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Book Review Essay: “Edoardo Weiss: The House that Freud Built” by Paul Roazen

This biography of Edoardo Weiss is a well-timed tribute to the founder of the SPI (Italian Psychoanalytic Society) and of the *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, its main journal, whose publication resumed in 1954, after the suspension ordered during Mussolini’s regime.

Weiss (1889-1970), a Jewish doctor born and educated in the multifaceted and multicultural city of Trieste at the turn of the century, was one of Freud’s close disciples. His analytic career began in Trieste, continued in Rome, where he moved in 1931, and culminated in Chicago, elected as his new home, where he emigrated with his family in 1939, following Mussolini’s introduction of anti-Semitic laws in Italy.

Intertwined with the vicissitudes of Weiss’ life is the history of Italian Psychoanalysis and of the *Rivista*, whose publication was suspended by the fascist regime and resumed in the post-war period. Perhaps the time has now come to begin looking closely at and reflecting on these painful historical events, which will require the assumption of ethical and political responsibility. Roazen provides an outsider’s view on the early decades of Italian Psychoanalysis, also subject of the itinerant exhibition on the history of the

Rivista di Psicoanalisi put together by the historian of psychoanalysis Anna Maria Accerboni, and the theme of a recently published special issue of the *Rivista*, devoted entirely to its own history.

In all three, Trieste features as an important meeting point for both Western and Eastern European civilizations; a crossroad as it were, but also a seaport, and a place of ‘frontiers’, as the Trieste-born writer Claudio Magris

called it. In the early decades of the 20th century, what is now a declined seaport and town, hosted James Joyce and Marcel Proust and was the birthplace of the Italian writers Umberto Saba and Italo Svevo (the former was a patient of Weiss, and the latter was his uncle). Both were closely tied to psychoanalysis. Not surprisingly, psychoanalysis significantly enhanced Trieste’s artistic fervour and vivacity.

Roazen begins his biography of Weiss by writing about Trieste and its ambience. This constitutes the book’s first chapter, and is followed by a chapter on Chicago, which addresses his efforts to adapt to his new home and to set up a clinical practice, after his move from Topeka, Kansas, where he’d initially joined the staff of the Menninger Clinic.

Finding a niche in which to practice and teach wasn’t easy for Weiss, who represented tradition and a devoted loyalty to the classical approach, and who was thus out of place in an environment which stimulated more the younger, innovative practitioners, such as Franz Alexander and Heinz Kohut, to mention only two, those that parted from familiar theoretical and technical solutions toward examining clinical problems, and

thus venturing into new territories.

Roazen essentially relies on a series of interviews he had with Weiss over some twenty years, in order to write his biographical account. Weiss himself conveyed his wish for a biographical rendition to come from their meetings, partly instigated by his Italian colleagues, who wanted to find a voice in the international psychoanalytic arena.

In the opening chapters of the book, Roazen seems almost to invite thereader to join him in his quest/question: who is and where is the object of a biographical enquiry? His question brought to my mind two associations, the first an image from the film *Citizen Kane*, which the director closes by leaving the audience with a sense of mystery, conveyed by the crystal ball and the 'thing/word presentation', 'Rosebud'. A similar sense of mystery and ultimate impenetrability of the object of enquiry is what Saba communicates by the words of his poem "Trieste". The poet tells the reader how he ascends to a hilly corner delimited by a wall, and from there he contemplates the city, which appears to terminate there. Bustling with traffic and people, the city cannot be apprehended in its magnanimity, its fluid and mysterious integrity, yet there remains a defined and delimited corner where it is possible to observe the object, which nonetheless retains its elusive nature.

This is an apt metaphor and it informed my reading of Roazen's biography of Weiss, particularly as the author tries to keep his focus on his subject, not always an easy task amidst the bustle of a whole group of pioneers of psychoanalysis. Moreover, remaining objective by steering clear of polemical tones and avoiding taking sides are equally difficult tasks in the face of theoretical and political conflicts, as well as because of personal loyalties. At times, therefore, the reader comes across passages which are difficult to understand, such as: "It sounds like Freud's supervision of Weiss, as well as Helen Deutsch, could be genuinely self-denying and agnostic..." (p.99) and one is not quite sure whether this lack of clarity is conceptual or editorial. There are, indeed, quite a few misspelled words, which could have been avoided by careful proofreading. An instance of this is the first line of the last paragraph on page 108, which reads: "Freud had already starting writing...", followed by another gerund, which sounds clumsy in addition to being wrong.

