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Toward a Psychoanalysis of Organs: A Note on Ferenczi's Contribution to the Theory of Sexuality

Introduction: On small texts with insight

At the time of writing this essay, in 2023, we are marking 150 years since Sándor Ferenczi's birth; and over 90 years since his death. In the 90 years since his death, for more than five decades, Ferenczi was the object of a complex event of forgetfulness: his presence within canonical psychoanalytic literature was almost spectral. To follow the terms used by Adrienne Harris and Stephen Kuchuck (2015, 5-6), Ferenczi was made into a 'ghost'. This spectral reference refers to his unacknowledged influence on theorists such as Melanie Klein, Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok, Michael Bálint, and Jean Laplanche, and to his absence from psychoanalytic training programmes and the core theoretical conversations in psychoanalysis.

For more than three decades, this event of forgetfulness started to be worked-through. The retrospective transformation of Ferenczi from 'ghost' to 'ancestor' (Harris & Kuchuck, 2015, 5-6) is the result of conversations, writings, conferences, seminars, ponderings on archival material, translations and teachings. It amounts to a revival of Ferenczi: where in the past we might have un-linked form his theoretical imaginary, his vocabulary, and his thought experiments, in the present many psychoanalytic thinkers are thickening the links.

In their essay "Why Psychoanalysis Has No History", Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Murray Schwartz (2012, 140) made an intervention into psychoanalytic historiography, by reminding us about the largely unacknowledged "trauma history of psychoanalysis". This refers to two distinct phenomena: firstly, to the migration of Jewish psychoanalysts before and during the Second World War, mostly to England and to the Americas, with deep consequences in terms of dislocation and communal fragmentation. Secondly, the notion of a trauma history refers to intellectual splits, quarrels and fragmentations internal to the field of psychoanalysis. At the intersection of these two forms of forgetfulness, what we are missing is a collective historical consciousness that can organise a set of disparate observations precisely as a trauma

history, a reflection on “a repetitive pattern of splits and consequent distortions” (Young-Bruehl & Murray Schwartz, 2012, 142). In particular, the split between Ferenczi and Freud had a crucial role to play in turning Ferenczi into a ‘ghost’, as many voices have shown (Bálint, 1968; Haynal & King, 1990; Martín-Cabré, 1997; Brabant, 2023). Crucially, turning Ferenczi into an ‘ancestor’ is not just a matter of setting the historical record straight, but of making sense of an arrest of the psychoanalytic imagination which lasted for nearly five decades, on both matters of theory and technique (Soreanu et al., 2023).

If the forgetfulness is of traumatic nature, and has produced profound splits in the psyche, the ‘revival’ cannot be a single act. There will need to be many overlaid revivals, constructions, links, and rearrangements around Ferenczi’s voice and his legacy (Soreanu et al., 2023). In the context of the publication of Ferenczi’s complete works in Hungarian,¹ and their forthcoming translation to English, organised by the International Sándor Ferenczi Network, new angles of engagement with Ferenczi’s early work are becoming possible. We now have fuller access to his early works, which have known little systematic engagement. Ferenczi’s contribution thus appears to us in a myriad of forms, in short texts, occasional talks, notes, fragments, or enigmatic succinct formulations that stimulate the clinical and theoretical imaginations. Some might be incomplete, or very condensed, but they carry important insight. The present essay is part of my broader project to rethink Ferenczi’s contributions to the theory of sexuality. In the first part, I engage with a short text of 1906 by Ferenczi, which I had access to in its French translation: “États sexuels intermédiaires” [Intermediary Sexual States]², and which was published in 1994 by EPEL Paris, in the volume *Les écrits de Budapest* [*The Budapest Writings*]. In the second part, I focus on a later theoretical construction, the idea of “amphimixis” (Ferenczi, 1924), which constituted another important development of a revised theory of sexuality. In the third part, I articulate some of the consequences of the idea of amphimixis, in terms of a psychoanalysis of organs and a new vocabulary on “organ cooperation” and “organ individuality”.

