

# The Critique of Regression



A Psychoanalytic Model of Irreversible Lifespan Development



Gregory S. Rizzolo

ROUTLEDGE

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# The Critique of Regression

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*The Critique of Regression* presents the most in-depth critique of regression available in the psychoanalytic literature, whilst presenting the first psychoanalytic theory of irreversible lifespan development. The clinical implications are amply demonstrated in three chapter-length psychoanalytic cases. The most important implication is that when we revisit the past, in a private memory or in an analytic session, we remake it afresh in light of the present. The analysis of the past is always, in this sense, an exploration of the present.

Gregory S. Rizzolo demonstrates that where we think we see returns, or regressions, to past stages of the lifespan, we in fact find the emergence of novel structures in subjective experience. Rizzolo considers the work of human development to be a work of mourning in which we lose, internalize and keep reworking the residue of a past to which we never return. The traditional notion of regression, which supports the fantasy of a literal return, operates as an intellectual defense against the mourning process. To critique the concept is to address the defense and to confront the loss of past relationships and of past versions of selfhood inherent in development. From the work of mourning emerge ever-new configurations of desire, defense and subjective meaning. The task of analysis is to cultivate, amidst the repetition of familiar patterns, the potential for novelty at play in each moment.

This thought-provoking work will interest new and experienced psychoanalytic clinicians alike, who want to go beyond traditional theories of development to a contemporary look at how we develop inexorably across the lifespan.

**Gregory S. Rizzolo** is a faculty member at the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago and an advanced candidate at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. His work has appeared in *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, the *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* and the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. He maintains a private practice in Chicago USA.



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When music is played in a new key, the melody does not change, but the notes that make up the composition do: change in the context of continuity, continuity that perseveres through change. *Psychoanalysis in a New Key* publishes books that share the aims psychoanalysts have always had, but that approach them differently. The books in the series are not expected to advance any particular theoretical agenda, although to this date most have been written by analysts from the Interpersonal and Relational orientations.

The most important contribution of a psychoanalytic book is the communication of something that nudges the reader's grasp of clinical theory and practice in an unexpected direction. *Psychoanalysis in a New Key* creates a deliberate focus on innovative and unsettling clinical thinking. Because that kind of thinking is encouraged by exploration of the sometimes surprising contributions to psychoanalysis of ideas and findings from other fields, *Psychoanalysis in a New Key* particularly encourages interdisciplinary studies. Books in the series have married psychoanalysis with dissociation, trauma theory, sociology, and criminology. The series is open to the consideration of studies examining the relationship between psychoanalysis and any other field—for instance, biology, literary and art criticism, philosophy, systems theory, anthropology, and political theory.

But innovation also takes place within the boundaries of psychoanalysis, and *Psychoanalysis in a New Key* therefore also presents work that reformulates thought and practice without leaving the precincts of the field. Books in the series focus, for example, on the significance of personal values in psychoanalytic practice, on the complex interrelationship between the analyst's clinical work and personal life, on the consequences for the clinical situation when patient and analyst are from different cultures, and on the need for psychoanalysts to accept the degree to which they knowingly satisfy their own wishes during treatment hours, often to the patient's detriment. A full list of all titles in this series is available at: <https://www.routledge.com/series/LEAPNKBS>

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A Psychoanalytic Model of Irreversible Lifespan Development  
*Gregory S. Rizzolo*

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# The Critique of Regression

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Lifespan Development

Gregory S. Rizzolo

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For Mom & Dad  
Doug & Trev  
Grandma Cookie  
Jess  
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Sienna Rose

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# Introduction

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When we dream, Freud (1900) argued, we slip backwards from a world of conscious action into an unconscious realm of infantile memory and desire. The residues of our waking life meet there with repressed primitive wishes capable of animating a dream. “We may speak of dreams,” he wrote, “as having a ‘regressive’ character” (p. 541).

The idea of regression, with all of its intrigue, would shape a century of theory building. It would also become one of the thorniest, if recently neglected, areas of inquiry.

The process of dreaming is, Freud (1900) continued, analogous to that of neurotic symptom formation (p. 597). A thought or behavior becomes pathological when it is seized upon and made into the disguised vehicle of expression for a repressed infantile wish. To unravel a symptom, as to unravel a dream, is to trace it back to its origin in infancy.

