

**THE FERENCZI CULT:
ITS HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL ROOTS.**

Running title: THE FERENCZI CULT.

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The most well-known and influential Hungarian participant of the psychoanalytic movement was Sándor Ferenczi. His life work has evoked -after a long silence or at least semi-silence- great interest and enthusiasm first in Western Europe (France, Italy, Spain, Germany), then in North and South America, and most recently, surprisingly, even in his native country, Hungary. In other words, he may become eventually a prophet in his own land.... In the last decade, Ferenczi's rediscovery has led to numerous new publications of his works, to monographs, essays, commentaries on his biography and on his clinical and/or theoretical achievements, as well as to important international conferences in Budapest, Madrid, Tel-Aviv, Bologna, etc.¹

Paradoxically, despite the growing scholarly interest in his theoretical and therapeutic achievements, Sándor Ferenczi still remains an enigmatic and somewhat mysterious figure who has recently become an object of cult. It seems that he could not escape the fate of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis, most notably, that of Freud and Jung: their life and work have become a myth, an object of cultic respect and adoration for the followers –diabolic figures for the enemies.

Quasi-religious cultivation of the “great man” is an often-observable phenomenon in literature, politics, history, as well as in science, and it has several political and ideological functions. These functions may help to legitimate the whole enterprise, to increase the inner cohesion and the group identity of the cultic community, to defend the group against external threats and pressures. Psychoanalysis as a movement has been always particularly vulnerable to myth formation and creation of legends; first, for obvious sociological reasons (the needs to fight against external and internal threats), and, secondly, for reasons originating in the nature of therapy which deals with individual and collective secrets and phantoms. (11, 12)

The cultic functions can be realised in several ways, such as, for example, the ritualisation of the transmission of knowledge, and the “biography as passion” (13), that is, attempts to create a homogeneous and coherent biographical narrative in which all life history moments crystallises around the great man's central theme or passion. Most of the biographies written so far on the life great psychoanalysts are of this kind -and Ferenczi is not exception.

In this paper I want to call attention to some features and reasons of this cultivation -through focusing on certain elements of the Ferenczi cult. I do this, of course, without any intention to raise doubts in Ferenczi's greatness or originality, without any intention of “deheroisation”. However, I am convinced that a genuine historiography of psychoanalysis must follow the path of modern historiography in general, which attempts at deconstructing both myths and counter-myths about persons, events and processes in history, in political, as well as in cultural and intellectual history. Examining the structure of the myth formation about psychoanalysts we can learn a lot about how ideas are originating and operating in changing social contexts. (14, 15)

Of course, it is very difficult to separate “true history” from mythology, since psychoanalytic mythologies, as all mythologies are constructed from the pieces of reality. On the other hand, as recent philosophies of history, the works of Paul Ricoeur (16), Hayden White (17), Dominick LaCapra (18) and others teach us, there are no sharp boundaries between scientific historiography and fiction; retelling the past is, by necessity, a narrative reconstruction. The relationship between fact and fiction, reality and mythology are a particularly complex problem in psychoanalysis that, by its essence, concentrates to the problem of the relationship between facts and fictions, reality and fantasy in the person's life history. In the history of

psychoanalysis, it was Sigmund Freud who first introduced the concept of psychic reality the truth of which lies in the person's subjective, inner experience, as opposed to the "objective", "external" reality. In the historiography of psychoanalysis, we also encounter with these kinds of "psychic realities".

FERENCZI'S GOWN

The central question of my paper is: Why Ferenczi's figure is particularly apt for mythology formation? There is, of course, no simple answer to this question. In certain sense all great authors may become objects of cult –it is especially true for literature, where we can find, for example, the cult of Shakespeare from the 18 century on; or, to take another example, the cult of Attila József, the Hungarian poet whose liaison with psychoanalysis and early, tragic death contributed largely to the creation of legendary narratives (13). Cultivation is not a function of "objective" greatness (which, naturally, cannot be measured), but the *impact* the person exerted to contemporaries and to subsequent generations on various ways -directly or indirectly, through most different channels. According to Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud -together with Karl Marx- were *founders of discourse*, that is, they created discourses which could have been later challenged, disputed, refuted or falsified, but no one can avoid or surpass them (19). Ferenczi did not found new discourse, his whole life work remained within the frames of classic psychoanalytic discourse; nevertheless, his modifications and suggestions contributed largely to the survival and diversification of the psychoanalytic discourse. As the great Russian writer, Dostojevskij once remarked: we all come from Gogol's gown. In a certain way, some of the most significant directions of modern psychoanalysis came from Ferenczi whose gown was wide enough to cover tendencies which have been running later into very different, sometimes explicitly opposite directions.