An early queering moment for psychoanalysis: Ferenczi’s “tertiary traits”

Ferenczi’s 1906 text, “Intermediary Sexual States” is a hybrid writing form: part object of dialogue with the medical establishment of the day, part theoretical intervention, part activist piece taking a stance in the defence of homosexuals. In 1906, in Budapest, the year after Freud was writing his first version of the *Three Essays*, Sándor Ferenczi presents this text in front of the Medical Association of Budapest. At this time Ferenczi defines himself as a neurologist, and he has not yet met Freud. We do not yet have an English translation of this extraordinary text; in 2023, we only have Hungarian and French versions. It is worth noting that in 1905, Ferenczi became the Budapest representative of the International Humanitarian Committee for the Defence

¹ So far, the first 3 volumes of *Ferenczi Sándor összes művei* have been published. (*The ed.*)

² Originally in Hungarian: Szexuális átmeneti fokozatokról. *Gyógyászat*, 1906, (46)19: 310-314. (*The ed.*)

of Homosexuals, created by the prominent Berlin sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. He signed petitions calling for legal reforms around the criminalisation of homosexuality and he published the talk we are looking at here. It is also worth noting Freud expressed his sympathy for this Committee, but he did not wish to be associated with the initiatives for legal reform.

In 1906 Ferenczi speaks to the medical establishment in the hope it would tolerate an intervention, an incision, a political breach, an activist statement in defence of a marginalised and oppressed group. As Ferenczi writes: “According to Hirschfeld, himself backed up by eminent physicians, individuals do not all progress toward a determined masculine or feminine type. There exist in certain cases certain intermediary forms between the two sexes. In the psycho-physiological organisation of such individuals, the masculine and feminine traits are intermixed.” (Ferenczi, 1906/1994, 244.)

Before entering deeper into the theoretical formulations of this short piece, let us focus on this early image of *intermixing*. The image counts for a moment of *queering* psychoanalytic theory and history. ‘Queer’ operates at its most political as an *activity* and not as a *noun*. Queer is thus always an intervention, an interruption, a transformational process. This is important because it allows us to invent new ways of thinking about relationality, about the many and beautiful forms in which a relation between two or several things can present itself to us (Soreanu, 2023).

How can psychoanalysis *queer itself* by learning to look more closely *at* itself in another temporality – say from 2023 to 1906? In 2023, many voices are writing, fruitfully, in a queer psychoanalytic orientation (Giffney & Watson, 2017). But can we still learn something by looking at a 1906 text about intermixing? I side with Caroline Dinshaw (2007, 178), who writes: “I [focus] on the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalised people now and then, and I suggested that with such queer historical touches we could form communities across time.” I find myself wondering what the touch of this distant time of psychoanalysis can do to its present time. I thus wish for a *queer spectrality*, for a moment when the affective force of the past can erupt into the present, speaking of a desire from another time and placing a demand on the present in the form of an ethical imperative. What would it mean to write a theory of sexuality starting from a landscape that is beyond the phallus and beyond a strictly Oedipal imaginary? Queering our practice meets us here as an ethical imperative.

In a recent text, psychoanalyst Jakob Staberg (2023) introduces the idea of a “tactile eye” as an epistemological intervention in the genealogical analysis of psychoanalytic traces. The tactile eye is a hybrid and queer form, neither solely sight not solely touch, and it stands for a particular type of perception that needs to be accessed for writing a revised history of psychoanalysis: the writer of such a history will “touch with their eyes” a wide range of materials: letters, disparate notes, theoretical texts, gestures of turning away (like Freud turning away from Ferenczi in 1932), silences, half-secrets, noisy quarrels, erotic passions, unfinished analyses, and dreams.

