



***My Words Would Have Murdered:* Sandor Ferenczi, Women’s Memoir, and Reparative Reading**

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This article explores some of the ways in which the work of Sandor Ferenczi can open new possibilities for readers of literary trauma narratives. I examine the significant ways in which Ferenczi re-writes the Freudian analytic paradigm to introduce the importance of factors such as trust, compassion, and belief. I posit that through the use of strategies such as fragmentation and absence, contemporary women memoirists such as Meena Alexander, Theresa Cha, and Maxine Hong Kingston invite a reader who is invested in co-creating multiple selves and stories that make sense of trauma in diverse ways. By entering into dialogue with such work, we not only gain insight into the nature of trauma and its inscription, but also take part in the kind of flexible, dialogic witnessing process called for by not only Ferenczi, but the authors of the texts themselves.

To cite as

Roeder, T., 2018, ‘*My Words Would Have Murdered: Sandor Ferenczi, Women’s Memoir, and Reparative Reading*’, *PsyArt* 22, pp. 32–31.

[I]t would be a good thing to have a second method of arriving at the aetiology of hysteria, one in which we should feel less dependent on the assertions of the patients themselves.

—Sigmund Freud

In his *Clinical Diary*, Freud’s former pupil Sandor Ferenczi defines trauma as a “reaction to an ‘unbearable’ external or internal stimulus in an autoplastic

manner (modifying the self) instead of an alloplastic manner (modifying the stimulus)” (1988, 181). The object of analysis is to reconstitute a self that “recalls” the traumatic event and thus ends its subconscious repetition (1988, 182). Unlike Freud’s model of analysis, which stresses the objectivity of the analyst¹, Ferenczi’s therapeutic model is insistently dialogic. The process of psychic reparation demands the joint arrival of analysand and analyst at the moment of trauma, and it is only through the active participation of the analyst as a caring witness that the psyche of the analysand can be “repaired” (1988, 182)

Although Ferenczi’s work offers multiple and rich insights for those interested in trauma theory and literature, his name seldom pops up in the field literary studies. In his book *Sandor Ferenczi: The Psychotherapist of Tenderness and Passion*, Arnold Rachman states that “it is now a matter of record that Ferenczi’s clinical work and theoretical ideas were suppressed, censored, and removed from mainstream psychoanalysis” (1995, xv), particularly by Freud and Jones. In recent years, a number of analysts, including Rachman, have excavated this history and brought to light the meaningful contributions Ferenczi has made to the field of psychoanalysis—particularly his privileging of the qualities of empathy and flexibility, as well as his significant insights into the causes, effects, and treatment of trauma. By repressing Ferenczi’s work on trauma, the psychoanalytic establishment also largely succeeded in repressing its own investment in keeping the widespread phenomenon of childhood sexual assault hidden. Revisiting the work of Ferenczi may thus be especially meaningful for feminist scholars who wish to explore questions of trauma, textuality, and relationality in a larger cultural context of systematic violence without relying solely on oedipal paradigms that enact such repressive strategies.

Additionally, while Ferenczi’s work offers a compelling alternative to strictly Freudian ways of understanding, it also complicates the popular myth of some sort of one to one correspondence between “writing” and “healing.” While the work of therapists and writers from Judith Herman to Maxine Hong Kingston indeed suggests powerful links between storytelling and psychological recovery, these links are more complex and nuanced than some simplified, mainstream discourse allows². It becomes too easy to imagine the act of re-constituting a self after trauma through the simple construction of a cohesive narrative. In mainstream narratives of trauma (as well as popular “self help” literature) we sometimes encounter a traditional oedipal paradigm that consists of: 1.) a state of unity; 2.) disruption through trauma; 3.) a triumphant reconstitution through language; 4.) a stronger being, made powerful by

¹ In his “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis,” Freud writes: “I cannot advise my colleagues too urgently to model themselves during psycho-analytic treatment on the surgeon, who puts aside all his feelings, even his human sympathy, and concentrates his mental forces on the single aim of performing the operation as skillfully as possible” (1995, 359).

