

## Groddeck's Lessons

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"Where am I to begin? Where to end? My childhood wakes up,  
and something within me is weeping."

—*The Book of the It*, Letter 24

As we gather in this symposium to celebrate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Georg Groddeck, I can only imagine that he would indeed feel "more regal than any monarch, and blissfully happy" in knowing that he is for us the "lord of the earth" (1925, pp. 18, 13) not for a mere twenty-four hours but for three days and that his memory has endured into the twenty-first century. In keeping with Groddeck's (1923) own reminder that "all things have two sides, so we can always consider them from two sides" (p. 275), however, as well as with Wolfgang Martynkewicz's (1997) observation that "every birthday is also for Groddeck a retrospective fantasy of a past, lost paradise" (p. 32), I think our celebration must be tinged with a sense of melancholy and graced with the tears that not only Groddeck but each of us may feel moved to shed whenever our childhood awakens within us.

Since we are brought together by our admiration of Groddeck, I expect we would all be prepared to echo Count Hermann Keyserling in paying tribute to him as "the greatest magician among the psychoanalysts and without doubt the most important human personality of them all," though Keyserling does not fail to add that Groddeck, like all analysts, was "an unresolved analytical case" (qtd. in Schacht, 1977, p. 21). In returning to Groddeck for the first time since the publication of my book *Reading Psychoanalysis* (2002), I wish simultaneously to affirm the inspiration I continue to derive from his work, especially *The Book of the It* (1923), my first encounter with which, as happened to Groddeck himself when he discovered the power of symbols, produced "an intoxication . . . such as I have never experienced before or since" (p. 269), and to offer some reflections on what I now regard as his limitations, which I will link to his status as "an unresolved analytical case." I propose, therefore, to speak first of "Groddeck's teaching" in the laudatory sense of what I believe to be the incontestable value of his contributions—even as I recognize, in Martynkewicz's (1997) words, the paradox that Groddeck seeks to avoid anything that one might "call a system or a teaching, which has a communicable content" (p. 304)—before turning to "Groddeck's lessons" in the cautionary sense of what we

may learn from studying the blind spots that weaken his enormously compelling vision of psychoanalysis and indeed of life itself.

In his initial letter to Freud on May 27, 1917, recounting what he calls “the history of my conversion” to psychoanalysis, Groddeck confesses that his reading of *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement* has led him to “become doubtful whether I may number myself among the psychoanalysts by your definition” (Giefer, 2008, p. 48). After voicing the hope that Freud would agree that, beyond its concern with the neuroses, the true domain of psychoanalysis is “the whole of human life,” from which it follows that “in themselves there do not exist any essential differences that could compel us to make an attempt at psychoanalysis here and not there,” Groddeck again acknowledges, “Here now is the point where I doubt whether I have the right to give myself out in public as a psychoanalyst or not” (pp. 49-50). In response to this appeal, Freud, on June 5, 1917, remarks that he would evidently be doing Groddeck “a great service” were he to banish him to the place “where Adler and Jung, among others, are standing” but that he “cannot do it.” On the contrary, Freud continues in a justly famous passage, “I must stake a claim on you, must affirm that you are a splendid analyst who has unalterably grasped the essence of the matter [*Sache*]. Whoever recognizes that ‘transference and resistance are the hubs of treatment’ belongs once and for all irrevocably to the wild army. Whether he also calls the ‘unconscious’ the ‘It’ makes no difference” (p. 59).