Roazen states that what today is known as the panic attack is the same as the old-fashioned notion of agoraphobia. A reader could get the impression that the former term has replaced the latter, while the term agoraphobia, along with its twin concept of claustrophobia, is still widely employed in contemporary psychoanalysis, which also relies on the descriptive term 'panic attack' to indicate the intensity of unthinkable anxieties that can go so far as to reach psychotic intensity. It would have been useful to have clarified the difference. In the third chapter, entitled "Discipleship and Federn", after a good four pages of not very pertinent, and often quite tangential statements, such as: "Analysts had an almost comic identification with Freud that someone like Freud's daughter-in-law Esti thought worked against psychoanalysis in Vienna" (p.48), Roazen tries to address the issue of Weiss' relationship with his analyst and his theoretical interest in the concept of the ego, which led him to question Freud's pessimistic view on the possible treatment of psychotics. Interestingly, a clinical and theoretical interest in hard-to-treat patients and in disturbed states of mind is a distinctive feature of the Centro Veneto di Psicoanalisi and perhaps these traces could be located in its early history. However, I could not help feeling disappointed by Roazen's approach to these interesting areas: he mentions them but fails to develop his thoughts, or help the reader learn more about Weiss' contribution. Roazen states:

About Weiss's own contribution to psychoanalysis I thought Weiss rather tended to confuse words with things, although it may have been natural authorial vanity (p.59).

I'm not entirely sure I understand what this means; it appears to be a vague and scathing remark. Understandably, Roazen's aim is not an examination or a clarification of the many complex theoretical

themes, which were then, and still are, being discussed. This would be too vast an endeavour, however the book would have profited by an expansion of the concepts he mentioned.

What comes through very clearly is the author's passion for truth and democracy, and so much so that sometimes he seems at times to lose his focus, and appears to be searching only for what he sees as what is intolerant, authoritarian and politically naïve in psychoanalysis and analytic circles. In this regard, there is a rather long section of the book, which deals with the contacts Weiss and Freud had with Mussolini and his cabinet. In particular, Weiss analysed the daughter of Forzano, a cabinet minister of the regime, who was also a playwright and was instrumental in bringing together Mussolini and the psychoanalytic world. To shed some light on this rather thorny affair, Roazen dwells on the wording of the inscription of a book, which Freud was asked by Forzano to give to Mussolini.

Freud had chosen to write something gracious about what Mussolini had done with the Roman past: "Benito Mussolini, with the respectful greetings of an old man who recognizes in the ruler the cultural hero." (p.33)

Quite clearly Freud's contribution, a verbal dedication, lends itself to various interpretations, distortions or even misuse. Roazen is at pains to show how Jones played on this kind of ambiguity, which was motivated by his own admiration of great and powerful leaders. Needless to say, the question of Judaism and anti-Zionism of some of the founders of psychoanalysis is at the core of this question. Roazen's concern is to demonstrate Weiss's unquestionable honesty and anti-fascist faith. But this is an important and worthwhile historical point of view, which needs the time, space and thought that it deserves. It also demands a certain courage to question motivation and ethical responsibilities of well-established psychoanalytic figures, and Roazen does bravely face this difficult task, the result of which is that some of the representatives of the early psychoanalytic group appear to be politically unsophisticated or even naïve.

Indeed there is much that is moralizing, intolerant, biased and politically naïve in psychoanalysis, but it is equally true that this discipline represents a powerful nosological instrument. Moreover, methodologically it has much in common with history, in that both disciplines can act as probes that expand the very field of knowledge they set out to investigate, to paraphrase Bion's dissertation on the psychoanalytic mode of investigating the unconscious.

It suffices to merely mention the subject of narcissism: the initial affirmation that narcissistic patients, or subjects who formed an essentially narcissistic transference, were not amenable to psychoanalytic treatment has given way to ample research into psychological phenomena which could be subsumed under the heading of narcissistic states of mind, including 'ordinary', but transitory phenomena such as the aesthetic or ecstatic-fusional states. These changes in perspective are well shown in this work, from which the reader gets the sense of psychoanalysis being a 'work in progress'.

Roazen's book, however, epitomizes the difficulties of writing a biographical account that is also an historical examination of the early psychoanalytic family, with all the conflicting loyalties, rigidities and limitations characteristic of any family. Some readers will find it illuminating, and appreciate the well-deserved attention given to Weiss, while some others may find some of the themes poorly developed. The aim of the book is indeed quite ambitious!

Contextualizing, understanding and creating meaning where, apparently, there had been ill formed or unthought-out material is the true lesson of the psychoanalytic method. Roazen's is a very complex and necessary investigation, which elicits intense feeling and passion, especially when it entails the acknowledgement of individual and shared responsibilities for historical events of such painful and/or destructive magnitude, such as those preceding the Second World War. Roazen must be appreciated for the passion and commitment he shows in his historical research, whether or not he succeeds better with some things than with others.

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