² One of the first Google hits that comes up for “writing and healing”, for example, is a for-profit on-line “course” entitled “Self Healing Expressions” that vaguely promises readers, “From the stresses of unemployment to cancer, studies reveal...writing heals.”

successfully overcoming the (potentially but not ultimately) destructive encounter. Such narratives may not leave room for women whose processes of disclosure/transformation do not take such a linear path. By choosing to depart from this model, both writers and readers of woman-authored memoir that eschews linear narrative—especially work centered on sexual or other trauma—can gain access to new and valuable insights into trauma and its reconstruction.

Ferenczi's *Clinical Diary* connects the idea of re-vision with psychic survival in particularly interesting ways. In it, Ferenczi “justifies the importance he assigns to trauma and develops a theory of trauma—its effects and treatment” (Dupont 1988, xvii). He argues that “[A]n abreaction of quantities of the trauma is not enough; the situation must be different from the actual traumatic one in order to make possible a different, favorable outcome. The most essential aspect of the altered repetition is the relinquishing of one’s own rigid authority and the hostility hidden in it” (Ferenczi 1988, 108). Ferenczi insists on the necessity of essentially re-writing the moment of trauma in order to make sense of it. He also designates a special role for the witness of the traumatic event:

One would think that the perpetual repetition in analysis of the traumatic experience, stressing first one factor and then another, would in the end result in a mosaic-like reconstruction of the whole picture. This does in fact happen, but only with a feeling of speculative reconstruction and not with the firm conviction that the events were real. ‘Something’ more is required to transform the intellectual coherence of the possible or probable into a more solid cohesion of a necessary or even obvious reality. (Ferenczi 1988, 24)

That “something more,” for Ferenczi, is the presence of a compassionate listener who can assure the victim of the reality of her experience.

My purpose in this essay is to explore some of the ways in which the work of Ferenczi can open new possibilities for readers of trauma-based narrative. I examine the significant ways in which Ferenczi re-writes the Freudian analytic paradigm to introduce the importance of factors such as trust, compassion, and belief. I posit that through the use of strategies such as fragmentation and absence, contemporary women memoirists such as Meena Alexander, Theresa Cha, and Maxine Hong Kingston demand a reader who is invested in co-creating multiple selves and stories that make sense of trauma in diverse ways. By entering into dialogue with such work, we not only gain key insight into the nature of trauma and its inscription, but also take part in the kind of flexible, dialogic witnessing process called for by not only Ferenczi, but the authors of the texts themselves.

Sandor Ferenczi and Reparative Reading

[P]aranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly

known.

—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notices that the kinds of critical habits associated with a “hermeneutics of suspicion” have become “nearly synonymous with criticism itself” (2003, 124). She points out that “to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant” (2003, 126). She also reminds us that this codified paranoia is not inevitable—it is, as she states, merely “a possibility among other possibilities” (2003, 125).

Sedgwick’s own interest in “reparative reading practices”—practices that involve a “hermeneutics of recovery of meaning” (2003, 125); that “extract sustenance from the objects of a culture” (2003, 151)—is instructive. While she ironically notes Freud’s own admission that “the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable, external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our philosophers” (2003, 125), her commitment to opening spaces for pleasure and amelioration speak back to this stance, paving the way for reparative readings that nourish and sustain.

One of the hallmarks of Freudian analysis is its insistence on what Freud, in his “Autobiographical Study,” calls “candor” (1995, 25). Any reticence on the part of the analysand is viewed as “resistance.” In his notes on the “Rat Man,” for instance, he writes: “Violent struggle, bad day. Resistance, because I requested him yesterday to bring a photograph of the lady with him—i.e. to give up his reticence about her. Conflict as to whether he should abandon the treatment or surrender his secrets” (1995, 312). In his paper entitled “On Beginning the Treatment,” he advises fellow analysts that “one must mistrust all prospective patients who want to make a delay before beginning their treatment” (1995, 365). In perhaps his most well-known skeptical stance, Freud, unable to cope with the sheer number of his female patients who had been victims of childhood sexual assault, ultimately abandoned his seduction theory, positing instead that his patients’ hysteria had its roots in fantasy.

