

METAPSYCHOLOGICAL MYTHOPOIESIS: On Sándor Ferenczi's Theory of Sexual Difference and the Agonic Conception of Life.

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E vero: il simbolo della realtà ha qualcosa che la realtà non ha; esso ne rappresenta ogni significato, eppure vi aggiunge -per la stessa sua natura rappresentativa -un significato nuovo [It's true: the symbol of reality has something that reality does not have: it represents all meaning, yet it adds-because of its representative nature-a new meaning].
- Pier Paolo Pasolini, Teorema (198)

It is generally acknowledged that the writings of Sigmund Freud and his immediate disciples play a decisive role in postmodern thought on religion. However, theoreticians of religion and historians of psychoanalysis are seldom inclined to explore the connections between the psychoanalytical critique of religious history and the post-religious *Weltanschauung* resulting from the psychoanalytical theory of the mind. This neglect is observable especially with regard to the oeuvre of Sandor Ferenczi (1873-1933), one of the seminal thinkers in the early history of psychoanalysis. This view is corroborated by the fact that two of the most relevant publications on Sandor Ferenczi in recent years (Aron and Harris, and Rachman) do not even mention the critical importance of his assessment of religious issues.

Ferenczi's most innovative contentions are included in a relatively short text that he began to write in 1914, but published only in 1924 under the title *Versuch einer Genitaltheorie*. Significantly, while the title of the Hungarian version of 1929 runs *Katasztrófák a nemi működés fejlődésében* (Catastrophes in the Evolution of Sexual Life), the title of the authorized English translation, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, recurs to the Greek term to underline the maritime origin of life. Although *Thalassa* represents a *chef-d'oeuvre* of psychoanalytical literature, it has seldom been the object of thorough commentary or criticism, a notable exception to this general disregard being Norman O. Brown's classic book *Love's Body*. Lou Andreas-Salome seems to have foreseen in 1913 the lack of response that Ferenczi's works would eventually encounter because of what she termed their "philosophical (synthetic) nature." Well aware that the speculative character of Ferenczi's texts was the reason why they were "not quite welcomed by Freud" (Andreas-Salomé, 132), she nevertheless surmised that "Ferenczi's time is still to come" (99).

In his approach to religion, Sandor Ferenczi differs profoundly from his fellow analysts Carl Gustav Jung or the much younger Erich Fromm, who conspicuously advocated religious worldviews while undermining the Freudian contention regarding the primacy of sexuality in psychic life. Like Freud, Ferenczi saw himself as an heir to the Enlightenment's critique of religion and adhered throughout his life to his master's fundamental premise concerning the "model character of sexuality" (Ferenczi 1964, II, 218). Having developed, in the words of Paul Roazen (2001, 129), a "militant commitment, a religious kind of devotion" to the cause of psychoanalysis, Ferenczi has been pertinently credited for playing "a heroic part -second only to that of Freud- in building psychoanalysis into a branch of science" (Lorand, 14). Such laudatory assessments echo those of Freud himself who once reminded Ferenczi, in a letter written in 1918, that he had planned to achieve "great things" with him (Freud 1980b, 340), and later, in a letter dated December 13, 1929, apostrophized him as his "paladin and secret grand vizier" (as quoted in Freud and Ferenczi 1993, 17). Although the relationship between Freud and Ferenczi was clouded at the end by growing dissension

concerning personal issues and psychoanalytical techniques, Freud stressed in his obituary of Ferenczi that his writings “had made all analysts his disciples,” and that his application of psychoanalytical insights to the biology of sexual processes in *Thalassa* constituted “perhaps the most audacious application of analysis that has ever been undertaken” (Freud 1999b, 268). Despite Ferenczi’s repeated protestations of allegiance to the psychoanalytical movement and Freud’s praise of his disciple achievements, both acknowledged that their relationship was complicated by Oedipal intricacies. Not surprisingly, Clara Thompson, an American whom Ferenczi analyzed in Budapest, appears to give a critical twist to Freud’s phrase about the “secret grand vizier” when she depicts Ferenczi as “a secret rebel who could not quite allow himself to know of his rebellion” (as quoted in Roazen 1984, 368).

