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Freud's Germinal Realism: From the *Reihen* of Trauma to the *Researches of Childhood*

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In memory of Philippe Van Haute

Abstract

Throughout Freud's corpus, one finds scattered a germinal motif: of the Keim and the Kern. The paper proposes that this trope pattern (of seeds, sprouts and kernels) in the early work of Freud is an index of the emerging discovery of a discrete category of reality with its own temporality, that he was trying to conceptualize: i.e., psychical reality. This paper revisits a strain of what it calls germinal realism in Freud's early thinking, before tracing a conceptual lineage (following what Freud calls the "Reihen" or series/row of trauma in his work of the early 1890s) between the conceptual framework of the seduction theory and the theory of the researches of childhood. The paper argues that, for Freud, the origins and objects of the child's researches (adult repressed sexuality) constitute a generalized form of seduction, and that the concept of the infantile researches/theories also represents Freud's final attempt to ontogenetically conceive of complex formation, before the advent of the phylogenetic theory of the Oedipus complex.

- [D]evelopment does not necessarily imply a simple unity or a monad on the model of a seed or germ cell that unfolds isolated potentials... The appearance of the unconscious is an event that is not scheduled in any program" (Laplanche, 2016, p. 66).

Very early on in Freud's writings, the *infantile* is associated with the legacy of the past in its most foundational aspect.² Starting with the exogenous realism of the seduction theory, whether one considers the role of traumatic "reminiscence" in *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud, 1893–1895/1955), the discovery of an infantile form of sexuality, or the insistent prominence given to childhood experience, Freud continually returned to "the infantile" as a realist referent, even as he put increasing emphasis on a specifically psychical form of reality. At the

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² This paper was largely conceived of and written before the global COVID-19 pandemic, when the idea of germs and contagion became a preoccupation for most of humanity. The research for this paper began in the context of a working group focused on the concept of the Oedipus complex. I would like to thank my colleagues Charles Hanly, Bradley Murray, Shawn Thomson, Meteb Alenazi and, especially, Alireza Taheri, for their friendship and for supporting this work at an early stage.

same time, the object of Freud's realism shifted over the years, from the ontogenetic etiological model presented in his trauma theory to the apparently endogenous and phylogenetic etiological model that follows *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913/1955b). With this shift in thinking, which would culminate in the theory of the Oedipus complex, Freud came to understand neurotic complexes as being formed around a phylogenetic nucleus (*Kern*) inherited from previous generations. However, as we will see, even in the case of the seminal nuclear Oedipus complex, the concept started its life not as *nucleus*, but as *germ* (*Keim*). In speaking of the *germ* and the *nucleus*, we refer to Freud's use of germinal words (*Keim* ["germ/seed/sprout"] and *Kern* ["seed/nucleus/core/kernel"]) throughout the corpus, but perhaps most prominently in the metaphors of the seduction theory of the mid-1890s, to conceptualize psychical reality and to express the non-linear temporality (*Nachträglichkeit*) of its functioning.

In what has been definitive in the historiography of psychoanalysis to this point, it has been argued (first by Freud himself) that this question of realism led Freud to disavow his seduction theory on September 21, 1897, as a result of a "continual disappointment of my efforts to bring a single analysis to a real conclusion" (Freud, 1985, p. 264). In what Laplanche refers to as the "apophantic illusion" of the letter, Freud bemoans that in no single case can he work his way back to the explanatory objective event, a factual scene that does not itself refer to any other and that wants of no supplement (Laplanche, 2016, p. 132). This "disappointment" represents an ironic dissociation from, and even reversal of, the principles of the theory of trauma as Freud had developed it through the 1890s. During this period, while Freud laid emphasis on real experience(s) and events in the child's life, at the same time, in the seduction theory, we have the *seeds* of a theory of trauma as a *serial* process (Freud repeatedly uses the term *Reihen* at this time ["series/row"]); here, the singular, objective traumatic moment is displaced temporally along a sequence and replaced by a core of psychical reality, an effective (*Wirklichkeit*) nucleus (*Kern*) born of the "concatenation" of iterative psychic registrations, which come to forge a serial pathway or template. What is decisive about psychical trauma in the seduction theory is not simply the real experience of abuse, but the subsequent "linking of scenes" or serialization that have been actualized in the psyche by the constitution of the *Kern* ("nucleus/core"). What lies fallow in Freud's own rejection of his "neurotica" is the seduction theory's postulation of a psychical form of reality born out of this serial process, a germinal reality to be activated or "to be translated" (as Laplanche would say) repeatedly and episodically. Dominique Scarfone (2019) argues that, for Freud, psychical reality should be distinguished from the merely "subjective," which is associated with ego functioning and secondary processes; on the other hand, as Freud stated in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "psychical reality is a particular form of existence not to be confused with material reality" (Freud, 1900/1953, p. 620). In a discussion of psychical reality in Freud in "The Sexual and Psychical Reality," Scarfone argues that the realism of the seduction theory failed due to the "lack...of the concept of psychical reality" and further that "[T]he seeds of psychical reality are indeed present in what Freud then conceived