The libido theory articulated what Freud considered the most consequential of infantile wishes—the child’s sexual impulses—and set them in a developmental series (Freud, 1905). The infant’s pleasure in sucking at the breast gives rise, he held, to the oral phase; his pleasure in anal retention and elimination to the anal phase; and his phallic-genital interest in the opposite sex parent, and with it the Oedipus complex, to the phallic phase. A fixation in any phase could set the stage for a regressive neurosis in later life.

The articulation of theory led to a greater specificity in the kinds of regression it anticipated. In hysteria, for instance, it predicted a “regression of the libido to the primary incestuous sexual objects,” that is to the Oedipus complex, but “no regression to an earlier stage of sexual organization” (Freud, 1917a, p. 342). The hysteric thus regards herself as the apple of her father’s eye, but resents the impression, having noticed the

little boy's penis, that she must accept a passive feminine position in the world (Freud, 1924).

In the obsessional neuroses, it anticipated, by contrast, a "regression of the libido to the preliminary stage of the sadistic-anal organization" (Freud, 1917a, p. 343). The obsessional thus evades the danger of castration by retreating into anal position from which vantage point he becomes preoccupied with control of dirty objects, feelings and impulses.

The history of psychoanalysis suggests a deepening interest in still earlier forms of regression. Zetzel (1968), for instance, introduced the "so-called good hysteric," a woman whose sexual interest in her father/analyst screens a pre-Oedipal fixation on her mother, who she feels deprived her of warmth and tenderness, much as the analyst now deprives her. The false self patient of Winnicott (1965) is more compliant than the so-called hysteric. He cooperates readily, but lifelessly, with the analysis of his Oedipus complex. Behind the compliance he too, however, betrays a deeper problem: a sense of non-existence masked by adaptation to maternal impingement now replicated in the analysis.

Balint's (1968) basic-fault patient and Kohut's (1971, 1977) narcissist belong to the same category of patients, who, though they might seem Oedipal, reveal, in their heightened vulnerability and/or deadened compliance, a variety of earlier regressive needs. The first person, who clings to others, or alternately learns skills to become self-sufficient, yearns unconsciously to return to the lost (or never realized) harmony of the mother-infant mix-up. The second, grandiose, but depressed and shame-prone, hungers for the mirroring, or the merger with an idealized other, that was thwarted in the earliest years.

The literature is peopled with character types dated to early childhood fixations and ruptures. The characters themselves are easy to find in everyday practice. The effort to provide an origin story for each one, leads, however, into two basic problems. First, it sets up hypotheses that cannot be verified beyond the tautological reconstruction of the adult's infancy. The impression is one of picking the wrong battles: The truth embodied in the character type, as a construct, is lost in unresolvable speculation about infantile causation. The stories tend, second, to be reductionist of life beyond childhood. The intrigue of later life can get lost in an aesthetic in which everything is contained in the beginning.

The first problem undermines efforts to address the second one. To address the second problem, one might take a three-step approach: (a) verify the

theory's picture of childhood, (b) verify the theory's picture of the adult's neurosis, and (c) demonstrate an empirical correlation the strength of which shows that later development is redundant or irrelevant. The difficulty, however, which brings us back to the first problem, is that the picture of childhood typically refers to motives and phantasies that lie beyond empirical verification. It would seem that the picture of childhood can be modified at whim to perfect the correlation until we are left with a restatement of the adult in the image of the baby.

We find scattered attempts to approach this tangle. Hartmann (1955) cautions against the 'genetic fallacy' whereby we reduce present-day mentation to its infantile precursors as if the continuity of function were inconsistent the development of function. Erikson (1958) similarly pokes fun at what he calls "originology": "a habit of thinking which reduces every human situation to an analogy with an earlier one, and most of all to that earliest, simplest and most infantile precursor which is assumed to be its 'origin'" (p. 18).

The theoretical swerve to originology has garnered too little interest. It is unlikely that anyone would appeal, for the sake of comparison, to the theory of the primal horde (Freud, 1913b) to explain contemporary social phenomena like the rise of ISIS, Brexit or the election of Trump. It is evident, regardless of the validity or invalidity of such origin myths, that one would require a more contemporary history of the issues or movements in question. Why do we accept a similar kind of lacunae, then, in our explanation of adult disorders?

