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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sarah and the camps: Case history, metapsychology and countertransference

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Abstract

Violence inflicted on men and women has repercussions on succeeding generations. Indeed, suffering that is not narrated and shared can become masochism and destruction. Based on a clinical case, I will propose an illustration of this fact and discuss it. I will also propose a discussion of countertransference linked to this case history. Finally, I will approach some topics on metapsychology and the way I use this concept to understand my experience.

AQ1   **Key words:**

Sarah across the borders

Sarah asked to resume her analysis. Not satisfied with her past two analytic experiences, she attributed her discontent to the fact she had been unaware of the differences in her analysts' orientation and had simply gone along with them, given the cultural biases of the time. This situation did not particularly delight me, and I told her I saw no reason I would succeed where others had not. I asked her if she knew of any reason herself. She said she felt good about it, having come across some articles I had written. She asked me if I had anything against letting her intuition guide her. After all, she was like every other patient, and as for me, it was my job, she said. I was somewhat surprised: it is unusual to meet people who think they are just like everyone else. Her former analyses must have brought her something. And she was right: analysis is my profession.

Sarah is a 40-year-old woman of delicate beauty. Her jet black hair and porcelain skin enhance a lively delicacy when she speaks about her problems. Sometimes she emphasizes a point, letting her thumb draw a line across her forehead. For five years she has been separated from her husband and lives alone with her son, whose age coincides with the break-up of their pairing. Her profession has made her life difficult. As a flight attendant on an international airline, she is not always at home. Her older daughter Rachel, half-sister of her son Solomon, can help her, but she already has her own life, and Sarah does not want to make too many demands on her, having learned this from previous analyses. Her girlfriends and the parents of her son's friends are not real options either. Neither are her own parents, living far away in another city. As Jews, her father, an Ashkenazi, and her mother, a Sephardi, never agreed to her living with someone not Jewish. So it was only after her separation that they renewed contact with her. Sarah's younger brother and sister also live in other cities, and in fact she does not get along with them either. Her only solution has been to hire an 18-year-old male babysitter, a first-year university student who needed a room in Paris.

It was complicated setting up her sessions. She was committed to two of them, but what about the other two? We agreed on three sessions per week, one of them at a flexible time. She promised to telephone me her weekly schedule. Although it is not standard procedure, I have taken on patients who cannot guarantee fixed times: international journalists, high-level computer specialists, diplomats, people who do not live in Paris but come to the city for their sessions. Generally, I raise their fees enough to let them remark the difficulties in these variations, which impose an increased availability on my part. I explain this to them. The working-through of these situations is meaningful in itself. In any case, I do not

regard the setting as reduced to a place or a procedure during the session (for example, facing the patient or not, extended silence on my part or even systematic interpretations) as basic components of the analysis. My experience has shown that, above all, psychoanalysis requires an effort of thought and imagination, attention and sensitivity to transference and countertransference. This effort, free-floating attention, constitutes the heart of any setting.

Claims that Freud never called into question his analytic setting, despite frequent changes in theory, are fabulations. Freud changed his setting as his practice evolved: home calls for his first patients, walks in the woods or mountains for his students in analysis, a combination of the couch and translation work for Strachey, and even conjoined paternity and analytic work for Anna. Some analysts often resort to defensive legends. In fact, historical assessment of the Freudian setting is sorely needed.

Sarah paid her babysitter, John, a salary and still does. Besides, "it is normal." She gave him a room on another floor from hers, and he could use the refrigerator. She was quite satisfied with him, and indeed remains so. He took her son to school, picked him up, drew his bath, gave him a snack, stayed to play with him, and in fact had always been reliable. When Sarah came home late, he waited. They always engaged in amusing, pleasant, and intelligent conversations. His comments about her growing son always seemed appropriate. He even attended Parent–Teacher Association meetings. When this was the case, he had her friends or the parents of her son's friends babysit for Solomon. In fact, John still does and remains pleasant, perceptive, and intelligent. Quite often Sarah underlines what she says, stating these are "facts."

She has no idea how it happened. One evening she came home later than usual. He was there. Maybe it was because one of her friends had flippantly remarked that once again she had two men home with her. She had never thought of her son as a man. He was a little boy, her Solomon. And he saw so little of his father, Maurice. On the other hand, her friend's remark had taken her aback. Yes, John was a man. And she started to look at him and think about him differently, to dream about him. He must have been aware of this. He began to shave, left his shirt unbuttoned. "When they put their minds to it, men are worse than women," she exclaimed. "At what?" I asked. "Seduction," she replied. Sometimes I asked a question without being particularly concerned, just to make my presence felt, to calm a perceived anxiety or an aggressiveness mounting too high and interfering with our free associations.