of as the memory traces of the traumatic experience that are eventually reactivated by a second event (*après-coup*) " (Scarfone, 2019, p. 1,250). Scarfone's statements are steeped in the germinal metaphors of the seduction theory. We will argue that, in a dialectical turn on Scarfone's proposition, while it may have been an unthought horizon in Freud's theorizing, his early realist theory, *psychical reality* is presented as *seeds*: psychical realities (*Keim* and *Kern*) that can come into existence only in the context of some serial linking (i.e., as the result of repression). In this regard, we will argue that the germinal metaphoric motif reflects something crucial about the realism of Freud's ontogenetic trauma theory, something that Freud himself seemed to forget: what we will call "germinal realism." The conceptual content of this germinal metaphoric finds its sense only in relation to what Freud repeatedly refers to in the mid-1890s as the *Reihen* ("series" and "row" of) trauma.³

This cluster of germinal words, originating in the rhetoric of Freud's early realism, form a kind of cast-off crop and a leftover of the earlier theory, *sprouting* up again in the later work on the "infantile sexual researches." After unearthing the seeds of an ontogenetic realist theory of complex formation in the seduction theory, we will focus on what Freud called the "researches of childhood," and on the ways that he conceives of its object, origins, and itinerary. Here we are attempting to recover and reintroduce the older, ontogenetic strain of thought, and so Freud's focus on the "researches", largely between 1907 and 1915, will be examined in the context of his evolving theoretical problematic, tracking the "germinal" conceptual framework of the trauma theory and self-analysis of the 1890s, and unearthing an unexpected return of Freud's germinal realism in the first decade of the 20th century, just before the arrival of the phylogenetic theory of the nuclear Oedipus complex. Viewed *après-coup*, within the context of this earlier conceptual framework, we will argue that the theory of the sexual researches comes into focus just before the advent of the nuclear Oedipus complex, as an alternative ontogenetic theory of "complex formation," mobilizing and transforming the disregarded conceptual tools of the trauma theory to help consolidate new discoveries (i.e., infantile sexuality). In what follows, we attempt to glean and propagate this "heirloom" of germinal realism in Freud, out of which will emerge a surprising discovery: the *generalized seduction* at the core of the "researches of childhood."

The Seeds in their Row: The *Germination* of a Realist Theory

³ Another germ for this paper came in a suggestive footnote in French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* (Deleuze, 1993/1969), in which he comments in passing on Freud's term "the Ego and the Id and Three Essays." While it has often been received as a staunch indictment of psychoanalysis (particularly his *Anti-Oedipus* of 1972), *The Logic of Sense* constitutes a significant engagement with it, although it is replete with references to psychoanalysis largely mediated via Deleuze's reading of Lacan's *Écrits* (1966) and his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Metapsychology: The Ego and the Id and Three Essays on the Theory of the Libido* (1914). While this engagement with Freud demonstrates a theory of the event and its temporality, his book does not develop the ideas that we will attempt to do in this essay.

serial formation of the repressed unconscious as psychical reality.