Ferenczi defined his own position with regard to religion and religiosity as one of frank enmity. Tellingly, he described even his lifelong interest in paranormal psychic phenomena and the occult as being “not properly an inclination to the occult, but a desire for de-occultation” (Freud and Ferenczi 1996, 134-35). Following Freud’s triple division of historical development into magical, religious, and scientific phases (Ferenczi 1964, I, 92), Ferenczi viewed science in general as “a progressive disillusionment” (III, 381) and psychoanalysis in particular as an instrument against the “absurd religious superstitions and practices of the authoritarian cult” (III, 12). Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that Ferenczi regarded it as one of the tasks of psychoanalysis “to destroy mysticism” (II, 49), a danger he associated with the philosophy of Henri Bergson and especially with the psychology of the ex-Freudian Jung (III, 277 and 428-29).

Ferenczi’s harsh rejection of spiritualistic worldviews is not the result of materialistic or behaviouristic premises, but of a methodological monism *sui generis*. Basically, this monism does not attempt to explain phenomena by reducing them to a single principle, material or spiritual, but postulates the existence of natural laws that are valid for both the physical and the psychical worlds (Ferenczi 1964, III, 217). Acknowledging that Freud had torn down “the sharp demarcation line between natural science and the humanities” (III, 542), Ferenczi contended that “since there is finally only one truth, the physiological truth must coincide ultimately with the psychological’ (IV, 30). In spite of his monistic assumptions, Ferenczi did not deny the dual polarities that pervade reality but, on the contrary, emphasized the need to take their tensional character into account before proceeding to their philosophical unification. To this end, Ferenczi envisaged a method he termed “utraquism,” based on constant alternation between natural sciences and human sciences, and corroboration of external and internal experience through a process of mutual analogization (I, 93). On the methodological basis of this “utraquistic” monism, Ferenczi outlined a “bioanalytical” alternative to the spiritualistic self-understanding of human beings throughout religious history. In contradistinction to the religious options offered by Western tradition, Ferenczi’s “bioanalysis” is essentially a “neocatharsis” (III, 482) that calls for a post-religious reinstatement of the tragic, “agonistic” conception of humanity’s place in the universe (Ferenczi 1989, 94-95).

From early on, Ferenczi’s affinities to the monistic worldview (Ferenczi 1994a, 65) sharpened his critical approach to Judaism and Christianity and to the teachings on sexuality that have been derived from their theologies. Thus, it is not by chance that, as a young physician in Budapest, Ferenczi welcomed the ideas on sexual emancipation propounded by Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), a Berlin sexologist who was a member of the Deutscher Monistenbund (German Monist Association) and the era’s most prominent advocate of sexual minority rights. In 1905, three years before his first meeting with Freud, Ferenczi published an article under the title “*Szexuális átmeneti fokozatokról*”, the Hungarian rendering of Hirschfeld’s central concept of *sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (“sexual intermediary stages”). Ferenczi followed Hirschfeld’s premise that “every woman has something masculine in her, and every man feminine traits,” and the article resonates with the basic sexological views that Hirschfeld presented in his *Sappho und Sokrates* (published under the pseudonym “Th. Ramien” in 1896, but reissued in 1902 under Hirschfeld’s own name). However, Ferenczi avoided dealing with the far-reaching theoretical consequences of assuming the sexual intermediariness of *all* human beings (Ferenczi 1994b, 247). In spite of his awareness of the inadequacies inherent in the traditional sexual binary, in this article Ferenczi was content with reviewing the biological and cultural arguments available to support a petition of Hirschfeld’s Scientific Humanitarian Committee, which called

for repeal by the German Parliament of the anti-homosexual paragraph 175 of the Imperial Penal Code. In his later writings, Ferenczi still advocated sexual tolerance, while continuing to neglect the theoretical issues that Hirschfeldt teachings entailed.

In this context, it is significant that Ferenczi also disregarded the radical views on sexual difference propounded by his close friend Georg Groddeck, director of a sanatorium in Baden-Baden, who, like Hirschfeld and Ferenczi, advocated a monistic view of human beings. In 1923, one year before Ferenczi published *Thalassa*, Groddeck published *Das Buch vom Es*, in which he upheld the Hirschfeldian thesis that “in the being that calls himself man, there exists a woman, [and] in the woman a man” (21), and contended that there are “neither purely heterosexual, nor purely homosexual human beings” (237). Characteristically, Groddeck echoes even Hirschfeld’s argument against the assumption of “qualitative oppositions” between the two sexes, stressing that “there are *sensu stricto* neither man nor woman,” and that “every human being is a combination of both” (239-40). Despite Hirschfeldt and Groddeck reminders that traditional sexual binarism is unwarranted, Ferenczi never consistently confronted the disruptive theoretical implications for psychoanalysis of dissolving the binary scheme of sexual distribution.