From the very beginning, accordingly, the question of who is a psychoanalyst lies at the center of Groddeck’s relationship with Freud. Ironically, whereas Freud broke with Adler and Jung because he refused to tolerate their theoretical differences, he insisted that Groddeck was a “splendid analyst” despite Groddeck’s misgivings as to whether he was entitled to call himself by this name. Although Freud must have been reassured to read Groddeck’s declaration that the It “stands in a secret connection with sexuality, with Eros or whatever else one wants to call it” (pp. 49-50), since it was Freud’s insistence on the primacy of his libido theory that precipitated his ruptures with the dissidents, by singling out transference and resistance as the “hubs of treatment” Freud offers his most expansive definition of what makes a psychoanalyst, according to which not only Groddeck but also Adler and Jung would continue to qualify since they never challenged these concepts. In praising Groddeck for having “grasped the essence of the matter,” moreover, Freud revises his customary use of the word “*Sache*” to refer to the psychoanalytic movement in the sense of a “cause” and deploys it instead to mean the core tenets of psychoanalysis, just as his designation of his followers as “the wild army” inverts his usual disparagement of “‘wild’ analysis” (Freud, 1910) in order to elevate “wildness” into an integral attribute of the psychoanalytic spirit.

Through his contact with Groddeck, therefore, Freud was moved to reaffirm the radical nature of his discovery of a dynamic unconscious and to liberate himself at least temporarily from his obsession with doctrinal orthodoxy and political loyalty by which he betrayed the noblest ideals of psychoanalysis itself. In view of this encouragement by the master, it is not surprising that Groddeck, in his first public appearance before the psychoanalytic world at the 1920 Congress in the Hague, should have introduced himself with the words, “I am a wild analyst,” before launching into a free associative monologue that irritated the conservatives while it delighted the progressives, including Ferenczi, Rank, Ernst Simmel, and Karen Horney (Grossman and Grossman, 1965, pp. 96-97). Simmel, in his encomium of Groddeck on his sixtieth birthday—now ninety years ago—followed suit by hailing him as a wild analyst, among other reasons, because he “owes his training to no one except himself” and because his “passionate nature” made him “a fanatic in the cause of healing” (Schacht, 1977, pp. 7-8), while Carl and Sylva Grossman fittingly titled their still extremely valuable biography of Groddeck *The Wild Analyst*. Embracing his role as the It of psychoanalysis, Groddeck compared himself in a letter to Freud on August 6, 1921 to “a little pepper that is not at all to be despised” (Giefer, 2008, p. 152; see Poster, Hristeva, and Giefer, 2016), and, as Martynkewicz (1997) has remarked, “he sought to turn the spear” against his detractors when he wrote in 1925, “As far as I know, not one of the leading psychoanalysts has been trained in such a fashion that he can purport to do anything other than analyze wildly” (p. 311).

Groddeck’s unsurpassed ability to convey the revolutionary power of Freud’s ideas, and hence of psychoanalysis as a whole, gives his writings their perennial freshness. Concerning the intertwined concepts of transference and resistance, for example, Groddeck (1926a) observes in his paper on bowel function that “in the image which he makes for himself of the doctor, the patient seeks and finds points of vantage which make it possible for him, under cover of real or fancied resemblances and analogies, to lay on the shoulders of the doctor that burden of guilt which is so actively exercising himself and making his disease necessary to him,” and since “resistance itself is included . . . in the transference,” whenever “a new symptom emerges, I am accustomed to put two questions to the patient: ‘What do you think I have done wrong?’ and ‘What have you done wrong against me?’” (pp. 106-8). As Groddeck repeatedly demonstrates, *everything* that passes through the mind—dates, numbers, words, names—becomes a signifier irradiated with meaning and can be interpreted by tracing what Christopher Bollas (2007) calls the “logic of sequence” that emerges through the process of free association. At his best, as again in his paper on bowel function, Groddeck (1926a) is capable not only of lightning flashes of brilliance but also of subtle discriminations: “The unconscious is indeed the

source of much conscious lying, but never does it lie itself; it merely hides, but when it speaks, it speaks the truth on every occasion and under every condition” (p. 108).

