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The Mother-Conflict in Schreber's Psychosis

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Probably the most widely studied psychiatric case is that of Daniel Paul Schreber, whose *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, a stark autobiographical account of a paranoid psychosis, appeared in 1903. From his analysis of this book, Freud (11) attributed the psychosis mainly to Schreber's oedipal conflict and to his unconscious homosexual love for his father. The present paper is an attempt to demonstrate, primarily through a reanalysis of the *Memoirs*, that conflict at the preoedipal level over unconscious, oral impulses towards the mother was an important factor in the etiology of the illness.

Macalpine and Hunter (35) state that although the *Memoirs* made Schreber the most 'frequently quoted patient in psychiatry', the *Memoirs* themselves have not again been thoroughly studied since Freud's interpretation of them in 1911. Noting that little further reference has been made to the original material, they state that the quotations from Schreber which are so often cited in the psycho-analytic literature are mostly passages which Freud excerpted to support his conclusions. Consequently, they feel, no new interpretations of the case have been proposed, and Freud's views remain unquestioned. They suggest that one reason for this has been the difficulty in obtaining the *Memoirs*, which Schreber's family attempted to suppress. But, they add: 'Perhaps the decisive reason ... is that the taboo of a "classic" was immediately attached to Freud's paper, setting it above critical scrutiny.'

Thanks to Macalpine and Hunter (35) the *Memoirs* have been reissued in English translation. In it and another publication (36) they have also added new facts about Schreber's history. Baumeyer (2) has given us a wealth of new information about Schreber's life, illness, and family, through his exciting discovery of the hospital records of Schreber's case and his diligent search for descendants of the Schreber family.<sup>1</sup> Niederland (37)(38)(39)(40) has made a major contribution to our understanding of Schreber's relation to his father by a painstaking study of a previously unexploited source—the medical publications of the elder Schreber, a famous physician and prolific writer.

Despite all this new material, the criticism made by Macalpine and Hunter in 1955 is still largely true—namely, that no interpretation of the Schreber case has been made which differs greatly from Freud's 1911 formulations which they feel explain the illness 'on a genital level only'.<sup>2</sup> Prior to 1955, there were only two exceptions to their criticism—the papers by Spring (48) and Knight (31). Unfortunately Macalpine and Hunter make no reference to Spring, or to the part of Knight's paper which significantly extends Freud's formulations. Since 1955, besides Macalpine and Hunter, only Fairbairn (7) has published a formulation which differs greatly from Freud's.

Spring (48) pointed out that Schreber's world destruction fantasies simultaneously expressed murderous, destructive rage toward specific people, and defended against such rage by deflecting it on to all humanity which, unlike an individual, cannot be destroyed. While Spring does not state that the destructive impulses to which he refers are pregenital in nature, he clearly implies that they are.

Knight (31) states that conflict like Schreber's over homosexual impulses is due to the ambivalent, pregenital, anal-sadistic quality of such homosexual love. Such love is 'precarious and dangerous' and 'justifiably feared or denied' because it barely fends off 'the strong hostile

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<sup>1</sup> Baumeyer first reported his find of the hospital records at the International Psycho-Analytical Congress in Amsterdam in 1951.

<sup>2</sup> It is not true that Freud explained Schreber's psychosis *solely* in terms of the genital level of conflict. In several places in the third section of his paper Freud (11) refers to the importance of fixation at the narcissistic stage of libidinal development—a pregenital stage. In the main, however, he stressed the oedipal (genital) level of conflict in the case.

component of ... ambivalent relationship to objects ...'. Klein (27) too has referred, though briefly, to the aggressive impulses in Schreber's delusions.

Katan (22)(23)(24)(25), like Freud, attributes Schreber's breakdown to homosexual conflict, and he especially emphasizes the importance of masturbation in the case. Katan (22) states that the world destruction fantasy was Schreber's effort to rid himself of homosexual tempters. Elsewhere, he asserts (24) that the oft-mentioned six nocturnal emissions which Schreber had at the onset of his psychosis were caused by an eruption of homosexual impulses, and that the 'castration danger involved in these orgasms caused him to sever his relations with reality, whereupon his psychosis began'. Nunberg (41), in his discussion of a paper by Katan (24), concerns himself mostly with the oedipal aspects of Schreber's case.

