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The Schreber Case and the Origins of the Red Book

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Daniel Paul Schreber is often referred to as the most discussed psychiatric patient in the history of medicine. His circumstances are well known, the son of a distinguished physician, he rose to prominence in the law, becoming, while still quite young, the *Senatspräsident* or presiding judge of the *Oberlandsgericht* in Dresden—the highest court in Saxony. Prior to this elevation Schreber had run a failed campaign for a seat in the *Reichstag* following which he suffered a breakdown—perhaps from exhaustion—resulting in a brief hospitalization. His election as president of the Dresden court, however, was followed shortly by a far more severe breakdown, resulting in his hospitalization in 1884. In 1903, as part of an effort to free himself from the Sonnenstein asylum he composed an extensive account of his delusional—or visionary—system, which he managed to have published under the title *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* that was translated into English as *Memoir of My Nervous Illness*. (Schreber, 2000) Accompanied by a carefully constructed legal argument, the *Memoir*, despite its exotic mystical and religious system, led to Schreber’s successful plea for release. Another hospitalization, however, was necessary following his wife’s death and Schreber himself died in 1911.

Schreber’s delusional system begins with a thought upon waking that “it really must be rather pleasant to be a woman succumbing to intercourse.” (Schreber, 2000, p. 46) With this thought Schreber begins a psychic journey into a world where he experiences his body being transformed into that of a woman, while God, through contact with his “nerves,” by way of “rays” seeks variously to

impregnate him or to torture him. As his visionary experiences progressed he came to the conclusion that it was his destiny to survive the destruction of the world and, by way of his intercourse with God, to be the originator of a new human race. At various points in his account he experiences those around him in the asylum in increasingly abstract ways, as “fleetingly improvised men.” His principal physician in the first stages of his hospitalization, Paul Flechsig, became an agent of torment who Schreber accused of “soul murder.” In his brief to the court seeking release from the asylum, Schreber maintained that while his experiences were beyond normal psychological patterns, and while also accepting that he was ill, he nevertheless maintained that his religious insights remained as valid as any other religious system. The court accepted this argument, and ordered his release from the asylum.

There is an extensive literature on the Schreber case. Much of it focuses on Freud’s commentary on Schreber in his “Psycho-Analytical Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (dementia paranoides)” (Freud, 1958) published in 1911. But other commentaries examine the relationship of Schreber’s case to the rise of Nazism (Santner, 1997) the nature of narrative (Crapanzano, 1998) and the history of schizophrenia (Escamilla, 2016). In the Jungian literature, however, Schreber is largely ignored. The most sustained discussion is a long essay “The ‘Womanizing’ of Schreber: catastrophe, creation, and the mythopoetic forces of mankind,” by Michael Vanoy Adams (Adams, 2004) and a small number of other papers where Schreber often figures only tangentially (Edwards, 1978; Dehing, 1994; Fordham, 1989). Adams draws attention to this absence in his paper, finding it remarkable that a figure he views as singularly suited to Jungian commentary would provoke, seemingly, so little interest in the Jungian community. I happen to agree with Adams, and will suggest that Schreber should in fact be of central concern to Jungians, but in ways that Adams could not address insofar as his essay was written prior to the publication of the Red Book.

