

METAPSYCHOLOGY IN FERENCZI: DEATH INSTINCT OR DEATH PASSION?

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The collection of dated, incomplete and provisional notes, comprising the posthumous document known as *Clinical Journal* (1985 [32]), as well as the preceding ones during 1930 and 1931, and those continuing it from October 1932 (*Notes and Fragments*) Post. 1930-33 XXI), compose very valuable information covering a wide range of subjects. Sometimes it deals with further developments of the works published during his life, on others, the author reveals aspects of his own thoughts which hardly appear in the works published with his express consent.

Within the radically novel beliefs, practically not suggested until then, the fragments involving a reformulation of Freudian metapsychological concepts are especially significant, and particularly those implying a critical position with respect to the Freudian concept of death pulse (Freud 1920g), which gradually appears with the passing of time in his notes.

This evolution of Ferenczi is not only a critical awareness with respect to Freud, but also with respect to himself, since it is going to result in the almost complete abandonment of this concept of death pulse, which formerly, before being publicly declared by Freud, had already been suggested by our author, who had shown the interest of introducing an idea approaching a “tendency towards inertia” (1913 VIII) which Freud himself was unwilling to conceptualise, at least as “death tendency”, as proposed by Ferenczi, according to what Lou Andreas-Salomé indicates (Andreas Salomé 1970 {1912-13})¹.

But once the “third step” had been stated by Freud (1920g) in pulsional dualism, Ferenczi soon started to manifest his discrepancies, with respect to nuances; on the one hand, the death pulse is discussed in his “Hegemony” (*Thalassa*, 1924 XLII); but in fact, we might be dealing with a “perpetual oscillation between life and death pulses”, which is only a difference of nuance, but not trivial since Freud had made the supremacy of the death pulse over that of life one of the latter’s intrinsic traits. On the other hand, what “according to Freud’s classification”, in certain diseases was “a congenital weakness for the will to live” (due to the excess weighting of the death pulse), for Ferenczi, at least in some cases, it is a weakness that does not depend on a “congenital character”, but refers to a “simulated morbid tendency” (in fact, badly conceptualised) not attributable to the death pulse but to early traumatism (*The Badly Received Child and His Death Pulse*, 1929 V).

These differences in nuances in the work published during his life time, will have a much greater meaning in the posthumously dated notes. Hence, no more starting those conserved from 1930, in the second note of the first day of writing (10/VIII/30), we find that the expression “death pulse”, at least formulated as such, does not convince the author, and a few days afterwards (24/VIII/30 -1st note), he proposes replacing it by “altruistic pulse”.

A new and personal theory arises from the moment, which using Freud’s theory as a basis, gradually differentiates itself and introduces an “apparently slight modification of the Freudian hypothesis of life and death pulses” (23/II/32). Insisting with the author, only that of the apparently slight modification, going over his developments, Ferenczi finally discards the conceptualisation of any death pulse or instinct and reconsiders psychic dynamics according to an attenuated dualism between not completely opposed different life tendencies, on the metapsychological basis of his theory.

In another part, I have tried to explain (Jiménez Avello, 98) this pulsional neoconception based, I insist, on the main idea that there are life instincts or pulses. To describe it here would exceed the formal limits and purpose of this work. It should only be mentioned that I would perfectly accept Freud’s warning (1920g)

on his “third step”: “what follows is speculation, often to a great extent, which each person will consider or reject according to his/her subjective standpoint”. Also like Freud, it is not so satisfactory solved for us not to consider it as a “lame” theory, such that the verses of Abu Hariri may be applied (“The Scripture say: hobbling is not a sin”) with which Freud ends this work.

Once having excused myself for not having explained this neoconception here, moreover I would like to suggest that it is not necessary to know it in detail, such that a question arises that may be worded as follows: if there is not death pulse, if the supremacy of life pulses and the principle of pleasure in the psychism are maintained, how can the severe clinical situations related to the compulsion to repetition leading Freud to conceptualise a death instinct in the human being be explained?

