in an emotionally charged situation. This superficial dilation of the facial blood vessels may symbolise the adolescent’s repressed desire for the penis. If we set aside the question of displacement from one area to another, we still need to know exactly how this desire takes the form of temporary flushing.

We can speculate that the flow of blood into the surface of the body already has a kind of *a priori* significance, especially as it effectively soothes the excitation localised through intensified exchanges. The existing desire grabs, therefore, onto the signifying means already at its disposal. That which is forbidden to conscious thought is magically realised through the language of the body in the blush. The

vessels dilate as if to accept an object and this organic fiction becomes the very symbol of the repressed desire. We thus use our bodies for symbolization, just like the artist uses his materials to create art. In each case, it is a matter of “materializing” repressed desires as if by magic. And this is possible because our bodies function from the start like a language. By symbolizing we simply give voice to the original sense of the organic units of meaning.

From here we can take the decisive step towards our original goal of extending psychoanalytic theory into biology. If our bodies speak from the beginning, foundational meanings are derived from even more fundamental symbolizations that point toward phylogenesis and the historical traumas and privations of our species. The language of organs and bodily functions would therefore be symbolic organizations that refer to ever more archaic languages. Saying this, it seems entirely logical to consider the organism as a hieroglyphic text, amassed over the history of the species, that appropriate forms of investigation would be able to decipher.^{viii} This unexpected way of looking at biological facts opens a domain of radically different but verifiable hypotheses. Thus, a new science is born: the psychoanalysis of origins or *bioanalysis*.

The Development of the Psychoanalysis of Origins

A new science is born? It is said quickly. It is perhaps only wishful thinking, a utopian dream. This is not how a new scientific domain is constituted. To build its edifice, proven tools are needed. How about psychoanalytic method? But this uses talk and free association. How can we make an organ, an animal or a palaeontological

remnant speak? The answer to this will depend upon how practicable the discipline of bioanalysis is.

Let us return for a moment to psychoanalysis. How is it done? Behind the succession of free associations (manifest contents), the analyst looks for the affective attitude that governs the sequence. This is, so to speak, its law of intelligibility. In the analytic situation, nothing can motivate these attitudes other than the revival of past experiences. The affective attitudes emerging from an analytic session carry the desires, fear, failures and conflicts (latent contents) produced over the course of an individual's history. Of course, once the latent content has been established, it merely becomes the manifest content of a deeper latent content and so on. It is as if the emotional history of the individual can be reformulated by successive steps backwards. We know how Freud produced an ontogenetic model of the emotional stages of the child (the genital, phallic, anal, oral, even the prenatal) from the abundant material of his adult patients in whom these survived. The persistence of the "child" is one of the basic assumptions of analytic work. The individual comes to understand themselves through this model; as the result of the life circumstances impacting the child over the course of maturation.

So far, we have followed Freud, but for Ferenczi it is always a question of going further; into the infancy of the species, our phylogenetic childhood. To do this, he evokes Haeckel's biogenetic law stating that, just as the analytic session repeats the sequence of the individual's history (from which we can reconstruct the corresponding ontogenetic moment), so "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny."

Appropriate reflection on the psychoanalytic session should therefore be able to lead us to the remotest antecedents in the history of living beings. It is necessary, however, to clarify that repetition is always symbolic, having both similarity and

difference from the original occurrence. The guiding question is thus twofold: what is the ancestral trauma that ontogeny repeats symbolically, and what is repressed in this symbolic repetition?

We would surely be on the right path if our guiding question did not contain an unfortunate trap; that we are witnessing a radical change in the meaning of the term “ontogenesis.” While, for Freud, this term refers to the modelling of emotional development from *inside*, the Ferenczian perspective also introduces into consideration the anatomical and physiological aspects of this development from *outside*. This objection is specious—so claims the author of *Thalassa*—since the psychic and organic are not two realities but a single one, made of symbols and meanings. Life has an essential eloquence, as we analyse on the couch. We can also add that psychoanalytic method proceeds by a continual to and fro between inside and outside, and that there is no difference in principle between the verbal action of analysis, the efforts of a paramecium confronted with an obstacle, the inflammatory reaction of tissue to chemical attack, and even the normal functioning of the cardiac muscle.

Effectively, all these vital phenomena acquire their full meaning when they are completed by this genetic dimension, seen from both inside and outside. This does not invalidate objective research which is considered integral to the psychoanalysis of origins. It is the results of this that is required in the place of associative material. *To observe facts in the manner of the classical sciences, to interpret them psychoanalytically and return to the facts through the hypotheses produced, these are the exploratory steps of bioanalysis.*

Have we arrived safely? Have we landed on the enticing shores of our new science? A reef still lies before us: anthropomorphism. Some ingenious souls stay stuck there. Anyone can see them on their wreck, discoursing on the repression of ants or the anal eroticism of honey bees. Despite mistakes, Ferenczi's bioanalysis rarely falls into these platitudes, although it is true that it advances against this same threat: the confusion between internal sense and a greater meaning projected into the world. Similarly, he will always encounter those who are too pedantic, timid or malcontent to engage with him any further. Yet it seems that the persistence of certain problems, such as the impossibility of clearly defining the relationship between the outside and the inside, objective and subjective, and internal and external sense, far from being a hindrance, is the true crux of bioanalytic research. To demand that this problem be solved in advance is like the fabled mole who declares "I will only go outside when I can see it clearly."