Mitchell (1988) argued that the field of psychoanalysis holds to a latent morality of maturity by which it locates the most uncomfortable aspects of human experience in the child. The readiness to originology might reflect a moral impulse, then, to infantilize the patient. The analyst and often the patient tacitly accept the idea that the most unruly impulses, needs, affects, defenses and phantasies in human experience are, by definition, childish. The psyche is split accordingly into the mature and the infantile. The patient and analyst join in the belief that, of the two of them, the patient is the more immature one.

The theoretically sanctioned move to infantilize the patient might serve a number of purposes. It might make the patient's provocative or emotional nature more acceptable and even endearing. It is often easier to forgive in a 'child' what would be unacceptable in an adult. It might, at the same time, afford the analyst a momentary feeling of triumph over

the ‘childish’ parts of himself that he has unconsciously identified with his childish patient.

The implication is that the theory of regression can provide an intellectual safe-haven for unanalyzed countertransference feelings toward the so-called childish parts of the patient. To challenge the theory is, therefore, to open an unwelcome area of analytic inquiry.

The inquiry itself leads into the network of beliefs, concepts and images that give rise to the problem. Freud (1937) pictured the mind as an archeological dig site. The relics of infantile sexuality were thought to be buried beneath the corroding effects of everyday weather. The causal hypothesis is that the infantile persists because it is repressed and, as such, can surge up to influence, but is not much altered by, events in the present. Such a vision supports the possibility of a regression to unmodified infantile fixations.

Wachtel (2003) points out, however, that early patterns drop out of the lifespan if they are not reinforced. A different causal hypothesis emerges. The infantile persists, to the extent that it does, not because it is buried beneath present influences, but because it is inextricably implicated in shaping the present and is continually reinforced by its own effects.

To concede this point, but retain the concept of regression, one might invoke the imagery of ego psychology. The ego, then, is a machine comprised of functions and sub-functions (Hartmann, Kris, & Loewenstein, 1946). The best functions are mature and durable. Other functions are less so. They can break down and regress to earlier modes of operation (Arlow & Brenner, 1964). Production continues, in that event, on the basis of a compromise between the stable-mature and the regressed functions of the operating system.

The problem here is one of the genetic fallacy. It is assumed that the structural continuity from a past ego function to a present one is inconsistent with the notion of development. Certainly, one can reify a given mental function—a supposedly regressed function in this case—and then artificially isolate the parts that best show its childhood origins. The function is not a thing, however, but a way of operating. It has become part and parcel of a broader personality style. It is integrated with other functions, in the service of new interests and demands, such that its functional status is not what it was in childhood.

I shall argue that, contrary to the theory of regression, the person develops irreversibly across the lifespan. The work of development is, in large part, a work of mourning in which we lose, internalize and keep reworking

the residues of a past to which we never return. The psychoanalytic notion of regression, which supports the fantasy of a literal return, operates, even behind any morality of maturity, as a defense against the loss inherent in development. We can more accurately describe what we once called ‘regressions’ as shifts, or transformations, in the present intrapsychic–interpersonal field. The personality styles above, so eloquently described by their authors, are best seen as lifespan adaptations. No one makes a pure return to the subjective world of his infancy.<sup>1</sup>

The book is organized into ten chapters in which I trace the history of the concept of regression, discuss past and present critiques, and attempt to substantiate the argument above.

The first chapter presents what I have termed the traditions of defensive and restorative regression (Rizzolo, 2016). The defensive tradition frames regression as a retreat from the dangers of forward development. The restorative tradition frames regression, by contrast, as a primary (non-defensive) pull toward a restorative object relationship. I discuss the first tradition, which originates in Freud, the second tradition, which originates in Ferenczi, and integrationists, like Balint, Winnicott and Kohut, who constructed developmental tilt models (Mitchell, 1988) in order to house both potential regressions.

The second chapter examines earlier conservative and radical critiques of the concept. The conservative critique holds that the term is misused and/or misapplied in clinical practice (Macalpine, 1950; Arlow & Brenner, 1964; Gill, 1984a). The implication is that it should be revised or clarified. The radical critique suggests that the term—no matter how well it is clarified—leads to the genetic fallacy and, behind it, a morality of maturity (Mitchell, 1988; Inderbitzin & Levy, 2000; Rizzolo, 2016). The implication is that it should be abandoned in favor of a more nuanced sense of the infusion of past and present.

The third chapter, which attempts to develop the implications of the radical critique, argues that the person—an irreducible agent of his own experience—is the proper subject of psychoanalytic inquiry (Schafer, 1976; Gill, 1983; Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987). The person thinks, feels and acts out of the whole of his inner composition. It does not make sense, then, to parse the doings of his repressed infantile self from those of his adult self. Nor does it make sense to parse the workings of infantile functions from later ones. The early and later acquired functions merge into the present movement.

