In their essay ‘Why Psychoanalysis Has No History’, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Murray Schwartz make an important intervention into psychoanalytic history writing, by reminding us about the largely unacknowledged trauma history of psychoanalysis. The trauma history refers to two distinct phenomena. First, it refers to the migration of psychoanalysts before and during the Second World War, mostly to England and to the Americas, and to its deep consequences in terms of dislocation and communal fragmentation (Young-Bruehl & Schwartz, 2012, p. 140). Second, it refers to intellectual splits, quarrels and fragmentations internal to the field of psychoanalysis. At the intersection of these two forms of forgetfulness, what we are missing is a collective historical consciousness that can organize a set of disparate observations precisely as a trauma history, a reflection on ‘a repetitive pattern of splits and consequent distortions’ (Young-Bruehl & Schwartz, 2012, p. 142). Various voices have by now discussed the traumatic consequences of the split between Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi for our contemporary psychoanalytic imaginary (Bergmann, 1996; Brabant, 2003; Haynal, 1997, 2002; Martín-Cabrè, 1997; Schneider, 1988). While these discussions are crucial for recovering Ferenczi’s contributions to psychoanalytic theory and technique, it is equally important to ‘thicken’ our accounts of his other dyads and collaborations. Among these, the collaboration with Elizabeth Severn has a privileged place, as she was one of his key patients and the protagonist of the Clinical Diary (1932) (the case of ‘R.N.’). Arnold W. Rachman, with his Elizabeth Severn: The ‘Evil Genius’ of Psychoanalysis, does the work of both illuminating the Ferenczi–Severn dyad (and their co-creations, including the experimentations with mutual analysis) and exploring Severn’s own biography and her journeys before, during and after her analysis with Ferenczi. Rachman (2017, p. 57) refers to the forgetfulness around Severn as a case of Todschweigen or ‘death by silence’: disowning a psychoanalytic dissident by suppressing and censoring them, in order to preserve mainstream psychoanalytic thought and practice.

The book makes available to psychoanalysts a range of fascinating primary materials – Rachman’s selections from the Elizabeth Severn archives. We trace
Severn’s travels across countries, disciplines and psychic states. We get acquainted with Severn’s announcement of her opening the first office as a clinician in San Antonio, Texas, in 1908; we see Severn sitting on her couch in her office at the Hotel Seymour in New York City in 1924; we gain access to key details of the practices around Severn’s analysis with Ferenczi; we even see her horoscope chart, drawn by J. Wallington. I particularly appreciated the insights we gain into the relationship between Elizabeth Severn and her daughter, Margaret, who was a successful dancer and a close witness to Severn’s analytic relationship with Ferenczi. Rachman selects a set of excerpts from the correspondence between Elizabeth and Margaret, which allow us to make sense of the close relationship between mother and daughter. Despite the historical insights, the book does not belong, in my view, to the biographical genre. Rachman’s goal is to bring the marginal Elizabeth Severn into the story of psychoanalytic theory making, by insisting on the co-construction by Ferenczi and Severn of a trauma theory that has several markers: the importance of regression and reliving in the psychoanalytic frame, the importance of the analysis of countertransference; the empathic presence of the analyst. Notably, we get insights into Severn’s experimentations, as early as 1916, with self-hypnotic trance states, when she was able to access earlier periods of her life. Severn brought these experiences into the consulting room when she started her analysis with Ferenczi. Rachman’s book gives a clear sense that Severn was already on a psychotherapeutic journey when she met Ferenczi, and therefore the thesis of mutual influence between the two is well founded.

There are further particularities of Rachman’s book that separate it from the biographical genre. First, Rachman starts his exploration from his own psychoanalytic training, and he ponders on contemporary experiences of silencing, which are traumatizing to candidates and which perpetuate the Todschweigen. This part, which reads as a psychoanalytic memoir, has the function of connecting the more recent forms of forgetting and denial with those of the first generations of psychoanalysts. Present and past thus do not appear as radically disjunct from one another, but precisely connected by various invisible threads, including by confusions of tongues between generations. Rachman goes on to trace his own discovery of Ferenczi, who at the time of his training was a very marginal figure.

Second, we are in a position to trace the archival sources that Rachman uses to put together his argument. This is distinctly valuable, as the story of the burial and unearthing of sources and documents is part of working through the traumatic history of psychoanalysis. There is meaning in capturing not only the content of sources that carry the stories of marginal figures in psychoanalysis, but also the disappearances and reappearances of these sources in different forms and places. By the end of the book, with Rachman, we are able to place some of the important sources for an alternative account of Severn, should we want to work on one ourselves. There is considerable space given to the interview that Kurt Eissler, the founder and director of The Freud Archives, conducted with Severn in
New York, on 20 December 1952. We find out how Rachman came across Severn’s archive, as it was left by her daughter, Margaret, after her death. We also learn that *The Severn Papers* that Rachman worked on for his manuscript are available without restrictions at The Library of Congress in Washington. Finally, we learn that a duplicate of *The Severn Papers* was donated to the Ferenczi House in Budapest, the place where Ferenczi analysed Severn and where he also wrote *The Clinical Diary*.

The book is structured around several ‘moves’, some bearing a more biographical accent, some bringing the trauma theory to the forefront, while others trace the context and the travels of the material that is analysed. We move from Rachman’s own psychoanalytic journey, to his encounter with *The Severn Papers*, to the triangle Freud–Ferenczi–Severn, to Severn as a person, as a patient and as a clinician, to the development of the trauma theory and of the rule of empathy (seen as Ferenczi–Severn co-creations), to the premature termination of the analysis, to Severn’s life and work after Ferenczi’s death, to a broader discussion on regression in psychoanalytic theory, to Severn’s Orpha function (her traumatically derived clairvoyance), and to the writing of the case of R.N. in Ferenczi’s *Clinical Diary*. In all these moves, we encounter fascinating details about and around the Ferenczi–Severn dyad. There is, however, some overlap between chapters, and we are left with an open question about the status of the repetitions: might it be a kind of methodological decision of the author with regard to writing marginal histories, where the points of return in the book are meant to invite us to turn, over and over again, towards what was lost or forgotten in writing the history of psychoanalysis?

On this journey, I would have liked a more extensive exploration of Severn as a thinker, in particular of her book *The Discovery of the Self* (Severn, 1933). While Rachman insists that Severn and Ferenczi co-created the trauma theory that Ferenczi went on to write up in his late papers and in his *Clinical Diary*, it would have been interesting to give Severn a sharper voice, or perhaps to let her speak for herself, by engaging her ideas. *The Discovery of the Self* is, fortunately, available in its republished version of 2017, accompanied by an excellent introduction by its editor Peter Rudnytsky.

After reading Rachman’s book, I could assemble an image of Elizabeth Severn, but a puzzling question remained with me: how did Severn organize the transmission of her knowledge to others, in her own time? Transmission is an integral part of psychoanalysis, and most psychoanalysts that made a mark, be they forgotten and only later revived, proved that they were able to give a form to the act of transmission. While we can accept, as Rachman suggests, that Ferenczi thought that he was conducting a training analysis with Severn, we ask: what can we say about Severn’s ability to transmit what she understood about trauma, or about the workings of countertransference? This question demands an answer if we wish to establish Elizabeth Severn as Sándor Ferenczi’s equal partner in thought.
References