She was the one who took the initiative. Solomon was in bed, already sleeping. John was about to leave. She stopped him. They sat down. She asked him about his studies. He spoke to her in his singing southern accent. So much pleasure, real music. She took his hand. He did not pull it away. She kissed him. He hugged her. And, then, there he was in her bed. She was mad with joy.

"'Mad,' you rightly said, did I say." It was if she "had never known any other man before," she said. "Kind of a delusion," I added. She agreed. This has been going on for three years. John is madly in love with her. But she does not want Solomon to find out. She does not want to give the impression she has stolen his big pal from him. She does not want him to find them together in the same bed. She is ashamed of friends who might see them in restaurants or at the movies. She cannot take it any longer. But John can. He says their love is more important than anything else. What can be done?

Sarah: first reflections

The first year of Sarah's analysis concerned her difficulties with John. He insisted, he demanded, he wanted to be seen as her man. She was afraid. She did not want to be seen as her daughter's rival, either. Rachel got along so well with him. Then, too, she was old and he was so young. He endlessly repeated that all this was not true, and that it did not matter anyway. She did not believe him. She became jealous: "and his girlfriends at the university? Aren't they pretty? Are their asses better than mine?" She made scenes. She did not want to be seen as his woman yet still she was jealous of him. She did not want to stay with him for good but still she did not want him to leave. When she worked, she called him late at night, at all hours, insisting she only wanted to hear about Solomon, actually to find out what he was doing, to make sure he was not with someone else. "Some girl," I specified. She agreed.

In addition, Solomon's father had never paid child support. Quite the contrary. He never had any money, and when he asked Sarah to lend him some, she did. He lives on nothing, all alone in a room. She does not want to tarnish her son's image of a father, nor does she want him to have a father who squats . When he is supposed to take Solomon **AQ2** on vacation with him, Sarah is the one who pays for the airline tickets. He takes his son to Solomon's grandparents. In spite of all this, he is proud of him. **AQ3** His profession: a storyteller, he tells stories. That is why she chose him. It is a fact.

In the village where she had been vacationing with her daughter, there had been this man. In fact, it was Rachel who first discovered him. She had caught up with other children to play with, and they all made a circle around him. Rachel was nearest to him. He

told the children stories. They were happy, they laughed, and they played together. Sarah had thought a man like him would certainly be an excellent father. He loved children and knew how to make them love him. And Rachel seemed to love him too, all the more so as she had barely known her own father. When I vaguely asked Sarah what had become of him, her response was vague, a whisper: "Oh, that one . . . " She did not go on. I didn't insist. Later, I would find out: for a long time Sarah had been quietly testing my capacity to open my mind and think together with her, among other things.

An important change took place when she announced she wanted to ask me a question. Questions can often be appalling. "Do you think I should tell Solomon that his father, Maurice, had incestuous relations with his half-sister and that is why we parted?" Panic may induce stillness, just before understanding. Often the work of an analyst is to wait. She laughed, with sarcasm: "You see, I never could have imagined he loved children that much! He never actually had sexual intercourse with my daughter, but in fact he fondled her. She told me so. I questioned her stepfather. He kept silent. I demanded he apologize to her. He did nothing. I told him I would leave him if he remained entrenched in his silence. He did not react."

Up to then, my surprise had come from seeing her affair with John as an effort to work out her Oedipal complex: desire for her son, rivalry with her daughter. Now another, more dangerous, element appeared: narcissistic identification with her former companion. Like him, she had seemingly "sexually abused" a willing young person, even ravished to be "abused" in this way. His ravishment did not remove her guilty feelings. And, along with the narcissistic identification, Ferenczi's identification with the aggressor (which merits further discussion), emerged the fantasy of incestuous homosexual relations with her daughter. In her transference, Sarah expressed confusion and despair facing the possible fragmentation of her thoughts. So she held to me with a seemingly innocent question, which blocked the flow of free association and disrupted my suspended attention. My silence. I spoke to her. I told her the situation was certainly extremely delicate. I also thought that stating the obvious was not enough. In order to point out the importance of the imaginary dimension of narcissistic identification, I added: "Maurice, John, Solomon, we shall see how your thoughts run their course. And we won't forget 'that one,' of course." "Whom do you wish to speak of?" she asked, startled. "The missing father," I added. "Rachel's?" She insisted. She had understood me.