Ferenczi was pioneer of one of the most influential directions in modern psychoanalysis, the *object relations* theory. As it is well known, he had an immediate role in the origin of this theory, most significantly through his disciples who later appeared on the British psychoanalytic scene: Melanie Klein und Michael Bálint. In these intellectual and personal routes of transmission the modern theories of attachment and infant development may celebrate in Ferenczi their founding father who always emphasised the significance of early mother-infant interaction and of the pre-oedipal period in general.

Recently, several authors have pointed out that there seem to be quite a few surprising similarities or connections between Ferenczi's and Lacan's theories. Although Jacques Lacan had repeatedly criticised certain aspects of Ferenczi's work, he also recognized that, for example, Ferenczi's ideas on the development of the sense of reality as well as on the origin of subject, or even on the person of the analyst and the counter transference had influenced his own theories on multiple ways. (20, 21). On the other hand, and for very different reasons, Ferenczi is celebrated, especially in the United States, as the pioneer of an interpersonal, "two-person psychoanalysis", or "humanistic" psychoanalysis, as contrasted to a "one-person psychoanalysis", represented by Freud and the orthodox psychoanalysis in general. (8)

Nowadays several psychoanalytic schools may celebrate in Ferenczi their founding father, their founding mother or at least some sort of secret spirit who animates the whole endeavour. This is, of course, a starting point of legendary formation, since each direction has its own image of Ferenczi (as they have their own Freud as well). There are, however, other important reasons and conditions of the formation of myths. Among these I have to mention here the role of personal documents which are now available in abundance from and on Ferenczi.

PERSONAL DOCUMENTS AND CONFESSIONS

One of the main reasons for the growing interest in Ferenczi was the publication of his *Clinical Diary* (22), in the 1980s (first in French, then in German, English, Italian and other languages, and, much later in 1996, in Hungarian [23]), and, of course, the publication of the subsequent volumes of his correspondence with Freud, which is now available in its entirety (24)². The diary and the letters as personal documents bring Ferenczi (and, to certain extent, Freud) into human closeness, and allow us a unique insight into

the sufferings and passions of the author(s), the form and content of their intellectuality, their private and professional successes and identity crises, and in this way these documents may serve as an extraordinary source of examples, models and historical legitimisations for the psychoanalytic endeavours of our days.

The use of personal documents raises the interesting problem of ‘What is an author?’, discussed by Michel Foucault. (19) Is Ferenczi, the author of *Thalassa* is the same subject as the person who complains in his letters to Freud about his digestion problems or sexual failures with Gizella? However, when personal documents are published and thus become available not only for researchers but for the general public, and may become objects for public discussions, they are interpreted -by necessity and quite independently of the original intentions of the authors- not simply as private reflections, self-narratives but *confessions* as well -and, as confessions, just like in the case of great writers, for example, Rousseau, Goethe or Thomas Mann, they help to create the image of the great man as being great in every pieces of his activities- by the mere fact of being brave enough to admit his sins, wrongdoings, failures and weaknesses. (Schorkse)

THE RHETORIC OF (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY

In the formation of mythologies the use of metaphors and other rhetoric figures play an important role. These metaphors are used in the self-description of the authors as *self-mythologies* much before disciples and biographers construct their “official” mythologies in oral and written forms. These self-mythologies use rhetorical figures, metaphors, and other forms of representations. For example, Freud celebrated himself as “conquistador”, Jung saw himself as a charismatic researcher of the soul. The figurative nucleus of Ferenczi’s own self-mythology was the metaphor of the “enfant terrible”. “The fact is that I am known generally as a restless spirit... or the *enfant terrible* of psychoanalysis” -writes in his article “Child analysis with adults”(1931).

The self-mythology of the “enfant terrible” had been easily transformed into another, *external* mythology which long dominated the “official” psychoanalytic community, that is, the myth of *mental illness*. Ernest Jones, the most prestigious representative of this myth describes with mournful solemnity the *extraordinary* insanity of the *extraordinary* person. He comments the last period of Ferenczi’s life with the following words: “The demons which remained hidden deeply in his soul, and against which he fought so successfully for many years, broke up at the end, and from this painful experience we had to learn again how horrible their power may be.”