The Symbolic Essence of Reality

Ferenczi's biological vision, the reader must acknowledge, awakens profound and unspeakable resonances in us. Those who deny the scientific validity of *Thalassa* can still recognise in its poetry and mythology, an object for meditation. This extraordinary cosmogonic epic (why not consider it as such?) that emerges from psychoanalysis, follows creative lines of thought to produce liberating and therapeutic effects, much like folklore and religious mythologies in previous epochs. This is because it reveals that scientific and poetic truth fundamentally have the same essence. The joy and vitality of reading *Thalassa* is how it exposes the

progressive collapse of the hermetic partition that, in our ego, forbids contact between “rational” and “irrational” aspects.

Ferenczi’s accomplishment is that he makes us feel that we are not simply a collection of atoms that, through a series of coincidences, have finally united after a few billion years to form the equally contingent reign of the living and its progeny, homo sapiens. He also frees us from the need to resort to some transcendental power to account for our condition and destiny. From our atoms to our cells to our imagined end, we are, for Ferenczi, absolutely woven from symbols. These symbols carry within them their history and the sense of how they came into being. They are singular, of course, but also double-faced in that what they show hides what they once were, and what they once were, alone, reveals their reality. This account of the human condition is also an insight into the very structure of being and the symbolic coherence of the universe. The psychoanalysis of origins, therefore, is both a philosophy and a research tool. Beyond mechanistic descriptions or mystical appeals to ultimate truth, what we might call psychoanalytic pansymbolism in the wake of *Thalassa*, brings together cause and sense, body and soul, phenomena and transphenomena in a radically new form of scientific understanding. There is already at least one area in which this unifying vision of psychoanalysis is bearing fruit; psychosomatic medicine. This discipline owes everything to Ferenczi and his students.^{ix} Here, bioanalysis has found a fertile field of experimentation and therapeutic action. The new vision, however, goes beyond the framework of a single discipline, with Ferenczi seeing scope even in biochemistry. Perhaps the day is not so far away when an ingenious microphysicist will construct a theory of atomic and intra-atomic phenomena on pansymbolic considerations. For now, it is up to the philosopher to meditate on the ultimate questions that Ferenczi’s thought raises: how

is the idea of the symbol possible? What is the structure of the original symbol? Can we conceive of a topology and physiology of symbolic sets? What is the transphenomenal sense of phenomena? And so on ...

It is now time for the presenter to disappear and let the reader follow their own inspiration. May the joy of discovery accompany their every step.

N. A.

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ⁱ Nicolas Abraham's introduction prefaces the first French edition of Sandor Ferenczi's incomparable text *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*. The text I have translated is Nicolas Abraham's "*Presentation de Thalassa*," which prefaces the French edition *Thalassa: Psychanalyse des origines de la vie sexuelle*. Trans. Judith Dupont and Sylvio Samama. Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1962. All subsequent notes are Abraham's from the original text. I have given the English edition of cited books and essays where possible and have otherwise translated titles into English when appropriate.

ⁱⁱ First published as Sándor Ferenczi. *Versuch einer Genitaltheorie*. Wien: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1924.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Sándor Ferenczi. "The Origins and Disappearance of Neurotic Symptom" [in Hungarian], Budapest, 1913. Preface.

^{iv} See Sigmund Freud (1920). "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." SE XVIII, 1-64.

^v See Sigmund Freud (1900 [1899]). *The Interpretation of Dreams*. SE IV and V.

^{vi} See Sándor Ferenczi. "On the definition of introjection." *Final Contribution to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. and Trans. Michael Balint. New York, Basic Books, 1955: 316-18 (Original work published 1912).

^{vii} The quotes here are from Ferenczi's collected writing on hysteria, *Hystérie und Pathoneurosen*. Wein: Intern. Pschent. Vrlg. 1919. This has not been translated into English as a complete text, but its separate essays have. The quotes, some of which I have modified, are from Sándor Ferenczi. "The phenomena of hysterical materialization." *Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. John Rickman. London, Hogarth Press, 1951: 89-104. [Translator's note]

^{viii} These views do not necessarily imply an evolutionism of the Lamarckian type, based on the inheritance of acquired characteristics – although Ferenczi preferred this theory, which is closer to psychoanalytic thinking than the various forms of Darwinism.

^{ix} See Franz Alexander. *Psychosomatic Medicine: its Principles and Applications*. New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1950.