The heterosexual teleology that sustains Freud’s Oedipal theories constituted the major single hindrance to the adequate reception by Ferenczi of Hirschfeld’s basic insights. In the Freudian context, such a teleology was intimately connected with the incongruous postulation of a unique male libido in the psyches of men and women alike, and with the unascertained assumption of a non-clitoral, vaginal orgasm, which supposedly allowed women to overcome their initially phallic sexuality and to erotically charge the physiological processes related to motherhood. Significantly, Ferenczi followed Freud’s teachings regarding vaginal orgasm even in the “clinical diary” he wrote in 1932, one year before his death. Despite minor revisions of the Freudian view; Ferenczi presupposed a “transfer of the [erotic] zone to the vagina” (Ferenczi 1999, 234-35) and asserted further that “vaginal eroticism in the untouched inner vagina, and the resulting increased interest in passivity are awakened only quite late” (126). The fact that Freud’s two orgasm theory was first seriously challenged only with the publication, in 1953, of Alfred Kinsey’s book on female sexuality (see Kinsey et al., 482-84) makes it clear that Ferenczi was not alone in supporting the Freudian contention. As has been argued by Anne Koedt in her classic essay “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” (1970), such a contention constitutes a decisive corroborative element in an overarching patriarchal ideology that aims at reducing female sexuality to the reproductive function. In the case of Ferenczi, the uncritical assumption of vaginal orgasm is especially flagrant, not only because it contradicts ascertainable facts but also because it contrasts with the general aim of *Thalassa* to reassess womanhood in a way critical of the Freudian overemphasis on the Oedipal complex. These shortcomings notwithstanding, Ferenczi went beyond Freud’s critique of the prevalent religion of the Father by disclosing the bioanalytical dimensions in which the suppressed religion of the Mother once originated. Based on this disclosure, and despite its sexological insufficiencies, Ferenczi’s *oeuvre* entails a more radical superseding of religion than Freud’s does.

Although the heterosexual teleology that Ferenczi endorsed implies that male-male and female-female sexual combinatories fail to accomplish the aim of nature, he did not refrain from noting that “female homosexuality is actually something very normal, just as normal as male heterosexuality” (Ferenczi 1999, 126). The fundamental asymmetry implied in Ferenczi’s view of homosexuality is dependent on his assumption of the “greater physiological and psychological complexity of the female” (Ferenczi 1964, III, 462). Indeed, Ferenczi was convinced that, in comparison to the male, the female seems to be, “at least in an organic sense, a more finely differentiated being, that is, a being adapted to more complicated situations” (III, 462). This advantage results from a specific strategy of survival developed in times when the female had to cope not only with the hardships of the environment but also with the brutality of the male, who imposed his will upon her, and in so doing, spared himself the task of adapting, remaining, therefore, more primitive (III, 462). On the assumption that the “incest barrier” was “a purely male invention,” Ferenczi argued that the resolution of the Oedipal conflict in the case of women does not manifest the distressing character that marks the partial renouncement of the males to their drives (III, 339). Since castration is not a menace for the female, she could content herself with accepting her phallic disadvantage by renouncing

clitoral sexuality and adapting “to the compensation mechanisms of vaginal sexuality and motherhood” (III, 339). Consistently with these views, Ferenczi held that the complete cure of female neurotic patients can take place only when they “resolve their masculinity complex and give themselves up without rancour to the ideal possibilities of the female role” (III, 377). In the last resort, Ferenczi’s arguments make it clear that, if the internalization of the sexual divide deriving from the Oedipal setting is originally a male historical achievement, the appropriation of the sexual binary by women divests it from its inexorability thus exculpating female homosexuality from the ominous cultural charge of being “against nature.”