The fourth chapter explores the relational matrix in which the person makes meaning of his experience. Traditional psychoanalytic conceptualizations argued for the regressive nature of group functioning (Freud, 1921; Bion, 1961). A related but distinct wave of pre-Oedipal theorizing emphasized the infantile nature of intense interpersonal dependency (Hartmann, 1939; Winnicott, 1954a, 1954b; Balint, 1968; Mahler, 1975; Kohut, 1971). A tautology emerges in which it is presupposed that only children are intensely dependent on others; intense dependency in later life thus becomes evidence of regression. But it is by now a commonplace that we are all embedded in fields of dependency. The tautology is rejected for a broader conception of *Nachträglichkeit* (Freud, 1896, 1898, 1918), or deferred action, in which the past is continuously reshaped in the field of our present dependencies. Our ongoing dependency becomes, therefore, not the evidence of regression, but rather a precondition in re-imagining the past.

I illustrate the deferred action of the field through Klein's (1959) apt portrayal of how marriage changes the psyche in depth. We observe in her account how the wife reconfigures her husband's internal mother and, conversely, how he reconfigures her internal father. The changes exemplify how the present field in fact modifies all internal figures.

I proceed to a special case of deferred action in the adult representation of child selves. The imagined figure, or character, is not the direct portrait of an historical self, but a construction—expressive a lifespan history—configured or reconfigured in the present field. I illustrate this point in Davies and Frawley's (1991) vivid account of the child representation one often finds in the internal world of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

The fifth chapter attempts to bring the person and the field into a lifespan model of development.<sup>2</sup> The unconscious is considered 'timeless,' or lacking in temporal distinctions. Yet it is nested in a lifespan history and so, contrary to Freud's view, reflects the inexorable passage of time. The person must therefore face the constant loss a past to which he cannot return. Instead of dating common clinical issues, for example trust, autonomy and assertiveness, to nodal infantile fixations or arrests, I reframe them as issues for the life cycle (Stern, 1985; Mitchell, 1988). The person does not regress to them, but reengages them in new iterations at each new phase of life (Wachtel, 2003, 2008). The entry into each new phase opens new fields with unique limits and growth potentials. The struggle is rarely uniform.

For most people, it involves shifts between modes (Erikson, 1950) and positions (Klein, 1946; Waddell, 1998) within the relational matrix.

No one can roll back the additions and modifications of lifespan development in a full-fledged return to the motives and conflicts of his childhood. By *regression*, however, some analysts mean not a full-fledged return to an earlier developmental phase, but a non-phase-specific slip into primitive phantasies and defenses. The operational term, in this particular variation, is not regression, but *primitive*, which originated in Freud's (1913b) interest in anthropology. Freud and his followers, including Klein, believed in a world where ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Here the regressed analysand = normative child = third-world subject = primitive subject. The sixth chapter queries the basic assumption that primitive psychology is, in fact, primitive.<sup>3</sup> I argue, in the negative, that many so-called primitive processes—for example, hallucinatory gratification, condensation, splitting and projective identification—are not intrinsically primary in evolution or development. They develop from infantile to adult modes of operation. To engage in them is not to regress, but to make use of increasingly sophisticated mental operations.

The seventh chapter addresses the relatively recent psychoanalytic interest in the here-and-now. The relational, Kleinian and ego-psychological theorists of the here-and-now share an interest, in spite of their metapsychological differences, in the analysis of transference, and, except for Gill, in the analysis of present extra-analytic manifestations of conflict (Joseph, 1978, 1989, 2013; Gill, 1979, 1984b; Sandler & Sandler, 1984, 1987, 1994a). For them the analysis of the present comes before and takes priority over genetic interpretation. The critique of regression clarifies that the analysis of the here-and-now is not a superficial activity, that is, a game played with the derivatives of buried infantile mentation, but, on the contrary, an engagement at the deepest levels of the present unconscious. The reconstruction of infancy is not an inherently profound activity, but rather a narrative act, which reflects, in form and content, the subject's immersion in the field.