In its earlier, *complex* version, the seduction theory was not simply an exogenous etiological (causal) explanation of the neuroses; in its topographical discussion, it offers a first theory of complex formation and repression. If we look at the way Freud frames the psychic topography of the traumatic process, we see, importantly, that there is again this emphasis on the *series*. In his discussion of his Lucy case, Freud defines the traumatic moment as follows:

The actual traumatic moment, then, is the one at which the incompatibility forces itself upon the ego and at which the latter decides on the repudiation of the incompatible idea. That idea is not annihilated by a repudiation of this kind, but merely repressed into the unconscious. When this process occurs for the first time there comes into being a nucleus [*Kern*] and centre of crystallization for the formation of a psychical group divorced from the ego—a group around which everything which would imply an acceptance of the incompatible idea subsequently collects (Breuer & Freud, 1895/1955, p. 123).

Thus, even as Freud is trying to define how the singular trauma takes root in the psyche, he cannot help but express this in relation to groups and sets. This complication of the singular traumatic scene model is made explicit in the following passage from his theoretical contribution to *Studies*, “The Psychotherapy of Hysteria,” in which we find Freud emphasizing the complex as a *serialization* over the objectivity of the originary traumatic scene, the iterations of which form a serial “pathway”:

As a rule, indeed, the situation is not as simple as we have represented it in particular cases—for instance, where there is one symptom only, which has arisen from one major trauma. We do not usually find a *single* hysterical symptom, but a number of them, partly independent of one another and partly linked together. We must not expect to meet with a *single* traumatic memory and a *single* pathogenic idea as its nucleus; we must be prepared for a *series* [*Reihen*] of *partial* traumas and *concatenations* of pathogenic trains of thought... [t]o begin with there is a nucleus consisting in memories of events or trains of thought in which the traumatic factor has culminated or the pathogenic idea has found its purest manifestation. Round this nucleus [*Kern*] we find what is often an incredibly profuse amount of other mnemonic material which has to be worked through...” (Breuer & Freud, 1895/1955, pp. 287–288, translation modified).

Here the traumatic series (*Reihen*) of the psyche culminates in and manifests a new topographical reality: a psychic “nucleus” (*Kern*). In other words, the *Kern* is an expression or product of the serial process, which crystallizes some psychic organizing principle for the *Reihen*, thereby establishing the “complex.” What does it organize? As we have already seen, Freud will repeatedly use the botanical motif to denote the fragmentary, traumatic registrations (that are formed into

in love with my mother and jealous of my father” and asserted that this was a “universal event [...in] early childhood” that he likened to the scenario of the Oedipus narrative:

The Greek legend seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he feels its existence within himself. Each member of the audience was once, in germ and in phantasy [*im Keime und in der Phantasie*], just such an Oedipus, and each one recoils in horror from the dream-fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the whole quota of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one (Freud, 1985, p. 265; Freud, 1962b, p. 238).

Even though Freud had only weeks prior rejected the idea that a singular event (seduction) can constitute an ontogenetic, etiological factor, he importantly deems Oedipus both a “universal event” and an “infantile state” represented as “*im Keime und in der Phantasie*.” For readers of the Fliess letters, it is easy to retrospectively interpret this passage in the teleological terms of the phylogenetic program of the mature theory of the Oedipus complex. Indeed, the ambiguity of the phrase “in germ and in fantasy” in the English translation has contributed to the confusion. Where Strachey translates the phrase literally with “in germ and in phantasy,” Masson translates it as “a budding Oedipus in fantasy” rendering the “bud” as a *result* of a drive process developed in fantasy, and so collapsing and losing the conceptual distinction of “in germ *and* in fantasy” (my italics). However, as we have tried to demonstrate, the term *Keim(e)* had a very specific meaning and role in Freud’s thought, and so, read within its *series* (represented not only by his previous writings of the mid-1890s but also within the context of the other letters to Fliess), Freud continues to use “germ” in the sense that it was given in his trauma theory, with its emphasis on afterwardness (*Nachträglichkeit*). To illustrate this, if we look at the use of the word immediately antecedent to this correspondence, we find that *Keim* occurs in his previous letter to Fliess (October 3, 1897), in which Freud uses it in a pivotal and now famous sequence describing the new discoveries of his self-analysis, which, we shall suggest, are a dry run for the theory of the “sexual researches”:

[T]he old man plays no active part...in my case the “prime originator” was an ugly, elderly, but clever woman, who told me a great deal about God Almighty and hell and who instilled in me a high opinion of my capacities; that later (between two and two and a half years) my libido toward *matrem* was awakened, namely, on the occasion of a journey... during which we must have spent the night together and there must have been an opportunity of seeing her *nudam*; [...] that I greeted my one-year-younger brother (who died after a few months) with adverse wishes and genuine childhood jealousy; and that his death left the germ of [self-] reproaches [*Keim zu Vorwürfen*] in me. I have long known the companion of my misdeeds between the ages of one and two years, it is my nephew, a year older than myself [...] (Freud, 1985, p. 268; Freud, 1962b, p. 233).

Here Freud links in a sequence: 1) the doting attention and “high opinion of my capacities” invested in him by his nanny; 2) the “awakening” of “libido” toward his mother, which he deduces from a memory of a trip with her; 3) the ambivalent impressions (rage, jealousy, and guilt) left upon him (as a “germ”) by the birth and death of his younger brother, and 4) his cruelty in tandem with another boy (his cousin/nephew) toward a young girl (his cousin/niece). In his seminal work titled *Freud’s Self-Analysis*, Anzieu rightly emphasizes that Freud placed “greatest importance” in this passage on the person he refers to as the “prime originator” in his case: his nanny, a middle-aged Czech woman named Monika Zajic (Anzieu, 1986, p. 236). Written less than a fortnight after the abandonment letter, Freud’s opening reference in this passage to the “old man,”—his father Jacob—takes up the etiology of the seduction theory directly by clarifying to Fliess that his father was not the seducer in his case. While this passage is often retrospectively cited in the historiography of psychoanalysis as one of the earliest episodes in the discovery of Oedipal desire (here of little Sigismund for his mother [*matrem*]), Freud strikingly and unambiguously positions “the old woman” in the role of his seducer and even explicitly associates his sexual “awaken[ing]” not just with his mother but with Zajic. In what sense then, is the nanny his seducer, the “prime originator”?

As the passage unfolds, its theme begins to reveal itself. Freud goes on to directly assert that his lost brother and his elder nephew have “determined” both his “neurosis” and “what is intense, in all my friendships,” and further, that regarding his nanny, “if...I succeed in resolving my own hysteria, then I shall be grateful to the memory of the old woman who provided me at such an early age with the means for living and go[ing] on living” (Freud, 1985, p. 268–269). This letter to Fliess is rife with “germs” and the serial logic of the traumatic *Reihe*. Closest to the surface is the notion Freud seems to be conveying that, just as the germinal impressions with the two boys planted the seeds of different psychic series (of rivalry and guilt and of fraternal friendship, of which Fliess is, of course, the latest episode), so too the nanny’s seductive investment planted something in him. Yet, in the continuation of this letter the following day (October 4, 1897), Freud discloses more information to Fliess in the context of an analysis of a dream the previous night that suggests that the nanny’s attention towards Sigismund was much more *directly* sexual in nature: “She was my teacher in sexual matters,” he states (Freud, 1985, p. 269). In addition, Freud refers to memories of “reddish waters” in which his nanny bathed them together, suggesting the nanny’s menstruation, as well as being induced by her to steal money as a toddler (although the latter turns out to be a screen memory) (Freud, 1985, p. 269). This dream is taken up repeatedly by Freud afterward, in the previously cited “Oedipus” letter (October 15, 1897), in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. While we can speculate on what Zajic may or may not have *done* to the young Freud, in the germs that she left in him, we suggest that there is another, generalized sense of seduction involved. In what approaches a voice in the *future anterior*, Freud ends this letter by suggesting that, if he is able to complete the work of his self-analysis he *will have been* gifted his scientific discoveries and intellectual “capacities” by his seducer. Although he seems to later describe direct seduction by his nanny, we propose that via this episodic return of the *Nachträglichkeit* of the *Reihe*, we already see the germination of a generalized seduction in Freud’s linking of his intellectual pursuits to the nanny’s care for and attention to the little Sigismund: to her physical ministrations, her “teach[ing]... in sexual matters,” her theological/theoretical discourses, and her general investment in his intellectual

capacities. In addition, in returning to the famous “Oedipus” letter of October 15, it becomes clear that the presence of the nanny must also be considered in the Oedipal *Reihe*, further underlining that this early model of Oedipus has an ontogenetic grounding.