This move, in which (predominantly) women’s accounts of childhood sexual abuse were discounted, was famously contested by feminist research of the 1970s and 80s (Herman 1997, 30). However, it was also disputed much earlier, by one of Freud’s own pupils. In his essay “Ferenczi and Sexuality,” Rachman points out that “Ferenczi challenged the traditional notion, found both in Freudian psychoanalysis and in the attitudes of the lay public, that a report of sexual abuse is the fantasy of the child and therefore is unreliable” (1993, 90). In his *Clinical Diary*, Ferenczi notes that “such incidents [of sexual abuse] are much more frequent than one would imagine” (1988, 189). Ferenczi views the reality and frequency of such incidents as a basis for revising a Freudian understanding of infantile sexuality. He questions the inevitability of concepts such as the “Oedipus complex”, for example: “Experiences regarding the traumatic effect of genital attacks by adults on small children oblige me to modify the analytic view of infantile sexuality that has prevailed up to now [...] one has to ask oneself how much [...] of the Oedipus complex is really inherited

and how much is passed on by tradition” (Ferenczi 1988, 79). Ferenczi’s awareness of the cultural origins of such complexes is hugely significant—unlike “heredity,” societal patterns such as the wide-scale abuse of children and the rape of women have the potential to be transformed through action that springs from an awareness of these (often hidden) stories .

Ferenczi consistently adopted a stance of belief towards his patients, maintaining that he did “not exclude the possibility that delusional productions contain more objective reality than we have assumed until now. From the very beginning I was inclined to think that the hallucinations of the insane [...] are not imaginings but real perceptions” (1988, 58). Skepticism, Freud’s *de facto* mode, is replaced by a willingness to recognize the possibility of truth in a patient’s narrative, especially with regard to childhood sexual violence. This act of listening is particularly important because:

In most cases of infantile trauma, the [...] usual cure is repression: ‘it’s nothing at all’; ‘nothing has happened’; ‘don’t think about it’ [...] Such things are simply hidden in a deadly silence; the child’s faint references are ignored or even rejected as incongruous, with the unanimous concurrence of those around him, and with such consistency that the child has to give up and cannot maintain his own judgment. (Ferenczi 1988, 25)

Ferenczi’s poignant realization of the traumatizing effects a response of silence and disbelief can have in the face of an abuse narrative prefigures the work of feminist therapists like Judith Herman in powerful ways. As Meena Alexander reminds us in “Silenced Writer,” a section of *The Poetics of Dislocation*, “Without silence the words we treasure, the words we measure our lives by, could not appear. But *silenced* is different” (2009, 95).

Ferenczi’s ability to listen to, trust, and empathize with his patients was famous—and famously criticized by Freud. As Freud’s “Recommendations” make explicit, the traditional analytic paradigm calls for an “opaque” analyst who shows his patients “nothing but what is shown to him” (1995, 361). In his compassionate re-writing of this wisdom, Ferenczi stresses the role of analyst as witness as early as 1932, remarking on the re-traumatization that can occur when the victim of trauma is met with “stupid and boring analytical questions” rather than genuine empathy, from her analyst: “In therapy Ferenczi tried to revive the traumatic sequence, and find a new resolution by offering what had previously not been offered: a trustful atmosphere” (Haynal 2002, 65). There’s no telling the damage that Freud did to his patients by essentially disbelieving their experiences. Ferenczi hypothesizes that the reason for this disbelief sprung from the fact that “[s]ince making this discovery [that “hysterics lie”] Freud no longer loves his patients. He has returned to the love of his well-ordered and cultivated superego [...] Since this shock, this disillusionment, there is much less talk of trauma, the constitution now begins to play the principal role. Of course this involves a certain amount of fatalism” (Ferenczi 1988, 93). Traumatized by the (embarrassing) “betrayal” Freud experienced at the hands of his female patients, he sought refuge by adopting a stance of coldness and skepticism.