The “tactile eye” thus brings another way of knowing, a tentacular exploration. Tentacles are neither fingers nor eyes. In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, feminist thinker Donna Haraway (2016, 30) talks about a new tactile mode of knowledge: “tentacular knowledge”. She reminds us that “tentacle” comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, which means “feeler”, and *tentare*, meaning “to feel” and “to try”. I believe Ferenczi himself was as “tentacular” psychoanalyst and thinker: feeling, trying, experimenting, hesitating, advancing, retracting, revising.

In his writing, Jakob Staberg (2023) unpacks the making of Ferenczi into a ‘scapegoat’, and this can help us traverse other exclusionary events and inclinations in the field of psychoanalysis. Staberg also engages in a fascinating comparative analysis of Freud and Ferenczi’s dreams, showing their different atmospheres. In Ferenczi’s dreams, we meet images of archaic mothers and of loss, contamination, contagion and leakage. I find myself wondering what the touch of this distant time of psychoanalysis, landing us in 1906, can do to its present time. What matters here is that for a moment we find ourselves *before* Ferenczi met Freud, in 1908, before this intense and complicated relationship that ended in trauma and impacted the field profoundly.

Let us take a further step into the 1906 text on “Intermediary Sexual States”. Here, Ferenczi differentiates between *primary sexual traits* (genitals, which he analyses as fundamentally hermaphroditic in nature since the first days of embryonic life); *secondary sexual traits* (gained by bodies in puberty, but occurring in surprising mixes); and, remarkably, *tertiary sexual traits*, or *the psychological character*. This tertiary category involves, on the one hand, the subjective, lived, fantasized experiencing of both primary sexual traits and secondary sexual traits (or, we might say, *‘lived’ gender*); and sexual attraction, love (or, we might say, with Freud, *object choice*) (Ferenczi, 1906). Although he does place a male and a female character as two types of this tertiary layer, again, remarkably, a study of many cases shows us an extreme *variety* of intermediary states, more or less feminine men and more or less masculine women, where the individual’s sexual being results from a *modulation* of primary, secondary and tertiary sexual traits. What Ferenczi writes is an anticipation of Patricia Gherovici’s (2017) succinct formulation on sexual difference: sex needs to be symbolised, while gender needs to be embodied.

Another extraordinary move in Ferenczi’s text is that of shifting, halfway through the piece, to the term “Uranians”, the 19th century term (in German: *Urning*, coined by German lawyer, journalist, early sexologist Carl Heinrich Ulrichs), to refer to homosexuality. The motivation he gives is that the population he is discussing have themselves shown resistance and dislike to the term ‘homosexuality’, because their subjective experience while in love is not that they love a person of the *same* sex, but overwhelmingly one of loving a sex *different* from theirs. Reverting to the term “Uranians” would such resolve this external imposition. This strikes the reader as a very contemporary point, one that comes *after* the interventions of feminists and queer theorists on the violence of naming and the intricacies of sexual identity and gender, including the recent excellent contributions on trans psychoanalysis (see Gherovici, 2017; Saketopoulou & Pellegrini, 2023).

Ferenczi brings in support of his thesis on tertiary sexual traits a letter written by a transvestite, who describes the (voluptuous but also ordinary) experience of wearing women's clothes, also making a case that the transvestite's seduction of their object of love is in effect and if seen from close no different from the seduction of a man by a woman. There is nothing outrageous about it. Ferenczi's "tactile eye" on this letter is a moment of queer spectrality: the affective force of the past does erupt into the present, speaking of a desire from another time. After encountering this story of other-than-heterosexual desire, as regarded by Ferenczi in 1906, I ask: what does a theory of sexuality beyond the phallus and Oedipal commonplaces of thought look like?