The reply is predictable only knowing Ferenczi’s work a little and the works presented in the Full Meeting on Traumatise in the Congress, as well as in the different workshops in which related subjects were dealt with: they are early, massive and unforeseen traumatise, caused by destructive actions of the surroundings and especially those other significant ones, those which “simulated” (Fer 1929 V), on being due to something constitutional, a field in which the notion of the death pulse completely is forms.

I said that the reply was predictable, but also obviously too short, since another question immediately arises: How can the traumatise explain phenomena of such a magnitude as traumatic dreams and neurosis, suicide behaviour or primary masochism? Or also: How can the incapacity for analysis of certain cases be explained without resorting to a possible death pulse?

For Ferenczi’s reply to this question, certain ideas related to certain terms appearing in the Journal, particularly three of them show great merit: the first, the concept of a “mimetism or mimicry phase” (30/VI/32 - 1st note) the second, the reference to some, so-called “foreign transplants” (7/II/32), the third, the in-depth study of the concept “passion” (3/VII/32?), which he had dealt with in other manuscripts.

MIMICRY (SEMIDILUTION, AUTOPLASTY)

Many years before Ferenczi had described his hypothesis on the genesis of the psychism or what is the same according to his terminology, on the establishment of the “sense of reality”. This hypothesis considers the concept of introjection appearing as the author’s own neologism in *Transfer and Introjection* (1909 VII), where he establishes that the construction of the psychism results from an interplay of introjections and projections.

In *The Development of the Sense of Reality and its States* (1913 VIII), the first work ever written about the genesis of feeling itself (Balint; in Ferenczi, 68-82), he makes use of these ideas from a genetic point of reference. In it, he establishes a series of phases, periods or states, by which he explains the evolution of the subject from the primary psychic state (“state of unconditional omnipotence” “monist”), omnipotentially ruled by the principle of pleasure, until the psychism ruled by the principle of reality (“dualist”). In this process, the unconditional omnipotence of the intrauterine phase, after passing to a conditioned phase with birth (conditioned to hallucinations, gestures, etc.) and in successive phases, cedes its supremacy to the principle of reality in what was then (1913 VIII) called the “projective state” or “scientific state” of reality.

This approach is basically maintained in the posthumous notes. The development phases of the sense of reality and the mechanisms articulating them described in (1913 VIII), although not specifically referred to, let us understand that they are maintainable as the substrate of evolution, transforming the “clairvoyant child” of the Journal into an adult (19/VII/32-1st note). Only that here, the approaches will be extended by the conceptualization of a new phase, situated between the “unconditional intrauterine omnipotence” and that of “omnipotence conditioned to the desiderative hallucination” which in the article of the 13 followed it. Ferenczi presents it as follows: *Before the hallucinatory period, there is still a period of pure mimetism*².

This very early phase of pure mimetism proposed, suggests immediate resonance in relation to the Freudian idea of primary identification (prior to all object cathexis) and this is the case since Ferenczi is referring to the same matter, but does not feel satisfied with the development that has been given to it. He speaks of a psychic process whose importance perhaps has not been sufficiently appreciated, even by Freud, namely, the identification process as a stage prior to the object relation³.

And what has not been sufficiently appreciated, even by Freud, is the malleability of the psychism during this phase. This malleability is referred to in different ways. In the *Journal* he speaks, for example, of the idea of a state (consistency) still in semi-solution of the child personality⁴.

A long time before, in *Phenomena of Hysterical Materialization* (Fer 1919 V), he had hinted the existence of “autoplastic phenomena” in the psychism. Autoplastic in the sense of not seeking a modification of the surroundings, but of the own substance of the individual (an idea which he claims to have commented with Freud).