THE INTERNAL OTHER

Jones’ verdict suggested that Ferenczi was, at the end of his life, mentally disturbed, and the main symptom of this disturbance was his opposition to Freud. This -politically rather incorrect- opinion was challenged again by another myth: that of the *victim*. As it is well known, Erich Fromm played a leading role in “rehabilitating” the Ferenczi as early as at the end of the fifties. In 1957 and 1958 he collected many, at that time available proofs (letters, interviews and other documents) against Jones’ allegations. Fromm’s main conclusion of investigating the Ferenczi case was that the historiographic method used by the British psychoanalyst does not differ essentially from a “Stalinist rewriting of history”, by which dissidents are labelled as betrayers, spies or mentally ill. According to Fromm, the Freud biography written by Jones reflects perfectly the totalitarian turn in the psychoanalytic movement which is dominated by closed circle of sectarian functionaries not so different from the Central Committee of a Communist party. Fromm suggested that in fact Ferenczi fell victim to what he calls a “character assassination” committed by this bureaucratic organisation. Quite independently of the correctness of the psychiatric or political diagnosis in the strict sense, the example of both Jones’ and Fromm’s show how whole narratives can be constructed around one label, that is, “mentally ill”, and “victim”, and how they can be used for justifying one’s particular position in relation to Ferenczi’s work. Thus, “martyrdom” has become part and parcel of the Ferenczi mythology. Martyrs - dying and resurrecting gods are needed for all movements – and the psychoanalytic movement is no exception from this rule.

All these mythological elements –“enfant terrible”, “mentally ill”, “victim”- helps the biographer to view the whole life work and to order life history facts from a certain perspective. From this perspective Ferenczi’s figure emerges as the crystallisation points of *otherness*. It is, however, a special kind of otherness, a different position which is *central and marginal* at the same time. This paradoxical position appears on different levels. On the one hand, Ferenczi was one the key figures in the psychoanalytic movement, who related to his Master – as Freud put it – with an “intimate community of life, feeling and interests” (F. 11.1.1933). On the other hand, serious disaccords and differences had gradually developed between them, which, however, never led to open break – unlike in the case of other great “dissidents” of the movement such as Carl Gustav Jung, Alfred Adler, Otto Rank or Wilhelm Reich, who were forcefully excluded from the movement, and, as a consequence, their differences were strongly radicalised. In other words, Ferenczi’s heretic position remained that of an “internal otherness”, which was not possible to solve within the given conditions.

THE HUNGARIAN CONNECTION

Ferenczi’s internal otherness should be examined in a broader social and cultural context. One of the signs of his otherness was that he spent most of his life in Budapest, in the “other” capital of “Kakanien”, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. This fact led many observers and commentators to often attribute some kind of “Hungarianness” to Ferenczi’s person, theories, and therapeutic attitudes. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the more than one hundred years of the history of the psychoanalytic movement is the important role played by Hungarians in it. The “Hungarian connection” of psychoanalysis is a frequently mentioned subject for serious as well as for anecdotic or legendary history, just as the Hungarian contribution to Hollywood, to the atomic bomb and modern mathematics. It is a truism indeed that quite a few members of the so-called Budapest School of psychoanalysis -for example, Sándor Ferenczi, Géza Róheim, Imre Hermann, István Hollós, Robert Bak, Mihály Bálint- acquired significant international reputation, sometimes even outside of the narrow disciplinary borders. The presence of Hungarian emigrants and their descendants on the North and Latin American, British, French, German, Swedish and other Western European psychoanalytic scene is also significant. The migration of psychoanalysts and the psychoanalysis itself is a phenomenon that must be studied in the context of one of the most remarkable historical trends of the 20. century: the intellectual migration which follows the attraction of the Western centres of modernisation. In this respect, the history of psychoanalysis has many similar features with the history of modern mathematics and physics, economics, philosophy.

But who is a Hungarian? What is Hungarian? According to many commentators, the spirit of Hungarian language, or some features of the Hungarian national character or soul inspired Ferenczi in developing his ideas on infant-mother relationship, love, or tenderness. These attributions go back to Freud himself who saw something exotic in Ferenczi’s Hungarianness, a flower burst into bloom in the middle of the Puszta, the Hungarian steppe. “Hungary, geographically so near to Austria, scientifically so foreign to it, has given to psychoanalysis only one co-worker, S. Ferenczi, but such an one as is worth for a whole society” (1914d) - wrote Freud in the *History of psychoanalytic movement*. When in 1910 the first collection of Ferenczi’s psychoanalytic essays was published in Budapest under the Hungarian title *Lélekelemzés. Értekezések a pszichoanalízis köréből*, Freud wrote to Ferenczi on January 14 (f. 101): “Don’t you want to reveal me what the strange word in the title (*Lélekelemzés*) means? It must be something very beautiful.”

