Translating the Psychoanalysis of Origins: Reflections on Nicolas Abraham's "Introducing *Thalassa"* and Sándor Ferenczi's Theoretical Legacy.

> …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.
>
> Nicolas Abraham, "Introducing *Thalassa*"

A reader might reasonably ask why I translate Nicolas Abraham's "Introducing *Thalassa*"? What purpose does this short essay, itself an introduction to the French translation by Judith Dupont and Sylvio Samama of Sándor Ferenczi's ground-breaking 1924 text serve now and in the annals of classic psychoanalytic literature? I will address this question by situating Abraham's commentary in relation to both Ferenczi's oeuvre and the volatile French psychoanalytical scene into which it was introduced when published in 1962. This will also demonstrate the continued relevance of its insights today. In the intertwining of Abraham's arguments with those of the work it prefaces, I particularly want to draw out how the transposition of meaning from one geographical and historical context to another reframes the impact of a text that is unashamedly polysemous and whose sense is dissipated even further through the effects of Abraham's introduction. This is ostensibly,

then, a question of translation which becomes a motif here, for not only the production of a text in a new language (my first concern), but also for the functioning of this text as it mediates ideas between different cultural registers. The notion of translation also provides a further benefit as an analogue for understanding the descriptions of the psyche that emerge, at the level of content, from this complex interaction.

The task of translation is never neutral, and in my rendering here of Abraham's text is drawn many fraught theoretical, personal and political elements. Before I can even begin to reflect on my contribution to this signifying process-probably its least interesting aspect-the question of the proper meaning(s) of *Thalassa,* as this is determined by and impacts on its first psychoanalytic audience (including Freud), and all subsequent and differently situated readers, is intrinsically woven into Abraham's introduction. *Thalassa* is a text whose construction is already complicated from the outset, provoking Freud to describe it as "perhaps the boldest application of psycho-analysis that was ever attempted" ("Sándor Ferenczi," 228). Its notions push the construction of the psychological subject back into the furthest reaches of a biological past, but more than this, it exemplifies a distinctive style of theoretical writing. *Thalassa* epitomises what Martin Stanton describes as the "unique narrative space" (77) of psychoanalytic speculation, where different levels of explanation-phenomenological, biological, psychological-complement, combine and yet disrupt each other in their always incomplete descriptions of psychical operations. Ferenczi introduces the term *utraquism* to denote this drawing upon and layering of analogies from different disciplines so that even before the question of linguistic translation, the determination of meaning often opens onto a labyrinth of assembled truths and partial knowledge.

Faced with these particular challenges, the translators of *Thalassa* had to then negotiate three languages to faithfully transpose Ferenczi's meaning into French. For the two central figures involved in this project, Abraham and Dupont, each of these languages resonated with difficult and conflicted personal associations. As Hungarian Jews, both had faced the growing antisemitism that was poisoning central Europe after the First World War. Each had fled the Nazi occupation of Hungary in 1938 to then find their families decimated by the Holocaust. The Magyar that was their mother tongue and that of Ferenczi, forms the unspoken frame of the text; a language no doubt filled with ambivalence for the everyday oppression it meted out to Jews.[i] German was *Thalassa's* language of publication and had to be engaged directly despite its foreboding and oppressive associations. It had been the lingua franca of psychanalysis in its early days but was also connected with the Hapsburg monarchy that had dominated Hungary[ii] and, of course, it was the traumatising language of Nazism that ripped through the nation's Jewish population with unparalleled violence. French, the translating language, was similarly resonant for Abraham and Dupont as it suggested a new life, but one that was divided in their early encounter between Pétainist collaboration that forced them into hiding and the resistance of Free France.[iii] Exploring the complexities of these interacting languages is not my specific aim here, as my object is Abraham's introduction and not the translation of *Thalassa*. Their intersection does, however, draw attention to the trials involved in this translating process where meaning can become disorientated and potentially re-signified not simply through transposition between languages but through the conscious and unconscious motivations that haunt the translator (a term I broaden to include Abraham as a mediator of meanings in his introduction). Translation necessarily positions the translator in a web of meanings and intentions that enshroud the transfer of sense. The impact of a psychological dynamic in this exchange can

at best be speculated on so my focus instead will be on the theoretical transformations effected as the thalassal hypothesis is moved across contexts and through Abraham as a dedicated and motivated commentator.

Abraham's debt to Ferenczi

Abraham acknowledged the influence of three masters on his work. Through his philosophical training and work in the aesthetics department of *Le Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS) in Paris, Edmund Husserl was a constant reference, as was Freud through his psychoanalytic training in the 1950s (Roudinesco, 598). It was Ferenczi, however, who exerted the greatest impact.[iv] Abraham's partner and collaborator Maria Torok acknowledges this profound connection when she places the French text of "*Présentation de Thalassa*" at the beginning of their posthumously published collection of essays *L'Écorce et le noyau* (1978), despite it being chronologically out of order in an otherwise chronological text. Torok qualifies this decision because not only does it function as an introduction to *Thalassa* but it also "constitutes at the same time an indirect preface to '*Le Symbole',"* (*L'Écorce,* 14, my trans.) Abraham's most important early text.

Abraham's introduction to *Thalassa* demonstrates a personal and cultural identification where positive affiliation towards a towering figure balances more ambivalent feelings towards the Hungary of his birth. In a conversation with Abraham's close friend René Major in 2005, he told me that following a shared road trip to Hungary that was Abraham's first visit since moving to France, he declared that the country no longer offered him anything and he did not return. Ferenczi had also suffered persistent anti-Semitism under the Habsburg and Horthy regimes in his lifetime so Abraham's association with this persecuted

yet courageous figure cements a theoretical lineage. This is a lineage, however, that is not a straightforward transposition and development of ideas. It is a translation between contexts that, like the actual translation of the text, subtly transforms the thalassal argument.