Another key phase of analysis started concerning her relationship with her daughter. At first, Rachel

had been mad at her when she announced this new man would be her stepfather. Her daughter yelled. "It is not fair! I am the one who discovered him! He is mine!" She had shouted and cried. Sarah had to calm her down, make promises, and even that was not enough. Rachel went to live with her grandparents. Only very slowly did she start to return home, much later, when she began to notice her grandparents thought she was right to leave her mother. Rachel did not want the whole family to blame her own mother.

But to what extent was she not responsible for the sexual abuse and hadn't she offered her daughter to make up for her own absences?, Sarah worried. These questions tortured her. For Sarah had already started to work as a flight attendant and she often left this couple, that is, her daughter and her stepfather, alone. And even from the start, she had imagined "things could happen between them." From my point of view, it was not only "things," but also relations, signifiers, I insisted: her daughter confided in her, but she refused to believe her, finding all sorts of excuses for her companion. She had thought Rachel wanted to take revenge for the old feeling of being deprived of the person she had found "all by herself." Rachel had to insist and, to put it bluntly, tell her mother to return home one evening at a precise time. They had set a trap, perhaps justifiably so, to expose this man. "And desire," I told her. And I added: "of some and the others, of one and another."

Sarah and her surprises

Of course, she was overburdened with guilt, but still Sarah stood up . One day I asked her why she might have given her daughter to this man. She had thought of an effort to replace a vanished father, or an attempt to recompense her for the theft she had supposedly committed, what she had already thought of. She did not understand what I meant. I told her that when two women share a man, they also share something between themselves (Hériter, 1994). And maybe it could bring us to her own childhood memories. What about her and her own mother?

She avoided this issue. "In fact," she answered, "the problem was not only my daughter but his given word.

I insisted he should explain us why he had behaved like that. He refused. I insisted he apologize to us, to both of us. My daughter and I shared a close intimacy at that time. Again, he refused to speak. I insisted on knowing his reasons. He said nothing. If he had done something, I doubt I would have sent him away. Worse than incest was the lack of explanation, not a

AQ4

AQ5

single word. For us, that was unbearable. For Muslims, a woman's word is worthless, and no man has to hear her."

Once more I was surprised. I gasped. Perhaps to control my reaction, I asked: "Solomon's father, Maurice, is a Muslim?" I had let myself in for it: her answer took me even more aback: "In truth, my son's name is Solomon Ibrahim. His father is Maurice Ibrahim. I know there are problems. At school a little girl asked Solomon why he wore a Star of David around his neck. He always has to explain there are black Jews, too."

"Yes, indeed," I told her. "Strange also that you did not mention it before. Perhaps this whole story seems very strange to you, too." And I caught myself wanting to share with her the same, deep spoken intimacy she had with her daughter. And maybe with her own mother, a long time ago.

"I was afraid you would not understand me if I told you sooner. Today I no longer find it strange. No. I think one has to do things for reconciliation."

I thought to myself: "reconciliation" in the sense of repression. "Reconciliation" can be a good rationalization. She added: "You know, in my analyses before, I neither wanted to nor was able to speak about my history, I mean, my real history, what I know of it, my memories. I narrated things. For example, one of my analysts intervened about my occasional habit of taking drugs. He got all worked up about that. He went from there to my supposed homosexuality and that sort of thing. The other one, a woman, saw it as an illness, "the signifier of the other," she told me. I understood next to nothing. With you, now, it is different. Do you know you don't walk like the French do? I do not know how to say it: you dance when you walk. And I do not know how to explain it, little by little; your dance made me remember and made me want to speak about my memories." For this woman, had not my basic role as an analyst slipped away to become my relationship to my body? Bodies for her, delusions.

And she told me a surprising and yet not uncommon story, at least in a certain epoch. This story was ruled by the logic of unconscious formations, as if everything in it was under the spell of primary processes. Her father was one of the few survivors of a concentration camp. On his return to his village in the center of France, all his family had disappeared. He himself was very weakened, ill, ailing. Sarah's mother, who had come to France from North Africa, deemed it a miracle he was alive. She decided to take care of him, and she also needed to get married and get French papers in order to stay in France. So they got married. During their early years, it was his illness and her social difficulties that mainly brought them together. Then Sarah was born. She was considered a blessing, but there were enormous differences between her parents. They built complicity around religion. They were extremely devout, respecting rituals and holy days.

