

Book Reviews

Elizabeth Noble: Primal Connections

Simon and Schuster, New York 1993, 335 pp., \$ 12.00, ISBN 0-671-67851-5.

Anyone who has had the pleasure of meeting Elizabeth Noble, perhaps of attending one of her lectures, will immediately recognize the warmth and integrity, the depth of insight and strength of conviction which pervade this book. Though full of the most up-to-date information from the ever-expanding field of pre- and perinatal psychology and medicine, "Primal Connections" is first and foremost a personal encounter with one of its leading proponents. It is not a book in which Elizabeth argues about psychological theories and concepts. Rather, from beginning to end, she lets her vision, her way of viewing human life, of understanding key moments of her own experience, fill the pages. No possible moment is excluded: conception and implantation, life in the womb, birth and life after birth until death – all conceivable phases of being human, even the possibility of past lives and pre-conception consciousness, are drawn together in a huge tapestry of scientific evidence, anecdote and quotation, personal experience and statements of belief. The book is exhilarating and exciting but was also for me sometimes intellectually demanding and overwhelming. The sheer breath of Elizabeth's view, the span and courage of the connections which she makes, often had me pausing for breath! I had to take time out to ponder and am still pondering over much that was presented to me. It is a most stimulating book, a most interesting encounter.

The guiding words of Ashley Montagu in the last paragraph of the Foreword concerning the importance of speculation proved to be important. They encourage an attitude of critical openness. I am sure that every reader who approaches the book with that attitude will gain much.

One of the key issues of pre- and perinatal psychology – indeed of depth psychology in general – which reading the book continually brought to my mind concerns the problem and the power of metaphor. Hardly a single paragraph failed to raise new aspects, to shed light and pinpoint hidden corners. Elizabeth entitles one of the sections in her first chapter "Pre- and Perinatal Metaphors". However, many of the connections which she makes throughout the book depend on metaphor and specifically upon the search for literal, very often biological/organic interpretations of quite common metaphors. She gives numerous examples from everyday English of what she calls birth metaphors, e.g. world falling in, no room to maneuver, tight squeeze, no way out. My feeling is that even readers for whom the insights of this book are a startling revelation of new psychological dimensions, will be able to sense some birth experience behind

these metaphors. They will also probably be able to accept that there is some truth in the simple and direct interpretation that Elizabeth offers. However, the power of metaphor to reveal and connect becomes – at least for me – too thin when phrases like “I can’t seem to get into this” or “My head is splitting” are proposed to express – not, as I would spontaneously expect, birth memories – but conception memories. I have similar problems when metaphor is interpreted very specifically, as for example in “Face presentations at birth may have difficulty ‘facing up to things’ or often say, ‘Let’s face it’.” I accept that people born face first can use such phrases more frequently than others. However, in my experience such strong, pre- and perinatal determination of adult mental processes is only to be seen in cases of quite severe psychological illness. Such people who are not ill do not reveal their birth so directly and many none-face presentations also use face metaphors.

The whole problem becomes much more complicated when one considers that “every birth symbol can lend itself to a variety of interpretations other than birth” (p. 77) or that there is also the possibility of retrojection: “Of course, dreams are infinite in meaning and their interpretation is infinitely arguable. For example, fear or any other emotion in a dream may be retrojection from the higher levels of the mind back to the prenatal foundation, or it may be an actual mobilization of deeply buried, organic memories” (p. 75). How can one be certain then that a particular metaphor or symbol is in fact a primal connection, an accurate recall and appropriate expression of an authentic memory of a real pre- or perinatal event?

The book “Primal Connections” is a significant contribution to the search for answers not only to this question but to many others concerning the nature of mind and indeed the meaning of life.

Terence Dowling, Mainz

Sigmund Freud: Hemmung, Symptom und Angst

Vienna, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag 1926, 123 pp.