The eighth chapter explores the clinical implications in a contemporary report of defensive regression (Haft, 2005). A hermeneutic methodology is advanced to suit the purpose. It aims not to disprove what cannot be disproven—namely, claims about the repressed infantile past—but to move beyond genetic reconstruction to a more complete lifespan conceptualization. The patient, then, who presents with severe obsessive-compulsive

symptoms, is thought by the analyst to have regressed from Oedipal dangers to an anal fixation. The symptoms emerge, it is held, to manage anal erotic and sadistic impulses. I attempt to show that, regardless of potential anal influences, we require a lifespan conceptualization. The patient experiences his erotic-sadistic impulses through an ever-evolving identification with his father—one that proceeds through several life phase iterations. We can understand the image of the anal toddler not as a literal picture of the patient's unconscious self, but as a character with meaning in the here-and-now field.

The ninth chapter pursues the implications further in a contemporary report of restorative regression (Grossmark, 2012). The patient, who feels he does not exist, relies on a war chest of erotic and sadistic behaviors to ward off a profound and empty sense of despair. He can be aloof, insightful, needy, rejecting, appreciative, desperately excited and so on. The analyst is forbidden, however, to interpret his mood or even to request that he attend his sessions, rather, than, say, calling in impromptu from the car or the shower. The analyst suggests that the patient has regressed to a primary state of mother–infant relating. The difficult behavior, it is thought, reflect an infantile demand for total attunement. I attempt to demonstrate, by contrast, that the behavior, like the obsessional symptoms in the previous chapter, require a lifespan interpretation. It reflects an erotized identification with a dominant mother rolled into a sadistic identification with an abusive step-father and subsequently cultivated through the actual domination of men in fetish clubs. The image of the patient as a neonate appears in the relational matrix. It helps the analyst to endure the patient's needy demands and softens his guilty countertransference frustration.

The tenth chapter presents a lifespan approach to the analysis of a young man, a thwarted singer-songwriter, who sought help for jealous thoughts he felt undermined his reality-testing.<sup>4</sup> Travis worried that his lovers, of whom there were several, merely tolerated him. They lusted, in secret, after his more aggressive and successful rivals—or so he believed. I provide a developmental history and three representative sessions. I then suggest how a defensive and restorative regression analyst might conceptualize the process. The two regression accounts illuminate relevant childhood dynamics. But they leave open three gaps. They do not, for one, account for the specificity at play in the associations. Travis finds himself in rivalry with a specific male object (the rival artist) for a specific female object (the feminine muse). They reflect his childhood parents only through the

later prism of his adolescent/young adult search for an identity in artistic production. They do not account, second, for the fear he has grounded his worth in a grandiose illusion. They do not touch, lastly, on the mourning implicit in accepting that he has failed to actualize his teenage dreams and in moving forward toward a revised vision. A lifespan interpretation accounts for these gaps. It brings the childhood insights of the first two accounts into a further reaching analysis of the tasks and dangers in the present.

My primary aim in this book is to explore a vision of psychoanalysis without regression. To abandon the term is to resist the genetic fallacy and the often implicit morality of maturity. It is, moreover, to confront the loss inherent in irreversible lifespan development. It is not, however, to dismiss the character types embedded in regression theory. The causality is simply redistributed from childhood, which we have over-privileged, to a cumulative causality of reinforcements and modifications in each phase of life. The field of inquiry is opened, by implication, into the function of patient-infantilization and, beyond this point, into the often subtle transformations of lifelong development.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this critique appeared in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 64(6): 1097–1131.
- 2 An earlier version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* (Rizzolo, in press).
- 3 An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 65(6): 945–977.
- 4 A shorter version of this case has been accepted for publication in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*.

## The Defensive and Restorative Traditions

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The term *regression* has been used in many different ways since Freud's early (1900) discussion of the formal, temporal and topographical aspects of regression in dreaming. Two dominant traditions—here termed the 'defensive' and 'restorative' traditions—have evolved, along with several integrative traditions, in the psychoanalytic literature.

The individual retreats, in a defensive regression, from a situation of unconscious danger to an earlier fixation of relative safety and pleasure. He replaces current wishes and dangers with the more manageable, if still problematic, ones from an earlier phase of life. The process of regression is likened metaphorically to the flow of a stream that washes back on itself (Freud, 1905) or to the retreat of an army to an old camp (Freud, 1917a).

In a restorative regression, by contrast, the subject experiences a primary yearning to re-establish early conditions of merger with a life-sustaining other who is felt to be an environment. This is not a defensive process. It is mobilized by feelings of safety, not of danger. Such regressions can be likened metaphorically to a merger with *Thalassa*, the primal sea spirit (Ferenczi, 1938), a harmonious mix-up in the mother–infant dyad (Balint, 1968), or the inhale of the other's pride and joy as a kind of oxygen (Kohut, 1984).