Nowhere is Groddeck’s genius displayed more fully than in *The Book of the It*. So passionately does he expound Freud’s shibboleths of the Oedipus and castration complexes and pursue his own unremitting quest for sexual symbols that even though I have embraced the “relational turn” in psychoanalysis and would ordinarily be skeptical of these classical formulations I cannot help falling under their spell once again. By casting his masterpiece in the form of letters to a “lady friend,” moreover, Groddeck (1923) through his persona of Patrik Troll is able not merely to expound but to *enact* his teachings. A notable instance occurs in Letter 7 when he interprets his correspondent’s loss of a ring given to her by her deceased sister and notes that whereas he had spoken in his previous letter about transference, resistance, and symbolism, she had mentioned only the first two topics in her reply but bypassed symbolism, which he had illustrated by equating the ring with “the female sex organ” (p. 59), so that “instead of naming the symbol in your letter, you lose it in the form of your topaz ring,” a parapraxis that he attributes to the likelihood that this sister had initiated his charming lady into “the play with the ring of the woman” and thus had something to do with her “learning about self-satisfaction” (p. 72).

The reply of the lady friend to which Patrik Troll refers is purely imaginary, but by bringing his interlocutor to life in this way Groddeck makes his text truly a dialogue between the author and reader, just as every psychoanalytic treatment is an encounter between two human subjectivities. Whereas in his interpretation of the ring as a symbol and of the significance of the lady’s loss of her ring Groddeck appears in his capacity as the seemingly omniscient analyst who unmask the hidden truths of the unconscious, on a deeper level *The Book of the It* is a work of self-analysis in which Groddeck is the patient who remains eternally a mystery unto himself. By giving himself the pseudonym Patrik Troll Groddeck has fused Pat, his own nickname as a child, with Troll, his pet name for Emmy von Voigt, the Swedish widow who became his second wife in 1923 and who—together with Freud and Groddeck’s earlier correspondent and likely also romantic interest, Hanneliese Schumann—must be considered one of the models in real life for the lady friend whom he fantasized himself to be addressing in his letters.<sup>1</sup> “Patrik Troll” is thus simultaneously Groddeck and Emmy, analyst and patient, and

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<sup>1</sup> Martynkewicz (1997) seeks to cast doubt on Emmy von Voigt’s identity as “the real model” (p. 293) for the lady friend on the grounds that she was translating Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* into Swedish and was already familiar with psychoanalytic concepts, but this hardly makes it less likely that Groddeck would have had her, as well as Freud, at the forefront of his mind as the addressee of his letters.

in this conflation of roles Groddeck exemplifies the dialectical reversal he underwent with his patient Miss G., whom he credits with setting him on the path to becoming a psychoanalyst. Not only was she “a seriously ill woman” in 1909 when he began her treatment but he describes himself as having been psychically “bankrupt” and subsequently told by one of his critics that he was “hysterical” (p. 264) at the time. In the course of his work with Miss G., as he reports in Letter 30, he “was all at once confronted with the strange fact that I was not treating the patient, but that the patient was treating me; or, to translate it into my own language, the It of this fellow-being tried so to transform my It, did in fact so transform it, that it became useful for its purposes” (p. 267).

In accepting the retrospective diagnosis of himself as hysterical, Groddeck states that he “was all the more convinced of its accuracy because it had been formulated without any personal acquaintance but solely from the impression given by my writings” (p. 264). Consulting the Grossmans’ biography (1965) as a Baedeker, we may note that his life was shaped by the following events: the absence of a wet nurse for several days after his birth (p. 17); his sister and next-oldest sibling Lina’s privileged position in the family due to her illnesses (p. 18); his mother’s depression following the death of her father, the eminent pedagogue August Koberstein, in whose memory she wore a black dress for the rest of her days (p. 20); his mother’s disdain for his father, which his father’s family reciprocated by believing that he had married beneath him (p. 22); being dressed in girls’ clothes and sent to a girls’ school until the age of nine (p. 22); being torn from his family at twelve and dispatched to Pforta, the elite boarding school where his grandfather had been headmaster and where young Georg was a “chronic bedwetter” (p. 24) and repeatedly thrashed until his graduation (p. 26); his family’s financial ruin and move from the spa town of Bad Kösen to Berlin when he was fifteen (p. 27); contracting scarlet fever at sixteen (p. 28); his father’s agonizing death at eighteen (p. 33); being conscripted into the army for eight years as recompense for his medical education (p. 39); his mother’s death in 1892 when he was twenty-six (p. 40); and the death of Lina in 1903 (p. 51) followed by that of his three older brothers Wolf in 1906 (p. 51), Karl in 1909 (p. 52), and Hans in 1914 (p. 63), leaving him, as he wrote to Freud on August 6, 1921, “the lone surviving member of my family” (Giefer, 2008, p. 135).