But the term which becomes most characteristic in the notes, is that which he uses in several languages among which the orthography only changes slightly. In English he writes, “mimicry”. The dictionary search of such a term does not necessarily add anything new to that suggested with mimetism, since, as such, it may be translated, but it is added if it is used in the biological sense, where the term refers to animal mimetism, whose most important example is the change of color of the chameleon to confuse itself with the surroundings. Hence, it is a mimetism whose function is to adapt to the environment, survive in it and being confused within it. More specifically, in biology, a “protective mimicry” (protective mimetism) is considered.

During this “phase of pure mimetism”, the tendencies to self-affirmation are, according to Ferenczi, very weak, such that an excess of pressure from the environment opposing the compliance of the principle of pleasure via self-affirmation, will oblige the compliance of this principle to be sought by the via of this “protective mimetism” against the external danger. The author expresses it as follows: *The “reaction of mimicry” (...) is more primary than the reaction of self-affirmation and to validate itself (...) (more childish).*⁵

The merit of this idea of a “mimicry” phase, which by the descriptions made about it, may be considered very early, original, is immediately revealed to us if we advance towards considering the structuring of the psychism being conceived. By means of the latter, a theoretical body begins to be completed, congruent with the magnitude granted to the action of the environment, of the other important factors, over the “human puppy” in his passage to a “human being”⁶, since during this phase in “semi-solution”, the psychism will tend to be molded, mitigated, mimetised one over the other. Ferenczi writes:

in this (stage or phase), a term for the situation of displeasure is finally used, however, not due to a modification of the surrounding world, but to the yielding of living substance, that is, due to a partial abandonment of the weak tendency towards the self-affirmation which has just been attempted, a resignation and an immediate adaptation of the self to the environment.⁷

If we continue the metaphor taken from Physics which is used when speaking of this state of “semi-solution”, it may be understood that the action of the surroundings, if not contrary to the principle of pleasure (tendency to self-affirmation) will favor the “solidification” of this semi-fluid body, or in other words, the individualization. If, on the contrary, the environment would oppose the principle of pleasure, the psychism will lead to the “liquefaction” or, in other words, towards the fusion-confusion with the other and the all.

THE “FOREIGN TRANSPLANTS”

This main idea approaches an extremely malleable psychism, where the mimetic tendencies predominate in adverse situations, opening, as I said, the possibility of advancing in the explanation of how the action of the environment on the psychism becomes so profound. So profound indeed, as to be easily confused with the subject’s own impulses.

To refer to this profound presence of the other in the subject, Ferenczi introduces the concept of “foreign transplants”:

*...adults make their will power enter and more specifically, psychic contents of an unpleasant nature in the child; these split-off foreign transplants vegetate throughout life in the other person.*⁸

“Foreign Transplants”: this expression evokes the grafts on a plant, which coming from another, form part of it, modifying it, from the first. The clarity of the barrier between the subject and the other is lost in the meta-

phor, as on the other hand occurs in most psychoanalytical conceptions, from Freud's classical psychoanalysis to some of the most recent ones, like that of Laplanche on the "enigmatic significant" (Laplanche, 88).

But the particularity of this conception on foreign transplants acquires all its originality when applied to "mimicry", which has its origin in actions intrusive to the other. This idea on "foreign transplants" permits, on the one hand, to accommodate a concept which is so basic for the theorisation of the trauma, such as the "introjection of the aggressor", or "identification with the aggressor", and on the other, opens the possibility of reconsidering the phenomena related to the compulsion to repetition which Freud related to a pulsional origin (of death) and which Ferenczi conceives, now we may express it, as deleterious phenomena for the individual produced, not by the death pulse, but as a 'passional' response of the subject to the traumatogenic action of the other.

