

BOOKS / LECTURES

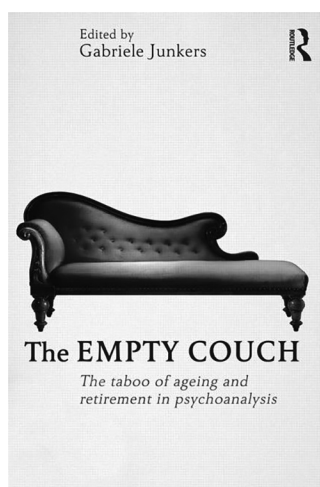
The Empty Couch: The Taboo of Ageing and Retirement in Psychoanalysis *edited by Gabriele Junkers*

London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013, 186 pp.

Freud left us an overwhelming legacy, part of which is his thoughts about the relationships between work, illness, old age, and death. In 1910, at the age of fifty-four, and long before his dramatic struggle with cancer had commenced, Freud wrote to Oskar Pfister,

I cannot face with comfort the idea of life without work; work and the free play of the imagination are for me the same thing, I take no pleasure in anything else. That would be a recipe for happiness but for the appalling thought that productivity is entirely dependent on a sensitive disposition. What would one do when ideas failed or words refuse to come. It is impossible not to shudder at the thought. Hence, in spite of all the acceptance of fate which is appropriate to an honest man, I have one quite secret prayer: that I may be spared any wasting away and crippling of my ability to work because of physical deterioration. (Schur 1972, p. 259)

Freud's model of absolute commitment to psychoanalytic work has been followed by many psychoanalysts. Martin S. Bergman, for instance, voiced in his 100th birthday speech the insight that psychoanalysis is not only an independent profession, but also a deep passion:



I remain thankful to psychoanalysis for protecting me from an early retirement and the swimming pools of Florida, and for enabling me to still work and teach at the age of 100 and to still make discoveries and write. I have been told more than once that I had a love affair with psychoanalysis and this may explain why, as the lover of psychoanalysis, I find it exhilarating to be an analyst. (Bergman, 2014, p. 9)

But what are the dangers of a “passionate dedication” to psychoanalysis (p. 21)? And what does “life without a couch” (p. 3) look like?

The aging, sick, and dying psychoanalyst is at the centre of an excellent collection of essays, edited by Gabriele Junkers, a psychoanalyst, training analyst, and member of the German Psychoanalytic Association. *The Empty Couch* is a disturbing but powerful symbol of the finitude and transience of psychoanalytic work.

Aging has, of course, some advantages and benefits, too. Following a groundbreaking work by Kurt R. Eissler (1975), in his essay “Psychoanalyst: A Profession for an Immortal,” Paul Denis, one of the book’s contributors, mentions the “greater tolerance of the analyst to the illness of the patient,” the “reduction in therapeutic ambition,” the “greater acceptance of the ordinary human character of the patient,” and the increased “empathy in relation to the child that the patient has been when it reappears during analysis” (p. 34). In his article “Growing Older as an Analyst: Problems of Ethics and Practice Based on Personal Experience,” Johan Fredrik Thaulow also notes “the greater tranquility for both patient and therapist,” especially as erotic transference becomes “less persistent and risky” (p. 44) as a result of increasing age.

However, the disadvantages seem to outweigh the benefits. Aging is characterized by Gabriele Junkers as “an attack on the analyst’s life and work” (p. 21)—a relentless vitality decline marked by multi-morbidity. Cicero is also cited in order to outline the numerous painful aspects of aging: “ageing disqualifies us for the enjoyment of the sensual gratifications; it incapacitates us for acting in the affairs of the world; it produces great infirmities of the body; and it confronts us with death as a fact of life” (p. 22). Kurt R. Eissler, who stated that aging “decreases the therapeutic power” of the analyst (p. 34), warns against the loss of memory of the analyst, the “increase in narcissistic investment” in old age, and the gradual death of the aging analyst, but also warns us against the analyst’s heroism, which can harm the patient.