Freud's analysis at a distance, however, remains the central text in the Schreber cosmos. For Freud, Schreber suffered from paranoid dementia due to the repression of homosexual desires that began with his childhood love and admiration for his father, and in turn became projected onto Flechsig. The basic dialectic of paranoia followed a pattern that Freud had laid out in 1908, in which paranoia was the result of the failure of an initial act of repression to defend against the implications of a homoerotic desire, which transformed the desire into a negative projection on to the desired object and perceived the object as the agent of an attack or threat from the outside. Paranoia as an expression of repressed homosexuality, was, however, a more recent development of Freud's model, originating in his collaboration with Sandor Ferenczi. On the other hand, it was Jung who first introduced Schreber's *Denkwürdigkeiten* to Freud following the Second International Psychoanalytic Congress in Nuremburg in March of 1910. Jung had already studied Schreber's book at least as early as 1906 referring to it, albeit in passing, at several points in his study of dementia praecox, published in 1907. *The Psychology of Dementia Praecox* (Jung, 1960a) was also the occasion for the first theoretical exchange between Freud and Jung in their correspondence, and it gave rise to what would become the debate over the nature and the application of the concept of libido. This debate, as both Zvi Lothane (Lothane, 1989; Lothane, 1992; Lothane, 1993; Lothane, 1997; Lothane, 2012) and Patrick Vandermeersch (Vandermeersch, 1991) point out, would come to a head around the Schreber case several years later, but it is important to understand how it originated as there has developed a rather extensive and altogether misleading narrative about Jung's objection to Freud's sexual etiology of the neuroses—that he objected to the sexual theory out of some fastidious Victorian moral sensitivity—which in turn flows into his discussion of dementia praecox and paranoia.

Any discussion of the debate between Freud and Jung must take into account several critical differences in their experience prior to their first exchange of letters. Jung was already familiar with Freud's work, having read *The*

Interpretation of Dreams upon its publication as part of his training at the Burghölzli hospital, and it is clear from his dissertation that he was at least familiar with some of Freud's other early works. More importantly, however, Jung was involved almost exclusively in the treatment of psychotic patients under the direction of Eugen Bleuler, arguably the leading psychiatric theoretician in Europe at that time. Freud, on the other hand, was primarily engaged with neurotic patients in his private practice in Vienna. Additionally, Jung's work at the Burghölzli involved extensive experimentation with the word association test over a wide array of individuals, both in the hospital and from the general population. Jung would continue to rely on evidence from these experiments to validate many of his theoretical proposals well into the 1930s. Taken together, these aspects of the relationship complicated matters from the beginning, as Jung, while deeply admiring of Freud's work on neurosis, brought to the relationship not only a distinctly different clinical experience, but also an experimental base for many of his early objections regarding Freud's theories. These differences would become manifest almost immediately. In Jung's second letter to Freud he comments that he cannot entirely accept the idea that sexuality is the only "basic drive" suggesting that hunger, for example, is equally fundamental, and informs the infant's eating and sucking. He goes on to suggest that one complex—perhaps sexual in origin, can contaminate another complex that is not sexual in origin and vice versa, writing, "Two complexes existing at the same time are always bound to coalesce psychologically, so that one of them invariably contains constellated aspects of the other." (Freud & Jung, 1974, p. 7) Jung's argument was that Freud relied too heavily on the observation of behavior that appears similar to sexual satisfaction, for example in the nursing infant. Lothane, drawing on Vandermeersh summarizes the dispute, writing:

Freud's libido theory envisaged a process of coalescing of sexually-toned infantile component drives into adult forms of sexual aim and love object choice and was the basis of a theory of pathogenesis of neuroses and psychoses according to which

symptoms represented a return to fixation points created in the course of libidinal development. By contrast, Jung argued for a genetic, or evolutionary, conception of a holistic, vital drive, or primordial libido, concerned with self-preservation only, which only at a later stage became differentiated into sexuality. Jung's theory of pathogenesis stressed the role of a real, actual conflict in the patient's adult life as a result of which "libido became introverted and regressively formed the fantasies which Freud has mistakenly considered to be the origin of neurosis." Jung proposed this theory for psychoses in general and for Schreber in particular. For Freud, the two theories were on an irreconcilable collision course.