Ferenczi's legacy in France

Abraham's introducing of Ferenczi into 1960s France was against the grain of the intellectual traditions that were otherwise developing there. Ferenczi was a largely forgotten figure in a time when Jacques Lacan's "return to Freud" was dominating discussion in the psychoanalytic field. Despite this, *Thalassa* found a significant French audience, although it retained a foreignness that can be ascribed to not only Ferenczi's nationality, but also to his dissident character and the eccentric thinking he stimulated in the Budapest School of Psychoanalysis. In his lifetime, Ferenczi and the institution he founded were always in the shadow of Freud and Vienna, and often conflicted with the father's authority over theory and technical innovations.[v] Worse than this, his work was shunned following his death, largely through the insinuations of Ernest Jones, whose difficult analysis with Ferenczi, and to settle scores Freud's behalf, provoked him to describe his analyst's general dissent as a manifestation of psychosis.[vi] This consigned his work to obscurity until Michael Balint's well-known efforts to revive his legacy from the late 1940s made a limited impact in his native Hungary and brought Ferenczi to an English-speaking audience.

In France, engagement with Ferenczi's work was virtually unknown before the publication of *Thalassa*.[vii] It was not until the 1960s, firstly through a translation of "The Confusion of Tongues" by Vera Granoff and then a reflection on his position in the psychoanalytic establishment by her husband Wladimir Granoff in the 1961 article "*Ferenczi: Faux*

problème ou vrai malentendu"[viii] that the proper focus on Ferenczi's work gained momentum. Abraham and Dupont[ix] are the central figures in attempts to redress this imbalance with the publication of *Thalassa* initiating a readership and cementing a loose group of emigrant Hungarian psychoanalysts in France, which included the figures of Ilse Barande, Myriam Viliker and Eva Brabant.

In 1969, Dupont, along with colleagues Madeleine Cassanova and Bernard This, created the Journal *Le Coq-Heron* in the spirit of openness, interdisciplinarity and experimentation that, for the founders, characterised the early interventions of the Hungarian psychoanalytic tradition. This is especially so in Ferenczi's case as an individual who had always resisted the dogmatism of many orthodox positions (in psychoanalysis and wider social issues such as the legal status of homosexuality) and fought for the inclusion of psychoanalysis in the university so it could engage with a broader scope of ideas. *Le Coq-Heron* championed marginalised Hungarian psychoanalysts and provided a forum of tolerance and cross-disciplinary exchange in a French context that was riven by conflict and sectarianism among the different psychoanalytic institutions in the wake of Lacan's break from the *International Psychoanalytic Association* (IPA). Contributions were encouraged and published from orthodox analysts of the *Paris Psychoanalytic Society* (SPP), Lacanians of the *Paris Freudian School* (EFP) and the breakaway groups with more ambivalent allegiances such as the *French Psychoanalytic Association* (AFP) and *The Fourth Group* (OPLF). Analysts involved with *Le Coq-Heron* continued to translate the work of Ferenczi and other significant Hungarian texts and many contend that it was Dupont's editing of his *Clinical Diaries* in 1985 (in French and 1988 in English) that finally established his positive reputation in the psychoanalytic world and beyond.[x]

Abraham in French psychoanalysis

Abraham's introduction is important as a document in this history, especially as it was his acquaintance with Gérard Mendel at *Éditions Payot,* that allowed *Thalassa* (and later translations of Ferenczi) to be published in the first place. Its impact, however, is not restricted to this. Like his master Ferenczi, Abraham was a consummate nonconformist, whose life and theory refused the comfort of rigid positioning. He was marginalised in his lifetime by his member institution, the SPP, who refused him full titular membership because of an intervention by his analyst Bela Grunberger.[xi] His work was similarly rejected by Lacan who, commenting on the publication of *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* that Abraham wrote with Torok suggested "in the drama of insanity, this is an extreme" (Roudinesco, 600). There is, however, something in Abraham's side-lining that is part of his irrevocable personal attitude towards institutional and theoretical dogma; an attitude one suspects that was consciously or unconsciously cultivated. Even his reading of Ferenczi resists assimilation to an orthodoxy. To this day, the re-appropriation of Ferenczi's name and legacy in Hungary (centred around the journal *Imágó Budapest*), the renewed focus on his work in the British Psychoanalytical Society (leading to the inclusion of his archive in the Freud Museum, London) and his impact on the Relational School of Psychoanalysis in the United States, often fails to acknowledge Abraham's key influence.

The recognition of Abraham's work in France is more apparent, especially among the group formed around *le Coq-Heron.* Even so, his reading of Ferenczi can never be considered as a direct and unproblematic development. There are parallels between Abraham's unique understanding of psychoanalysis and his displaced status in French culture. He is the

perpetual foreigner, threatened in any location because of his Jewishness, uprooted from his oppressive Hungarian origins and later finding himself out of joint there and in his new Parisian locale. It is unsurprising that his closest friends, and those whose work his orbits, are similarly drawn from emigrant and unsettled communities. Jewish-Hungarian analysts are, of course, part of this filiation, but so are his great friends Jacques Derrida (French-Algerian, assimilated Jew), René Major (French-Canadian) and Wladimir Granoff (Russian, displaced and dispossessed by the Bolsheviks) to name some of the most significant.