In Balint, Winnicott and Kohut's writing we find similar attempts to integrate the defensive and restorative regression traditions into a comprehensive model of mental functioning. They rely, in spite of their differences, on a common 'developmental tilt' approach (Mitchell, 1988). Dependency needs are located in the pre-Oedipal years of development. Restorative regressions are thus thought to imply a return to pre-Oedipal needs. Sexual and aggressive conflicts, and retreats from them, are considered Oedipal in

nature. Defensive regressions are thus thought to imply a higher level of developmental achievement.

In spite of its explanatory appeal, however, the developmental tilt highlights problems internal to the concept of regression. Above all, it raises the problem of the genetic fallacy (Hartmann, 1955). We find ubiquitous relational needs reduced to their original manifestations in early life in spite of widespread clinical findings that such needs are pervasive among so-called pre-Oedipal and Oedipal patients across the life cycle. The reduction suggests an implicit a morality of maturity vis-à-vis dependency needs. The internal break down of this solution re-opens an inquiry into the problems of regression.

### **The Tradition of Defensive Regression**

The psychoanalytic concept of regression first appears in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). "We call it 'regression,'" he wrote, "when in a dream an idea is turned back into the sensory image from which it was originally derived" (p. 543). According to the theory, the process integrates three different kinds of regression. There is a 'formal' regression from complex ideas to primitive sensory images, a 'topographical' regression from the preconscious to the conscious systems, and a 'temporal' regression from present to past psychic structures. The three kinds of regression were held to be 'one at bottom,' because, "what is older in time is more primitive in form and in psychical topography lies nearer to the perceptual end" (p. 548).

Freud developed the concept further in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Here he introduces a psychic force—the libido—that can progress or regress along an organically determined line of development. The libido is defined as a quantitative variable representing 'processes' and 'transformations' in sexual excitation (p. 83). It flows from a narcissistic reservoir of self-cathexis into oral, anal and genital object investments. Along the way, it forms fixation points of relative safety and gratification. If it encounters obstacles—for example, danger situations—in its forward path, it can regress, washing back like a blocked 'stream,' into the 'channels' of its old fixations (p. 170).

He later suggested that the ego marches in step with the libido (Freud, 1916–1917). If the libido behaves like a stream, the ego behaves like an army. It establishes camps along the path of libidinal development to which it can retreat, as needed, from conflict on the front line.

The concept of regression became an essential diagnostic tool. In hysteria, for example, there was thought to be a regression to the “primary incestuous objects” of the Oedipal/Oedipal phase (Freud, 1916–1917, p. 342). In the obsessional neuroses, by contrast, there was held to be a deeper regression from Oedipal danger to an anal-sadistic fixation wherein the libidinal impulse was “obliged . . . to disguise itself as a sadistic impulsion” (pp. 343–344). Paranoia, in this theory, reflected an even deeper regression from object love to narcissism. It left a dry riverbed of object libido—not enough to form a transference to the analysts—rendering the patient inaccessible by the psychoanalytic method (Freud, 1912, 1914).

Ego psychology expanded in various ways upon the work of regression in human development. We find, for instance, normal and pathological regressions along the developmental lines of id, ego and superego (A. Freud, 1965), progressive and regressive ego adaptations (Hartman, 1939), regression in psychic differentiation and integration (Hartmann, Kris, & Loewenstein, 1946), regression in the service of the ego (Kris, 1936) and, more recently, the anti-regressive function of the ego (Sandler & Sandler, 1994b).

‘Psychoanalysis,’ Gill (1954) wrote, in a statement that, for many, captured the essence of clinical practice, “is that technique which, employed by a neutral analyst, results in the development of a regressive transference neurosis and the ultimate resolution of this neurosis by techniques of interpretation alone” (p. 775). Implicitly excluded from analysis were those patients considered to be too regressed to tolerate the analyst’s neutrality or, in the most withdrawn and psychotic cases, to form a neurotic transference.