In an unpublished study of the relationship between paranoia and homosexuality, Gill (17) reconsidered the Schreber case and concluded that paranoid delusions are not invariably a defence against homosexuality. He suggested that both paranoid delusions and homosexuality can be defences against hostility, that 'either may be the overt defence, with the one appearing only if the other fails', and that oral as well as anal and oedipal conflicts are present in paranoia. Walters (50), in a 'methodological critique' of Freud's analysis of the Schreber case, doubted whether homosexual conflict occurs in all paranoid psychoses, but offered no other theory.

Niederland (37)(38)(39)(40) suggests that the principal cause of Schreber's illness was the oedipal conflict with the father, and that castration anxiety was the mainspring of the psychosis. He states (37): 'Not being able to face the powerful father ... , or to take the place of the father' made Schreber unable successfully to run for parliament or to accept appointment to a high judicial position. Therefore: 'Instead of running *for* office or accepting an appointment to a high office, he had to run *from* it, driven by his castration fantasies which were set in motion the very moment the dreaded masculine role threatened to become a reality'. In his study of the father's medical publications, Niederland (38)(39)(40) advances very convincing evidence that a pathological and homosexually toned father-son relationship is reflected in the son's delusions.

While Baumeyer (2), like Niederland, mainly follows the classical Freudian conception of Schreber's disorder—inverted Oedipus complex, homosexual conflict, castration anxiety, etc.—he dwells briefly on the significance of destructive and aggressive impulses in Schreber and also mentions the possible importance of Schreber's relationship to his mother. Niederland (39) is the only other author so far cited who even mentions Schreber's mother, mainly speculating on her possible significance for Schreber in his oedipal conflict with his father. Baumeyer finds it 'noteworthy' that the image of Schreber's mother is so faint, and that Schreber remained so 'entirely under the influence of the overpowering father'. The bellowing attacks designed to keep God from forsaking him are interpreted to mean 'Schreber behaved like an infant calling for his mother'. These comments of Baumeyer's are the first definite suggestion in the literature that preoedipal conflict with the mother was in any way involved in Schreber's illness.

To date, only Fairbairn (7) attaches great importance to Schreber's relationship to his mother, stating that 'if the mother-*imago* is conspicuous by its absence in Schreber's phantasies, this may be a measure of his mother's importance rather than otherwise'. He believes that 'horror of the primal scene', which he regards as a more basic horror than that of incest, is the cause of Schreber's illness. Recollection of the primal scene is so disturbing because the memory evokes such rage towards the mother—rage at her infidelity to the child. Schreber's homosexuality and procreation fantasies are both interpreted as a means of denying 'the primal scene and his hatred of his mother ...'. Schreber's conflict over running for parliament, or accepting his court appointment, was pathogenic because: 'The assumption of such a role must have signified for him a participation in the primal scene, on the basis of an identification with his father, calculated to mobilize his sadistic hatred of his mother, and thus, from the infantile standpoint, to threaten destruction of the world.' Similarly, Schreber's delusions of becoming a woman 'provided him ... with a ... means of cryptic participation in the primal scene and a means of making restitution to his mother, whom he wished to destroy for what seemed to him her faithless adultery with his father'.

Macalpine and Hunter (35), (36) proposed that *the* pathogenic factor responsible for all Schreber's symptoms was the presence of primitive, pregenital procreation fantasies. They state (35): 'Schreber

fell ill when a wish-fantasy that he could, would or should have children became pathogenic.' His hypochondriacal symptoms are interpreted as bodily delusions of pregnancy. In support of their contention that Schreber's hypochondriasis is primarily an expression of pregnancy fantasies and procreation wishes, they liken his symptoms to those experienced during couvade. This custom, they believe, is one in which 'primitive prephallic procreation fantasies in the male are expressed in physical symptoms (hypochondriasis)....' They ignore the persuasive study by Reik (42) which demonstrates that couvade is a complex, ceremonial means for the father to ward off and do penance for his destructive, jealous feelings towards his wife and child—the child being the hated rival for the fickle wife (mother).