About a generation ago psychoanalysis started with Freud’s efforts to deal with the problem of anxiety, which he first encountered in the so-called “actual neuroses”. In his recent book, *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*, he returns to this startling point and discusses the difficult problem of anxiety with special reference to the solution suggested in my *Trauma of Birth* (1924). Freud originally interpreted neurotic anxiety as a result of libido repression and from that interpretation developed his present “castration” theory. In *The Trauma of Birth*, making use of a chance hint thrown out in a footnote in the second edition of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1909), I attempted to deduct the anxiety-affect genetically from the experience of birth. I took a distinct step beyond Freud here in that I linked the *physiological* birth-anxiety (which was all that Freud had in mind in the footnote mentioned) to the separation from the mother as a trauma of great *psychological* importance.

In his present book, Freud withdraws from his theory of the conversion of libido into anxiety. He now admits that anxiety is not, as he formerly supposed, produced by the mechanism of repression, but that it is reproduced as a state of affect in imitation of a given memory picture (pages 15 and 76); and he refers back to his earlier suggestion that in mankind the primary anxiety is experienced in the process of birth (page 60). Apparently, however, he is unable to accept my theory of the relationship between this affect-reproduction and the separation from the mother, although he does recognize the “discovery of this great connection” as “of undisputed merit” (page 103). Yet the fact is that Freud formerly could make no use of his idea of the physiological birth-anxiety until I had linked it on to the separation from the mother in its *psychological* meaning. Incidentally, this connection, which I discovered in the course of analytic work, has what might be called experimental verification in the observable fact that the patient, in the process of separation from the analyst, reacts with a reproduction of birth-anxiety symptoms.

Freud’s dilemma is that he must either give up his own concept of anxiety as “castration anxiety” or bring this concept into harmony with his birth-anxiety theory. He already admits “that the castration anxiety is not the only motive force of repression (or defense)” (page 62), and limits its pathogenic signification to the phobias; in hysteria, he now holds, it is the loss of the love object, and in the compulsion neuroses it is the super-ego, that conditions the anxiety. On the other hand, his critical discussion of his own cases of phobias of animals (little Hans and the Wolfman) leads to the conclusion that in them the genital excitation (tenderness and fear) is “expressed in the language of the overcome transition-phase from the oral to the sadistic libido organization” (page 34). Here he apparently tries to save the castration theory by conceiving these sadistic-oral expressions as “a distortion-substitute for the content of being castrated by the father” – with what right is not mentioned! The attempt to save the castration-anxiety theory, however, is unmistakable, and the result of the attempt is bound to give rise to a new problem. This problem would not have come up if Freud, while writing his work (in the summer of 1925), had been able to use my genetic-genital theory, for he would then not only have seen the primary relation of the sadistic-oral “language” to the mother-object, but also would have been able to put the castration fear in its proper place as connected only with the later (genital) (Edipus stage. Through neglecting the *genetic* connection between the (oral) mother stage and the (genital) father stage, Freud “interprets” the first as a “distortion-substitute” for the second. As a result he is unable to apply his new concept of anxiety as a reproduction, and so has to look for an *actual* cause for the castration fear at the genital stage. In tracing it back to a “real fear” – the “fear of an actual threatening danger or of a danger considered to be real” (page 39) – the doubt again arises whether the fear can be newly produced from the economic conditions of the situation or is merely reproduced as an affective signal of danger carried over from the birth situation. So the important question remains whether the anxiety-affect – or affect in general – is newly produced or only reproduced.

Freud attempts to solve this problem by assuming a “transition from the automatic, unwilling production of anxiety to a purposed reproduction as a signal of

danger” (page 83). This “transition” is not very clear because in a certain sense all affects are reproductions; indeed this fact, as Freud himself once hinted, determines their real nature and explains, in my opinion, their intensity and painfulness. I mean that every affect is a reminiscence which is renewed – *i.e.*, newly produced in the sense of being recalled by an actual experience. But this reminiscence finally goes back to the first experienced anxiety-affect of birth, as Freud himself again implies in his discussion of real anxiety (page 72): “Since it is so often a matter of the danger of ‘castration’”, the fear therein appears “as the reaction to a loss, a separation”. According to my concept as set forth in *The Trauma of Birth*, birth would be the first anxiety-experience and the separation from the mother would be the prototype of the castration fear. But since Freud is unwilling to give up the castration theory as the pillar of the sexual etiology of the neuroses, he is unable to admit the traumatic character of the separation from the mother in parturition. So he severs “the great connection” which I have “discovered”, in his assumption that birth is not experienced subjectively as separation from the mother, “since she is entirely unknown as an object to the completely narcissistic foetus” (page 73).