(Lothane, 1997, p. 110)

By the time of the Schreber debate, however, the issue of libido had become far more acute. Jung was, by this time, arguing that Freud's account of libidinal withdrawal, as spelled out in the *Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality*, was insufficient for a description of dementia praecox. In the Schreber case itself, Freud had acknowledged that his position on withdrawal from a specific object, as was the case in the formation of a neurosis, was problematic, when faced with the global withdrawal of the dementia praecox patient. Writing to Freud in December of 1911 Jung pressed this point home:

As for the libido problem, I must confess that your remark in the Schreber analysis, has set up booming reverberations. This remark, or rather the doubt expressed therein, has resuscitated all the difficulties that have beset me throughout the years in my attempt to apply the libido theory to Dem. praec. The loss of the reality function in D. pr. cannot be reduced to repression of libido (defined as sexual hunger). Not by me, at any rate. Your doubt shows me that in your eyes as well the problem cannot be solved in

this way. I have now put together all the thoughts on the libido concept that have come to me over the years, and devoted a chapter to them in my second part. (Freud & Jung, 1974, p. 471 Jung's emphasis)

Jung's reference is to the following comment in Freud's study of Schreber:

“(3) A third consideration which arises from the views that have been developed in these pages is as follows. Are we to suppose that a general detachment of the libido from the external world would be an effective enough agent to account for the ‘end of the world’? Or would not the ego-cathexes which still remained in existence have been sufficient to maintain rapport with the external world? To meet this difficulty we should either have to assume that what we call libidinal cathexis (that is, interest emanating from erotic sources) coincides with interest in general, or we should have to consider the possibility that a very widespread disturbance in the distribution of libido may bring about a corresponding disturbance in the ego-cathexes. But these are problems which we are still quite helpless and incompetent to solve.” (Freud, 1958, p. 73)

Also in 1911, Jung, using material provided by Theodore Flournoy, published the first part of his major study of mythology, *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido— Transformations and Symbols of the Libido*. (Jung, 1912) *Wandlungen* is generally viewed as the final nail in the coffin of the relationship between Freud and Jung. On one hand it appeared to be a continuation of the debate over the nature of libido with Jung's position being one of a more general concern for self-preservation that differentiated itself into more specific forms of libidinal investment. But there was another aspect to that book, and to the dispute between Jung and Freud over the nature of dementia praecox that is usually overlooked in the commentaries—the role of the symbol, and more

particularly the status of psychic imagery, in Jung's theorizing.

In my own earliest work on the relationship between Jung and Freud I identified several axes upon which their disputes rotated, that went beyond the dispute over libido, which appeared to me to be more of a proxy for deeper issues. Among these deeper issues was the problem of temporality in the unconscious, which Jung would take up after the break and to which I will return in a moment. Another critical distinction, concerned the fundamental form of the contents of the unconscious—specifically whether the deep unconscious was populated by previously conscious material that came to be lodged in the unconscious by way of repression, or rather by structuring factors that were present as natural constituents of the unconscious—that is unconscious contents that were not the result of repression. Jacques Lacan, who met with Jung in 1954 and may have actually seen the *Red Book* and discussed Jung's technique of active imagination with him, also identified this distinction, taking special notice of Jung's notion that the libido transforms through the agency of the symbol. In the materials for his 1955-1956 seminar "On Questions Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis" Lacan comments:

It is of the utmost importance to observe – in the experience of the unconscious Other where Freud is our guide – that the question does not find its outlines in protomorphic proliferations of the image . . . This is the whole difference between Freud's orientation and that of Jung's school, which latches onto such forms: Wandlungen der libido. These forms may be brought to the fore in a mantic, for they can be produced using the proper techniques (promoting imaginary creations such as reveries, drawings, etc.). . . . Similarly, it is precisely to the extent that this style of articulation has been maintained, by virtue of the Freudian Word [verba] . . . that such a profound difference persists between the two schools. (Lacan, 2007, p. 460)

Not surprisingly, Lacan is dismissive of Jung's emphasis on the image in his understanding of the unconscious. And I would agree that this distinction is a point of fundamental divergence between the systems.