"You know, Rachel suffered a lot from my refusal to celebrate Christian Christmas. We talked a lot about it. Silly thing, but that is how it was. She complained that all the other children had gifts, and she had nothing. I explained to her that, yes, she had something else, our own feast days. But, she did not agree. I started to do things differently with Solomon because Rachel insisted I should not act the same way with him. In any case, she always prepared a Christmas meal and gave out gifts as soon as she left home to live with her friend, a goy. So, to avoid more misunderstanding with my daughter, I had to accept the situation. I too ended up celebrating Christmas."

"Not having anything," "having gifts," "having something else" are signifiers that, as I understand it, belong to the domain of working through separation or sexual differences and questioning about childbirth. They appeared after others signifiers, related to destruction, to camps, illness, meeting between strangers, and, lastly, religion.

"My parents were so tiresome with their religiosity. And my mother always had to take care of my father or make me do it. He was the first to anything: to eat, to have a bath, always his priorities. I quarreled a lot with them, and they irritated me so much that I took my first trip to Africa. I found my first African boyfriend who came to join me in France. It was the only way I had to revolt, to show my parents they were wrong. Of course, that bothered them, but I had to have an affair with a Muslim to break off and get rid of them for good."

I heard and imagined what she told me from two perspectives. Certainly, "mixed marriages" bespeak a curiosity about humanity and a passion for otherness. It is also possible that they are symptoms of an unrestrained narcissistic search for the same, going far away to find something to confirm the extinct force of a childhood home. When "mixed" marriages open windows onto human landscapes, they enrich a couple's capacity for sublimation. On the other hand, when their main source is narcissism and its problematic fluctuations, they produce waterfalls of symptoms (Prado de Oliveira, 1999, 2001).

However, Sarah was caught up in a much more complex movement that nonetheless started with a simple postulate: "I must *be independent* of my parents." Pressure to be independent showed itself a little later as "I must *free myself* of my parents." With such burdensome parents, this formula became: "I must *get rid* of my parents." Now, it is impossible to *get rid* of one's parents. "Getting rid of" is simply the ultimate formula of repression,

exclusion, and foreclosure. "Getting rid" then becomes "meeting," not as a spoken word, but as an event or a "fact." "Meeting blacks" to "get rid of blondes," "meeting Africans" to "get rid of Europeans," "meeting Muslims" to "get rid of Jews." How long are we going to refuse reality? Undoubtedly, "Jews" and "Muslims" can live together on the condition they accept *everything* and not be willing to get rid of *any* difference, joining together in their common humanity. On the other hand, "getting rid of" is the original signifier of the Shoah and the misfortune of Sarah's father, whose survival alone provides ample testimony. Sarah was caught up in these conflicts, which, at the same time, were also her own.

I said nothing about these matters, of course. I told Sarah: "Difficult to be together when we come from so far away and are always so different." I wanted to be careful about this. I thought of the disseminated difficulties of this analysis, quite clear in the life and history of Sarah, itself linked to the history of her parents and even to that of a world beyond them. Belief in the hereafter is a demonstration of our awareness that we possess only what our ancestors have bequeathed us. Inheritances mark our lives as much as what we create, combined with a very small measure of invention, fantasy, and the fleeting joy of being alive. Which allows us to set the game in motion again.

Sarah and women

I saw the first name of Sarah's son, as she had just revealed it, as a symptom. I cannot take up here the discussion raised by Stekel (1912) in his article "The restrictive force of proper names" and continuing at least up through *The Wild Mind* of Levi-Strauss (1962/1966).

Freud (1912), p. 56) states:

Even a civilized adult may be able to infer from certain peculiarities in his own behavior that he is not so far removed as he may have thought from attributing importance to proper names, and that his own name has become to a very remarkable extent bound up with his personality. So, too, psycho-analytic practice comes upon frequent confirmations of this in the evidence it finds of the importance of names in unconscious mental activities.

As "mixed" marriages, proper names can be organized as symptoms or as sublimations. However, given what Sarah had said and continued to say about Solomon, this first name seemed to be the

symptom of a certain split running in the family since the marriage of an Ashkenazi with a Sephardi built around the pain of concentration camps, of exile, and then compromise through religion. This splitting was revived with the marriage of Sarah to a Muslim, an acting-out aimed at resolving her conflicts with her history.