The difficulties involved in such an assumption are worthy of mention at least. Freud rightly emphasizes the fact that in general we know too little about the newly born child and its sensations to be able to draw hard-and-fast conclusions with regard to it. But in spite of isolated child observations and even child analyses, the same thing is largely true for the child in general, in whom too much of the adult, especially adult sexuality, has probably been projected. Be that as it may, Freud’s warning that caution is necessary in interpreting the sensations of the newborn child is sound, but it holds also for his own assertion that the mother does not represent an object for the newly born. We cannot make dogmatic statements as to that; rather the whole matter amounts to nothing more than a quibble over words. For it is certain that the newborn child loses something as soon as it is born, indeed even as soon as birth begins – something that we can express in our language in hardly any other way than as the loss of an object or, if one wants to be more precise, the loss of a milieu. The characteristic quality of the birth act is that it is a transitional phenomenon *κατ’ ἐξοχην*, and that very fact may determine its traumatic character. One might perhaps say that in parturition the ego first finds its object and then loses it again, which possibly explains many peculiarities of our psychical life. Indeed, I think that without such an assumption, or one similar to it, one can have no adequate understanding of the later child anxiety, as Freud himself admits (page 81). For only on the theory of a reproduction of the birth severance can we explain why the child, when it misses the mother, reacts with anxiety, instead of merely longing for the lost object, as would the adult.

Just as little will one be able to understand the longing for the womb, which is undoubtedly biological (and not merely a desire for flight, although it may be that also) if one does not conceive it in the same sense as an attempt to re-establish an early existing “object relation”. Freud’s attempt to sexualize this simple biological fact in accordance with his castration theory is not helped by reference to Ferenczi’s “genital theory”. To interpret “the phantasy of the return to

the womb as coitus-substitute for the impotent (those inhibited by the threat of castration)” may perhaps occasionally be permissible in the case of patients in the analytic situation, but to accept it is a general psychological principle, an explanation of the universal longing for the womb – a longing that is found in the potent as well as the impotent – is logically, psychologically, and biologically unjustified. That the penis is an instrument for taking complete possession of the mother at the genital stage, I have myself maintained, and so “castration” signifies a separation from the mother in which the anxiety refers to birth. But to interpret the longing for the womb as a substitute for coitus, as Freud wishes to, is the very opposite of Ferenczi’s theory, which, with its biological deepening of the Jungian concept and its linking on to mine, holds just the reverse – namely, that coitus is a (genital) substitute for the biological longing for the womb.

With regard to the Freudian criticism of my doctrine, I should like to call attention to the fact that, in my presentation of the Freudian concept, I considered the birth-anxiety also as a reaction to a danger. Freud, in emphasizing this point, overlooks the fact that the first danger situation in birth involves a danger to life (death-anxiety – birth-anxiety), not the loss of the penis. My point was that this physiological anxiety in parturition (independent of the loss of object) undergoes a “psychical anchoring” in relation to the mother and the tendency to return to her. In Freud’s presentation there is no mention of this psychical anchoring of anxiety, or of any similar assumption, so that it is difficult to see how he passes from the birth-anxiety to a psychical-anxiety problem at all. He then draws the conclusion “that the earliest phobias of childhood do not allow of a direct tracing back to the impression of birth and till now have had no explanation at all” (page 81). He admits that the later anxiety at the loss of an object is “psychical”, but that again is nothing else than saying the the (physiological) birth-anxiety-affect somehow becomes psychical in relation to an object. I have merely attempted to place the first appearance of psychical anxiety – of which, even in Freud’s opinion, the newborn is capable – in the birth act itself and not in early childhood, where it obviously arises at the loss of the mother, thus referring back to the first separation from her. Freud here does not seem to distinguish clearly between two problems. He gives no convincing reason why anxiety at the loss of an object (psychical anxiety) could not just as well have its origin in parturition as later in early childhood, where the connection is obvious. Possibly his reluctance to admit the mother as an object in the birth situation may be related to his relinquishment of the libido-privation theory of anxiety: having been influenced by my birth-anxiety theory to abandon his old position, he now goes to the other extreme and denies the presence of a libido object in parturition. In so doing he overlooks the fact that it is not my contention at all that anxiety in birth proceeds from the loss of a libido object. I say rather that it arises from the physiological (life) danger and is connected with the loss of an object only “incidentally”. This connection is full of significance for the whole development of the human being, especially for our psychical life. Already in *The Trauma of Birth* I had given up the idea of the change of libido into anxiety after tracing back anxiety, genetically, not to suppressed libido (loss of object), but to the (physiological) birth-anxiety. Analytic observations and experiences have brought me to