Ferenczi’s contention regarding the female relativization of the sexual divide implies a depotentiation of the specific sexuality of women. To the extent that it is deemed to culminate in the renunciation of clitoral activity for the sake of the pleasures of vaginal passivity and reproduction, female sexuality is essentially a sexuality of self-overcoming, contrasting with the self-assertiveness of male phallicity as the true sexual paradigm. *Thalassa* reflects this asymmetric understanding of sexual difference not only at the level of its fundamental premises, but also in its scope and structure. Not by chance, Ferenczi warns the reader that key contentions of his coital theory are restricted to “the simpler conditions pertaining to the male participant” and postpones indefinitely the discussion of the applicability of his conception to “the more complicated conditions in the female sex” (Ferenczi 1989, 18). Despite Ferenczi’s programmatic intention to reassess the role of womanhood in his theory of coital activity, the role he keeps in mind throughout *Thalassa* is first and foremost that of the male. Ferenczi’s unbalanced account is the result not just of biographical or intellectual imponderables, but of the biased assumption that only male sexuality is active. Ferenczi accepted that, as Freud put it (in 1909), “the libido, wherever it occurs, is male” (Nunberg and Federn, 113), and that, again as Freud put it (in 1933), “There is only one libido, which is placed at the service of the male and female sexual function” (Freud 1999a, 141).

Since Ferenczi ultimately neglected the complexities implied by Hirschfeld’s *Zwischenstufenlehre* and accepted the Oedipal sexual divide as the only viable principle for the social structuring of sexuality, the argumentative thrust of *Thalassa* remains within a phallogentric regime that conceptualizes female sexuality as a merely deficient version of its male counterpart. Under these circumstances, women, of all people, are left to a great extent unaccounted for in a treatise of which the avowed purpose was to deploy the symbolism of regression to the womb.

Although Ferenczi conceived of psychoanalysis as a “battle against habits” that aims at substituting “realistic adaptation” for counterproductive resolutions of conflict, he never thoroughly questioned the validity of the phallogentric order (Ferenczi 1964, III, 280). Despite being cognizant of Hirschfeld’s fundamental teachings, Ferenczi avoided confronting the fact that they undermine the dominant binary scheme of sexual distribution on which the regime of heterosexual teleology endorsed by psychoanalysis is grounded. In contradistinction to the phallogentric sexual divide, Hirschfeld’s doctrine postulates that human individuals are unique composites of different proportions of masculinity and femininity. Given that these proportions vary from one sexual layer of description to another, and can alter or be altered in time, the postulation of discrete sexual categories, including those of the binomial scheme, is, strictly speaking, not warranted. Since, according to Hirschfeld’s paradigm shift, sexual difference is not determined in relation to one single excluded alternative (male or female), but in relation to an open-ended system of as yet only partially realized combinations of the masculine and the feminine at the different descriptive layers, the sexuality of each and every individual is characterized by a unique complexity (see Bauer 1998 and 2002). By positing a natural continuity between the male and female sexual poles, the new scheme of potentially infinite sexual constitutions implies, in the first place, the deconstruction of the Oedipal asymmetry that pervades Ferenczi’s theory of genitality. Second, given the natural continuum from penis to clitoris, the new scheme falsifies the assumption of the self-effacement of female sexuality fostered by the ideology of phallogentric fertility. Third, and more importantly, Hirschfeld’s scheme envisages a more encompassing realization of phylogenetic possibilities, present in the psychophysical constitution of the human species but repressed or suppressed for the sake of compulsory heterosexuality. Hence, the Hirschfeldian doctrine of sexual intermediaries contributes to a re-evaluation of the critical potential inherent in Ferenczi’s genetic

account of sexual complexity, which he, in the last resort, pressed incongruently into moulds prepared within Freud's Oedipal paradigm. Since the ascertainable sexual complexities of the species override sexual binarism, the "education for the sake of reality" envisaged by Freud himself can be accomplished only once analytical insight has invalidated the mythology of Oedipal sexuality (Freud 1980a, 182). It is therefore all the more relevant to bear in mind that, despite its explicit tendency, Ferenczi's bioanalytical discourse occasionally comes close to questioning the sexual binarism that the psychoanalytical Oedipal mytheme intends to corroborate.