These elements, transmitted from one generation to another, are extremely difficult to work through in psychoanalysis as they constitute one of the most solid cores of the subject's narcissism. In fact, I think, for Freud, narcissism is not only a "mirror" relationship, which deals with surfaces and spaces, as largely believed. Narcissism is also expressed through the "shadow of the object that falls on the ego," implying signifiers linked to time (Freud, 1917, p. 249; Prado de Oliveira, 1995). Reference to signifiers that pertain to death and narcissism demands tact and can in general only be approached indirectly. So do anything in psychoanalysis with claims to an interpretative status, if we are to put aside temptations to translate the patient's words into our theoretical jargon. **AQ6**

Trying to think along with Sarah about pain seemed the wisest thing to do in this situation. I drew her attention to all the pain in her life: the pain of the present situation with John, but also the pain of a marriage in order to "free herself" from her parents, the pain of not having recognized what she demanded, the pain of the conflicts with her daughter and the impossibility of expressing conflicts with her parents because of their past sufferings, the pain of the mutual lack of understanding between her parents, and lastly the infinite pain of the camps and of exile, whose shadow had engulfed her life, even before her own birth. Repetition of pain had become fate, the way it was.

Sarah listened to me quite attentively, and when I stopped a long silence ensued. Then she added, obviously moved: "You call that masochism, don't you? This passion to submit to what is most contrary to us, in us? You are right! I am going to tell you. As I had the name of Solomon's father, I could pretend to be an Arab. It was not difficult being hired as a flight attendant on an airline company in one of the Gulf countries. This should certainly keep me far enough from my parents and their religiosity." "And throw her in exile, too?" I asked. **AQ7**

Experience reveals some omnipotence in masochism, linked to a kind of cold, to a negation of sensuality and the transformation of sentiments into sentimentality, even if a flight attendant is also a care-taker in some sort of diffuse way. "Such is the trinity of the dreams of masochists: cold-maternal-severe, ice-sentimental-cruel" (Deleuze, 1967, pp. 45–6). The masochist is, above all, sentimental. The suffering or humiliation he hopes to submit to

has no limits. The sadist would die before he could inflict all the awaited suffering on a masochist who, in fact, is of no interest to him or her (Langley, 1997)[1].

Indeed, this fantasy of omnipotence linked to the masochism she had named seemed to prey on Sarah. She seemed to have suffered from this mixture of coldness and care. She had to struggle to mitigate it and make it bearable. Her fantasies of omnipotence were traces of this struggle. She might have imagined her father as all-powerful as a survivor of concentration camps, but his omnipotence itself was a reaction to the cold omnipotence of the criminals. She might have wanted him to be much more powerful than he appeared in conversations between her parents about his return, or conversations in the family or among friends on this subject. Also, her mother must have seemed all-powerful to her, saving this man from death and raising him back to life with so much devotion, even if she had her own almost unbearable feelings linked to exile.

To these traditional remarks on masochism, I would like to add my personal experience. Masochism and paranoia are intimately linked. Masochism corresponds to the eroticization of the feeling of persecution. Here the persecutor is not longer he or she who threatens, but, by means of it, he or she becomes the one who excites and thus procures *jouissance* that the subject cannot admit, accept or even recognize as such. If there is an imaginary omnipotence here, it is ruled by the delusion of grandeur described by Freud in his study of President Schreber (Nydes, 1963a, 1963b).

There may be a feminine masochism of varied sources even if they do not seem to match Freud's thesis. Reik has discussed them in a pertinent way, pointing out that "feminine masochism" is a male fantasy (Freud, 1924; Reik, 1941), although Marguerite Marie Alacoque, once Lacan's patient , describes the "happiness of suffering" (Trinité, 2003).[2] Among these sources is the figure of self-sacrifice. For Sarah, this sacrifice made her submit to the repetition compulsion, linked to her fantasy of the omnipotence of female sexuality. Sarah was torn apart in her Jewish identity, obliterated by her fantasies on Muslims, and, above all, bound to survive between two sources of important suffering and confused identity. Certainly, these notions call

for further investigation and discussion if they are not to become a new psychoanalytic ideology.

I shared some of my thoughts with Sarah. With an immense satisfaction and a smiling voice, she told me that, in fact, she had always imagined women far superior to men and never understood "this psychoanalytic nonsense about the castration anxiety one reads or hears about here and there." In fact, when she had decided to make her first appointment with me, before calling me, she was sure I was a woman. At a friend's house she had come across something I had written and was delighted by so much sensitivity and delicacy. "Only a woman could have written this!" – she had been certain. And she was very surprised to find out I was a man. For one or two sessions, she had hesitated about staying or leaving, and in the end, with initial confidence in me, she had stayed. Our discussions suited and disturbed her at the same time. They allowed her to make significant progress along thoughts, to remember, to associate, and to dream. "But I am sure there must have been a very important woman in your life, or women, for that matter, who have made so feminine the way you think and speak."