The “strange word” is but the literal Hungarian translation of the word “psychoanalysis”. The question itself, however, betrays how Freud sometimes treated Ferenczi: he saw him as a “familiar stranger”, a citizen of a common, nevertheless scientifically and culturally foreign country, the representative of another culture, the discourse of which refers -in spite of the lexical identity of words- to an unknown, exotic domain, to “something very beautiful” in his imagination. This problem -that of language, communication, understanding and transmission- has become a central theme in Ferenczi’s work as reflected for example in the problematisation of the confusion of tongues between the child and the adults.

Constructions of Ferenczi’s Hungarianness are, however, rather misleading since he was far from being a prisoner of a national language and culture regarded as something exotic and strange. Quite the contrary,

he mastered German as mother tongue, if he had mother tongue at all, and his culture, his *Bildung* was essentially the same as Freud's. Ferenczi was a typical example of "the ethno-cultural and linguistic plurality of Central European *Lebenswelt*, which could be described as 'a complex cultural system'" (See Moritz Csáky – Elena Mannová: *Collective Identities in Central Europe in Modern Times*. Bratislava 1999. p. 8.) "In the multiple pluralistic situations of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy multi-lingualism was reflected among other ways, in the fact that the inhabitants spoke two or more languages in everyday life. Sometimes the 'mother' tongue was not confined to the mastery of one language, but could include knowledge of several languages, and this could affect cultural creativity as well."

Multiple pluralistic situations were particularly characteristic for the Jews of the Monarchy. Jews in the Monarchy have a long history of migration, acculturation and assimilation. Most of the founding fathers (and mothers?) of psychoanalysis were migrants -they themselves or their ancestors had wandered from the Eastern parts of Europe, from Galicia and other Eastern regions of the Monarchy, or from the territory of the Russian Empire, from Poland, the Ukraine and so on, toward the more western parts, Hungary, Austria proper, and Germany. Freud's or Ferenczi's family history are good examples of this mobility which was *geographical* as well as *social*: members of the subsequent generations of the assimilationist Jewish middle class move from Galicia through the Moravian Freiberg to Vienna, from Cracow through Miskolc to Budapest, from the periphery to the centre, from the small town, the shtetl, the ghetto to the large, modern, cosmopolitan, anonymous city where people were not separated according to their ethnic or religious origins. The choice of the medical profession, as in the case of Ferenczi, was also part and parcel of the assimilation strategies. Medicine was one of free professions which were open without limitations to people of Jewish origin in the Monarchy. Medical profession could promote one's life carrier and mobility as well as it could ensure social recognition and prestige. A doctor as citizen and modern intellectual was relatively independent from the social hierarchy while he had a cultural capital which was easily convertible and applicable: the doctor's role was more independent from linguistic, national or class boundaries than that of the traditional intelligentsia.

Thus, instead of searching for non-existing Hungarian roots, we have to emphasise this ethno-cultural and linguistic pluralism in Ferenczi's background. On the other hand, it is true that Ferenczi, as most members of the assimilationist Jewish middle class in Hungary, was loyal to the Hungarian state, and mastered its official language as well. His early, pre-psychoanalytic writings were published originally exclusively in Hungarian, mostly in the famous medical journal *Gyógyászat*. It is no time here to comment these early writings, which create, however, a rather interesting problem for the history of psychoanalytic ideas as well as for intellectual history in general. (A full collection of the pre-psychoanalytic writings was published recently by Judit Mészáros in Hungarian).

WHO IS THE AUTHOR?

The main problem of this early, pre-psychoanalytic writings lies in the following: To which extent can we claim that these essays anticipate, in fact, the later, professional psychoanalytic writings? We know from Ferenczi himself that in the beginning he refused Freud's ideas, especially the theory of the sexual origin of neuroses. In what sense can we see these works as part of his *psychoanalytic oeuvre*? Do they have their own, absolute value, or only local values, and they borrow their light from the aura of the later works? The question is not trivial at all since it concerns the fundamental problem of the relationship between the author and his work, the function of the author/subject, as I referred earlier to Michel Foucault's essay "What is an author?" In the light of Foucault's investigation we can say that Ferenczi seen as a unified, self-containing subject is a construction of the biographers, commentators and interpreters, and the function of this construction is to create a coherent biographical narrative which is organized around one main theme -unfolding the spirit of a genius. Examined from this Foucauldian perspective, Ferenczi's early medical-popular writings cannot be regarded part of his psychoanalytic oeuvre, and we can not find in them any genuine trace whatsoever of a "development" showing toward psychoanalysis, even though there are, naturally, thematic overlappings with Freud's interests: love, sexuality, hysteria, perversions,