Ferenczi was unable to come to terms with the fact that so much of Freudian analysis was invested in replicating the sins of the father, thus repeating the trauma. He instead urged analysts to “take really seriously the role one assumes, of the benevolent and helpful observer, that is, actually to transport oneself with the patient into that period of the past (a practice Freud reproached me for, as being not permissible), with the result that we ourselves and the patient believe in its reality” (Ferenczi 1988, 24). When such transportation does not occur, “the patient prefers to doubt his own judgment rather than believe in our coldness, our lack of intelligence, or in simpler terms, our stupidity and nastiness” (Ferenczi 1988, 25). (This process is labeled by some contemporary feminists as “gaslighting.”) Ferenczi notes that “patients cannot believe that an event really took place [...] if the analyst, as the sole witness of events, persists in his cool, unemotional, and, as patients are fond of stating, purely intellectual attitude, while the events are of a kind that must evoke, in anyone present, emotions of revulsion, anxiety, terror, vengeance, grief, and urge to render immediate help” (Ferenczi 1988, 24). Precise interpretation is not enough. “My words would have murdered,” he realizes at one point; “I would have injected the irritating, exciting poison, I would have created the anticipation of an orgasm, and then I would obtain the displacement of the love-object” (1988, 54). Analysis cannot be accomplished by “intellectual means alone” (1988, 54).

Ferenczi’s insistence on the dialogic nature of analysis—patient and analyst must work together in a non-hierarchical relationship—is striking. When a patient’s trauma is recalled in Ferenczian therapy, the analyst must offer “encouragement” and “a flood of healing compassion” (Ferenczi 1988 15). The contact between analyst and analysand cannot be superficial if healing is to take place. For Ferenczi, witnessing is active work. As Elaine Scarry points out, “For the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as having certainty,’ while for the other person it is so elusive that ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt’” (Scarry 1985, 4). The work of Ferenczi evidences a powerful attempt to move beyond that space of doubt and into the reality of another’s pain.

Since “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (Herman 1997, 1), the work of writing (as well as reading) trauma is both difficult and necessary. The concept of the witness has become an integral one for writers, theorists, and scholars who work with traumatic knowledge in any form. The work of contemporary women memoirists who challenge the traditional biases in Freudian ways of reading, knowing, and responding provide us with a particularly insightful window into some of the many possibilities that lie beyond the paradigm of linear narrative, doubt, and authoritative interpretation.

Sandor Ferenczi and Reparative Reading

In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander writes, “What I have learned to remember is the wound I could not carry in memory. I must write it out if I am to go on living [...] I turn to flashes of remembrance, bits and pieces of memory, backlit, given at high intensity, so I can piece my life together again” (2003, 237). While Judith Dupont writes that “[o]nly therapeutic intervention from the outside can [...] break the isolation” of the trauma victim (1988, xix), Suzanne Henke makes a powerful case for the connection between the analytic setting and the act of self-writing, drawing a parallel between the object of psychoanalysis and that of “scriptotherapy”—both, she argues, transform the “frozen imagery” associated with trauma into a contextualized narrative. Henke maintains that life-writing can “effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis,” providing “a therapeutic alternative” for trauma survivors (2000, xii). She questions the necessity of the literal presence of an analyst, using the work of Shoshana Felman to posit that “a surrogate transferential process can take place through the scene of writing that allows its author to envisage a sympathetic audience” (2000, xii).

As Ferenczi notes in his *Clinical Diary*, “a neof ormation of the self is impossible without the previous destruction, either partial or total, or dissolution of the former self. A new ego cannot be formed directly from the previous ego, but from *fragments*” (1988, 181). It’s no coincidence that writers like Meena Alexander and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha stress the importance of the fragment in their work. In *Dictee*, Cha’s polyvocal, multi-genre exploration of loss, trauma, and redemption, Cha writes of “decapitated forms [...] Would-be said remnant, memory. But the remnant is the whole” (2001, 38). By re-establishing the links between the present and the past, Cha suggests, the past may *become* present. This significantly echoes the work of Ferenczi, who sought to re-call the moment of his patients’ traumas so that they might be re-experienced (and repaired) in the present. The fact that *Dictee* is presented to its audience in a fractured state also evokes the need of a witness who can sift through the fragments in order to produce a reading that makes meaning of the memories encoded in the text.