Her words reminded me of projective identification. She had awakened something in me. I had to make an effort to grasp a fleeting memory. Some time, some way, I might have been a little girl. It might have been through the way she addressed me or a special quality in her delicate manner. Some confusion in her mind linked to confusions in my own mind. Memories of more violent fantasies accompanied this one. I distinctly said to myself that, seeing my own mother, I wanted to suffer with her, to share her pain in such a way that it could attenuate it for her. Certainly, for her, the destiny of women was to suffer. It took me some time to clothe myself against this, in my own way, so to become the boy I was.

After questioning myself about the little girl who hid herself in my violent, little boy fantasies, I could understand a certain hovering aggressiveness between Sarah and me. It was linked to a kind of coldness of Sarah's. Did she want to "take care" of me? Was I to "take care of her" or "with her"? She could be absent from herself, from what she said. She had spoken to me of her bouts of jealousy over John. Was it to impress him more than anything else, or so it seemed to me now? Or to impress me? She had had every reason to be angry when Rachel told her about her stepfather, but she had first reacted otherwise, denying it. Retrospectively, I felt Sarah had been cold, absent, distrustful, "flying away" indeed from her daughter before "flying away" from her son. Her daughter had to insist. Her profession as a flight attendant called for this *mise-en-scène*, this

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[1] In fact, two of my clinical cases where masochistic fantasies and acting-out were at stake showed that sexual workers have to protect their clients against their fantasies by attenuating them. Literature corroborates these clinical data (see Langley, 1997).

[2] Marie de la Trinité was the name taken by Marguerite Marie Alacoque once she entered a convent. In this way she signs her book.

indifferent and seemingly kind, care-taking, absent neutrality. Her delicacy now seemed as cold as her job.

I imaginatively reconstructed a situation where her mother had not taken care of one particular man who had undergone particular sufferings. Or of one particular child. Sarah's mother had discharged herself of a duty. She had seen her man's suffering as an aggression directed against her and would have felt superior to him by sacrificing herself. The aggressiveness of my countertransference led me to put together this situation that confounded pain and care and took on aggressive tonalities. The violence of pain and the urgent need for care once again invaded those it had already attacked. Care that would have been pure protection became an aggressive struggle to survive. I believe this to be a recurrent experience when an analysis "works": some kind of confusion happens between both analyst and patient. A life-guard has to plunge to save someone who is drowning.

"You thought I was a woman. Maybe this belief persisted in some way, in your imagination, and it could not be abandoned altogether. It is a hard thing to do, to partake from our thoughts and beliefs." Sarah agreed. Since the beginning of time, women have been seen as a category of the "male species" rather than as a category of human species. This can lead to a desire for revenge, which men may recognize as rightful. Nevertheless, if our beliefs in the sins of Sodom have quite disappeared, the ashes of Gomorrah still threatens us. Are men and women to be ruled by rivalry or can they emulate and compromise? It is a sad thing when revenge destroys the possibilities of thought and exchanges. These ideas lessened my aggressiveness and allowed me to successfully conclude our session.

Perhaps too I had enabled Sarah to inscribe something of transference toward me as a mother and to identify with an ailing father in her analysis. However, the difficulties she had in defining boundaries made me less happy, even if there may be a common ground nowadays to admit that the concept of boundaries has limitations (Goldberg, 2008). Those Sarah crossed professionally every day appeared to be metaphors for boundaries between generations or sexual identities. Sarah was always surprising, with her ever-present distant delicacy that made her seem absent.

My intervention had been problematic. Maybe it had been ruled more by a countertransferential acting-out than by a large understanding of Sarah's movements as a whole. Anyway, it revealed first, the continuous movement between transference and countertransference; second, the need to let them be flexible; and, third, Sarah's main fantasy, which

was indeed that of an engendering female omnipotence, so close to masochism. These trends would find an articulation in her symptoms: a dying or fading man, tortured abuser or abused, vanishing women from vanishing families or countries. Nonetheless, the stories she told during sessions, and the fact she could talk about them, were due to the transference and my assigned place in it.

