

**JEP – European Journal of Psychoanalysis Humanities,
Philosophy, Psychotherapies**
Number 31 – 2010 /II

SCHREBER REVISITED

Guest Editor's Introduction

Zvi Lothane

In the articles put together in this issue, commemorating Freud and Paul Schreber's centenaries, we revisit Schreber, father and son, the men and the many myths created about them down the decades. It all started with Freud in 1911, whose essay made Paul Schreber immortal, and with W. G. Niederland in 1959, whose articles portrayed Moritz Schreber as a domestic tyrant, child abuser, and a forerunner of Nazi ideology. It is remarkable how entrenched these myths, in the sense of likely stories, still are in spite of historical evidence to the contrary. However, even more striking is that Paul Schreber's book, rather than thrown into the dustbin of history, endures as a continuing inspiration to authors in psychoanalysis and neighboring disciplines.

As set forth in my paper, the book *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* was never meant by its author to serve as an "autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoides)," let alone paranoid schizophrenia. It was Freud who pressed Schreber, a life, into the Procrustean bed of a psychiatric diagnosis and a psychoanalytic formula: paranoia is caused by homosexual desire. This was Freud's *etiological* myth about Schreber, reductionist and totalizing at the same time, and it was challenged by his supporters Bleuler and Jung in due course. Moreover, Freud misrepresented Schreber's descriptions, as did many interpreters after Freud, conflating acts with fantasies, actions with motives, intrapersonal with interpersonal. This contradicts an important principle of exegesis: the sanctity, the inviolability, of the text to be interpreted.

As Freud acknowledged himself:

The Court that gave Dr. Schreber back his liberty summarizes the content of his delusional system in a few sentences: ‘He believed he had a mission to redeem the world and to restore to it its lost sense of bliss. This, however, he could only bring about if he were first transformed from a man into a woman’ ([Schreber’s p.]475)” (Freud, 1911, p. 16). ... The Redeemer delusion is a phantasy that is familiar to us through the frequency with which it forms the nucleus of religious paranoia. Even though this may appear to be true of his delusion in the final form, ... the idea of being transformed into a woman (that is of being emasculated) was the primary delusion, that he began by regarding that *act* as constituting a serious injury and persecution ... The position may be formulated by saying that a sexual delusion of persecution was later on converted in the patient’s mind into a religious delusion of grandeur” (p. 18; my italics),

The term ‘religious delusion of grandeur’ was not used by Weber. What Schreber fantasized as persecution was not the same as what how Schreber experienced as persecution in reality, as a patient who acted and interacted with doctors and hospital personnel and who fell victim to the diagnoses, decisions and psychiatric expertises to the courts, resulting in years of incarceration. Freud confused Schreber’s homosexual *dread* of being sexually or aggressively abused by others, with homosexual *desire* for Flechsig, which he imagined happened *before* Schreber saw Flechsig again, and proceeded to make tendentious selections from Schreber’s text to convert an interpretive fiction into a biographical fact.

Another example of an interpretation converted into fact:

The patient had a fresh ‘nervous collapse’ ... at a time when his wife was taking a short holiday. But when she returned... he himself no wished to see her. ... ‘What especially determined my mental break-down [=nervous collapse] was a particular night, during which I had a quite extraordinary number of emissions—quite half a dozen, all that in one night.’ ([Schreber’s p.] 44) It is easy to understand that the mere presence of his wife must have acted as a protection against the attractive power of the men about him; and if we are prepared to admit that an emission cannot occur in an adult without some mental concomitant, we shall be able to supplement the patient’s emissions by *assuming* that they were accompanied by homosexual phantasies that remained unconscious” (Freud, 1911, p. 45; my italics).

Nobody knows what fantasies Schreber entertained that night, or what other causes

there were for the number of emission, e.g., a long absence of intercourse with his wife and no relief through masturbation.

Schreber himself as a man who loved, lived, and suffered, created a personal myth of a founder of a new religion to redeem the world. As founder of a new science, psychoanalysis, Freud created his personal myth of saving suffering humanity. Schreber dramatized his life in visions and voices; Freud (1900) dramatized events and encounters of his life in dreams that fill his epochal *Interpretation of Dreams*. C.G. Jung (1961), who created a redemptive blend of psychoanalysis, dramatized his personal myth in the opening lines of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

My life is a story of the self-realization of the unconscious. I cannot employ the language of science to trace this process of growth in myself, for I cannot experience myself as a scientific problem. What we are to our inward vision, and what man appears to be *sub specie aeternitatis*, can only be expressed by way of myth. Myth is more individual and expresses life more precisely than does science. Science works with concepts of averages which are far too general to do justice to the subjective variety of an individual life. Thus it is that I have now undertaken, in my eighty-third year, to tell my personal myth...What I tell is *my fable, my truth*" (p. 3; Jung's italics).