For Cha, “Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say” (2001, 3). Given this, we may wonder, “Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound” (2001, 33). Cha’s reasons for speaking evoke those of Ferenczi’s analysands, who wish to halt the subconscious repetition of their traumas. “To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion” (2001, 33). Remembering again becomes a necessary act, a re-construction of not only self, but of history. The hope of recollection is the end of repetition. Trauma, until it is named, exists in the present, cannot become memory. Trauma “is burned into your ever-present memory. Memory less. Because it is not in the past. It cannot be...It burns” (2001, 45).

If one accepts that the ultimate significance of the analytic process lies in the fact that it is a mutual endeavor, it begins to make sense that any

(re)construction of self must be a dialogic act—whether literally, as in the case of Ferenczi’s patients, or figuratively, through the sort of imaginative process Henke envisions in her examination of women who use writing as “a different kind of therapeutic tool” (2000, 141). Cha herself speaks of textual creation as a process of formation requiring more than one: “You write. You write you speak voices hidden masked...From one mouth to another, from one reading to the next the words are realized in their full meaning” (2001, 48). Through multiple, shared readings, words come to mean more fully; meaning halts pain, constructs beginnings. The invention of self that occurs within the text is, significantly, a process enacted when “you, as viewer and guest, enter the house. It is you who are entering to see her. Her portrait is seen through her things, that are hers” (Cha 2001, 100). The construction of self and text intertwine, and require the presence of a witness. In *Dictee*, pieced together from fragments of selves and the recollection of hidden memories, new and remembered identities emerge: “Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time’s memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History. Past. Let the one who is disease...Restore memory” (2001, 133). In the recitation of the forgotten is the power to “restore” the memory that history has sought to erase.

In the coda to her memoir *Fault Lines*, entitled “Book of Childhood,” Meena Alexander explores the trauma hidden beneath the surface of the original memoir, reconstructing both self and narrative from memories that surface through the body: “It began with a New York summer when I could not breathe properly [...] In the hidden places of my body a cold sweat broke out” (2003, 238). Before the past may become present through language, it announces itself in altered form: “Pain afflicted my back. My torso was utterly numb. I had always believed in the truth of the body. What was my own body telling me now?” (2003, 240). While the atomization of self that occurs as the result of trauma serves, as Ferenczi points out, a protective function, it also calls into question a stable narrative where body, identity, and history cohere: “Such phantasmic violence is hard to put into words. It’s like watching a horror show in which the ‘I’ is an unwilling participant” (Alexander 2003, 238). The buried past surfaces in fragments: “What I saw came to me as if flashes of lightning were breaking into the darkness” (Alexander 2003, 239).

As memories of the sexual abuse Alexander suffered at the hands of her maternal grandfather resurge, they force her to revise the very foundation of her self-narrative: “I was tormented by the feeling that I had written a memoir that was not true” (2003, 241). The underlying structure of experience is disrupted by traumatic knowledge: “What foundations did my house stand on? What sort of architect was I if the lowest beams were shredded?” (Alexander 2003, 241). As Alexander reminds us, trauma does not merely interrupt a cohesive narrative; it compels us to recognize that “there was never a coherent self (or story) there to begin with” (Brison 2002, 116). Self-writing is inherently a provisional act. It is also necessary to survival. Ferenczi himself asks at one point: “Must I (if I can) create a new basis for my personality, if I have to abandon as false and untrustworthy the one I have had up to now? Is the choice here between dying and ‘rearranging’ myself?” (Ferenczi qtd in Dupont i). Alexander’s coda bears witness to both the necessity and the

difficulty of the sort of “rearrangement” envisioned by Ferenczi, and to the construction of narratives that offer sustenance, but can also be continually revised.