PASSION

The term passion is used by the author more and more frequently in the articles published in the last years, but without greater precision regarding its exact meaning of his sources of erudition. Only a few lines at the beginning of *Post-Scriptum* with which he concludes, *Confusion of Language* (1933 IX), warns the reader about the Cartesian roots of the meaning of "passion" as used by Ferenczi. They are:

Psychoanalysis may maintain the Cartesian concept converting passions as a consequence of suffering, but perhaps they may also respond to the problem of knowing how the component of suffering, namely, sadomasochism is introduced in the ludic satisfaction of tenderness.¹⁰

This is a flashy reference to Descartes, because it appears with nothing preceding it and there it stays. Almost cryptic, it gains complete sense in some fragments of the Journal. Particularly in the undated note after those of 30/VI/32, possibly written on July 3rd 1932, Sunday¹¹, when Ferenczi had taken down from the shelves the corresponding volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*¹² and searched for several items, perhaps in the *Macropaedia*: among them "Passion" and "Cartesianism".

Firstly, Descartes is presented as a suitable source to reconsider the philosophical facet of Ferenczian metapsychology: it is with Descartes that the Subject himself becomes an object of investigation; it is with Descartes that the "*res cogitans*" is habilitated for its own knowledge. In turn, Descartes is one of the Malebranche's sources (to whom Ferenczi also refers), as well as of Spinoza, Leibnitz, of mechanicism, dualism, etc., authors and theories constituting an important part of the epistemological substrate of psychoanalysis.

Ferenczi was interested in the philosopher, particularly to consider with him, the term "passion". Firstly, he looked for it as such, then he looked for Cartesianism and read that referring to *Essay of the Passions* (Descartes, 1649) of the French philosopher.

If we repeat the etymological search for the word "passion" ourselves, but with the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy, we find:

Passion: *Action of suffering. 2. By analogy, that of Jesus Christ. 3. The opposite to action. 4. Passive state in the subject. 5. Any disturbance or disordered emotion of the spirit 6. Very strong penchant or preference of one person towards another 7. Vehement appetite or penchant towards something. 8 (...)*

Of the different meanings, perhaps all of them contribute to Ferenczian idea of passion, but above all that of "Vehement appetite or penchant towards something" responds the best to Ferenczi's idea, and perhaps that of Descartes, which the diarist investigates. This facet of the penchant should be especially highlighted, which is described as "vehement", compared with what would be a non-vehement penchant ("tender" for Ferenczi). In the Encyclopedia he used, this vehement character is made more evident: "*The modern use generally restricts the term to strong and uncontrolled emotions*"¹³.

Therefore, if we permit ourselves to link both dictionaries, it may be expressed that passions refer to "vehement (strong and uncontrolled) appetites and penchants".

For us, this is the sense nearest to Descartes taken by Ferenczi. In the rationalist thinker, passion originates from bodily suffering, it never has its origin in the soul (in the constitutional, we may say ourselves), but it is introduced in the “*res cogitans*” of man as a result of being, in turn, “*res extensa*”; it is a response of the *res cogitans* to the suffering coming from the body and environment.

Situated in this idea, the reference to Cartesianism in *Confusion of Language* (1933 IX) becomes more understandable. In a child that does not suffer, in a state of “passive object-related narcissism”, like that denominated in another part of the article or in “ludic satisfaction of tenderness” as said in the quote: What makes suffering appear?. The reply in Ferenczi connects with these Cartesian ideas: suffering installs itself as passion introduced in the soul as a result of the traumatogenic action of the environment. In brief: for the philosopher and the psychoanalyst, passion is the correlation in the subject(in the “*res cogitans*”) of the other’s action.

DEATH PASSION

With the purpose of clarifying this idea and comparing it with the Freudian death pulse, I would now like to introduce the expression “death passion”.

By means of this expression, ‘death passion’, I try to define the passional print provoked in the subject when the action of the other is a sadistic action, whose correlation in the subject will be the inoculation, like a “foreign transplant” of this ‘death passion’, a deep print of suffering disturbing his/her vital balance, so much so, as to be confused with something of the order of the constitutional and the pulsional (of death).