Abraham's iteration of Ferenczian ideas is a translation into a French language and intellectual culture that is itself bastardised; a melange of linguistic and cultural cross-currents that Abraham not only impregnates with his own thought but has this mutually reconstructed through the influence of his new context. His association with Derrida, the architect of deconstruction, forms a key part of this new context as Abraham introduces Ferenczi's thought into a French cultural vocabulary where the post-war influences of structuralism and existentialism were being challenged by a newly emergent poststructuralism. Although not established in an identifiable form until the later 1960s, with key debates instituted by Derrida alongside Foucault, Deleuze and others, the poststructuralist destabilising of meaning and being (the two secure axioms of structuralism and existentialism respectively) mirrors Abraham's sense of displacement and resonates in his translations of Ferenczi's ideas.

Alongside Torok, Abraham produced a conceptual apparatus that is deliberately unstable, where the systematic or exhaustive elaboration of the psyche is replaced with what translator Nicholas Rand describes as "a cluster of insights open to further development and discovery" (1). His development of the concept of the symbol that steers much of his work,

for example, loses the sense of connection to a fixed referent, as its dual action is noted in the psychoanalytic context. Where the symbol is pulled towards meaning in the associations it forms with other symbols, it also carries a non-sensical silence inscribed in its structure that replaces more solid signifying foundations. It is this destabilising basis as it continually provokes the breakdown of meaning that Freud named the unconscious, and that Abraham highlights further as a process of radical disruption.[xii] In his key 1968 text "The Shell and the Kernel" Abraham reflects on how "one is struck, as soon as Freudian terms are related to the unconscious Kernel, by the vigor with which they literally rip themselves away from the dictionary and ordinary language …[to]… no longer [follow] the twists and turns (*tropoi*) of customary speech and writing" (85). Symbols (from a patient, text or theory) are always fragments, therefore, separated from an original sense of unity that Abraham describes in his 1974-75 "Seminar on the Dual unity and the Phantom" in terms of a *metaphor*. "Every symbol is originally a metaphor," he states, enjoined in a unity that is only ever a fiction and "having lost one of its parts, the metaphor becomes a symbol" ("The Seminar*,"* 15). The action of the symbol is to seek the complement that will reveal its truth in meaning. The process of becoming meaningful, however, is always metaphorical (Abraham describes the joining of symbol with its complement as metaphorisation) and this precludes any notion of *a priori* truth that can be revealed in its immanence. The excavation of a symbol's history, and thus its reason for being (in the clinic, this is how the symptom is understood) becomes a translation where elements of a meaningful past are interwoven with unknowns that disrupt the continuity of a neat narrative. The immediate context of interpretation situates the value of the understanding generated, but this is never complete or without uncertainty. What is produced is a new symbolic formation that writes over the symbol first

presented and projects the demand for further translations into future contexts where we can at best anticipate their (re)signification.

Ferenczi's thalassal thesis and its symbolic legacy in Abraham

So how then does this impact Abraham's reading of *Thalassa?* Ferenczi's thalassal argument extends a lifelong consideration of trauma and its imprint in the individual. He defines trauma in terms of its resistance to psychical representation and explores its expression in pathological states initially modelled on shellshock; these include incalcitrant somatisation, troubling affective states and irrational thoughts and behaviours. Where his intervention into these clinical manifestations characterises his most innovative technique, what is at issue in *Thalassa* is how catastrophes also produce the most everyday experiences, or what Ferenczi calls "the manifest symptoms characterising normal and organic life" (84). The disruptions and regressive aspects of pathological formations, therefore, are also inscribed in those human operations that we presume to be developmental and that lead through the accretion of experience or the completion of biological stages to maturation.

At the heart of *Thalassa* is a reconsideration of the achievement of genital sexuality and the act of coitus that eschews a simple linear model of progress. Ferenczi comments on his *modus operandi* as "to supplement what has hitherto been a more or less two-dimensional science of life with a depth biology," which shows the insufficiencies of "a conception of vital phenomena limited to a single interpretation of the data" (84). The psychoanalytic methodology, or *bioanalysis* that he champions is "committed to the view that it [is] a prerogative of the psychic sphere alone that its elements, indeed one and the same element, could be inserted simultaneously into several genetically different causal series"

(84). Ferenczi thus extends Freud's notion of the overdetermination of psychical acts and their poly-dimensional character, where causal explanations can be sought at many possible levels. Any two-dimensional account of cause-effect that makes simple logical connections between phenomena in time and space is thus exposed in its inadequacy and requires additional explanatory frames to situate its meaning.

Where Freud had already highlighted the manifold obstructions along the path of psychosexual development, Ferenczi sees certain regressive aspects of the sexual and reproductive act as essential to its operation. These elements, furthermore, are not restricted to ontogenic traumas in the life of the individual. Ferenczi extends the inscriptions of trauma into a phylogenetic past where the exacerbating effects of an unprocessed event did not even happen in our lifetime.

Implicit in the word "*Thalassa*" (From the Greek for "sea") Ferenczi describes the foundational trauma of our sexual life as desiccation. Birth ejects the infant from a blissful state of suspension in the amniotic sack in which unity with the mother as environment and provider is experienced concretely. Trauma characterises the first moment of post-partum life and the constant endeavour to re-find the lost sense of unity then inscribes all later action, although this is rarely conscious or explicit. There are clear parallels here with Abraham's rethinking of the symbol and its refinding of a perfect first moment in the process of metaphorisation. Trauma adds a motive to this operation that Abraham recognises from the outset in "*Le Symbole.*" The thalassal thesis is also, in many ways, a rewriting of Freud's death drive in the desire to return to an earlier (and simpler) state of existence, although this is without the essentialist or metaphysical traps that sometimes ensnare Freud's speculations. Indeed, what makes the thalassal argument so extraordinary

and contentious is that this first trauma of postnatal separation is not the original event that motivates the individual. It is itself a repetition of earlier catastrophes in the history of the species that are inscribed in what Ferenczi terms a "biological unconscious" (83). He describes this biological unconscious as "the form of activity and the mode of organisation characteristic of apparently long superseded stages in the development of the individual and the species," (83) suggesting that the body remembers its traumas at a cellular level, which in turn motivate current behaviour.