Alexander writes that: “To be haunted by the illegible is the fate of those who have passed through fire and children who have been hurt beyond visible measure” (2003, 317). Ferenczi, exploring the lasting traumatic effects of childhood sexual abuse, hypothesizes that “[t]he traumatic aloneness, the father’s prohibition and his will to prohibit, the mother’s deafness and blindness, that is what really renders the attach traumatic, that is, causing the psyche to crack” (Ferenczi 1988, 193). This realization is echoed in Alexander’s coda: “My mother, it seemed to me as I read my book again, was constantly averting her eyes, looking elsewhere, not seeing, not able to see” (2003, 241). Both Ferenczi and Henke point to the re-constitutive power of the act of re-imagining and revising trauma in the presence of a (real or constructed) witness. Alexander writes: “My father was the one person I could have told. But by 1997, when bits and pieces of my childhood were restored to me, my father [...] was really dying” (2003, 241). She thus imagines telling her father—“He would believe me instantly. He would feel the rage I still could not trust myself to feel [...] He would yell at my maternal grandfather. Appa would carry me away from that house, drag my mother away too, swear at Ilya, ‘We will never enter this house again’” (2003, 241). Alexander’s father becomes the witness who can halt the recurring story of violation and forgetting by believing and responding in an appropriate way.

The response to bodily violation may necessitate additional, somatic responses as well. “Once hearing the panic in my voice, [my therapist] asked me what had comforted me when I was a child. Holding on to trees, I told her” (Alexander 2003, 240). After her therapist urges her do just that, Alexander finds a lilac tree in Fort Tryon Park: “I stood there, a grown woman, and held tight to the tree. I could feel my flesh again, clarified, sap and bark upholding me” (2003, 240). “Recovery” cannot be accomplished by “intellectual means alone” (Ferenczi 1988, 51). As Alexander powerfully reminds us: “There is an instinctual truth of the body all the laws of the world combined cannot legislate away” (Alexander 2003, 242). By embodying these traumatic experiences in text, Alexander calls attention to the complex relationships between flesh and language. It is by acknowledging the hidden story surfacing in flashes beneath her original memoir that Alexander can begin to revise her self-narrative: “I kept starting over and over again. I touched the soil of my self, a field with its necessary knowledge, harsh, shining, buried in bits and pieces” (2003, 242). The “Book of Childhood” is integrated into, but not absorbed by, the original narrative. The two exist side by side, bearing witness to a constant negotiation between past and present, body and memory.

In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, themes of memory, body, and trauma also unfold in an interesting relation to Ferenczi’s work. In perhaps one of his most intriguing configurations, Ferenczi theorizes that the psychic fragmentation of trauma (specifically in children) can produce a “fragment” he calls the “Orpha”: “a singular being, for whom the preservation of life is of *coûte que coûte* significance. This fragment plays the role of the

guardian angel; it produces wish-fulfilling hallucinations, consolation fantasies” (1988, 9). The Orpha, split off from bodily consciousness, functions as a protector. The creation of the Orpha is, often at a literal level, an act of psychic survival. The Orpha becomes indispensable to children who undergo repeated trauma: “It anesthetizes the consciousness and sensitivity against sensations as they become unbearable” (1988, Ferenczi 9). The figure of the “woman warrior”—the swordswoman who can enact violence and offer protection—becomes a powerful guardian, producing fantasies that allow Kingston to imagine a different future from the one of “wife and slave” that has been inscribed for her: “I would have to grow up to be a warrior woman” (2004, 20).

In a later section of the same memoir, Kingston writes of her childhood silence:

My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top. I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moments before the curtain parted or rose [...] I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas. (1989, 165)

Like the construction of the Woman Warrior, the painting of these hidden pictures, “full of possibilities,” is, for young Kingston, a means of creating and safeguarding a self. School officials, however, view the work as a source of grave concern. Ferenczi and his student Michael Balint provide us with alternate lenses to interpret silence. As Balint writes in *The Basic Fault*: “Perhaps, if we can change our own approach from that of considering [...] silence as a symptom of resistance to studying it as a possible source of information, we may learn something” (1991, 27). Neither Ferenczi nor Balint were afraid to move beyond language with their patients. Both experimented with physical touch and refused to flatly equate silence with resistance. A source of censure from the traditional psychoanalytic establishment, Ferenczi’s awareness of a world beyond linguistic interpretation made possible Balint’s non-verbal work with borderline patients.