This list of misfortunes does not purport to be exhaustive, but I think it suffices to establish that Georg Groddeck was a severely traumatized individual. When he alludes in *The Book of the It* (1923) to “the inconsolable loneliness of my school years” and claims that he “knows virtually nothing more of that time between the ages of twelve and seventeen except that I had to pass them separated from my mother” (pp. 96-97), this alleged amnesia is no

ordinary forgetting but is rather due to his need to repress the memories of exceedingly painful experiences. Perhaps the most dramatic proof of the impact of Groddeck's traumas is provided in Letter 25 where he analyzes his habit of expressing his displeasure by saying, "I've already told you that 26,783 times" (p. 218). Groddeck notes first that he was twenty-six when his mother died, then that his parents were twenty-six when they married and that his father was born in 1826, which makes it significant that the last three numbers—seven, eight, and three—add up to eighteen. If you multiply the initial two by the ensuing six plus seven, you again get twenty six, just as you do if you add the same two to the final eight times three. Groddeck himself, moreover, was born on 13/10/66, and if you add thirteen to one plus zero to six plus six, lo and behold, you again arrive at the magical twenty-six.

But this is only the beginning of Groddeck's numerotechnics. Having separated out the initial two in his previous operations, he now leaves it aside and pairs the remaining numbers to make sixty-seven, seventy-eight, and eighty-three, which he interprets as follows: "Sixty-seven was my mother's age when she died. Seventy-eight is the number of the year in which I had to leave my parents' house in order to move into the dormitory of the school. In the year eighty-three my old home was lost to me forever since in that year my parents left the town of my birth and to relocated to Berlin" (p. 219). Also in 1883, Groddeck reports having been told by a fellow-student at Pforta, "If you keep on masturbating like that, then you will soon be totally crazy; you are half-crazy as it is" (p. 219). Soon after being thus publicly humiliated, Groddeck "became ill with scarlet fever, following which a kidney infection appeared," setbacks that made the year eighty-three, "corresponding to its prominent position as the end figures of the mystery number 26,783, impose itself as especially important also in my external life" (p. 220).

Since these are Groddeck's own associations, I in no way wish to doubt their validity or to question the psychic determinism that governs his fondness for the number 26,783. My point is rather the twofold one that Groddeck through his numerology has unfurled a red thread to his traumatic history and that he has done so without realizing it. Thus, in underscoring the truth of Keyserling's observation that Groddeck is himself "an unresolved analytical case," this extremely impressive piece of self-analysis brings me to a consideration of the blind spots that restrict his vision.

In assessing Groddeck's limitations, I begin by setting aside any possible indictment of his racism and anti-Semitism, as I see no evidence of these blemishes in his psychoanalytic writings, or of his sexism, which is no worse than that which is so pronounced in Freud. The more fundamental issues center on what Martynkewicz (1997) has characterized as Groddeck's "deep-seated antimodernism" (p. 147) that "separates him from the Enlightenment aspiration of

psychoanalysis" (p. 10). In a psychoanalytic context, this cast of mind is manifested by Groddeck's lack of any theory of trauma, such as Ferenczi (spurred on by Elizabeth Severn) espoused in his final period. For if there is one theme that Groddeck never tires of reiterating it is, as he says in Letter 31 of *The Book of the It* (1923), that whereas one can "find an external and an internal cause for the happenings of life," he himself has "been more and more tempted to seek out the internal cause" to the point where his "Troll arrogance" leads him to discern not only within himself but also within other people "an It, a God, whom I could make responsible for everything," so that he maintains: "Illness does not come from without; a man creates it himself, uses the outer world merely as an instrument in order to make himself ill" (p. 275).