Sarah had started to go out with her young boyfriend. She would go to movies or to dinner *en tête à tête* when Solomon was with his father or went for a night with his little friends' families. "After all, why couldn't older ladies have love affairs with younger men?" she asked. "In fact, things have been going on the other way round for centuries." Indeed.

Shortly afterwards, Sarah contracted cancer of the uterus, followed by major symptoms. At this time, she recalled her first cancer, of the breast, after meeting John, the help and support of the young man, her fear he would leave her then, and her present fright he would do so now, in spite of his professed love. Although not able to put an end to them, John's love attenuated her fantasies and anxieties connected to a damaged, cut, destroyed body. Castration anxiety is but a knot that can be easily undone when the fantasy of a body that comes apart becomes reality.

Religiosity and illness had been closely bound in the life of this woman. What she had most rejected in her parents' home moved back into her own life.

Principles for a discussion on metapsychology

Among the numerous attacks on psychoanalysis, one seems particularly harmful: it denies the real progress that the concept of multiple determination, or overdetermination, has brought to our way of understanding things and to our way of thinking in general. Indeed, there are writers who support the psychoanalytic theory but claim that metapsychology no longer serves any purpose. It remains to be seen how they understand and use this concept.

The clear statements of Freud are unequivocal. It is therefore all the less unfathomable that a great number of psychoanalysts have given way to statements that link metapsychology to biology or neurobiology. For example, the following is from an article by Gedo (1997,):

Unable to correlate clinical findings with contemporary neurophysiology, Freud tried to anchor psychoanalysis within biology through a speculative metapsychology. Recently, epistemological objections have led to abandonment of his proposals

as of a scientific theory, although many still use them metaphorically.

Put in such terms, the problem of metapsychology is in complete contradiction to what Freud put forward. Contrary to the claims of these statements, Freud used biology or neurophysiology as a metaphor in an attempt to create a psychology beyond the realm of the conscious.

These views are resistances against the enlargement of our capacity to think. They are based on fallacious ideas that go back to German romanticism and try to deny the metaphors by assigning them realistic foundations. This resistance appeared very soon after Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Basically, they reduced metapsychology to the concept of the death drive and its implications and, later, to biological metaphors. This resistance appeared in three strata: resistance to the concept of a death drive, resistance to the close tie between this drive and sexuality, and resistance to metapsychology, assumed to be mainly a derivative of this concept. Parallel to these forms of resistance, I would add others that fail to take into account the theoretical contribution of Spielrein (1912) to the concept of a death drive, as well as the particular circumstances surrounding it (Carotenuto, 1980).

This latter form of resistance pretends that failures of the metapsychological approach are due to the analytic technique occasionally proposed by Freud. Very often, Ferenczi appears as the supposed hero of the criticism of a so-called Freudian technique, neglecting the fact that Freudian definitions changed several times, as Ferenczi's probably did too.

Some authors seems to believe in a close relationship between metapsychology and the scientism of psychoanalysis on one hand, and scientism and natural sciences, as sometimes proposed by Freud, on the other. This is not because proposals were made by Freud that we should be blind to the fact that this was not always his position either in his texts or in what we know of his practice.

This situation is all the more deplorable in that, as of 1980, different conceptual and logical kinds of confusion have already been analyzed and criticized in an important paper on the subject. Ellman and Moskowitz (1980) studied and discussed the long-standing criticisms of metapsychology. Their well-founded remarks anticipate other attacks that have ever since targeted metapsychology and consequently, in some ways, psychoanalysis as well. They also criticize any attempt to reduce "reality" to an empirical, instrumentalist, descriptive, logical, linguistic or psychologizing approach that claims that metapsychological data cannot be observed and are not able to organize experience or describe

it correctly. These authors likewise dismiss criticism of the "anthropomorphism" of metapsychology. I would add that even purely mathematical, geometric or logical definitions of phenomena are still ruled by an anthropomorphic approach, for a human presence is needed to imagine and formulate them.

The metapsychological approach to subjectivity calls for a clinical *démarche* based on the analysis of **AQ12** transference and countertransference. It needs to be anchored in the notion that subjectivity is multiply determined, according to coordinates set down by Freud. These coordinates have, for the most part, been stable ever since. Even if our understanding of the continuous play of transference and countertransference has been significantly enriched since then, the notions of suppression and of the coming back of the suppressed are a common ground for analysts, as well as overdetermination in our lives.