As Sedgwick suggests in *Touching Feeling*, performative strategies are often ignored by contemporary theory in its privileging of the verbal, although having access to them opens a rich landscape of textured meaning that exists beside the written and spoken narratives most often associated with traumatic knowledge. For those invested in the exploration of trauma and its many iterations, it makes sense to remain attuned to the diverse array of performances—textual, bodily, and visual—by which victims of trauma may transform their memory into art, and the variety of witnessing practices such work may call for.

Listening to Another’s Wound: Readerly Responsibility and Trauma-based Narrative

Henke reminds us that the term “narrative recovery” evokes “both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject” (2000, xxii). The transformation of trauma into art allows the artist to reconstruct the moment of trauma in narrative form in the presence of an imagined and/or real audience who serves as witness. The shape of the trauma-based narrative pieced together from fragments and flashes, however, may bear witness to its own process of assemblage, allowing the reader to enter through the fissures:

It seems to me that in its rhythms the poem, the artwork, can incorporate scansion of the actual, the broken steps, the pauses, the brutal silences, the brutal explosions. So that what is pieced together is a work that exists as an object in the world but also, in its fearful consonance, its shimmering stretch, allows the world entry. I think of it as a recasting that permits our lives to be given back to us, fragile, precarious. (Alexander 2003, 289)

Such work bears testament to both the fragility and the resilience of self. Ferenczi conceptualized memory as a “collection of scars of shocks in the ego” (Ferenczi 1988, 111). The work of memoirists like Cha and Alexander resists the kind of glossy unity presupposed by more facile notions of “writing as healing,” instead making visible the scars.

In her essay “Creating Redemptive Imagery: A Challenge of Resistance and Creativity,” Sandra Campbell speaks of the need for women to “create images, sounds, and stories that articulate difference, that illuminate paths towards alternatives, indeed that describe the unfamiliar” in response to the daily cultural onslaught of narratives that promote “domination and violation” (1993, 141). She suggests that when alternate narratives proliferate, cultural attitudes can shift. The reader who chooses to meaningfully engage with work that disrupts popular notions about trauma, violence, and the nature of narrative itself can also choose to take on a responsibility not to replicate the sort of violent interpretation that would re-inscribe widespread impulses to doubt and/or bury difficult truths about sexual violence and childhood trauma. “The responsible reader must follow the text’s meandering movements, attend to its heterogeneous meanings, restrain the impulse to assimilate these into one point of view, [and] acknowledge the partiality and contingency of all interpretations” (Shweikart and Flynn 2004, 17). The reader of trauma-based texts is called to be a witness to the complex, difficult, and fragmented truths of the other who is violated as well as the culture in which such violation takes place. To fully engage with the pain of another is itself a painful act. Being forced to recognize one’s own complicity in such traumatic experience is also painful. It may be tempting to refuse to enter such a fraught space—to, as Freud did, facilitate instead an emotional coldness and turn a blind eye to unbearable realizations.

Yet, as Scarry remarks, “the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain” (1985, 9). And the act of listening to such expressions is equally important. Both Ferenczi and Herman speak poignantly about the devastating effects experienced by trauma survivors whose narratives are met with silence and disbelief. Such acts implicitly signify that we are choosing to “identify with the perpetrators rather than with the victim” (Herman 1997, 244). In the words of Ferenczi: “[W]hat is the use of [repeating] the trauma word for word, to have the same disillusionment with the whole world and the whole of humanity?” (1988, 55).

Embedded in the reading model(s) with which we approach trauma narratives are ethical and political choices—choices to believe or disbelieve; choices to take a reparative or paranoid stance; choices to “listen” to silences or to impose our own interpretations on them. By responding with generosity, rather than skepticism, to texts in which bodily memory is encoded, we may enter into the kind of compassionate dialogue that marked Ferenczi’s practice and ultimately led to his falling out with Freud. Simply by approaching traumatic texts from a position of empathy, rather than doubt, we as readers make an ethical choice with positive consequences. After all, as Cathy Caruth reminds us, “trauma may lead [...] to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (1996, 8).

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