Importantly, in this letter, just before Freud introduces his thesis of the Oedipal *im Keime und in der Phantasie* and in discussing the dream and its relation to the nanny, Freud relays to Fliess a memory of a mysterious episode from his childhood that has been given new meaning subsequently by Freud’s uncovering of the nanny’s transgressions through his self-analysis. In the memory, his mother has vanished and cannot be found, and Freud remembers his older brother “unlock[ing] the wardrobe” (Freud, 1985, p. 272). One of the things that he discovered was that it was the nanny who had committed theft (not Freud) and that she had been reported by Freud’s older brother, which led to her being “locked up” in prison for the crime (Freud, 1985, p. 272). Freud’s interpretation of the enigmatic memory is that he must have asked his brother to open the wardrobe based on his infantile theory that just as the nanny was abruptly gone from his life because she was “locked up,” so his mother must be locked up if she was also abruptly absent. While there are many different, commented-upon aspects of this passage, suffice it to say that we can see that Freud’s associations to this memory clearly locate the nanny in this ontogenetically constituted *developmental series* with his mother, which he then associates with the Oedipus myth.

While the prominence in his work of the temporal *Reihen* largely seems to wain as Freud came to focus increasingly on psychical reality and the “meshwork” (*Geflecht*) of the primary process (the term *Reihen* for the most part disappears or is de-temporalized, as in the case of the “complemental series”), we would propose that these letters represent a fledgling first attempt to integrate the new discovery of infantile sexuality within the conceptual framework of the *series*, a framework that continues to influence Freud throughout his work, from the theory of the drives to the repetition compulsion and the transference. However, it is in the linking of the developmental series to a *to be translated* and a *drive to know* (as reflected in the letter of October 3) that we have perhaps the most striking example of the legacy of the seduction theory as an ontogenetic model for conceiving of complex formation. Let us now turn to how these *heirloom* notions are propagated by Freud himself in his theory of the “researches of childhood.”

Starting in 1907, while Freud was analyzing the young toddler “Little Hans” and following a period during which he emphasized apparently endogenous factors in the life of the psyche, such as the child’s fantasy and infantile sexuality, the related notions of the “sexual researches” and the “sexual theories” of children first appear in texts such as “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children” (Freud, 1907/1959), “On the Sexual Theories of Children” (Freud, 1908/1959b), his case report on Little Hans titled “An Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy” (Freud, 1909/1955c), and “Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” (1910/1957). In these texts, we have an unexpected reemergence of Freud’s realism, although now with an apparently different object. In 1910, Freud wrote in his study on Leonardo Da Vinci:

Many, perhaps most children... pass through a period, beginning when they are about three, which may be called the period of infantile sexual researches. So far as we know, the curiosity of children of this age does not awaken spontaneously, but is aroused by the impression made by some important event—by the actual birth of a little brother or sister,

or by a fear of it based on external experiences—in which the child perceives a threat... (Freud, 1910/1957, p. 78)