Mankind has created many archetypal myths of a different kind, mythologies to explain the mysteries of the human and non-human universe. Myth making has not stopped with the ancient Hebrews or Greeks: mythology lives on in Tolkien's *Hobbits*, *Star Trek* or in Alex Proyas' film *Dark City*, in which a Dr. Schreber is a dramatis persona, recreating time and again mankind's types and archetypes. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Goethe's *Faust* are dramaturgical representations of mythical, not historical, types. The abstractions and generalizations of science are also a kind of mythology, here the abstractions and generalizations of descriptive psychiatry and Freud's etiological formula that all disorders are sexual disorders, which his mentor Josef Breuer said was a case of Freud's *paranoia scientifica*. Freud's Schreber is an archetype, not a real person.

Therein lie important lessons for psychiatry and psychoanalysis today, both as scientific philosophies and as therapeutic practices. At issue is essentialism, the notion that a disease, paranoia or schizophrenia, is caused and manifests an inherent essence.

Existentialism, on the other hand, holds that existence precedes essence. Scadding (1990) wrote that such “‘essentialist’ definitions [of disease],... attempting the impossible task of revealing the essence of the *definiendum*, have no place in science; my statement is methodologically nominalist” (p. 243). Essentialism is manifest in psychiatric diagnoses and psychoanalytic dynamics. In psychiatric and psychoanalytic accounts, personal life dramas are converted into case histories, or case narratives, in keeping with the practice of scientific narratology. I also choose nominalism, i.e., a concern with the real, living person over and above the essentialist universalism of disorders, diagnoses, and dynamics. Such a nominalist approach informs my concept of dramatology (Lothane, 2009). A person is not primarily a story teller but an actor and interactor in life’s daily dramas and traumas which descriptive psychiatry converts into symptoms, syndromes, and systems, and nomenclatures like the DSM-IV or ICD-10. As dramatologist, I translate Schreber’s prosaic and poetic narrative into the dramas and traumas of love.

The central focus in Dr. Shmuel Hazanovitz’s interpretation is passion, as feeling and emotion, and the intensity of passionate states of mind, “*that passion is a deep and unique experience of truth. ... Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet seems to be a disguised essay on the questionable truth of what appears to be an overwhelming experience of ‘true love’.*” Indeed, Schreber passionately loved his mother, wife, quoted from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. Nevertheless, for Hazanovitz, as for Freud, the most significant one was Schreber’s passion for his father, or the passion to be a lover of a male God, as He is portrayed in both Hebrew and Christian sacred texts from which female divinities were expunged. Hence Hazanovitz’s enduring passion for Freud’s homosexual flawed reading of Schreber’s psychosis as caused by homosexual desire rather than his adoration of and identification with the eternal feminine. Since Schreber’s detailed feminine fantasies erupted during his stay at Flechsig’s, not in Sonnenstein, the question arises whether these fantasies were a cause or a result of his psychosis (Lothane, 2002). Lacan equivocated, too, but his most passionate interests were structural linguistics, *Le-Nom-du-Père*, *Le-Non-du-Père*, and *Les-Non-Dupes-Errant*. Like Schreber, Lacan had a passion for neologisms and for psychotic discourse, but neither was mad.

The lacuna of Schreber's passionate love for his wife, left by Hazanovitz, is filled by Dr. Bernd Nitzschke. The author eloquently portrays the vicissitudes in Schreber's concern for his wife, his intense dependent longings and love for her, the trauma caused by her absence, the grief that resulted from it. To compensate for this lack, Schreber withdrew into a world of fantasy and became his own wife, as Schreber explains: "I am entitled... to obtaining a feeling of sexual well-being by the cultivation of voluptuosness... I believe that God would never attempt to withdraw from me (which always impairs my bodily well-being considerably but would follow my attraction without resistance...if only I would always be playing the woman's part in sexual embrace with myself, always rest my gaze on female beings, always look at female pictures, etc.)" (*Denkwürdigkeiten*, pp. 284-285). On the other hand, Nitzschke is still under the spell of Schreber's talk of machines, which, Nitzschke insists, should "remind us again of the orthopedic-pedagogic literature composed by Schreber's father [such that] these postural regulations, as conceived by the father, fostered an intimate connection between man and machine in the mind of the son." This connection was disproved by Lothane (1992, 2004). Schreber's bodily miracles and metaphors expressed his emotions following the traumatic transfer to Sonnenstein. Schreber's criticism of mechanistic psychiatry and his doctors, incapable of understanding his metaphors and treating him as an object and rather than a suffering person.

Furthermore, equating "light-telegraphy"—an expression attributed by Schreber to Flechsig—with radio, is Wolfgang Hagen's fantasy, since Schreber did not use the word radio and the first radio transmission took place in 1906. Schreber's rays (*Strahlen*) were emanations from God, not from machines, his explanation for being both chastised and saved by God's rays. Another meaning of *Strahlen* in Schreber was *Seelen*, or souls, and here the puzzle was the hypnotic-suggestive power of one person over another, e.g., Flechsig's power over him. A hypothesis more fitting to explain both these influences, not mentioned by Schreber but one he might have heard about it, was Od (from Odin), a form of energy proposed by industrialist and philosopher Karl von Reichenbach (born 1878 in Stuttgart, died 1869 in Leipzig), emanating from objects to person and from person to person, especially those termed sensitives, and described in his 1852 work *Odisch-*

Magnetische Briefe and 1854 book, *Der Sensitive Mensch*.