Schreber's unmaning, according to Macalpine and Hunter (35), was 'not castration as a punishment for forbidden homosexual wishes, nor was it a means of achieving such wishes. Rather its purpose was to permit procreation.' This idea is elaborated further: 'Archaic procreation fantasies have no ego or superego disapproval. The wish to produce or create, which can ultimately be traced to the urge to procreate, is intrinsically egosyntonic. It finds no opposition in ego, superego, or personality but can clash with reality. The innate urge to give or prolong life with its connotation of denying or averting death and ensuring immortality, is one of the mainsprings of human activity, and, by sublimation, of creative activity in both sexes. It is a wider, more primitive concept than reproduction, both in the history of the individual and of mankind.' Accordingly, Schreber's end-of-the-world fantasies are viewed as being 'set in motion by his desire to bear children'—this improbable-sounding interpretation being explained by the assumption that 'God could not help Schreber to be fruitful unless a "world catastrophe" necessitated recreation of the species.' Macalpine and Hunter's suggestion that an 'innate urge to give or prolong life' could lie at the bottom of delusions that all humanity had been annihilated is not, at least to me, completely convincing.

It should be no cause for surprise, as it seems to be to Macalpine and Hunter, that Freud interpreted Schreber's psychosis mainly in terms of oedipal conflict. He used the concepts then available to him—those of the oedipal relationship, especially the relationship of the boy-child to the father. As Erikson (5) has noted, 'Freud's oedipal father has clarified much, but, as sudden clarifications do, he has also obscured much.' Although Freud's emphasis on the genital-oedipal relationship of Schreber to his father obscured the importance of the pregenital and primarily mother-oriented aspects of the case, this does not mean that Freud was necessarily wrong; in the light of present-day psycho-analytic theory Freud's concepts were incomplete, but not necessarily incorrect. Freud's psycho-analytic investigations were notably incomplete concerning the importance of conflict over oral impulses directed towards the mother in psychosis and homosexuality in men. Freud (10) touched on the oral conflicts in male homosexuality in his study of Leonardo da Vinci, in which he commented: 'For the time being we shall put aside the question of what there may be to connect homosexuality with sucking at the mother's breast. ...' He seems to have put the question aside permanently. In his study of a psychotic or near-psychotic condition in a man, Freud (15) repeatedly touched on the oral conflicts with the mother which are so prominent in the case, but, as in the Schreber case, his principal formulation concerned the oedipal conflict between father and son. In his papers on psychosis and homosexuality in women Freud (12), (13) did consider conflict with the mother in such conditions. In 'Female Sexuality', Freud (16) explored many aspects of the pregenital relation to the mother, including oral impulses towards her. He concluded that the preoedipal attachment to the mother was 'far more important in women than it can claim to be in men'.

So far, none of the researchers on Schreber's illness has suggested that primitive, destructive-dependent, oral impulses towards the mother were of crucial importance in the case. Yet daily clinical experience shows the importance of such impulses in patients with intense homosexual and psychotic conflicts like Schreber's. Furthermore, the work of Klein (26), (27), (30), Glover (18)(19)(20), Fairbairn (6), Loewald (34), Sechehaye (46)(47), Bergler (3), Rosenfeld (44), Heimann (21), Rosen (43), and many others, has demonstrated the importance of conflict over archaic, oral impulses towards the mother in psychoses and in homosexuality. It should be no surprise then if such conflicts are demonstrable in Schreber's history and in his *Memoirs*. I was prompted to look for evidence of such conflict in the *Memoirs* because of observations made during the analysis of a man with paranoid

tendencies and considerable conflict over latent homosexual impulses. After a lengthy period of analysis of the classical, oedipal conflict with his father, my patient's productions began urgently to point towards his conflict over preoedipal, oral, destructive-dependent impulses towards his mother.

To return again to Schreber, I hope to demonstrate that in his *Memoirs* a mother-figure is prominently, although symbolically, represented and that conflict over voracious, primitive oral impulses towards that mother-figure is an important feature of his psychosis. Because of limitations of space I shall mostly confine my analysis of the *Memoirs* to those sections which deal with Schreber's concept of 'nerve-contact with God', 'soul murder', and 'unmanning'. A summary of the historical data now available on the case will also be made. Although Schreber's psychotic symptoms and *Memoirs* cannot, I believe, be fully understood without consideration of the pregenital, oral impulses towards a mother-figure, this does not mean that all facets of the case can be explained in terms of such impulses only. Like every other human being, Schreber's psychological organization was a very complex structure made up of elements from the genital, anal, and oral levels of organization, and a study of the case from any one of these levels only would necessarily be incomplete.

### Case History of Daniel Paul Schreber

There are so many newly found facts about Schreber's illness and family that this summary, compiled from the work of Niederland (37)(38)(39)(40), Macalpine and Hunter (35), (36), and Baumeyer (2), must leave out much interesting material. Particularly regrettable is the necessity to treat only briefly the latest findings of Niederland. To make reading easier I shall usually not specify from which of these sources information was obtained.