In this short text, Ferenczi is able to unpack the existence of *intermediary* forms in the field of sexuality, in a moment that comes before a tradition of thinking about the intermediary. Psychoanalysis can learn from queer theory how to sustain a phenomenological effort in describing and symbolising intermediary states. The psychoanalyst can be alongside their patient in finding a metaphor for their being in-between states – when some old form is dissolving, and the new form has not yet emerged. The difference between symbolising and labelling is crucial here. Labelling is a kind of naming ridden with projections, idealisations, reifications. It makes sexuality into a 'thing'. But there exists a naming that is accompanied by meaning-making, by the work of phantasy. This naming is hesitant, or oblique. In Ferenczi's 1906 text, this oblique naming is the dropping of 'homosexuals' for 'Uranians', upon their own protest to the name.

I end with Ferenczi's words in 1906: "I consider homosexuality as an act that has no damaging consequences for society. [...] The repression of homosexuals is unjust and futile. [...] It is possible and necessary to talk about these problems and to write what we think. If we do not do this, we condemn homosexuals of being detained without a profound etiological analysis, in which case we are not equitable judges but cruel executioners."

A later construction: amphimixis

We now take a leap of almost two decades, to arrive at a concept that is central to Ferenczi's theory of genitality, and that I consider a de-Oedipalising intervention. I am referring to Ferenczi's (1924) idea of *amphimixis of eroticisms*. In 1924, in his book *Thalassa*, Ferenczi brings a striking metapsychological construction that can impact the way we think through different forms of relationality. His focus is not on component instincts, but on the outcome that they can lead to through their *encounter*, while understanding that this will not be a peaceful, harmonious, or conflict-free encounter. It may be a clash. Ferenczi talks about the fusion of different eroticisms, containing different pleasurable and painful experiences, with different object relations and forms of displacement, in a way which transcends any strictly *individual* horizon of reference. He names the fusion of eroticisms 'amphimixis' – a medical term that denotes the mingling of two substances, usually to create a third. In Greek, the prefix 'amphi-' means 'on two sides'. There is no unilinear, irreversible or progressive sexual

development of the individual, but rather every act we might wish to analyse will be a mix of infantile, adult, oral, anal and genital components. This mix will be unique, and irreducible to these components. Amphimixis refers to individuals, but also to their *relations*. As I see it, amphimixis is at the heart of a radical revision of sexual theory.

“For what I described in physiological terms as a coordination of urethral and anal innervations may be expressed in the vocabulary of the sexual theory as a synthesis or an integration of anal and urethral erotisms into genital erotism. I may be permitted to emphasize this new conception by giving it a name of its own; let us term such a synthesis of two or more erotisms in a higher unity the *amphimixis* of erotisms or instinct-components.” (Ferenczi, 1924, 9.)

The consequences of this non-linear conception are profound. In *Thalassa*, we see a democratisation of forms of erotism. Ferenczi creatively de-centres the genital register; he displaces the primacy of the genital over the other component instincts. His language is ‘horizontal’, as he argues that: “The genital would then no longer be the unique and incomparable magic wand which conjures erotisms from all the organs of the body; on the contrary, genital amphimixis would merely be one particular instance out of the many in which such fusion of erotisms takes place” (Ferenczi, 1924, 12). Genitality is read in *Thalassa* as a retrogression to the original striving of being immersed in the womb and its gratifications. But beyond the genital amphimixis, the psyche is capable of “a clever combination of mechanisms of pleasure” (Ferenczi, 1924, 12).

We enter a relational landscape, of complicated mixtures and transpositions of erotism. In terms of psychic forms that are imaginable with Ferenczi, at times it seems that an ‘inter-species’ relationship goes on *within* the same self or ego. The Other has already made it to our psychic life, and there are odd ‘inter-forms’ and fragments that attest to this Other-within.

A telling example that Ferenczi (1924, 14) finds is that of synaesthesias, which he does not cast as displacements or confusions, but he instead regards as a site for the amphimixis of eroticisms: “synaesthesias [...] in which the stimulation of a given sense organ is accompanied by the illusional stimulation of some other (*audition colorée, vision acoustique, audition odorée, etc.*) [coloured hearing, acoustic vision, olfactive hearing] supply evidence for the existence of mixtures of erotic trends” (Ferenczi, 1924, 14). To this, we can add tactile vision, the “tactile eye” I discussed above, which prefigures an epistemology of intermixing.