In the sexual act, the uterus and its moist vaginal entrance are once more the focus of pleasurable action, as germ cells fuse in the act of fertilisation and-at an embryonic level-there is a return to the womb. Following the theories of Ernst Haekel, Ferenczi proposes that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, and that the ejection from the womb is traumatic because it repeats a similar thalassal catastrophe in the species as our ancestors moved from the sea to the more hostile environment of the land. This is an ejection, furthermore, that is itself likely to be a repetition of related earlier events. He states, in "the act of coitus and in the simultaneous act of fertilisation there are fused into a single unity not alone *the individual catastrophe of birth and the most recent catastrophe to the species, that of desiccation, but all the earlier catastrophes since life originated*" (63). From sexual desire to the coital act, to fertilisation and the long gestation of the germ cell in the amniotic sack, all reproductive behaviour is a residuum, structured through thalassal deprivation, in which a personal unconscious writes the forbidden history of individual development on a substratum of catastrophes inscribed in a biological unconscious. In adult sexuality, therefore, the genitals become the locus of all the tension generated not only by the "unresolved and unmastered traumatic experiences in the life of the individual," but also "all the catastrophes of phylogenetic development accumulated in the germplasm" (66).

By considering these different strata that dictate the individual psyche, Ferenczi reintroduces a biological paradigm into psychoanalysis that had always been problematic for Freud. This is not to say that he conceives the psyche according to a simple metaphor of biological processes, or that he considers the psyche merely as an epiphenomenon of material functions in the body. Like Freud the possibility of leaning psychological theories on biology is, for Ferenczi, very different from biological determinism. Haekel's theories were questioned empirically long before Ferenczi wrote *Thalassa* and they function more as a mythology or "useful fiction" (Stanton, 63) in the consideration of psychical phenomena. It is this aspect of Ferenczi's argument that particularly interests Abraham and forms the basis for his rethinking of psychical structure.

In his introduction, Abraham highlights the importance of the symbol in Ferenczi's work, which through *Thalassa* extends into "what we might call psychoanalytic pansymbolism" (*"Introducing Thalassa,"* ***). He further relates this to the "very structure of being" and how "from our atoms to our cells to our imagined end, we are … absolutely woven from symbols" (ibid.,**). Symbolism here is conceived in terms of the units of meaning that allow trains of association to enact desires in accordance with the pleasure principle. Symbols point back to what has motivated them-in the body or its composition-so that the located desire can be expressed through connective chains.[xiii] In this way, "our bodies function from the start like a language," desperately trying to voice "the original sense of the organic units of meaning" (ibid.,**). Desires grab onto signifying means at their disposal, to be materialised "as if by magic" (ibid.,**). Abraham gives the example of blushing as the satisfaction in the body of a repressed desire (he speculates on the sexual connotations of an intensive emotional exchange) that is expressed through existing physiological channels. Our bodies are thus symbol systems that seek expression in conscious phenomena and that

point towards “even more fundamental symbolisations … [in] … phylogenesis and the historical traumas and privations of our species” (ibid’, **). This tracing of increasingly archaic meanings in our symbolic organisation suggests that the “organism [is] a hieroglyphic text, amassed over the history of the species, that appropriate forms of investigation would be able to decipher” (ibid., **). The figure of the hieroglyph is taken from Ferenczi’s text and is key for his understanding how symbolic expressions of the body or psyche (just like ancient and indirect inscriptions) preserve “whole portions of buried and otherwise inaccessible history” (*Thalassa*, 44). Ferenczi proposes that it is psychoanalytic method, specifically the paradigm of bioanalysis, that can uncover and decipher these hieroglyphs.

Abraham’s return to the organism – the symbolic reconfiguration of the *somatic*

Seeing each level of influence on the individual as symbolic, Abraham conceives the organism as a dense hieroglyph that translates the history and pre-history of inscribed experiences. Like Ferenczi, he recognises that these experiences insist from a biological as well as a personal unconscious, although this suggestion created problems for the reception of the bioanalytic model by French psychoanalysts. Freud’s biologism, especially that of his final theory of life and death drives and the structural model this underpinned, was deeply unpopular in France at the time of *Thalassa’s* translation, and had been one of the driving forces for Lacan’s “linguistic turn” and his focus on socio-symbolic structures. The ideas of the British tradition were also influencing French psychoanalysis at this time, although the neglect of biology was just as apparent. Klein and her disciples considered the body only as

it was phenomenologically revealed in the intersubjective clinical situation, while Winnicott and others from the independent group eschewed Freud's drive model altogether.[xiv] Despite this Abraham was undeterred*,* presenting to a seemingly inimical French audience a renewed vision of Ferenczi's bioanalytic paradigm. The publication of *Thalassa* was an unexpected success, launching a significant challenge to and not insubstantial revolution in established thinking.[xv]

Thalassa's mode of reception in 1960s France can be understood in terms of its status and impact as a translation. In his 1996 text "Translation, Philosophy, Materialism," Lawrence Venuti discusses how the movement of meaning between contexts involves transformation that is ultimately never complete. There is always an excess of meaning from both the new and original context that he distinguishes in terms of a domestic and foreign remainder. The domestic remainder is what the new context adds in a translation to make it understandable to the domestic reader. These are additions that readers in the first language would not necessarily recognise and "therefore exceed the foreign writer's intention" (25). The foreign remainder, on the other hand, is what, from the original context, cannot translate and remains as a foreign element to remind the reader that the given text *is* a translation.[xvi] In these terms, Abraham's introduction draws attention to the symbolic aspects of *Thalassa* which claim that "the psychic and organic are not two realities but one, made of symbols and meanings" (*"Introducing Thalassa,"* **). Repetition of some arch-catastrophe that structures existence, is always symbolic and thus the question of biology becomes more palatable to the structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers that dominated 1960s France. Abraham's translation of ideas can therefore domesticate notions that are discontinuous with the prevailing trends in Francophone philosophy.