the belief that in the case of patients under analysis, the libido (wish excitations) as it were covers anxiety – that is, anxiety temporarily disappears because the libido is gratified, not because a change of anxiety into libido has taken place. Freud, on the other hand, after accepting birth-anxiety as the source of anxiety in general, simply draws the logical conclusion that the assumption of a change of libido into anxiety is no longer necessary. He then proceeds to use this conclusion as an argument against what he erroneously conceives to be my position and asserts that anxiety even in parturition is not produced from libido. In other words, he turns an objection to the libido-privation theory into an objection to my theory, or rather his misconception of my theory. For I repeat that I have never contended that anxiety in birth arises from the libido; I have maintained that anxiety is not produced from libido at all, although I am of the opinion that even in birth it is connected with loss of object – as I have said, is psychically anchored.

In this book, perhaps for the first time, Freud does not speak from his own analytic experiences, but uses my experiences deductively and critically. This may explain why he reaches no positive conclusions apart from that in regard to anxiety. But this conclusion – that anxiety is reproduced as a reaction to a danger-situation, as a signal of it, so to speak – is pre-analytical, not to say pre-psychological. To begin with, Freud must admit that the first danger, and so the prototype of every anxiety affect, is birth; on the other hand, he cannot deny that the neurotic anxiety that most interests us is “anxiety before a danger that we do not know. So the neurotic danger must first be sought: analysis has taught us that it is an impulse danger (“Triebgefahr”). In bringing this danger, unknown to the ego, to consciousness, we obliterate the difference between real anxiety and neurotic anxiety – treat the last like the first” (page 125). But in another passage he contradicts this by saying that “the impulse is not a danger in itself, but is dangerous only because it brings with it a genuine outside danger – that of castration” (page 67). This latter assertion I cannot understand, for in our milieu, where the neuroses arise, castration is no danger at all. Freud finally says with regard to neurotic anxiety: “There is nothing to distinguish it from real anxiety, which the ego normally expresses in situations of danger, except the fact that the content of anxiety remains unconscious and becomes conscious, as well as where and how it becomes distorted. For this it will be necessary perhaps to reinterpret the anxiety dream, the Freudian explanation of which is based upon the old theory of the conversion of libido into anxiety. It is interesting that Freud does not mention the anxiety dream once in his whole discussion. In the anxiety dream there is certainly no question of an external danger, and yet the anxiety is quantitatively greater than is usually the case in reality.

This leads to the weighty problem of *quantity* and to the therapeutic idea of *abreaction* bound up with it. In his general estimation of my concept (page 102 ff.) Freud does not accept the quantitative moment (intensity of the birth trauma), which I emphasize; on the other hand, in another passage (page 17) he finds it “throughout plausible, that quantitative moments, such as the enormous force of excitation and the breaking through of the defense against stimuli, are the immediate causes of the primal repressions”. And after a thorough discussion of all

the problems involved, he comes to the conclusion that “there are quantitative relations that are not directly to be demonstrated and that are comprehensible only in terms of their results. These quantitative relations determine whether or not the old danger situations are established, whether the repressions of the ego are maintained, whether the child neuroses persist.” Everywhere, in the last analysis, Freud comes to the incomprehensible quantity-moment as the determining factor. Only in regard to the trauma that occurs at the beginning of the individual’s development – namely, birth – he will not admit that the intensity is conclusive, or at least, if it is so, he contends that it should be measurable and capable of demonstration. The same apparently contradictory attitude toward my theory appears in connection with the *abreaction* of the trauma, concerning which Freud expresses doubt (page 103). Yet in a further discussion of the problem (page 119 ff.), where he traces the anxiety reaction back to the danger situation, he comes finally to the conclusion: “Anxiety is, on the one hand, expectation of the trauma, on the other hand a milder repetition of the same” (page 127). This implies the idea of abreaction in reproduction, by means of which the child seeks “psychically to master his impression of life. If this is the meaning of an abreaction of the trauma, then one can no longer object to it” (page 128).