Toward a psychoanalysis of organs: organ cooperation and organ individuality

One important consequence of the construction of ‘amphimixis’ is that sexuality becomes a matter of an intricate web of connections and forms of relationality between different psychic parts and fragments. Ferenczi explores what I would call a ‘psychoanalysis of organs’, which takes seriously the organ as a site of anxiety and signification, and investigates some fascinating semi-autonomous qualities of organs. Some version of a psychoanalysis of organs takes shape in Ferenczi’s writings of

1919, 1926, 1932, where he introduces ideas such as “organ neurosis” (1926) and even more curious phenomena such as “organ individuality” (1924, 82) or the “cooperation of organs” (1924, 82) – a distinctively relational idea.

Some questions raised in these texts are only partially answered, but they remain relevant for contemporary psychoanalytic debates. What is the relationship between the ego and the organ? What is the relationship between the psyche and the soma? In Freud’s work on hysterical conversion the organ/limb was rendered as ‘mere matter’, in the service of the psyche, mouldable and transformable through the power of the psyche. There is thus a ‘mastery’ of the ego over the organ in Freudian theory. In short, the ego loses the mastery over the organ when the organ is subject to an over-cathexis. But what happens when the idea of ‘mastery’ can no longer encompass the relation of the ego with the organ? This is the question that Ferenczi asks when he treats organs not only as a site of anxiety, but also as a site of meaning and even interpretation. Ferenczi invites us to wonder about the secret life of organs. Organs appear capable of different kinds of regressions, perversions, strangulations, condensations, displacements, doublings, which we usually attribute to the psychic stratum (Wilson, 2015).

We enter a clinical imagery of ‘wise organs’, or, as Ferenczi states: “when the psychic system fails, the organism begins to think” (1932, 6). The accent here is on the productive and materialising force of hysteria: the lump in the throat of the hysteric patient is not merely a hallucination, but it is part of a new ‘grammar’ of organs, a stirring up of the tissues of the throat, or of the contents of the stomach, or of the intestinal matter, which implies a capacity for condensation, displacement, repetition, or identification. This showcasing of the creativities of the hysterical symptom has important implications for how we can imagine the relationship between the psyche and the soma. In short, there is a ‘horizontalising’ gesture here, where the soma is just as capable of complex acts as the psyche.

In *Thalassa*, Ferenczi (1924, 82) talks about an internal qualitative differentiation in the sphere of the libido, which can lead to an “organ libido” and even an “organ individuality”. As he writes: “According to the ‘theory of genitivity’, the cooperation of organs and of their component parts does not consist simply of the automatic adding together of useful workmen to give a sum total of performance. Each organ possesses a certain ‘individuality’; in each and every organ there is repeated that conflict between ego- and libidinal interests which, too, we have encountered hitherto only in the analysis of *psychic individualities*” (Ferenczi, 1924, 83). Ferenczi differentiates between the ‘altruistic’ functioning of organs and autoerotic or self-gratifying processes in the tissues. Organs are thus capable of cooperation, but this is not a guaranteed outcome; it takes struggle and a complicated negotiation between opposing forces.

Ferenczi constructs a whole new series of terms, which are both clinically and politically interesting: cooperation, conciliation, endurance of suffering, selflessness, appeasement, adaptation to renunciation, self-denial, compromise. In one entry of the *Clinical Diary*, Ferenczi even experiments with a modification to the sphere of the dualism death drive/life drive. He renames them the “drive of self-assertion” and the

“drive of conciliation” (Ferenczi, 1932, 41). The “selflessness” he evokes, including the “selflessness” of organs, emerges in relation to the scene of trauma. The “drive for conciliation” appears as a basis of the reality principle. To survive, as any sort of individuality, means to practice a kind of politics of self-limitation. In the same spirit, Jenny Willner (2023) argues against Ferenczi’s being a monistic thinker: what we find in his texts is not a fantasy of coalescence of everything into “one”, but of cooperation between radically different elements.