Groddeck's denial of external causes seems to require qualification in light of a series of statements concerning the mother-child relationship. "If anything goes wrong with a baby," he writes in "The Body's Middleman" (1933), "the first question ought to be, 'What is wrong with the mother?'" (p. 74). He adds in "Bowel Function" (1926a): "Whoever wants to doctor children would be well advised . . . to look very carefully into the conditions of the child's environment. . . . Above all, it is worth while to deal with the mother's mental attitudes, since nearly all infantile complaints are acts of revenge against the mother" (p. 87). Both of these passages could have been written by Winnicott, as could his declaration later in the same paper, "I have made a practice of studying the mother's unconscious whenever a baby's health is disturbed" (p. 91).

The Groddeck who comes to the fore here is a brilliant object relations theorist, just as his prescient recognition of the bidirectional nature of the analytic relationship makes him a relational therapist. The problem, however, is that these theoretical insights are not integrated into the larger framework of Groddeck's thought, which revolves around his denial of external causes and even of external reality along with his desire to make the It "responsible for everything." As he comments in a paper (1927) on Goethe's *Faust*, "never is the external truly real. . . . It is the unconscious which is real" (p. 196), and again in "The It in Science, Art and Industry" (1926b), "Man is in no way the creation of his environment; on the contrary, he creates his own world for himself; whatever lies outside his personality has no existence" (p. 153). Not only do such assertions contradict his statements concerning the mother-child relationship but they overlook the crucial point, which is no less integral to Fromm's concept of the social character than it is to the outlooks of Winnicott and Ferenczi, that what takes root in the unconscious is by no means purely endogenous and instinctual but is rather molded from the outset by environmental influences, from the interactions between mother (or other primary caretaker) and baby to the forces of wealth and power that circulate in any given society and

have brought the planet as a whole to the brink of catastrophe whether in the form of a nuclear Armageddon or a mass extinction of species through the destruction of our natural world.<sup>2</sup>

In large measure, therefore, what is missing from Groddeck's system is a proper appreciation of the role of trauma in the etiology of mental illness, notwithstanding the extent to which he was traumatized in his own life. This turning away from external reality is a more extreme version of what we find in Freud after his abandonment of the so-called "seduction theory" in 1897. It is entirely in Freud's spirit that Groddeck should write, "Sex neuroses are due, not to traumas in childhood, but to the conflict set up by the conscious lying of the child, who is aware that he has invited the trauma" (1951, p. 124). Groddeck denies that neuroses are caused by traumas and instead chooses to blame the child for being abused by a presumably adult perpetrator. In the same vein, Groddeck claims in *The Book of the It* (1923) that it is "entirely impossible for a man to take a woman if she is not, in some way or other, consenting" (p. 38), thereby advocating the abolition of rape as a criminal offense, and likewise insists that "the child wants to be beaten, he yearns for it, he pants for a thrashing, as my father called it" (p. 111), as he himself was beaten for his transgressions at Pforta and, it would appear, also by his father at home.

Not only does Groddeck focus exclusively on internal causes and refuse to give due weight to environmental factors despite having been repeatedly traumatized in his own life, but this blind spot in his vision can be understood analytically as being the *result* of these very traumas. As is well known, it is common for victims of abuse to engage in what Ferenczi (1933) termed "introjection of the aggressor" (p. 162), so that the child internalizes the guilt-feelings of the adult and mistakenly judges himself or herself to be, in Groddeck's phrase, "responsible for everything." Seen from this perspective, Groddeck's theory of the godlike omnipotence of the It comes into focus as a compensatory formation that enables him to disavow the painful reality of his traumas and instead to convince himself that he must have "panted" for his beatings and "yearned" to be sent to boarding school, for his scarlet fever, the death of every member of his family, and so forth. In similar fashion, when Groddeck describes in *The Book of the It* (1923) how he requires "this artificial love, this remoteness because I am centered on myself and love myself to a wholly immoderate degree, because I have what the learned call narcissism," the grandiosity that causes him to say, "I come first, then come I again, then nothing comes for ever so long, and only then come other people" (p. 231), is likewise a compensatory formation that

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the divergences in their outlooks, Fromm wrote of Groddeck in a 1957 letter to Sylva Grossman, "Even if I was never his student in any technical sense, his teaching influenced me more than that of other teachers I had" (qtd. in Funk, 1999, p. 62).

masks an underlying lack of a genuine sense of self-worth due to not having been loved unconditionally or been allowed to form sufficiently secure attachments to his parents during childhood.