There are other contradictions in the book, obviously due to the resistances of Freud, who is following out my new line of thought to conclusions that necessitate a radical revision of his own views. Freud has already given up the chief support of his libido theory – the enigmatic mechanism of the conversion of libido into anxiety. And this means that he has had to restrict the rôle of the most important mechanism of his ego-psychology – repression – since it can no longer be held as the cause of anxiety, as he formerly assumed, but, on the contrary, is a consequence of anxiety (page 39 ff.). At present he holds to the mechanism of repression only in relation to the genital organization of libido (pages 65 and 124), whilst for other phases and processes which he formerly included under repression he reinstates the old concept of defense (“*Abwehr*”). But here again he goes only halfway, in his reluctance to give up his earlier concepts for new ones. For the mechanism of defense is again too general a concept; as a matter of fact, in his discussion of this theme (page 121 ff.) Freud is obliged to refer to special mechanisms, in particular the “procedure of making a thing as if it had not happened” – a circumlocution by which he avoids using the simpler and more natural terms proposed by others. (For a long time I have used the term “*Verleugnung*”, denial.)

If Freud finds it almost embarrassing that “after so much work we yet find difficulties in the concept of the most fundamental relations” (page 64), is it not possible that this situation may be partly due to a resistance on his part to accepting any idea that originates from others? Moreover, if he is finally obliged to take such an idea into account, he is further embarrassed by his attempts to refer it back to one of his own earlier points of view and to hold fast to that. This explains a great part of the difficulties that he still finds in the anxiety problem. For example, the only merit that he will grant me is that of having called attention to his concept of anxiety as a result of the birth process: “The Rankian reminder that the anxiety-affect is, as I myself first maintained, a result of partu-

rition and a repetition of the situation lived through at that rime, compelled us to a recent examination of the problem of anxiety." My own contribution – the linking together of this birth-anxiety affect with the separation from the mother – he cannot accept, in spite of recognizing its importance and allowing it to influence markedly his own presentation. Yet Freud's mention of the birth-anxiety affect as the prototype of later anxiety lay buried these twenty years in a footnote, and would in all probability never have led to any revision of the problem of anxiety – and with it of the whole psychoanalytic theory – if I, with my concept of the mother-relation, had not attempted to bridge over the gulf between the biological and the psychological.

Whatever faults *The Trauma of Birth* may have, it certainly has not the fault that has been ascribed to it in analytic circles – that of being too radical in attempting to substitute new concepts for old. Freud's present discussion implicitly contains the reproach that I was not radical enough, in that he has been encouraged to draw from my discernment further conclusions. When he states that my book stand on analytic – *i.e.*, Freudian – ground, he is right, in so far as I was still endeavoring to bring my own experiences into harmony with his libido theory. His present change of position justifies this my attempt, since he now wants to put my concept on psychoanalytic ground that he himself has already left in further pursuit of my views. In criticizing my presentation, which implies an attempt to save the libido theory, he has been compelled to give up this libido theory, a step that I did not yet trust myself enough to ake completely in *The Trauma of Birth*.

Apart from this personal satisfaction, Freud's book, being full of contradictions, is disappointing in more ways than one – in its failure to make any positive or new contribution, in its wavering between recognition and rejection of my new concept of anxiety. I think this may be partly due to the fact already mentioned that here for the first time Freud does not speak from his own experience, but merely draws deductive conclusions and adopts the corrections that his consideration of my new concept of the anxiety problem have made necessary.

I hope soon to be able to carry the elaboration of this concept out of the realm of controversy into more constructive fields.

Paris

Otto Rank

[Book Review of Otto Rank in *Mental Hygiene* 11 (1927), 181–188]