Daniel Paul Schreber was born on 25 July, 1842. He was the middle one of five children of a very famous physician and of a mother of whom we have almost no direct knowledge. It is mainly from the *indirect* and *symbolic* references which Schreber makes to his mother in his *Memoirs* that her importance in his case is established. In contrast we know a great deal about Schreber's father. The father was a small man who, being of frail health as a youth, probably reacted to his own physical failings by becoming a physician with a fanatical interest in physical culture and rigorously prophylactic methods of rearing children. The awesome personal and professional stature of the father is shown in the excerpts from his obituary quoted by Niederland (38): '... a physician, teacher, nutritionist, anthropologist, therapeutic gymnast and athlete, and above all, a man of action, of tremendous enthusiasm and endurance ...'. Niederland's studies also show that the cruel side of Schreber Senior was only thinly covered in his medical pronouncements about the most healthful ways to rear children. The sadism of the man towards children, including (perhaps especially) his own, was obvious in his medical writings. One of his most popular publications was a guidebook for child-rearing. In it Dr Schreber credited his methods with having had a life-saving effect on one of his own children, and, for the welfare of their children, all parents were urged to coerce their offspring in the earliest years of life. His book provided them with detailed directions for doing this.

In a later paper, Niederland (39) quotes other of the medical exhortations which Schreber Senior made to parents—exhortations especially relevant to his son's early, oral conflicts. The good Dr Schreber decreed, '... crying and whimpering without reason express nothing but a whim, a mood, and the first emergence of stubbornness; they must be dealt with positively, through quick distraction of attention, serious words, knocking on the bed (actions which usually startle the child and make him stop crying), or if all this be to no avail, through the administration of comparatively mild, intermittently repeated, corporeal admonishments. It is essential that this treatment be continued until its purpose be attained. ... Such a procedure is necessary only once or, at most, twice—and then one is master of the child forever. From then on, one glance, one word, one single menacing gesture are sufficient to rule the child. ...'

Of special importance for a study of Schreber's oral conflicts with his mother is the Doctor's insistence that during the first year of life babies must learn 'the art of renouncing'. This 'art' was taught in a fiendishly simple way: the child was placed in the lap of his mother, or nanny, who then ate or drank whatever she wished. No matter how much the baby begged or cried he was fed nothing—except of course his usual three meals at the usual time. Dr Schreber described how he summarily discharged a nurse because she could not resist giving a piece of pear to one of the begging Schreber children

during a lesson in the 'art of renouncing'. After news of her dismissal reached the other nannies in Leipzig, Dr Schreber had 'no further trouble ... with ... erring ... nurses'.

Much less is known of Schreber's siblings than of his father. Baumeyer tells us that his only brother, Gustav, was the eldest of the children, being three years Schreber's senior. He never married, was 'paralytic', and from the age of about 20 onward suffered from a 'progressive psychosis' (**perhaps general paralysis, according to Niederland, 39**). He finally committed suicide by unknown means at the age of 38 (1877, Schreber aged 35) just a year prior to Schreber's marriage and at about the same time that Schreber first developed hypochondriacal complaints. Of this first appearance of hypochondria we have no definite knowledge except that these complaints were present 'even at the time of his marriage in 1878. ...' (2).

At about the same time that the brother developed his progressive psychosis (Schreber aged 17), the father, aged 51, received a serious head injury when struck by a falling iron ladder at the gymnasium which he frequented. From then until his unexpected death three years later from what probably was a perforated appendix, Schreber Senior suffered from 'peculiar head complaints' (2). The exact nature of these head complaints is not known, although the term may be a euphemism for the 'obsessional neurosis with homicidal impulses' from which he suffered (2). Niederland (40) believes that a case history in one of the father's medical publications was autobiographical. This case study, entitled 'Confessions of One Who Had Been Insane', deals with 'attacks of melancholia, morbid brooding, and tormenting criminal impulses' suffered by a *chance acquaintance* of Dr Schreber.

About Schreber's sisters we know little. Anna, his second sibling, two years his senior, was apparently well adjusted. The third, Sidonie, was four years younger. She never married and was possibly hysterical. The fourth, Klara, six years Schreber's junior, was married. Apparently a stable and mature person, she had an affectionate and close relationship to her now famous brother. Her correspondence with Schreber's physician illustrates the kind of person she was.