Using Descartes’ belief that the pineal gland is the point joining the soul and the world, we may agree with Ferenczi that the Freudian theory leads to confuse what “death passion” is, grafted on the same pineal gland of the subject by the action of the world, with a supposed death pulse emanating from the subject’s “soul”, an idea which the author considers as “erroneous” to which he applies the descriptions of “sadistic” and “pessimistic”; writing: The idea of death pulse goes to far, it is already tinted with sadism¹⁴.

In this way, we can understand the description of “sadistic” applied to the “pessimistic” concept of death pulse or instinct: Sadistic because it collaborates in disguising the deleterious action of the other under a concept which exonerates him (of the death pulse). Sadistic, because it “refutes” the “death passion” deeply installed in the subject, but provoked by the action of the other. Sadistic, because it is constructed by someone (Freud) who, “identified as the aggressor”, provides scientific coverage to that “refuted” of the traumatogenic action, as intended by the aggressor. “Refuted” which for the author, as is known, constitutes the quintessence of the traumatic.

When the theory does not rescue the horror of the sadistic action of the other, it is because the theory itself is impregnated with this sadism, because it is a “passionate” science, in Ferenczi’s Cartesian terminology

... Science is also “passionate”, when it does not see or recognise more than selfish instincts.¹⁵

ELOISA

Some aspects of Eloisa’s treatment¹⁶ may serve to articulate these ideas at the clinical level. Eloise was a little older than thirteen when she came to the surgery with her mother. The immediate reasons for coming are an increasingly strong blockage for the study, as well as a growing psychic upset where anxiety and a negligible will to live intermix.

In the ideative content, the miserable situation in which, according to her, her mother and herself live has a strong presence. Both are the only two members of a family where there are no brothers or sisters and from which the father has been missing for several years, when the mother decided to escape from a pitiful economic and matrimonial situation emigrating with her daughter from their native country.

As immigrants in Spain, Eloisa and her mother have suffered all kinds of hardships and stresses. Stresses which currently have provided this woman with the meagre benefit of being able to feel many of the twenty-four hours of the day with badly paid, exhausting and unappealing work.

The painful experience of this situation is common to mother and daughter. At times, the similarity in tone and contents of their story, calls one’s attention. We know about the mother’s experience, thanks to

some interviews had in her presence, in which moreover, we learned that Eloisa was born from a “chance pregnancy” well received by her mother, because she wanted to have children, but when the child was born, the mother’s relation with her husband had strongly deteriorated and “soon began to know how difficult it is to have a child”; she suffered aggressions and affective and material abandonment by her husband. Eloisa also knew this story in detail: in part, thanks to her own memories, since the situation lasted until she was eight years old, and in part, thanks to her mother’s version.

Eloisa is full of feelings of impotence and probably envy. Her mother and her are “outcasts” and will never be able to leave such a situation. Also feelings of guilt: she complicates her mother’s life; she is a bad student, a difficult child. And now, on top of everything, she needs psychotherapy.

This and other data from the clinical situation makes the overwhelming guilt felt by Eloisa more and more obvious and leads us to think about somebody afflicted with guilt, but not with guilt coming from her own tendency to destroy herself, but from that induced by a story situating Eloisa in the place of the person guilty for the fateful maternal tale. A certain reflection in what is obvious in Eloisa corroborates this hypothesis: she is a girl with an acceptable physical appearance, well combed and reasonable dressed, attends school like any other child of her age, speaks correct Spanish (not her mother’s case) has time for pleasure, etc.; in other words, if any situation may be considered as unfortunate, it is her mother’s and not her own.

Therefore, Eloisa seems to us as a “badly received child”(Fer 1929b). Badly received by her father, of course, but also by a mother, who in spite of being absolutely devoted, points to her as the irreparable cause of her misfortune.