This transformation of biology into a symbolic register still leaves a foreign remainder to French intellectual trends that obstructs the neat transition of meaning between contexts. Abraham admits that Ferenczi's recourse to objective methods in the construction of bioanalysis is unusual in psychoanalysis and sits uncomfortably in its typically hermeneutic approach. Empirical facts, however, are never considered as ends in themselves, but as invitations to more symbolic speculation, in which they find their specific and contextualised meaning; a meaning, furthermore, that can trouble the generalised fact.

Here, there are clear parallels between the reception of the thalassal thesis in France and the way that the symbolic operations of the psyche translate the body proper. This is a body that is only translatable to a degree as the psyche attempts to grasp, comprehend and include its actions. Venuti's distinction between a domestic and foreign remainder can be modified to understand this, as aspects of our relationship with the body are domesticated through the transformations of the psyche (how else would we know our bodies?) and yet something foreign remains in this connection that will not be transformed. In the same way, the body can never perfectly inscribe the actions of the psyche. [xvii] Julia Borossa highlights the complex interactions between body and psyche in Ferenczi's work and how this prevents him at a conceptual level from simply "enclosing the psyche in a constraining carnal envelope" (xxi). Life has, what Abraham describes as "an essential eloquence" (*"Introducing Thalassa,"* **) that recognises biological processes but cannot be reduced to these. The eloquence of life is the "eloquent unpredictability" (Borossa, xxi) of the mind-body interrelation in which each pole bears the traces of the other that cannot be assmilated. When we consider the different strata that make up a life, there is no perfect coincidence or mapping of operations between levels. What is expressed at one level

invokes what has been translated of other levels, producing symbolising operations that Abraham continually refers to as "poetry" (*"Introducing Thalassa,"* **).

There are proper functions that are expected and are at home in a level of operation; an example of this could be the careful structuring of conscious thoughts to understand a phenomenon. These, however, are always incomplete and carry traces of inassimilable remainders that haunt and introduce uncertainty from other functional levels. Extending the example, the thought could be about myself and the name I was given which stutters out of my mouth when I am asked to say who I am; the body interrupts for its own, unknown reasons, with a memory that is beyond direct articulation yet reveals itself as it adds to or compromises meaning in the failed utterance. What emerges from Abraham's encounter with Ferenczi is a structure of existence that is rendered unstable through the interaction of levels that translate one another. It is no longer adequate to maintain a linear model of development, even if *Thalassa* reaches for that beyond the individual into a prehistoric past.

The translation of *Thalassa* transfers a demand to rethink the foreign in relation to the body and aspects of the biological process that hermeneutics and empirical investigation leave unthought. In many ways, Lacan develops the notion of the *real* as a response to this implicit imperative and ties it in his mature work to the action of the drives as these function beyond *symbolic* and *imaginary* realms.[xviii] Similarly, the work of the *Paris Psychosomatic School,* whose emergence in France can be directly tied to Ferenczi's legacy, draws on the idea of a body that can be domesticated and a body that remains foreign.[xix] Abraham's response to the eloquent unpredictability of symbolic existence and the poetic body was his conceptual turn or "new programme of research" (Derrida, "*Me-Psychoanalysis*," 6) of 1968.

Here, what is buried in the symbols that constitute us is fundamental to our existence yet has only the smallest possibility of remembrance and thus domestication.

In “The Shell and the Kernel,” Abraham interrogates the source of symbolic meaning in a designified action that psychoanalysis reveals as it continually transforms the meaning of words and the constructs they form. He examines the distinctiveness of psychoanalytic concepts that in standard French translations are capitalised to announce, “the radical semantic change psychoanalysis has brought to language” (83). Before the possibility of “the collision of meaning,” psychoanalytic concepts “strip words of their signification” to lay bare an a-semantic realm that is “the very foundation of the signifying process [*significance*]” (84-5). It is in these terms that Abraham explores the body, referring in particular to the *somato-psychic* relationship.[xx] Here the body is associated with the kernel of being, although the locus of truth cannot be fixed here in physiological processes. The *somatic* is one possible structure of the a-semantic core of existence that is beyond representation and can only be known through derivatives that become the messengers (symbols) of its action in a *psyche* where this can be understood. Abraham reflects:

> The *somatic* is what I cannot touch directly, either as my integument and its internal prolongations or as my psyche, the latter given to the consciousness of the self; the somatic is that of which I would know nothing if its representative, my fantasy were not there to send me back to it, its source as it were and ultimate justification. (87)