We know little of Schreber's early life. He was a diligent and capable student, knowledgeable in natural history, astronomy, philosophy, history of religion, literature, etymology, music, and foreign languages. An obviously brilliant man, he had reached a high point in an outstanding judicial career when he suffered his prolonged second breakdown in November 1893, at the age of 51—having had a briefer and milder episode nine years earlier. Of his early years, Schreber himself wrote little else than: 'Few people have been brought up according to such strict moral principles as I, and have throughout life practised such moderation especially in matters of sex. ...' (35).

At the age of 36 (1878), within a year of his brother's suicide and after developing some hypochondriacal symptoms, Schreber married Sabine Behr, a girl fifteen years his junior and of considerably lower social status. Mrs Schreber was a complaining woman at odds with her in-laws, her husband, and his physician—at least her letters to Schreber's physician make her seem to be such a person. Written in a childish hand, they consisted mainly of arguments against her husband's release from the asylum, complaints about the difficult life she had to lead, and accusations that her mother-in-law always misinterpreted her motives.

Of all the family Schreber's youngest sister apparently had the closest and most affectionate relationship to him. Her letters to the hospital staff, in contrast to the wife's, were those of a cultured, mature woman who was genuinely concerned for Schreber's welfare. The mother, interestingly enough, seems never to have written to the hospital staff about her son's condition.

Macalpine and Hunter (36) state that Schreber's wife, a diabetic, had six children, all of whom were carried to term but were stillborn. Of these six (or possibly in addition to them), the Baumeyer data show that two stillbirths occurred prior to Schreber's first psychosis in 1884. The rest apparently happened between then and his second attack in 1893. The probable significance of these stillbirths as precipitating factors in Schreber's illnesses will be noted later.

From the time of his marriage in 1878 (aged 36) until his first psychosis six years later (1884, aged 42) Schreber apparently did quite well professionally. In October 1884, while chairman of the County Court of Chemnitz, he ran for parliament. Shortly afterwards, perhaps during the campaign, which Niederland (37) believes was unsuccessful, Schreber developed severe hypochondriasis, for which he was treated at Flechsig's clinic in Leipzig from 8 December, 1884, to June 1885. This was a stormy and

obviously psychotic disorder of over six months' duration in which Schreber attempted suicide, was convinced that a fatal heart attack was imminent, and feared that his wife would desert him. Probably because of the two miscarriages his wife had before this first breakdown, syphilis was suspected, a suspicion of which an alert man like Schreber could well have been aware.

According to the *Memoirs*, Schreber recovered sufficiently to resume his judicial duties in January 1886, slightly over a year after his first illness began. He blamed this episode on overstrain from his candidacy for parliament, not even mentioning his wife's two stillbirths. This contrasts with his comments about his second illness in which he emphasized his 'repeated disappointments' over miscarriages. Although other data show that his first illness was of psychotic intensity, Schreber minimized its severity and denied that during it he had any delusions, 'any occurrences bordering on the supernatural'.

Schreber's recovery was apparently complete, since in April 1893, seven years after resuming professional work, he was appointed to the very high post of President of the Senate of the Superior Court in Dresden—the Supreme Court for all Saxony. Within six weeks of his taking office on 1 October, 1893, his second psychosis erupted violently. He was then 51 years old, which, as Niederland (38) points out, was the same age as his father was when his health began to decline after he received the head injury. Schreber was hospitalized from 1893 to 1902. His *Memoirs* describe his experiences during this breakdown.

According to Baumeier, from 1902 to 1907 he lived outside the hospital but was unable to resume professional work. Although his hallucinations and delusions continued in very mild form, his social behaviour was practically normal. In May 1907 his mother died at the age of 92, and Schreber began thereafter to sleep poorly—a prime symptom of his other two illnesses. Then on 14 November, 1907, his wife, aged 50, suffered a stroke which rendered her speechless for a time. Schreber, then aged 65, immediately became unable to sleep and fearful of relapsing into psychosis. His hallucinations intensified and his condition rapidly worsened. He was hospitalized by his sister on 27 November, 1907, and remained hospitalized and in the most severely regressed state of all his breakdowns until his death from pyothorax four years later on 14 April, 1911, at the age of sixty-nine.