There is another image of radical plasticity of the psyche that is crucial here: Ferenczi describes a kind of layering of organs. It appears that in the moment of trauma “[n]ewly created organs in respect to their functions are only superposed upon the old without destroying them; even when the new functions make use of the material medium of the old, the latter organisation or function, although apparently given up, remains ‘potential’, ‘biologically unconscious’, and may again become active under certain circumstances” (Ferenczi, 1924, 93, fn.). This layering or superposition of organs means that any idea of evolution is questioned. The layered organs contain many temporalities within themselves, many references to other moments, including to other catastrophes. It is a concentricity of catastrophes, where forward movement or progress will almost certainly involve a level of denial of this multiplicity of temporal references.

A related note on radical plasticity is that there can be ‘new organs’ produced at the time of the trauma. These emerge in a sudden manner. They are psychic events. It is a kind of “teleplastic” transformation (Ferenczi, 1932, 117), producing ad hoc organs, which become responsible for some of the organism’s functions. Teleplasty is another term that is key to Ferenczi’s psychoanalysis of wise organs. In the *Clinical Diary*, he shows that in some cases the hallucination of breathing can maintain life, even where there is total somatic suffocation (Ferenczi 1932, 117). It is as if the subject generates ex-corporated lungs, which are the teleplastic double of the physical lungs. For the purposes of defence and survival, the subject can also generate “receptacles, gripping tools, tools of aggression” (Ferenczi 1932, 117), which will still fight for life, although the organism can find itself in a lifeless state or in deep coma. To further concretise this intriguing idea of teleplasty, Ferenczi evokes the case of “R.N.” (Elizabeth Severn) who imagined an infinitely expandable bladder formed at the back of her head, where all her pain can accumulate (Ferenczi, 1932, 121). This pain-collecting bladder has a function in surviving the intensity of suffering in the scene of trauma. Ferenczi pays close attention in his clinical work to such odd organs, swelling up and disintegrating, in relation to some detail of the scene. Among these odd organs, the protective bladder has a special place, allowing some partial and hallucinatory integration, in a psychic time where the danger of complete disintegration looms.

Conclusions

In these notes and short texts, Ferenczi emerges as a thinker interested in processes of differentiation and in singularities. He is curious about the internal making-different in the sphere of the libido, where through clinical observations and theoretical elaboration we can become more able to follow *qualitative* shifts. As he writes in *Thalassa*, “[w]e conceived of the mental always as a variety of mechanisms operated by one and the same energy, in such manner that this energy might shift from one system to another; but we have never spoken specifically of a shifting of qualities, above all of qualitative differences in the energies themselves, such as the amphimixis theory would demand” (Ferenczi, 1924, 10). He shows an interest in *intermediary forms in the field of sexuality, which are neither/nor, or are both/and*. This comes across first through a vocabulary of *intermixing* (1906) and then, two decades later, through a more complex clinical-theoretical construction, *amphimixis* (1924). Sexuality thus becomes the realm of radical plasticity: it is subject to multiple forms of relation, but also to blending new elements together in new mixes, eradicating old forms, and constructing novel ones out of psychic detritus. To restate this in his terms, the psyche is capable of “a clever combination of mechanisms of pleasure” (Ferenczi 1924, 12). The primacy of genality is questioned, and what emerges is a new vocabulary of fragments, parts and organs: from the cooperation of organs to organ individuality, to the layering of organs, and to teleplasty.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a UKRI Frontier Research Grant (ERC grant guarantee), the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council [grant number EP/X022064/1], project title: ‘FREEPSY: Free Clinics and a Psychoanalysis for the People: Progressive Histories, Collective Practices, Implications for our Times’ (PI Raluca Soreanu).

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