The *somatic* is a “radical nonpresence” (87) whose truth can only be considered as its action is transformed into the operations of a psyche that henceforth functions as an envelope or “*shell*” to the *kernel* of being.[xxi] We might also consider this *shell* as the array of

observations, concepts and explanations that biologists and psychoanalysts construct-in their different ways-to somehow access this kernel. Both *somatic* and *psychic* are designified terms in the psychoanalytic register that cannot be reduced to the constructions of the ego (or a theoretical edifice) that observes them. The *somatic* is no longer the empirical body and the *psyche* is only suggested through the phenomenon of conscious introspection. In this schema, "only the *representative*, the mediator between two poles [the *somatic* and the *psychic*] seems to have preserved its meaning" (87). *Psychic* and *somatic* can only be conceived, therefore, through the differential relationships each generates regarding the other as these contend with the emitting and receiving of messengers. The symbol (the "messenger", "delegate" or "representative") forms the substance of human existence and the frontier between *somatic* and *psychic*, which are henceforth defined by the specific function to which they put the symbol. To recall Ferenczi's reflections on overdetermination, the symbol changes according to which network of activity it is inserted into. Abraham names this operation of the symbol and the *shell-kernel* relation it underpins "*différencement,*" (92) evoking Derrida's concept of *différance* as the constant activity of differences in a system that can never ultimately be determined.

Abraham uses the example of the *drive* to demonstrate the symbolic nature of the *somatic-psychic* interaction. The *drive* defines the action and force of the *somatic* and is the consummate psychoanalytic concept of the body. This is not the "instinct" of empirical science that can be viewed in the behaviour of animals, reduced to chemical interactions or measured in units of force. It is a *drive* that can only be known through the messengers that translate the actions of the *somatic* into a language that can be received in the *psyche*. For Abraham, this is the language of "affects, representations, or even fantasies" (87). The

somatic sends emissaries from a radically unknown *kernel* of being whose action in a "foreign" body demands to be read and (incompletely) transformed into metaphor in a comprehending *psyche*. This is a *psyche*, furthermore that is constructed and allowed to function in this transformation. The *psychic* responds to the messengers that issue from the *somatic* reproducing them as symbols that both de-essentialise (designify) each pole of the relationship and give them relative substance through the nature of the exchange.

Abraham's retranslation of the psychoanalysis of origins

Ferenczi's impact in France is thus a rewriting of *Thalassa* and his oeuvre in a way that he did not necessarily anticipate. The idea of a biological foundation, for example, while already being destabilised in Ferenczi's work is extended further as a foreign body in its francophone consideration. It is apparent that translation must be understood as a bi-directional process in which meaning does not simply move from an original text or event to its rewriting or enactment in a new context. The translated text has a reciprocal impact on the original which can change its nature and allow it to be re-signified as new threads of meaning are drawn out of its polysemy. This important transformation in logic increasingly steers Abraham's later theoretical direction as he applies insights from translation to his rethinking of psychoanalysis. The mark of Derrida's influence on Abraham's work is unmistakable here (an influence, I hasten to add, that was reciprocal) and draws the latter's ideas into the orbit of philosophical deconstruction and its emergence as a critical force. In his key texts of 1967 *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*, Derrida questioned both original meaning and authorial intention as privileged routes to the truth.[xxii] From "The Shell

and the Kernel" onwards these same concerns would orient much of Abraham's theoretical and clinical research, especially as he rethinks the notion of the symbol. Foreshadowing this prospect of later developments, his introduction to *Thalassa* assumes renewed importance, especially as it already reflects on the problematic origins of being and begins to ask how this is translated in the organism.

Abraham specifically draws attention to the allusions in *Thalassa* that the arch-catastrophe that Ferenczi constructs in the desiccation of the oceans is itself a repetition of an earlier unnamed event. The past that is located in a manifest action, therefore, is situated in a succession of prior occurrences, such that "once the latent content has been established, it merely becomes the manifest content of a deeper latent content and so on" (*"Introducing Thalassa,"* **). Ferenczi recognised that Freud's construction of ontogenic origins did not go far enough and needed to consider external, phylogenic processes to take them back into a more archaic past. The sense that each located origin itself replicates an earlier process and that the original source strangely vacillates (without resolution) between internal and external processes is implicit in *Thalassa.* It is in Abraham's introduction, however, that it begins to resonate with a force that will open psychoanalytic debate to the possibility of deconstructive logic and define the author's later conceptual trajectory. This is the beginning (a term that can no longer be used without irony) of what he describes in the introduction as a "psychoanalysis of origins"; a phrase he initially uses as a synonym for Ferenczi's bioanalysis, but which also contains a distinctive orientation that is uniquely his. For Abraham, it is not enough to simply find a more primitive cause. The psychoanalysis of origins must also take the continued sense of deferred searching as an axiomatic praxis that "proceeds by a continual to and fro between inside and outside" (*"Introducing Thalassa,"*

**). This in turn questions of the notion of a first, undivided moment that must henceforward underpin any possible envisioning of psychical operations.

It is in “The Shell and the Kernel” that Abraham returns more rigorously and intently to the psychoanalysis of origins. Here, he begins to outline an interpretative approach for engaging the symbols confronting the psychoanalyst that are translations of a patient’s ultimately irretrievable history. He proposes for this the neologism “anasemia,” (85) which Barbara Johnson (translator of “*Fors,*” Derrida’s commentary on Abraham and Torok) describes as joining the diverse meanings of *ana* as “upward” and “back” but also “again” with *semia* as a “sign or unit of meaning” (*The Magic Word,* 117, footnote 1.). For her, anasemia denotes the “process of problematising the meaning of signs in an undetermined way” (ibid., 117). Psychoanalysis is the exemplary anasemic discourse as it engages in signifying operations that defy standard spatial and temporal logic, moving from inside to outside and toward past and future in the same action (a further meaning of *ana* is “reversal”).