Freud expressed repeatedly during this period that these “researches” and how they were regarded and understood by the child were a matter of “vital exigency” for the child and were connected with real events (Freud 1908/1959b, p. 213). This is a striking reassertion of the importance of “experience” and “events” in the child’s life in line with other work, such as *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1908/1953b, after the apparent abandonment of Freud’s realism. It is also striking in this passage that, *contra* Hartmann, inquiry is not conceived of as a neutralized function; that is, the “drive for knowledge” associated with these researches is the result of problems posed to the child by the adults surrounding him. Indeed, rather than a product of a *conflict-free sphere* of ego functioning, intellectual inquiry is, on the contrary, here correlated with the awakening of the child to a “conflictual sphere” in his/her object world, which, for Freud, is indexed by the “mystery-making” of the adult world (i.e., their censorship, concealments, and repression) (Freud, 1907/1959, p. 134).¹³ In other words, the “mystery-making” concealments of the parents (the enigmas of the adult world) nevertheless become signals for the child—signs, we might say, “in force [but] beyond signification” (to borrow a phrase from Gershom Scholem, via the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben), that is, as having an address-value for the young recipient in spite of the opacity of its meaning, like a hieroglyph in a forgotten language (see Agamben, 1998). Instigated by these dystonic parental messages and the subsequent events that constitute disruptions for the child in the object world, inquiry and research become increasingly mobilized and cathected, activating a drive process: the “drive for knowledge” or the “drive for research.” However, as Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor (2002) has pointed out, this drive is unique in that 1) it is the product of a combination of two component drives (the drive to see and the drive for mastery) and 2) its aim in relation to its object is not simply discharge, but rather a libidinal investment in the search process itself and, thus, in the relation to the unknown or enigmatic.¹⁴

As a result of this urgent research and investigation, Freud proposes that the child produces “infantile theories”:

In spite of their grotesque errors the theories show more understanding of sexual processes than one would have given their creators credit for. Children also perceive the alterations that take place in their mother owing to pregnancy ... [however] the efforts of the childish investigator are habitually fruitless, and end in a renunciation which not infrequently leaves behind it a permanent injury to the instinct for knowledge. The

¹³ “Mystery-making” (*Geheimtuerei*) is a phrase Freud borrows from the author Multatuli (aka E. D. Dekker) in “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children” of 1908/1959; it will become important later on.

¹⁴ Despite these dystonic elements of the parental surround, in her developments of Freud’s theory of the infantile researches, de Mijolla-Mellor emphasizes that a key role is also played by the child’s narcissistic investment in the parental mysteries. Following the growing separation from the parental objects, the child makes a “treasury of enigmatic words” gathered from the “family noise.” These erogenous invested adult “magic words” become woven into what de Mijolla-Mellor calls the child’s “magico-sexual myths.” These myths reflect the thoroughly compromised nature of the child’s narcissism, which at once is occupied by the invasive adult foreign bodies and also represents a last bastion of mythic certainty and hallucinatory enjoyment.

sexual researches of these early years of childhood are always carried out in solitude. They constitute a first step towards taking an independent attitude in the world, and imply a high degree of alienation of the child from the people in his environment who formerly enjoyed his complete confidence (Freud, 1905/1953b, p. 197).

While these constructions of the neophyte investigator are an animistic bricolage (an “animic thought” as de Mijolla-Mellor calls it), reflecting both the child’s ignorance and the mythical-symbolic forms at hand, they also demonstrate the realism of the young theorist in that they come up with theories to account for the gaps in their knowledge of the adult world. It must be noted that all of the main areas of research (and the subsequent theories) listed by Freud (the “maternal phallus” and castration, explanations of birth, and parental coitus) are principally concerned with and attempt to form a schema for the differentiation and relatedness of the parents and of how the child situates him or herself in this triangular mapping.

It is no accident that in his 1915 addition of a section titled “The Sexual Researches of Children” to *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1905/1953b), after introducing the drive for knowledge, Freud presents the mythological symbol of “The Riddles of the Sphinx”: the fragmentary signals and clues of the parental secrets become the *germs* of riddles to be deciphered, *to be translated*. However, while these researches appear to be “fruitless” for the child, “failures” with the possibility of “permanent injury” and “alienation,” at the same time, they are “a first step towards taking an independent attitude towards the world” and so are aligned by Freud with a developmental accomplishment (Freud, 1905/1953b, p. 197). These three factors (the mapping of the parental relationship, the riddles of the adult world figured by the address of the parental chimera, and the new, injurious sense of separation and repression) all demonstrate that we are on the same developmental terrain occupied by the Oedipus complex, despite the conspicuous absence of the term from the revised *Three Essays*. Why, given all the emendations to this crucial text in subsequent years in which Freud inserted this section on the “researches,” does he banish the “nuclear” concept to a couple of footnotes?