Freud is quite clear here. On two separate occasions, he provided both detailed and comprehensive **AQ13** definitions of a term he had been working through for a long time: "I propose that when we have succeeded in describing a psychical process in its dynamic, topological, and economic aspects, we should speak of it as a *metapsychological* presentation" (1915, p. 181). Again, in the same time period, in his letter of May 4, 1915 on the same subject, he wrote to Karl Abraham in a more clinical manner (Freud & Abraham, 1965, pp. 220–1):

Your comments on melancholia are very useful to me, and I unhesitatingly incorporated in my paper those parts of them that I could use. What was most valuable to me was the reference to the oral phase of the libido, and I also mention the link with mourning to which you draw attention … but the explanation of the disorder can be derived only from its mechanism, seen from the *dynamic, topical, and economic* point of view.

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What I actually understand as metapsychology in a clinical relationship is that I am not concerned by structures alone. What I try to grasp, even if sometimes the idea of structures comes to my mind, is their dynamics and their economy. More than that, I would insist that no structure ever exists alone; they are always intermingled with other structures. Mental illness classifications are as useful to psychoanalysts as astrology is to astronomy. We are always in multilevel movements that imply concrete entities: bodies, desires, homes, houses, families, generations, social-political and economic determinations. The superego, for instance, is a multilevel entity, dynamic and economic, which corresponds to actual living experiences, in our past and in our present, in our bodies as much as in our social lives. If I forget that a

patient of mine is living a real life, I start to think about him or her in a kind of mystic way that uses psychoanalytic jargon. "Pure psychoanalysis" exists as much as the Trinity.

Sarah and metapsychology

Sarah's life is not a heap of events; her history is not a more or less tight or loose sequence of occasions more or less understandable or absurd. Her life has a meaning. This meaning cannot be exhausted by exploring a combinatory governed by formations of the unconscious or logical constructions of fantasy.

This meaning has roots that go well beyond Sarah's history. I do not know from what material the superego is formed if it does not start with this source, its events, places, words. Her history also obeys a dynamic whereby pleasure becomes unpleasure before becoming pleasure again, and idealization becomes denigration before acquiring a new shape in a movement that follows the transformation of the working-through of castration anxiety into the fantasy of disappearance and (why not?) somatic aspects of illness.

This meaning is also ruled by the strictest economy when projective and narcissistic identifications replace possible metaphors or metonymies in a regressive manner: in Hamlet's words: "Thrift, Horatio, thrift" (Freud, 1905, p. 42).

Finally, Sarah's history is governed by a topology whereby what was repressed reappears, according to the constraint of the repetition compulsion, before its inscription in a psychic place where it may be set in motion again. I have mentioned the pain that traversed Sarah's life like a red thread through the masts of a sailboat. Her pain as a daughter, as a mistress, as a wife. Her pain in not having her words recognized, and also her pain as a mother. Her pain as a child submerged in the greatest pain of the violent memories of her father and the submissive sufferings of her mother. How can we not say it? At the same time, the infinite pain of concentration camps and the acute pain of exile, when a sunny country is lost and exchanged for a cold snowy place. And their deafening echoes.

Pain does not stop with the suffering of those who have known it. Often, only greater pain overcomes a pain that became usual. Joy does not vanish with the disappointment that it may bring on. Often, only greater joy replaces former gaiety.

Between word representations and representations of things, between signifier and signified, in the transformations both of them undergo, among the places of their inscription, metapsychology blossoms and creates specific modes of entry into civilization,

which never eliminate savagery (Prado de Oliveira, 1997).

I think that, for Sarah, "coldness" was the signifier for those who had inflicted barely imaginable suffering on her father, as much as it was the signifier for her mother's frequent complaints about her new country. "To care" has been her way of fighting against and creating a fragile position as a woman. "Muslims" signified Sarah's quest for *Musulmanner* (Prado de Oliveira, 1996; Agamben, 1998/1999). "Muslims" was a word to signify those prisoners in concentration camps who no longer managed to defend or protect themselves, undoubtedly not all Jews, whose death was foreseeable and certain, although a small number of them, including her father, survived. But also, once upon a time in her mother's country, Muslims had been the neighbors and friends. Now they had disappeared and often became enemies.

Two things came to my mind again: the images of the film *The Nuremberg Trials*, which had led me to discover the camps and crime during my early adolescence, when I started discovering adult sensuality; as well as reading about the propagation of cruelty. The questioning of crime and of the diverse forms of pain and injustice never left me.

In one sense, Sarah survives.

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Biographies

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