Long before *Thalassa* was published, Ferenczi depicted the formative ideas of the treatise as his "biological speculations" (Freud and Ferenczi 2003, 170, emphasis mine) and, more precisely, as his "ontogenetic fantasies that have acquired a phylogenetic sister" (Freud and Ferenczi 1996, 734, emphasis mine). Even in the introduction to *Thalassa* itself Ferenczi continues to refer to his "speculations concerning genital theory" (Ferenczi 1989, 2, emphasis mine). Although fantasies and speculations are, according to Ferenczi's general outlook, tokens of the magical and religious worldviews supposedly overcome by science, in connexion with *Thalassa* the two concepts reflect not only Ferenczi's epistemological uncertainties, but also his proud awareness of his unprecedented enterprise. As Ferenczi makes clear early in the treatise, he was keenly conscious that his application of psychological insights to biology challenged the axiom that the natural sciences and the human sciences should be kept separate. Thus, clearly countering the scientific consensus, Ferenczi's "utraquistic" approach posited that "all physical and physiological phenomena require a metaphysical (psychological) explanation and all psychology a metapsychological (physical) one" (Ferenczi 1989, 4). From this perspective, *Thalassa* constitutes a metatheoretical effort that resorts to imaginative creativity in order to supersede the self-misunderstanding of the natural sciences and the human sciences as mutually exclusive realms of knowledge. Against the backdrop of Ferenczi's self-assessments, it is significant that he used the phrase "scientific fantasy" to qualify, Freud's metapsychology, on the grounds that "every scientific theory is a fantasy" that is useful as long as it achieves its aims and does not contradict empirical data (Ferenczi 1964, III, 530). Consistent with this stipulation, Ferenczi was careful to emphasize that the psychoanalyst should not regard himself as a "symbolist," a symbol-maker, but as one who works on "the deciphering of the symbols of dreamers" (IV 85). While unambiguously marking and respecting the boundaries of the psychoanalyst's task, Ferenczi, as metapsychologist, created one of the most powerful symbols in the history of psychoanalysis by encoding in the thalassic metaphor the confluence of the origins of life and the origins of the individual. Ultimately, *Thalassa* constitutes an eminent example of metapsychoanalytical mythopoiesis.

The kernel of Ferenczi's theory of genitality combines his own groundbreaking application of psychoanalysis to biology with an amplified version of the "basic biogenetic law" enunciated by Ernst Haeckel. As Freud had predicted in 1916, Ferenczi's "biological speculations" constituted the actual area of work "where he would remain without rivalry" (Freud and Ferenczi 1996, 199), so that it is no wonder that, after living through a period of doubts and uncertainties concerning the consistency of his pursuits, Ferenczi came to consider "bioanalysis" as an actual "discovery" with the potential of "initiating a new direction of research" (Freud and Ferenczi 2003, 460). His optimism was dependent on his conviction that analogical thought is a valid scientific instrumentality for relating the realms of the mind and the organic in dealing with the coital act. Taking as his point of departure the body of psychological knowledge concerning human sexuality Ferenczi sought to connect it to the body of empirical knowledge about the evolution of life on Earth. Following Haeckel, Ferenczi contended that the prenatal development of the individual is a shortened repetition or recapitulation of the zoological history leading to the human species. At the same time, however, Ferenczi enlarged the scope of Haeckel's original law to include not only the development of the embryo-palingenesis -but also the development of the arrangements for the protection of the embryo from its earliest stages on- coenogenesis, or more precisely, perigenesis (although this last term, which appears in the authorized English translation of *Thalassa*, Ferenczi 1989, 46-47, is not in the original German text). Based on the parallel between the fish and its aquatic surroundings, on the one hand, and the embryo and its watery environment, on the other, Ferenczi postulates that through coital activity the individual seeks to return symbolically to his ontogenetic, blissful, intrauterine existence, and, beyond this stage, to regain his

phylogenetic origins in the calmness of maritime waters and, lastly, of death. In its overall deployment, the regressive tendency working its way out through a system of symbolic references leads from the mother to the inorganic realm of Thanatos. *Thalassa* being ultimately an attempt to recover the “agonistic,” death-related dimension of sexuality, Ferenczian bioanalysis reveals itself as a post-religious catharsis, seeking to effectuate “reconciliation with the inner enemy” (Ferenczi 1964, I, 94).

In the early history of psychoanalysis, Otto Rank and Ferenczi himself were the most prominent advocates of a reassessment of the early maternal influence on the development of the individual. Even though Ferenczi was careful to emphasize that Freud was the first to recognize the relevance of fantasies concerning the prenatal state, he acknowledged Rank’s merits in treating these fantasies as the kernel of his neurosis psychology (see Ferenczi 1964, III, 312-13). Ferenczi highlighted the originality of his fellow Freudian by pointing out that, while Freud assigned to the analyst the role of the father, Rank considered the analytical situation to be dominated by the biological relation to the mother (II, 124). While Ferenczi welcomed Rank’s views on dreams and fantasies related to birth anxiety he castigated Rank for his disregard of the Oedipal setting and the fear of castration. Despite his own efforts to shed light upon the child’s maternal relation, Ferenczi remained, to the end of his days, true to the conviction he expressed in 1908 that the Oedipus myth had “universal human relevance” (II, 215). For Ferenczi, this assumption constitutes the systematic point of departure of the regressive tendency outlined in *Thalassa*, when he writes (Ferenczi 1989, 79):

In the light of this “bioanalytic” conception of genital processes, as I would like to term it, it becomes comprehensible for the first time why the Oedipal wish, the wish for sexual intercourse with the mother, recurs so regularly, with an almost wearisome monotony, as the central striving in the analysis of the male. The Oedipal wish is precisely the psychological expression of an extremely general biological tendency that lures the organism to a return to the state of rest enjoyed before birth.