As this applies to the psychoanalytic context-a domain the Abraham now characterises through the complementary operations of symbol and anasemia-the symbol’s meaning is generated synchronically through free associations that re-signify aspects of a patient’s life that are fixed in symptomatic action. Symbols, however, are also incomplete, carrying within them the negative traces of a history of traumatic division from an imagined source (metaphor) that completes them, and that they once perfectly described. This loss of a mythical unity intimates the diachronic history of the symbol’s emergence as meaningful and is the source of all future signification, as complements must be found to signify with its wound and temporarily assuage the trauma inflicted. The uncovering of a symbol’s past through anasemic interpretation is the excavation of ever-earlier sources of meaning, but

this searching is always projected interminably into a future of anticipated reconciliation with the perfect symbolic complement.[xxiii] The purpose of interpretation is to find better translations of an origin that is fundamentally an unformulated silence. In the symptom, existing attempts to organise translation fix meaning in ways that are obstructive to the operations of the psyche. The perpetual deferral of an initial moment to our existence that traumatises us into symbolic action, sticks in the symptom so that it becomes unmanageable. The symbolic processes of psychoanalysis aim to retranslate these origins in ways that are more beneficial for the patient and less likely to stagnate. Psychoanalytic (i.e. anasemic) translation, therefore, opens a future of reimagining that is just as important (and indeed original) as the origin that is presumed but never known. This notion extends Freud's concept of *nachträglichkeit* as the deferred resignification of an earlier event through the effects of a later action. Abraham, however, puts the priority of that first occurrence even more into question.

Building on Ferenczi's hieroglyphic notion of the self, Abraham considers the different symbolic levels as woven together, each row without precedence over the others and a tear or mistake in any warp or woof having implications across the entire surface of the fabric. Anasemia extends its conceptual breadth from a mode of psychoanalytic interpretation to a description of the translation effects (retroactive as well as proactive) that occur between levels in the organisation of being. In "The Shell and the Kernel," Abraham contemplates the impact of new impressions on what, in the psyche, has already been established. He considers the memory trace and its action on prior levels of signification which he describes as having "the same mediating mission as representations, affects and fantasies" (92). The difference, however, is that "their mission is centripetal while the others' is centrifugal" (92). From surface to depth (*shell* to *kernel*) there is a centripetal action of translation (this is

perhaps a less useful depiction than the metaphor of weaving) just as the centrifugal motion of the drive seeks expression in consciousness or real trauma causes a symptom.

This is developed further in Abraham and Torok's masterpiece *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*. Here, the impossibility of constructing meaning (finding the symbol's complement) has a *nachträglichkeit* effect on prior modes of symbolisation, inscribing a post-fact traumatism on Freud's most famous patient, the Wolf Man. Here, Abraham and Torok postulate that symbolic gaps from the Wolf Man's ontogenic development (specifically the family silencing his role as witness in his father's abuse of his sister) work their way into bodily processes and produce his bizarre symptomatology that includes many somatisations (constipation, compulsive sexual practices and so on) and affective states (agitation and crippling depression). They introduce new concepts such as the *crypt* and *phantom* to describe the workings of such obstructions as they issue from or rewrite our prehistory. In its initial meaning, the phantom describes the "centrifugal" movement of traumatic silences down familial lines, while Abraham and Torok first use the related notion of the crypt to describe a more centripetal direction of symbolic disruption into the body. Having created pathological existence, such action is also the key to its uncovering and ultimately its relieving through the therapeutic process.

To return to the question posed at the beginning, the translation of Abraham's "Introducing *Thalassa"* provides fresh insight into Ferenczi's theories and the possibility of stirring a new audience to assure an afterlife for this work through reformulation. I have considered this primarily from the perspective of translation and a bi-directional movement of meaning between two texts and contexts. Ferenczi's ideas live on and become more radical through the task of translation that was entrusted to Abraham, Dupont and others in their dislocated

and dispossessed situation in 1960s France. Abraham's introduction is also a key text situated at the beginning of his own emerging oeuvre that signalled the movement away from the phenomenology and Freudianism that directed his earlier work. In it is contained the seeds of an anasemic approach that owes its impetus to Ferenczi's work but is also unique in its negotiating of a specific French intellectual context.

This provides an interesting and necessary counterpoint to the dogmatism that had long stifled the SPP and was increasingly apparent in the Lacanian institutions. Such stagnation is by no means particular to this context as the tension between conservative institutes and the radical spirit of psychoanalytic praxis simmers unabated today as it did in the first years of the psychoanalytic movement. By keeping us ever mindful that the object of psychoanalysis-the unconscious-fundamentally escapes us, Abraham's reformulation of the symbol in terms of the continual displacement of its origin, allows us to rethink psychoanalysis in terms of its continual renewal. Abraham's theoretical translation of Ferenczi's psychoanalysis of origins, initiated in "Introducing *Thalassa,"* is the first step in a conceptual approach that questions the very notion of origins. Abraham's looking back into the past in Ferenczi's work awakens a future of possible reiteration where psychoanalysis can be readied, in an open spirit, to respond anew and without cliché to the various challenges it is required to answer.

What I have not properly considered so far, is the position of my translation in this cycle of renewal. I am necessarily modest as to its impact. Ferenczi's ideas are already making headway in the English-speaking world and a substantial number of Abraham and Torok's works have already been translated, provoking interest in many fields related to psychoanalysis. I present this more as a fresh angle that can join together approaches in the

Franco-Hungarian tradition, not only to present a more complete picture but to invite a next step whose direction is always yet to be determined. To paraphrase Abraham's closing remarks, I now leave the reader to follow their own path.

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[i] As Carlo Bonomi (2017) notes, Dupont translated *Thalassa* from the Hungarian language version that her father has published and not from the original German text that Ferenczi had written.

