

***“Infantile Thoughts”*: Reading Ferenczi’s  
Clinical Diary as a Commentary on Freud’s Relationship  
with Minna Bernays**

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“We should not forget that the young child is familiar with much knowledge, as a matter of fact, that later becomes buried by the force of repression.”

(Ferenczi, 1926, p. 350)

**I**

To juxtapose Freud’s relationship with Minna Bernays and Ferenczi’s Clinical Diary (1985) might well be described as a metaphysical conceit in Dr. Johnson’s famous pejorative definition of such comparisons as “the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together” (1781, p. 14). For, I must concede at once, the name of Freud’s sister-in-law is never mentioned in the private journal kept by Ferenczi in 1932, the year before his death.

In order to render plausible my ensuing argument, therefore, let me circle back to the beginning of the story and offer some guideposts by way of orientation. I start with the premise that, if Freud did engage in a sexual affair with Minna, four years younger than his wife Martha and his own junior by nine years, the effects of this primordial boundary violation would not have been confined to Freud’s “private” life but would rather have extended to the professional sphere in manifold ways, and would indeed haunt the entire history of

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<sup>1</sup> On Ferenczi as a touchstone not only for analysts who identify themselves as relational but also for those who consider themselves Independent – the former being predominantly, though not exclusively, American, and the latter British – see the eloquent paper by Michael Parsons (2009a) and the responses by Anthony Bass (2009), Emanuel Berman (2009), and Warren Poland (2009), and Parsons’s reply (2009b) to these commentaries.

psychoanalysis. By examining the image of Freud fashioned by the Hungarian disciple who has become an inspirational figure for contemporary relational and Independent analysts,<sup>1</sup> we shall gain an inkling of the far-reaching impact of Freud's alleged transgression, which – if proven true – would constitute not simply adultery but also incest in both a psychological and a biblical sense.<sup>2</sup>

My second premise is that, whatever the role one ascribes to fantasy in psychic life, it makes a profound difference whether or not this affair was consummated in reality. For, by Freud's own theory, it is only to be expected that human beings will entertain forbidden thoughts. To acknowledge such desires in a psychoanalytic context would not be compromising. But if Freud acted on these impulses, especially with a member of his own family, to confess what he had done would have had catastrophic consequences for his reputation and put an end to any hopes of founding a movement to advance his radical ideas about sexuality and the unconscious. Thus, in the scenario I am envisaging, Freud did engage in an affair with his sister-in-law, and this left him with an all-consuming secret – something, in the words that Freud was fond of quoting from Goethe's *Faust*, he could not tell the boys. It was the strain of keeping concealed what he most longed to reveal that caused this conflict arising in Freud's domestic life to disturb his relations above all with Jung and Ferenczi, the two colleagues who sought to know him best, with ever-widening ripples in the pool of psychoanalytic history.

We come now to the bedrock question of whether Freud did enter into a liaison with Minna Bernays. Although I have come to believe that he did, to make that case properly would require book-length treatment and must be deferred to a future occasion. By way of a down payment, however, I can outline why I find the evidence to be compelling. The fundamental point to be grasped is that there are not one but *two* indispensable sources of information concerning this affair, and these are *entirely independent* of each other. Thus, if even one of these sources were deemed to be credible, then the evidence for Freud's affair would already be very strong; but if *both* were to stand up under rigorous scrutiny, then I submit that the case would have been proved beyond any reasonable doubt.

The first source of information is *internal* and comes from Freud's own writings, especially *On Dreams* (1901) and his analysis of the "*aliquis*" parapraxis, found in chapter 2 of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), as well as other passages in the same book, all of which were written in the fall of

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<sup>2</sup> The Book of Leviticus makes explicit the prohibition against sexual intercourse between a man and his sister-in-law: "Neither shalt thou take a wife to her sister, to vex her, to uncover her nakedness in her lifetime" (18:18; King James Version).

1900, after Freud returned to Vienna from his summer travels first with Martha and then with Minna. It was on the basis of a brilliant exegesis of these texts that Peter Swales (1982) first advanced the thesis that Freud and Minna consummated their affair in the summer of 1900, following which Freud – like the allegedly recently reencountered but in actuality nonexistent “young man of academic background”<sup>3</sup> (Freud 1901, pp. 8-9) who misremembered a line from Vergil’s *Aeneid* – evidently feared he had impregnated Minna and sent her to a sanatorium where she likely underwent an abortion.

The second source of information concerning Freud’s affair with Minna Bernays is *external* and turns on the testimony of Jung, who, in an interview given to the American theologian John Billinsky in 1957, but not published by Billinsky until 1969, reported that during his first visit to Freud in Vienna in 1907, he had learned from Minna that “Freud was in love with her and that their relationship was indeed very intimate” (Billinsky, 1969, p. 42).<sup>4</sup> Although I have tried elsewhere (Rudnytsky, 2006) to show the essential integrity of Jung’s evolving narratives of his relationship with Freud, the key point for my present purposes, as I have indicated, is simply that these two sources – the *internal* and *external* – are altogether *independent* of one another, and hence there is no sense in which Swales relies on Jung in advancing his arguments.

In view of the highly charged nature of the material, it is not surprising that even distinguished scholars and analysts have lost their bearings in dealing with Freud and Minna. In their annotations to Ferenczi’s pivotal self-analytic letter to Freud on December 26, 1912, for example, the editors assert that “an attempt was made by Peter Swales... to verify Jung’s claim that Freud and Minna

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<sup>3</sup> The similarity of this description to that of Freud’s interlocutor in “Screen Memories” – “a man of university education, aged thirty-eight” (Freud, 1899, p. 309) – who is universally recognized to be none other than Freud himself, combined with Freud’s statement in the *Psychopathology* that he had “renewed his acquaintance” (Freud, 1901, p. 8) with the perpetrator of the *aliquis* slip, can, in my view, be construed as Freud’s private signal that he is continuing the disguised self-analysis begun in “Screen Memories” in his fictional dialogue with “Herr Aliquis.”

<sup>4</sup> The published version of Jung’s interview with Billinsky is only the tip of the archival iceberg. In a February 20, 1970 letter to Franz Jung, Billinsky stated, “May I say in all frankness that I gave only excerpts of your father’s remarks and not the whole story as your father told it to me.” In unpublished contemporaneous notes of the interview, Billinsky quotes Jung as having said explicitly, “I learned that Freud was in love with her and had sexual relations with her.” I am grateful to Peter Swales for sharing with me these documents given to John Kerr by Billinsky’s son after his father’s death. Also indispensable is Jung’s 1953 interview with Kurt Eissler, derestricted by the Freud Archives at the Library of Congress in 2003.