homosexuality, degeneration, dreams, unconscious processes, the relationship between psychic and bodily processes, the evolution of the psyche etc. What is interesting here is the remarkable presence of an interest of, and a need in a natural philosophy which continues to influence his outlook in his psychoanalytic period as well. Spiritualist, mystic, occult, vitalist, organistic theories, so popular in Germany and also in Hungary in that time both in scientific circles as well as in the general public, exerted great influence on Ferenczi (not unlike to Jung -see Richard Noll: *The Jung Cult: Origins of a charismatic movement*. Princeton Univ. Press 1994). Thus, I believe that the special interest of the early writings come not so much their scientific content but from the occultist, vitalist and mystic tendencies which are part and parcel of Ferenczi's life work and contributes to the creation of mythologies -through his own sexual-philogenetic mythology described most consistently and at the same time with poetic erudition in *Thalassa*.

AN OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

Finally, the figure of Ferenczi's (as well as of Freud's) symbolizes a "thalassic regression", an "oceanic feeling", a nostalgia for the "golden age", the "never-never land", the "sunken world" of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, of the *fin de siecle* Budapest and Vienna which is often represented, even in our "postmodernist", 21. century world, as an "obscure object of desire". These nostalgic feelings feed also the widespread images of Ferenczi as being a central figure in the rich and flourishing intellectual and cultural life of Budapest in the early 20. century. These images are too familiar here to detail them: journals, theatre, Ferenczi seen at the café table in the company of writers, artists, scientists etc... In fact, psychoanalysis was one of the most significant intellectual currents in the *project of modernity*, together with other radical intellectual movements of the time. Nevertheless, at least in the beginning, they were all marginal movements which had affected only a very small modernising sector of the Hungarian society. Ferenczi's great successes, the Budapest international psychoanalytic congress in 1918, and the subsequent attempts for the practical implementations of his ideas on war neuroses (the order issued to introduce psychoanalytic treatment in the Austro-Hungarian Army), and, finally, Ferenczi's appointment as professor at the newly established University psychoanalytic clinic are, in fact, the signs of the growing acknowledgement of psychoanalysis in wider circles. However, the issue to introduce psychoanalysis into Army medicine came, quite absurdly, in the moment when practically there was no more army, and Ferenczi's promotion for professorship took place in a rather antidemocratic way (the autonomy of the University had been suspended during the "short lived but glorious" Hungarian Republic of Councils.) Not to mention Ferenczi's decision to abruptly give up his professorial activity after a few weeks... Thus, the frequently mentioned legendary topos of Ferenczi as being "the world's first professor in psychoanalysis" is more like a failure than a success story.

Ferenczi's personal fate has proved to be particularly apt for a paradigmatic representation of Central European fate, the elements of which are particular creativity and innovation, special sensitivity, many-sidedness on the one hand; non-recognition and isolation, continuous crises of identity, early death and oblivion, and later reparation and compensation on the other. It is not by chance that in retelling the "Ferenczi story" the narrative of the tragic hero and the non recognised genius dominates.

Ferenczi's one-time theoretical and technical suggestions and innovations, such as his experiments with the so-called "active technique", the elaboration of the problem of counter transference, his ideas on the origin and nature of psychic trauma and on the significance of "the confusion of tongue" have represented all the time a disturbing problem and a painful challenge for most psychoanalysts -a challenge to which there was hardly any serious answer in Ferenczi's lifetime. In the Ferenczi legend his figure emerges as *the* therapist who always showed real feelings, loving care and tenderness toward the patients -in opposition to Freud who appears as an 'authoritarian', "indifferent", "rigid" figure who lacked genuine interest and empathy toward them. But maybe, Ferenczi's real achievement was discovering the ways how therapeutic *effectiveness and control* can be increased. In this sense, love and tenderness in his therapeutic stance can be interpreted not only as noble and legendary emotions but also means and instruments to increase the "micro-power" of the therapist over the patient in the sense of Michel Foucault's theory of power. Is it possible that -in contrast to Freud's classical authority- Ferenczi represent modern, or even postmodern authority, which

is disguised, hidden, politically correct, ideologically democratic, equalitarian and interactive -but much more effective than the classical one? Ferenczi is, from this perspective, a rich source of ideas and examples for the psychoanalytic movement which seeks for the renewal of its authority in a radically different social context -in the “globalized” culture of the 21 centuries.

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Volver a Artículos sobre Ferenczi

Volver a Newsletter 17-ALSF

Notas al final

1.- See for example 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

2.- The project for the Hungarian translation of the Freud-Ferenczi correspondence and for the adaptation and revision of notes and commentaries started in 2000, and the Hungarian version of the correspondence is planned to be fully by 2004. (24)