Ferenczi located at the very origin of the Oedipal process controlled by the Father the regressive drive to regain the motherly womb and, by so doing, reinforced the theoretical weight of his “thalassic” contentions, without questioning the cogency of Freud’s Oedipal theories. Far from criticizing his master, Ferenczi commended Freud’s remarks on the relevance of intrauterine life for the unconscious, in order to claim all the more forcefully that he had “amplified” Freud’s insights in his theory of genitality (Ferenczi 1964, III, 312). Independently of Ferenczi’s allegations of Freudian orthodoxy, however, *Thalassa* purports, from a systematic perspective’ not just the “motherly” complement to the Oedipal setting, but the radical reinscription of the progressive dynamics of the Law of the Father within the symbolic scheme of agonistic regression.

Given that Ferenczi viewed the sexual act as the symbolic expression of the drive to return to the mother, his theory of genitality is contingent to a large extent upon his account of how symbols result from the interplay of psychic faculties. According to Ferenczi, a symbol is a thing or a representation marked by an emotional charge, which cannot be explained by conscious means, but only by assuming an unconscious identification with another thing or representation that is the actual source of its emotional surplus (Ferenczi 1964, I, 102). Such a symbolic identification takes place when cultural censorship displaces the more relevant term of the equation from the conscious and, as a consequence, its emotional overdetermination flows into the previously less relevant term, which, from then on, becomes the symbol of its suppressed counterpart (I, 104). Ferenczi illustrates the case by pointing out that a tree or a church tower can function as a phallic symbol only when it becomes the recipient in the conscious of an emotional charge deriving from the previously suppressed phallus (I, 104 and 248). On the assumption that symbolic expression follows wherever unconscious activity takes place (III, 142), bioanalysis reveals the existence of this symbolism in areas generally deemed impervious to psychoanalytical research. Thus, not surprisingly, Ferenczi contends that “in symbolic or indirect forms of expression on the part of the psyche or of the body, there are preserved whole portions of buried and otherwise inaccessible history much in the manner of hieroglyphic inscriptions from out of prehistoric times” (Ferenczi 1989, 44). As a method for deciphering the symbolism of these

psychosomatic encipherments, bioanalysis proves to be a historical hermeneutics, designed to include in its scope the psychoanalytical understanding of the history of life. In light of what Nicolas Abraham (in Ferenczi 2002, 20) terms Ferenczi's "psychoanalytical pansymbolism" the human being becomes a texture of symbols, the visible manifestations of which conceal their immemorial genesis. Thus, ultimately, the psychosomatic unity of the individual discloses the symbolic coherence of Being.

Even if Ferenczi was eager to confirm the general validity of Freudian Oedipal theories, his contention concerning the "universality of the tendency to maternal regression (Ferenczi 1989, 27) aims at underpinning the primacy of this tendency in relation to the future-oriented enactment of the Law by the Father. Having claimed in 1914 that he had been the first to formulate the idea of a "regression of the psyche" in connection with the state of sleep, Ferenczi eventually made out of this idea the central premise of his theory of symbolism (Ferenczi 1964, IV, 69). In this context, the tendency to regression is depicted as dominating not only psychic but also organic life, so that its traces in the constitution of the individual allow the reconstruction of phases of development beyond the limits of the human species. At first, Ferenczi's scale of regression not only leads back to the stages of the "intrauterine omnipotence situation" (III, 172) and the physiological reflexes of the "protopsyche" (III, 138), but, ultimately, leads to the realm of the "nonliving" (III, 176). On these assumptions, Ferenczi sets out to prove in *Thalassa* that in copulation and fertilization the regressive tendencies, once triggered by phylogenetic and ontogenetic "catastrophes" are fused into a single unity.