In July of 1914 Jung presented a paper before the Psycho-Medical Society in London where for the first time he commented on the Schreber case at some length and on Freud's analysis of the case. (Jung, 1960b) While admiring of the sophistication of Freud's analysis, Jung is critical of what he refers to as Freud's "retrospective understanding" of the case which considers Schreber's fantasies to be entirely bound by earlier, repressed desires or experiences. This is the temporal issue that I mentioned a moment ago, and it has its origins as early as Jung's 1902 dissertation "On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena" (Jung, 1970) which posited a forward looking or developmental purpose to a fantasy system resulting from mediumistic experiences. For Jung, Schreber is also attempting to find a way forward—not falling prey to the reemergence of threatening, repressed homosexual impulses. Jung writes, "But if we look at the delusional system without prejudice and ask ourselves what it is aiming at, we see, first, that it is in fact aiming at something, and second, that the patient devotes all his will-power to the completion of his system . . . Schreber belongs in this class." (Jung, 1960b, p. §410) The world system or *Weltanschauung* that the patient creates, Jung goes on, is intended to "enable them to assimilate unknown psychic phenomena and so adapt themselves to their own world" (§416). To further explain this system building impulse in the psychotic, Jung introduces a discussion of the first elements of his study of personality typology, which came to fruition in 1921 with the publication of *Psychological Types* (Jung, 1971a). Jung had already introduced the orienting types, introversion and extraversion at the 1912 congress in Munich, where he attempted to account for the divisions occurring within psychoanalysis—specifically between Freud and Adler—by virtue of their differing typologies (Jung, 1971b). Jung's paper upset Freud, as it implied that his theories did not provide the singular perspective on the psyche that he envisioned, but rather

legitimized competing theories as simply alternative points of view on the same phenomena.

In the 1914 paper, Jung extended the significance of the introversion/extraversion distinction to an understanding of the psychotic experiences of Schreber, arguing that the introvert, precisely by virtue of the orientation toward the interior, of necessity constructs a system that allows for adaptation to the world. “An extravert,” he writes, “can barely conceive the necessity that forces the introvert to adapt to the world by means of a system.” (§420) Jung extends this proposition to the world of the psychotic, arguing that the delusional system is itself an attempt to adapt to the world. The difficulty is that due to the radical nature of the inward turn in a psychosis, the affectively charged or numinous contents of the unconscious capture the patient who then “remains stuck in this stage and substitutes his subjective formulations for the real world—which is precisely why he remains ill” (§416). This understanding of the inward turn and its relationship to psychosis points as well to a significant aspect of Jung’s experiment with the induction of near psychotic states insofar as he was able to contain them by way of active imagination, and retain his attachment to reality. Commenting on this process in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung writes:

To the extent that I managed to translate the emotions into images—that is to say, to find the images which were concealed in the emotions—I was inwardly calmed and reassured. Had I left those images hidden in the emotions, I might have been torn to pieces by them. There is a chance that I might have succeeded in splitting them off; but in that case I would inexorably have fallen into a neurosis and so been ultimately destroyed by them anyhow. As a result of my experiment I learned how helpful it can be, from the therapeutic point of view, to find the particular images which lie behind emotions.” (Jung, 1965, pp. 307-308)

What can we say about the images that lie behind the emotions? In both the *Red Book* and in his later works, the book is replete with mandala images, some of which are Jung's own creations, and some of which, as pointed out by Joe Cambray, bear a striking resemblance to the luminous paintings of sea creatures by the naturalist, Ernst Haeckle (Cambray, 2014). The *Red Book* in its entirety is set in reference to the medieval illuminated manuscript, and as Jeffrey Hamburger has pointed out, the tradition of illuminated manuscripts viewed even the text as an image (Hamburger, 2014). It is in Jung's concerted turn to the image, and particularly to the mandala, and the medieval text that we may begin to connect elements of the *Red Book* to Schreber's *Denkwürdigkeiten*, but not in the way one might expect. The problem for Schreber, I now want to argue, which Jung solves lies precisely in relation to the introvert's need to build a system that can contain the experiences of the unconscious. But once again, not the unconscious as Freud conceived it, nor, in fact as many Jungians may conceive of it.