Dr. André Bolzinger gives us a multi-layered, linguistically informed and deliciously witty reading of Schreber and Freud. Bolzinger's affection for Freud mirrors Freud's affection for Schreber. He artfully matches Freud's remarks on Schreber with other ideas Freud had not only about the great theme of the father complex but also what men and women want for themselves and for each other. In addition, Bolzinger presents us with a surprise: revisiting another father-son story, that of the 28th American President Woodrow Wilson, born the same year as Freud, about whom Freud composed an intriguing pathography. The interest in Wilson goes beyond Schreber: the role of America in World War Two and still playing the role of redeemer—or is it Rambo—on the world's political stage.

Dr. Galina Hristeva puts the pyramid back on its base with her thesis that Schreber was seriously concerned with religious ideas, with the conflict between religion and science. And so was Freud: "Freud's criticism of Daniel Paul Schreber pursued within the scope of the diagnosis of paranoia is an intensive form of religious criticism." Here are examples of Hristeva's sophisticated and subtle argument showing Freud's respect for Schreber's religious ideas: "Unlike Dr. Weber, who denounces Schreber's system as a whole, Freud sets out to analyze the components of this system which he reproduces in concentrated form. He stresses the original closeness and affinity between God and man as documented in Schreber's system." Similarly, Freud's comparing Schreber's theodicy "with other 'theodicies' also demonstrates the high measure of systematic order and coherence attributed by Freud to Schreber's ideas." Hristeva also traces the connections between Freud's criticism of religion with that of Ludwig Feuerbach, and other philosophers.

Using "the writings of Daniel Paul Schreber" as a springboard, Andrea Wald, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in April this year at the international Schreber conference held at Sonnenstein, sets forth a bold thesis of "the structure of science as latently psychotic." She starts with the premise of an "equivalence between the emerging

modern sciences of the 17th century and the psychophysics of the 20th century on the one hand and baroque and delusion (paranoia) on the other.” She analogizes from Schreber’s psychotic breakdown to a breakdown of “decentering of the world” in both 17th and 20th century science, as a result of the delusional onslaught of the baroque. Wald cites Lacan’s critique “discourse of the university” which underscores the “loss of the object.” The latter social breakdown results in “delusion as the truth of science.” This situation can be remedied by a “third term provided by psychoanalysis,” as defined by Lacan. In this reading Lacan is posited as a criterion of normality vs. the delusional nature of scientific discourse (for a different take on Lacan see Lothane, 1983). Wald’s thesis suggest this Pascalian question: if there are delusions in the sick, are there also delusions in the normal? And if everybody is delusional, how can we tell the sick from the healthy?

François Sauvagnat, PhD, noted Lacanian psychoanalyst, attempts to “recover at least eight distinct forms of realities” as experienced by Schreber, based on his reading of Lacan. However, on Sauvagnat own showing, his chief source, “Lacan’s most elaborate [1957-58] text on the famous jurist (On a Question Preliminary to Any Treatment of Psychosis Whatever) is somewhat disconcerting,” with which I agree, for it is more about Freud and Lacan than about Schreber. As the ancient saying has it, “amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas” (Plato is my friend, but truth is a greater friend); similarly, amicus Lacan, sed magis amicus Schreber, Lacan is a friend but Schreber is a greater friend, for Schreber is the real author of his life, *his* truth. Like Freud, Lacan applied a preformed theory (among others inspired by the case of Aimée) to the text of Schreber and then used Schreber as an illustration of his theory. Lacan’s article contains a few scattered biographical details about Schreber’s life but there is an interesting polemic with Ida Macalpine’s interpretation of Schreber’s fantasies as meaning pregnancy and procreation. Lacan pokes fun at Macalpine’s mistranslation of Schreber’s reporting that “[Flehsig] gab mir Hoffnung, die ganze Krankheit durch einen einmaligen ausgiebigen Schlaf“ (= and gave me the hope of *delivering* me of the whole illness through one prolific sleep): for the missing verb in the original Macalpine supplied the word “deliver,” which Lacan

understood as Macalpine referring to the specific meaning of 'deliver' as related to giving birth rather than the word's other general meaning, to rescue, to liberate, which is what Macalpine intended.

Bibliography

Freud, S. (1900), *The interpretation of dreams. SE 4, 5.*

Jung, C. G. (1961), *Memories, dreams, reflections.* New York: Pantheon.

Lothane, Z. (1983), "Cultist phenomena in psychoanalysis", in Halperin, D. A., ed.

Psychodynamic perspectives on religion and cult. Boston: John Wright/PSG Inc., pp. 199-221.

Scadding, J. G. (1990), Editorial, "The semantic problem of psychiatry", *Psychological Medicine*, 20, pp. 243-248.