From the beginning, the therapist sensed the threat of a psychotic outbreak, which could openly triggered if the treatment could not control it. Three specific moments from the same session may serve to demonstrate this risk:

--Eloisa has brief periods (in this and other sessions), not reaching a minute, in which she seems to be “gone” if we use the terms of the Journal: absent, “not there” (14/II/32). The classical treatises on psychiatry described these periods as “fading”, similar in their appearance to an epileptic absence, which is referred to as a symptom for the early diagnosis of schizophrenic psychosis.

--On some occasions she mentions having certain fantasies which, on the one hand, attract her and on the other shock her “because they are too real”. This sensation of reality is manifested to the therapist by Eloisa’s anxious gestures when she unsuccessfully tries to put a voice to them. The therapist doubts if the presence is the construction of an illusory fantasy or rather if it has a delirious or hallucinatory context which imposes itself and which she can hardly cope with.

--In another moment, without apparent continuity with the above, she often refers to having fantasies, “even unpleasant”, in which she is a stone, a tree or any other element from Nature. She narrates this with certain poetic beauty and nostalgia. When, afterwards, there is silence, the therapist finds himself thinking about the risk of suicide in this girl. In fact, after the silence, Eloisa talks about suicide, although she admits that she has never tried “because it would be too easy”.

* * * * *

Until this stage, the necessary clinical information for our development, since it is this part of the material which is suitable to show Eloisa’s situation as the result of the “transplant” made over her of the effects of a difficult life, which is her mother’s case but not her own. So, we may think about the serious situation in general and the suicidal ideas, particularly in a “foreign transplant”, in a ‘death passion’ grafted over her “mimicry tendencies”.

Considering this approach and the terms we have been dealing with, taken from Ferenczi or proposed as from him, we may condense in Eloisa most of that expressed regarding the clairvoyant child’s “depravation”. So: the sadistic action, the traumatogenic action of the other, an efficient action due to the malleability of the psychism in a “mimicry phase”; inoculating in the child certain “foreign transplants”, the most destructive of which, we may call ‘death passion’.

Where does the death pulse remain in all this conceptualisation? Nowhere. Such that the small note found in a notebook beneath the ruins makes sense. (Dupont, 98):

Nothing but life-instinct.

Death-instinct, a mistake (Pessimistic).

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Volver a Newsletter 18-ALSF

Notas al final

- 1.- 10-11/September/1913. "Avec Ferenczi".
- 2.- 30/VI/32 (1), "Projection of Adult Psychology over Children (Falsum)".
- 3.- 7/IV/32, "Destiny of the Children of the Mentally Ill".
- 4.- Ditto 3.
- 5.- 30/VI/32 (2), "Hypocrisy and <enfant terrible>".
- 6.- "Le petit d'homme" and "l'être humain" respectively, according to the expression of Althusser.
- 7.- 30/VI/32 (1), "Projection of Adult Psychology over Children (Falsum)".
- 8.- 7/IV/32, "Destiny of the Children of the Mentally Ill"
- 9.- A concept which he publicly explained in *Confusion of Language Between Adults and the Child* (1933 IX).
- 10.- This title with which *Confusion of Language* was read and with which it was published the following year, was not this one, but that of "Influence of Adult Passions on Character Neuroses and the Sexual Development of Children", the same title as the note of the *Clinical Journal* of 3/VIII/32?.
- 11.- A supposition I base on its contents, its relative extension and on having observed the author's custom to write in his Journal on most Sundays.
- 12.- One of Freud's two presents on the 50th anniversary of Fer. The other is the short commemorative text dedicated to him (Freud 1923i).
- 13.- 3/VII/32?, "Influence of Adult Passions on the Character Neuroses and Sexual Development of Children".
- 14.- 13/VIII/32, "Register of Psychoanalysis Sins (A Patient's Reproaches)".
- 15.- Ditto 14.
- 16.- I thank Eloisa's therapist for authorising me to use this material, initially known by me for purposes of supervision.