If we look back to “On the Sexual Theories of Children” of 1908/1959b for the way Freud conceives there of the renunciation of these “infantile sexual theories,” we will find a clue. He states:

[Children disillusioned of their theories] have a suspicion of there being something forbidden which is being withheld from them by the ‘grown-ups’, and that they consequently hide their further researches under a cloak of secrecy... [s]uch a psychical conflict may soon turn into a ‘psychical dissociation’. The set of views which are bound up with being ‘good’, but also with a cessation of reflection, become the dominant and conscious views; while the other set, for which the child’s work of research has meanwhile obtained fresh evidence, but which are not supposed to count, become the suppressed and ‘unconscious’ ones. The nuclear complex of a neurosis is in this way brought into being. (Freud 1908/1959b, p. 214)

In this passage, we have one of the earliest appearances of the concept of the “nuclear complex”

(*Kernkomplex*). As Strachey himself indicates in his footnote, while Freud will shortly thereafter elevate the Oedipus complex to the status of *the* nuclear complex of the neuroses, it is clear that he is *not* here outlining a fixed complex but rather describing an “ontogenetic” psychic process of nucleus formation in the dynamic interaction of the child with its surround. Tracking as we have the development of the germinal rhetoric and its connection to the notion of the *Reihen*, we propose that this passage represents another elaboration (another episode) of the notion of the “psychical series,” of that formation of a psychic nucleus from a germ (here again linked to the enigmas of the adult world) in the process of repression. The connections to the Oedipus complex here are then no accident: the concept of the sexual researches of childhood and of infantile theories are unseated in Freud’s problematics by the Oedipus complex because the former represented a final “ontogenetic” attempt to conceive a complex formation (as a psychical series), while the latter represented an explicitly phylogenetic new solution. As we have seen, Oedipus did *not* begin its life in Freud’s thought as a nucleus, but as a germ!

If the child has to “hide” and repress his or her inquiry, this is directly correlated to the “forbidden” and “withheld” object of the research: whatever is repressed in the parents. We must emphasize that in the premise laid out (in germ form in the 1890s and then more schematically in 1908), the nucleus (*Kern*) of a neurosis is formed on the basis of “psychical dissociation” from consciousness of specific disqualified ideas and impressions (germs) is but a generalized iteration of the seduction theory in that the seeds of the researches are explicitly linked by Freud, like the enigmatic ministrations of his nanny, to the mysteries of the adult world. Based on this earlier model, is there room to think of the Oedipus complex ontogenetically as an exceedingly common infantile theory provoked in the child by the parental “mystery-making” of triangulation? What would the clinical implications of an ontogenetic, serial model be?

Indeed, we do not have to wonder, as in “The Dynamics of the Transference,” we find the transference being defined by Freud as the “introduc[tion]” of the analyst “into one of the psychical ‘series’ [*Reihen*] which the patient has already formed” (Freud, 1912/1958, p. 100). In the placement of single quotation marks in his text, Freud seems to be explicitly citing the conceptual framework of the *complex* seduction theory (i.e., the *Reihen*) to elucidate the nature of psychoanalytic therapeutic action. Thus, while Freud would continually deny and play down the importance of the seduction theory in the evolution of this thought, the trauma theory’s “germinal realism” did not cease to impose itself and, indeed, represented an alternative ontogenetic strain within his thinking that lasted into his later years.

In revisiting a strain of what we have called “germinal realism” in Freud’s early thinking, we have been able to trace a serial lineage (following what Freud calls the *Reihen* of trauma in his work of the early 1890s) between the conceptual framework of the seduction theory and the theory of the researches of childhood. Following this framework has made possible the discovery that, for Freud, the origins and objects of the child’s “researches” are a generalized form of the seduction theory in that we find that their object is adult repressed sexuality and that this concept also represents his final attempt to “ontogenetically” conceive of complex formation before the advent of the phylogenetic theory of the Oedipus complex.

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