[ii] Under the Habsburg monarchy, the Austrian Empire had subjected Hungary since 1526, and from 1867 to 1919 endured an uneasy coalition. Hungarian men comprised nearly half of the men drafted by Austro-Hungary in the First World War. They fought almost exclusively for Austrian and German interests.

[iii] It is worth noting in this interweaving of invested languages that Abraham came from a family of orthodox Jews, trained in the Talmudic tradition and would have probably considered Hebrew (which he spoke fluently) as his first language. Ferenczi and Dupont were similarly from assimilated middle-class Jewish families where a strong Hungarian identity was downplayed in favour of emphasising linguistic and cultural pluralism, that included Hebrew roots.

[iv] This is acknowledged when his work was posthumously collected and edited by his partner and collaborator Maria Torok under the title *L'Ecorce et le noyau.* She places *"Présentation de Thalassa"* at the beginning of this work, despite it being chronologically out of order in an otherwise chronological text.
[v] Take, for example, Ferenczi's return to the question of trauma as a real phenomenon at the heart of psychopathology that challenged Freud's turn away from this and his increasing reliance on Oedipal explanations and the structure of fantasy. Freud was also infuriated by the perceived wildness of Ferenczi's experiments in active technique which included his condemnation of the notorious *Küsstechnik* (kissing technique).
[vi] As detailed in Ernest Jones. *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud,* vol.3., 188-190.
[vii] Daniel Lagache and Jacques Lacan cite him in texts from the 1950s, although the latter is critical of his notion of introjection. See Judith Dupont's *L'Introduction,* 106.

[ix] Dupont is even more central than Abraham in the translation of Ferenczi's work as she was Michael Balint's niece and entrusted with Ferenczi's legacy after her uncle's death.
[x] See Dupont, *L'Introduction* for a full elaboration.
[xi] See *Jacques Lacan & Co.,* 598-602.
[xii] In his 1979 text "Me-Psychoanalysis" Derrida describes a "break" in Abraham's thinking on the symbol that begins with his 1968 work "The Shell and the Kernel." It is this essay and his 1974-5 "Seminar on the Dual Unity and the Phantom" that I refer to here.
[xiii] André Green poetically describes this process as the "chains of Eros" in his book of the same title.
[xiv] It is telling that the Lacanian indifference to biology still bears its mark problematically on the French mental health system, with detrimental effects for the treatment of autism in particular. Sophie Roberts explores this in the 2011 documentary *Le Mur.*
[xv] In *L'Introduction,* Dupont notes how *Thalassa* was so successful that it was even sold in railway kiosks, although Bonomi qualifies that "because of its subtitle '*Psychanalyse des origines de la vie sexuelle*,' … it was [often] confused with a pornographic book" (130)
[xvi] It is impossible to overlook the parallels between this theory of translation and how Abraham and Torok conceive of the psyche appropriating the world. Here, the foreignness of the external world and inner processes must somehow be included in a comprehending (and domesticating) psyche through the corollary operations of incorporation (inclusion at the level of hallucinatory fantasy and the body) and introjection (metaphorical assimilation through symbolic means). Abraham and Torok develop large aspects of their conceptual schema in response to considering the extent to which that which is included in the psyche is domesticated or remains foreign. See their texts "Mourning or Melancholia" and "The Illness of Mourning."
[xvii] Both Abraham and Ferenczi refer to the exemplary psychoanalytic condition of hysteria in their speculations to demonstrate the limitations of the psyche's governance of the body and account for the variety of "mysterious leap[s] from the psychic into the organic" (**). In the many hysterical reactions, the everyday routines of life are frequently interrupted as the body inflicts unruly sensations, unsolicited affects and uncontrolled actions and reactions onto the unwary psyche. The extremes of hysteria only magnify processes that are commonplace in this complex exchange.
[xviii] His 1964 *Seminar XI* is largely recognised as Lacan's turn towards considering the *real.*
[xix] This section of the SPP was already loosely formed in the 1950s through the figures of Pierre Marty, Michel Fain, Michel de M'Uzan and Christian David but was vitalised after the publication of *Thalassa*, when their collected 1963 text *L'Investigation psychosomatique*, founded "psychosomatics as a strictly psychoanalytic discipline" (Marilia Aisenstein and Elsa Rappoport de Aisemberg, *Psychosomatics Today,* xvii).
[xx] Where psychoanalytic terms are capitalised in French, there is no consistent denotation in the English language. Nicholas Rand, the translator of "The Shell and the Kernel" had a torrid time trying to keep on top of Abraham's sometimes inconsistent use of capitals in the original French. For purpose of clarity, I have elected to italicize terms that have a specific psychoanalytic (i.e. anasemic) meaning and left them non-italicised when the word is meant more generally.
[xxi] Although Abraham privileges the Somato-Psychic relation as exemplary of the Shell-Kernel figure that dictates his work from 1968, he still recognises it as one example of many related relationships. In "The Shell and the Kernel" he examines both the relation of Laplanche and Pontalis' dictionary of psychoanalytic terms, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* to Freud's intuition of the unconscious, and the relation of consciousness to the unconscious in these terms.
[xxii] The question of translation shadows much of Derrida's work from these early essays. He makes the link between translation and the questioning of origins explicit in his 1985 essay "*Des Tour de Babel*," inspiring an important critical turn in translation studies that, for many academics and translators, still defines the field.

[xxiii] For a fuller explanation, see Abraham's "The Seminar on the Dual Unity and the Phantom" and my commentary on this, "The Haunted Delimitation of Subjectivity in the Work of Nicolas Abraham."