Thus, in Ferenczi's phrase, "we have represented in the sensation of orgasm not only *the repose of the intrauterine state*, the tranquil existence in a more friendly environment, but also *the repose of the era before the originated*, in other words, *the deathlike repose of the inorganic world*" (Ferenczi 1989, 63, emphases in the original). Since the regressive tendency urges the symbolic return to the most archaic forms of non-conflictive existence, the traces of which are enciphered in the unconscious record of life, such a tendency can only achieve its goal in death, in the paradisaical condition of rest to which all life aspires. Given the "biopsychic" pre-eminence of the thalassic access to Death (Ferenczi 1989, 95), its instrumentalization in the Oedipal punitive setting turns out to be merely derivative. Death being primarily a latent source of comfort and not a means to enforce the Law, the encipherment of Death in the depth of Life voids the religious vision of a future Life without Death.

The dynamics of regression steers toward the site of Death as the insurmountable limit that constitutes, in Ferenczi words, "the primordial source of symbolic formation" (Ferenczi 1964, II, 177). The markings on the way to this source are the mnemonic traces of catastrophes and reactive adaptations, which Ferenczi describes along the lines of Lamarckian evolution. As he claimed at a conference in 1927, Lamarck's "physiological explanation" of evolution is a much-needed supplement to the merely "statistical explanation" offered by Darwin's theory of natural selection, for Lamarckianism conveys the idea of a genetic transmission of characteristics acquired by an individual to his descendants. In his own version of adaptation, Ferenczi modified Lamarck's theory to include the possibility of the individual's adaptation to his surroundings, as implied in the concept of "perigenesis" (III, 349). Even though it may seem paradoxical at first sight, the whole forward-striving design of adaptation rests, according to Ferenczi, upon the regressive tendency aiming at the restoration of the calmness and harmony repeatedly lost in the unstable history of life (Ferenczi 1989, 69-71). While the wish for restoration never ceases to exist, it can be temporarily suspended by a censorship mechanism that diverts it from its original aim and reinvests its energy in order to achieve adaptation and constructiveness. Thus, it is the energy of regression normally serving the pleasure principle, which, once deflected from its course, can be transformed into a source of progression under the rule of the reality principle (III, 119-21). Consistent with the assumption that progression is basically the regressive tendency to restore pleasure working in the interest of survival, and in correspondence with his predilection for "Lamarck's more animistic ideas on evolution" (Ferenczi 1989, 94), Ferenczi eventually asserted that there is no absolute separation between life and death, since, as he claims, germs of life and regressive tendencies lie hidden even within inorganic matter (Ferenczi 1989, 94). The meaning of what the introduction to *Thalassa* rather cryptically terms "an animism no longer anthropomorphic" (Ferenczi 1989, 2) is made explicit at the end of the book (Ferenczi 1989, 94-95), as Ferenczi emphasizes that, on his assumptions:

We should have to drop once and for all the question of the beginning and end of life, and conceive the whole inorganic and organic world as a perpetual oscillation between the will to live and the will to die, in which an absolute hegemony of life or of death is never attained.

Against this backdrop, Ferenczi's animism aims at recuperating for the post-religious age the archaic sense of the *Agon*, which preceded the Law of the Father, in order to reinscribe this Law in the texture of a universe of which the very principle of intelligibility is the structure of the symbolic.

The following analogy, included in an essay first published in 1913 (Ferenczi 1964, I, 259), can be considered a proleptic abbreviation of Ferenczi's main contentions in *Thalassa*:

The development of the psyche is not comparable to the growth of a bubble, of which the surface would stand for the present and the interior, instead of containing the past, would just contain void space, but rather to the growth of a tree, in which the annual rings of its whole past continue to live under its bark.

With regard to genitality, this comparison implies that, beneath the apparently clear-cut scheme of sexual dimorphism, layers of non-dimorphic or pre-dimorphic sexuality continue to exert their influence on the configuration and variability of sexual life. Not surprisingly, Ferenczi endorses the genetic view of "psychobisexuality" according to which anatomical and psychosexual rudiments of the originally bisexual disposition are preserved, and, under certain conditions, may become dominant in an individual's psychic life (Ferenczi 1964, II, 211). Ambisexuality, therefore, includes "the psychic capacity of the child to direct its originally objectless eroticism toward the male, the female or both sexes, to fix itself of one sex or both" (I, 144). Since Ferenczi stresses that "the psychological sexual traits in each individual are mixed, although in unequal proportions" (I, 157), sexual relations with one's own sex constitute just a symptom that "can be either the manifestation of very different diseases and development disorders, or the expression of the normal life of the soul" (I, 154). Having mentioned the possible normality of same-sex relations, Ferenczi goes on to criticize the exaggerated suppression of the homoerotic drive components in modern culture, and to emphasize the importance of sublimated homosexuality for social and cultural cohesion (I, 167).