At the same time, we also find in ego psychology a certain complication of the concept of regression: Its potential adaptive-progressive value emerges, such that the concept no longer refers so clearly to a return to the past. Hartmann (1939) wrote, for instance, that even when mature forms of mentation fail, and a regressive adaptation presents itself to fill the gap, “no pure form of a previous developmental stage emerges” (p. 50). The regressive mentation has, paradoxically, a novel quality in the present. It is a solution to a new problem and, in its novelty of function, becomes part of new psychic structure.

Loewald (1981) seemed to acknowledge the latent conceptual problems when he wrote that, “words and concepts (such as regression and the rest) reveal themselves as flimsy or enigmatic or ambiguous if they are not merely used as shortcuts and as currency in the exchange of thoughts but

are given weight and consideration in their own right” (p. 22). He argued in favor of retaining the concept as a shortcut. One might counter-argue, however, that it is by exploring latent conceptual flimsiness that space opens for new thought.

Although Melanie Klein departed from the ego psychological reading of Freud, she too framed regression as a defensive retreat from situations of internal conflict and danger. In her writing, however, the standard picture of regression is complicated by regressive-progressive oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions:

For if persecutory fear, and correspondingly schizoid mechanisms, are too strong, the ego is not capable of working through to the depressive position. This forces the ego to regress to the paranoid-schizoid position and reinforces earlier persecutory fears and schizoid phenomena.

[Klein, 1946, p. 15]

The oscillation between positions is not phase specific. It can occur within any phase of life. It does not, that is, imply an erotogenic regression. This complicates the picture. It arguably opens the door for a re-imagining of regressions as shifts that occur within phases of the life cycle. I pursue this direction in Chapters 4 and 5.

Klein also implicitly challenged the concept of regression in her contention that the Oedipus complex manifests in oral phase of the first year of life (Klein, 1928, 1945). “The frustration experienced at the mother’s breast,” she wrote, “leads both boy and girl to turn away from it and stimulates the infant’s desire for oral gratification from the penis of the father” (Klein, 1945, p. 408). It is a matter of controversy whether the infant has the mental capacity to form a phantasy of the father’s penis. Whether or not Klein’s assertion is correct, it suggests that the Oedipal situation is not bounded within the confines of the phallic-genital phase, but, on the contrary, can occur in so-called pre-Oedipal phases. It is, in essence, an issue of triangular love relations that can occur in any phase.

Britton (1992) explores this opening in his contention that the Oedipal situation is ‘never finished,’ but has to be “re-worked in each new life situation, at each stage of development, and with each major addition to experience or knowledge” (p. 38). We do not regress to the Oedipal situation; we rework it over and over again.

## The Tradition of Restorative Regression

In 1914, Ferenczi attempted an interpretation and elaboration of Freud's libido theory. Ferenczi's reading, published in 1938 under the title *Thalassa*, indulged in what he admitted to be a loose, but arguably fruitful, play with mythical and biological metaphors. He argued that libidinal striving expresses a universal longing to return an 'aquatic' mode of existence, which the infant first experienced in the womb, and which was first experienced by proto-organisms in the ocean. There is a trace of the sea in the womb, so to speak, and one is always trying to get back to the state of repose experienced there. "The human being is dominated," he wrote, "from the moment of birth onwards by a continuous regressive trend toward the reestablishment of the intrauterine situation" (p. 20).

For Freud and the ego psychologists, psychosexual development followed a path from primary narcissism to differentiation and ultimately genital investment in a separate object. Ferenczi held, by contrast, that genitility was not an achievement of the differentiated ego, but, on the contrary, the expression of a deep regressive longing for merger. "The purpose . . . of the sex act . . . can be none other than an attempt on the part of the ego . . . to return to the mother's womb, where there is no . . . painful disharmony between ego and environment" (p. 18).

Just as Freud appealed to the metaphor of the stream in formulating the libido theory, Ferenczi appealed to the metaphor of Thalassa, the primeval sea spirit who spawned the first life forms. The mother's body symbolizes the primeval ocean from which life emerged, and to which it longs to return—to a state of harmony prior to the trauma of separation. The libido is not just pleasure seeking, then, but also Thalassa-seeking.

Balint (1959, 1968) acknowledges the influence of Ferenczi's *Thalassa* more than any other theorist in the restorative regression tradition. He draws explicitly on the metaphor of Thalassa in his depiction of the mother–infant dyad:

The child safely held in its mother's arms, the intrauterine, and the thalassal existence—are to be considered as symbolically identical; the friendly expanses of my theory are then but wish-fulfilling memories of these states; conversely, these states activate a strong attraction for regression.

(1959, p. 96)