As is evident from most contributions, psychoanalysts are not immune to denial, narcissistic defences, omnipotence, and immortality fantasies. Psychoanalysis as an “art of therapy” (Thaulow, p. 96) requires the aban-

donment of omnipotent thinking, the recognition of transience, and the “submission to the authority of the body,” as Martin Teising points out (p. 47). Danielle Quinodoz calls for the redefinition of aging and old age, the development of a “sense of the ephemeral” (p. 12), and “ageing usefully” (p. 12): analysts should learn to ascribe greater importance to life and its real values, to “being” rather than to “having” (p. 8), and to keep the “internal couch” always “occupied” (p. 14) while feeling “at peace” with their decision to stop practising psychoanalysis (p. 12).

By courageously exploring a neglected research area and fighting the “head-in-the-sand mentality” of many psychoanalysts, Gabriele Junkers’s impressive volume continues the work of several earlier authors, such as Eissler, Schwartz & Silver (1990), Tallmer (1989; 1992), Traesdal (2005), and others. The three parts of *The Empty Couch*—“Growing Older as Psychoanalysts,” “Illness and Ending,” and “Institutional Parts of Ending”—contain articles by prominent authors (in addition to those mentioned above), including Evelyn Carlisle, Cláudio Laks Eizirik, Barbara Fajardo, Maria Teresa Savio Hooke, Audrey Kavka, Leena Klockars, Luisa Marino, Mary Kay O’Neil, Martin Teising, and Tove Traesdal. They address a wide range of intriguing, often distressing issues from different perspectives and explore “the many cliffs and obstacles that this stage of life holds in store” (p. 3) in great depth. Gabriele Junkers herself draws on her long experience as a gerontologist, founder of the ad hoc Group on Ageing of the European Psychoanalytical Federation, and chair of the IPA Committee on Ageing. Her insights are captured in her editorial preface, an essay, an epilogue, and in the introductory chapters, which precede each of the three sections of the book.

The research presented in Junkers’s work stems from the imperative need to cope with the aging of the psychoanalytic community. According to Junkers, “more than half of all analysts today are already over the age of 60” (p. 176). Psychoanalytic institutions play a crucial role in this process and are often responsible for problems and injuries caused by aging or ill analysts. Junkers observes,

Whole institutes lapse into silence, a silence that makes them guilty not only of conniving. By averting their eyes from a colleague whose actions and behaviour do not live up to the standards of the group and by failing to intervene, they become perpetrators. (pp. 99–100)

Several potential solutions are discussed in the volume, e.g., the introduction of the title “Training Analyst Emeritus” (p. 97), as proposed by the Boston Institute in 1953, or the setting up of Psychoanalyst Assistance Committees to provide help to incapacitated analysts, as described by

Audrey Kavka. Contrary to proposals aimed at forcing psychoanalysts over the age of 75 to retire automatically and cease all their activities immediately, Danielle Quinodoz favours “a personalised retirement,” one that is carried out in a “caring and free atmosphere” (p. 16) and that “allows an analyst not to have to withdraw from all his different psychoanalytic activities at the same time” (p. 13).

In her epilogue, Gabriele Junkers advocates the adoption of a series of retirement provisions, procedures, and farewell rituals with regard to sick and aging psychoanalysts. Some of these provisions, such as the introduction of an age limit for training candidates (“training candidates should be admitted only if they are not significantly older than 50 years of age” [p. 179]), are questionable and hardly suited to save psychoanalysis from its present crisis and give us back “the strength and new inner spaces not only to mourn for what we believe to be lost, but also creatively to discover new paths that are as yet inconceivable to us” (p. 179). Yet the questions raised by Junkers are challenging and are an essential part of the book’s urgent “invitation” to break the taboo and to reflect on this difficult subject (p. xiii).

Antonio Ferro and Giuseppe Civitarese, the authors of the beautifully written foreword to *The Empty Couch*, are correct: this is not only a book about aging, but also a “meditation on life as a sequence of separations,” on the “transience of all things,” and on the “sense of beauty” and the “beauty of analysis” (p. xi).

This is a profoundly human book.

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Galina Hristeva
Schleifbrueckenstr. 11/1
73430 Aalen, Germany
galina.hristeva@gmx.de