These contentions notwithstanding, Ferenczi took pains to avoid being "misunderstood" as an advocate of homosexuality. He emphasized that heterosexuality was "natural and founded in the psychophysical organization of the sexes" (Ferenczi 1964, I, 168), and, further, that "it would be a gross mistake to take the femininity of man for homosexuality in general" (IV, 139). Hence, it is no wonder that Ferenczi ultimately endorsed the Freudian view of homosexuals as "rudimentary sexual types that have remained imperfect, whose development has been arrested at a provisory stage" (IV, 139). The obvious ambiguities in Ferenczi's assessment of homosexuality can be explained to a certain extent by the fact that, despite his theoretical acknowledgement of the genetic complexities of sexuality he feared any possible confusion between the psychoanalytical conception of a generalized bisexuality and what was assumed to be Hirschfeld's idea of homosexuality as a "third sex" a special and privileged sexual intermediary stage. Since the textual evidence shows that Ferenczi was cognizant of Hirschfeld's views regarding the sexual intermediariness of all human beings, his depiction of Hirschfeld's *Zwischensktfenlehre* as a mere advocacy of homosexuality constitutes a paradigmatic case of psychological repression. Despite the main contentions of *Thalassa* regarding the complex interrelation between phylogenesis and ontogenesis, Ferenczi disregarded Hirschfeld's emancipatory perspective of cultural organization beyond the ideological strictures of binomial sexuality and opted for the Freudian thesis of heterosexual teleology. Although the most innovative aspects of *Thalassa* seem to aim at the dissolution of the Oedipal regime for the sake of a non-ideological, complex, and realistic vision of each individual as a unique case of sexual intermediariness, Ferenczi remained, at least *coram publico*, an advocate of the binomial scheme of sexual distribution that sustains that regime.

Having neglected the deconstructive implications of Hirschfeld's doctrine of sexual intermediaries, Ferenczi regarded female sexuality from a typically phallogocentric perspective, as a *modus deficiens* of the

prototypical sexuality of the male. At the same time, however, Ferenczi radicalized the fundamental Freudian premise of the model character of sexuality for the life of the psyche by assigning to genitality the key role in deciphering the universal symbolism that conjoins the realms of matter and spirit. His depiction of thalassic regression from copulation to the limits of Death is ultimately an itinerary back to the source of symbolic representation. As the locus of the unmediated confrontation with Becoming that marks the worldview of tragedy, this source is in fact the arena of what Ferenczi once termed the “primordial struggle with reality” (Ferenczi 1964, III, 489). Tellingly, Ferenczi refers to Nietzsche’s philosophy of tragedy when he spells out, in the last pages of *Thalassa*, the consequences of the agonistic interdependence of Life and Death. Even though Ferenczi considered on one occasion that his theory of genitality could be retold harmlessly “in the form of a fairy tale” (III, 457), its critical edge can hardly be overestimated. Thus, despite its ambiguities and inconsistencies, *Thalassa* contributes to the dismantling of Western religious traditions by “reducing”, that is, “reconducting” their redemptive aspirations to the lucid truth of tragedy. Since regression is the *energeia* of progression, *Thalassa* fosters the recontextualization of Western religious textualities within the symbolism of Being arising from the confrontation with Death. That Ferenczi’s enterprise is maimed by the uncritical assumption of Oedipal sexual differentiation and heterosexual teleology does not lessen the grandeur of his endeavours, for they mark the locus where a future post-religious mythopoiesis, leaving behind the Adamic narratives of binomial sexuality, could attempt, for the first time in history to symbolize human sexuality in the potential infinity of its differences.

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This text corresponds to: Chapter 10 Metapsychological Mythopoesis: On Sándor Ferenczi's Theory of Sexual Difference and the Agonic Conception of Life, J. Edgar Bauer, pp. 169-183, in: GENDER AND MODERNITY IN CENTRAL EUROPE: The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy an its legacy, Part IV Early Psychoanalysis and Its Legacy, Edited by Agatha Schwartz, University of Ottawa Press, 2010.

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