In a collection of essays devoted to a critique of the philosopher, Hans Blumenberg, and his argument for modernity's transcendence of the medieval, Erin Labbie and Michael Uebe point to two critical aspects of Schreber's circumstances and delusional system. (Labbie & Uebel, 2010) First the circumstances: The physician treating Schreber, whom he accused of soul murder, was the distinguished psychologist, and neuroscientist, Paul Flechsig, who, in 1884 assumed the chair in psychiatry at Leipzig University previously held by the humanistic or "soul psychiatrist," Johann Christian August Heinroth, declared in his inaugural address titled "On the physical basis of mental diseases" that a "chasm... gaped" between him and Heinroth, "no less deep and wide than the chasm between medieval medicine and modern science." Psychiatric research and treatment, for Flechsig, would thereafter be a matter of attending to the nerves or nervous system, of his patients, and he established one of the foremost laboratories for the study of brain tissue from deceased patients. I want to add to the analysis of Labbie and Uebe the development in

physics around the same of a far more refined understanding of light, primarily through the Michalson/Moreley experiment which undermined the ether theory of light transmission, but for our purposes opened the discussion of electromagnetic radiation to investigation. What does all of this have to do with Schreber and the *Red Book*?

The factor I want to focus on at this point, which is outlined by Labbie and Uebe, albeit without reference to Jung's insistence on the need for a system to organize the introverted movement of the psychotics's withdrawal of libido from the entirety of reality, is that Schreber's system involves God's control of his life through rays that engage his nerves. As Labbie and Uebe point out, the irony here is that Schreber's system for organizing his psychotic states involves precisely an engagement with modernity, in response to what they, correctly I believe, view as a medieval problem of spiritual alienation. The argument of Labbie and Uebe is far more complex than this element alone, and deeply indebted to a Lacanian reading of Schreber, but this particular aspect of their argument is telling in terms of the problematic that Schreber sets up for himself. I would now join the argument by suggesting that Schreber's paranoia derives from the system he falls into in an effort to organize his experience of the unconscious. The modernity of his system does not allow him to engage constructively with the problematics of his sense of soul murder. He is, if we now turn to the *Red Book*, in the grip of the spirit of the age, rather than the spirit of the depths.

As we have already seen, Freud's analysis of Schreber included his reflections on the extreme form of introversion in a psychosis that amounted to an experience of the destruction of the world. An element in Schreber's delusional system was God's intention to destroy the world and then repopulate it through intercourse with Schreber, in his transformed feminine form. Jung's initial fantasies of the immanent destruction of Europe, if not the world, (Jung, 2009, p. 231) are remarkably similar to the fantasies both Jung and Freud

associate with the psychotic's withdrawal of libido from all objects. It is not a wonder that Jung feared he was slipping into a psychosis himself. A reasonable consensus now exists that Jung was not having a psychotic break, but I want to suggest that his attention to the Schreber case, and the growing dispute with Freud over the nature of libido, among other issues, that developed out of their divergent perspectives on psychosis, which had been central to their disagreements from the beginning, presented Jung with a problem that required a form of self-experimentation; Jung's own descent to the level of the unconscious experienced by the psychotic. The *Red Book* is, in this context, a response to Freud's interpretation and the paradoxical problems Freud had to admit existed in the analysis of psychosis regarding the withdrawal of libido, and an attempt to solve the problem that Schreber failed to solve in his own system.

Following the argument of Labbie and Uebe that Schreber was confronting a medieval problem by way of a modern system, it is possible that Jung's turn to the Middle Ages, as he explicitly remarks in the *Red Book*—"I must catch up with a piece of the Middle Ages-within myself." (Jung, 2009, p. 330)--reflects his own intuition regarding the nature of Schreber's claim that his soul was being murdered by his physician, the neuroscientist Flechsig. To the extent that this argument can be sustained, it may be possible to open additional avenues into our understanding of Jung's remarkable creation.

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