Groddeck speaks of himself with astonishing frankness, revealing what for many people would be shameful secrets concerning his adolescent bedwetting and notoriety as a masturbator, for instance, without apparent inhibitions. But Groddeck does not regard these behaviors as symptoms or try to explain their meaning in light of his own experiences, just as he does not recognize that his associations to the number 26,783 lead to traumatic memories. A further curious fact, as Grossman and Grossman (1965) note, is that Groddeck, beginning at eighteen with the abrupt loss of his father, “did not respond to death with grief” (p. 34). As he seeks to persuade the reader in *The Book of the It* (1923), “Did you ever see a little child mourn for a person? . . . But why, then, do people mourn for a whole year? Partly because of other people, but above all, in order—in the manner of the Pharisees—to boast to themselves, to deceive themselves” (p. 170). From the standpoint of Bowlby’s attachment theory it possible to see Groddeck’s absence of grief and mockery of mourning as yet another symptom of his inability to come to terms with his repeated experiences of abandonment and bereavement.

The absence of grief is not the only conspicuous omission in Groddeck’s life and work. Nowhere to my knowledge does he mention his divorce in 1914 from his first wife, Else von der Goltz, who suffered from depression, which meant also being separated from her children Joachim and the extremely disturbed Ursula, to whom he was a devoted stepfather. Nor does he acknowledge the tragic story of Barbara, his only biological child, who likewise ceased to live with him after the divorce from Else and was never able to sustain an independent existence, being so paralyzed with anxiety, as the Grossmans (1957) report, that even when “fully grown she dared not walk down a flight of stairs without clinging to her mother’s hand” (p. 43).<sup>3</sup> And while Groddeck rhapsodizes about being the youngest of five children, only in Martynkewicz’s biography (1997) do we learn that he was actually the *sixth* Groddeck since there was a firstborn daughter who died after only one month, following which “the mother recovered only after a few months from an illness” (p. 26). The theme of replacement, given consummate expression in Ferenczi’s coming to Baden-Baden as a substitute for Freud, thus hangs over Groddeck from before his birth, while the wounds left by his disappointments with his first wife

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<sup>3</sup> According to Martynkewicz (1997), “At the age of forty-eight Barbara Groddeck came as an invalid to a municipal nursing home in Baden-Baden, where she died on August 7, 1957” (p. 160).

and especially with his daughter must have been too painful for him to be prepared to expose them to the gaze of the reading public.

These, then, are the lessons I think we may learn from Groddeck in contemplating the one-sidedness in his world-view. The critique that could be offered of his rejection of science and medical diagnosis—the notion, as he says in *The Book of the It* (1923), that “every treatment of the sick man is the correct one, he is always and under all circumstances rightly treated, whether according to the method of science or the method of the healing shepherd” (p. 264)—follows from the dismissal of external reality on the plane of theory that is paradoxically a consequence of the traumas that he experienced in his life. Since, as Groddeck recognized, “truth is always ambivalent, both sides are true” (1951, p. 261), what is required is a genuinely dialectical perspective that synthesizes Groddeck’s romantic vision with Freud’s commitment to the legacy of the Enlightenment. Just as Groddeck revered Freud, “who with four lines of writing could bring a whole world into being, and then, in three more, laugh at his own words with such god-like irony” (1926c, p. 120), so do I continue to love Groddeck for his greatness as a man and to honor the enduring value of his contributions to psychoanalysis. The perfect balance was struck by Ferenczi when he wrote in Groddeck’s guestbook after his first visit to Baden-Baden in 1921: “Came to teach, and was instructed; left wholly smitten, half-converted” (qtd. in Martynkewicz, 1997, p. 284).

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