### Reanalysis of the *Memoirs*

It is my basic hypothesis that primitive, oral, destructive-dependent impulses towards a mother-figure were a crucial component of Schreber's psychotic conflict. The symbolic representation of that mother-figure and of the oral impulses directed towards her are, I believe, the most prominent and consistent themes in the *Memoirs*. The devastating effect of these oral impulses is demonstrated by Schreber's delusional conviction that first his wife, then Flechsig, and eventually all humanity had died, and that God himself was in grave danger of extinction. That Schreber's pregenital, dependent, voracious impulses were the cause of this destruction, and that the wife, Flechsig, and God were to a large degree representations of the mother towards whom these impulses were directed, can, I believe, be demonstrated in the *Memoirs*.

In the first paragraph of the introduction to the *Memoirs* there is evidence that the book is primarily an effort by Schreber to make reparation to his wife whom he 'murdered' after her desertion of him. In this introduction he states that his 'original motive' for writing the *Memoirs* was to acquaint his wife with his psychotic experiences so that he could more easily again live with her upon his release from the hospital. Other passages in the *Memoirs*, especially on pp. 214, 215, 240, also demonstrate Schreber's attempts at reparation for his delusional destructive acts.

In the fourth chapter of the *Memoirs* Schreber says that the eight years between his first and second illnesses were 'on the whole quite happy ones, rich also in outward honours and marred only from time to time by the repeated disappointment of our hope of being blessed with children.' In those eight years the diabetic Mrs Schreber had either four or six *full-term* stillbirths. Schreber's comment about 'repeated disappointments' is the first of many suggestions in the *Memoirs* that Mrs Schreber's frequent pregnancies and stillbirths might have been important causative factors in Schreber's first two breakdowns.

In June of 1893, the Minister of Justice personally informed Schreber of his 'impending appointment as Senatspräsident to the Superior Court in Dresden', the Supreme Court of Saxony to which only the Imperial German High Court in Leipzig was superior. Niederland (37) states that promotion to this court meant a 'practically irreversible life status' for Schreber, and 'refusal [of the appointment] would have

been something like a crime ..., since such promotions were made by the King ... and could not be refused. Illness, then, was the only way out, and with a lifelong position of this kind as a permanent threat before the patient, it could not be of short duration.'

Schreber himself emphasizes that his second illness was caused by the heavy burden of work of his new post. Between his appointment in June and his assuming office on 1 October, 1893, he dreamed several times of a recurrence of his nervous illness. In addition, shortly after awaking one morning, he had the strange thought that it must really be pleasant to be a woman succumbing to intercourse. Schreber indignantly rejected this idea which seemed so foreign to his whole nature, and he later decided that the experience was a result of malicious, external influences. It seems clear that Schreber's defences were failing before he assumed his new office. Premonitory dreams and regressive fantasies had begun to occur. As later discussion will support, in addition to its oedipal significance, Schreber's homosexual fantasy of being a woman also expressed an intense longing to give up the status of an adult man and, by identification with the pregenital mother, to regress to an archaic, undifferentiated, oral-dependent fusion with her.

The new post was burdensome. From personal ambition as well as intensely conscientious concern for the interests of his office, Schreber felt 'driven' to achieve the respect of his colleagues by exhibiting 'unquestionable efficiency'. The necessity for using great tact in dealing with the five judges of the court, most of whom were older and more experienced, added greatly to Schreber's tension. Within a few weeks he found himself overtaxed mentally and unable to sleep.

By late October or early November, the 'first really bad ... almost sleepless nights' occurred when crackling noises kept Schreber awake. He later concluded that these noises were malevolently inflicted 'right from the beginning ... to prevent my sleep and later my recovery from the illness resulting from the insomnia...'. Schreber's yearning for sleep, a steady theme in the *Memoirs*, can be interpreted, in view of the work of Lewin (33) and Rosen (43) on similar cases, as evidence of conflict over oral longing for the mother. His quest for the restoring sleep most certainly had a yearning, hungry quality to it.

As Schreber's illness assumed 'a menacing character', he went to consult Flechsig again. On the trip he stayed overnight with his sister and brother-in-law. While there his insomnia became even worse, and early the next day he hurried to Flechsig, telegraphing ahead to be assured of an appointment. In this first interview Schreber states that Flechsig 'spoke of the advances made in psychiatry since my first illness, of newly discovered sleeping drugs, etc., and gave me hope of delivering me of the whole illness through one prolific sleep, which was to start if possible at three o'clock in the afternoon and last to the following day.'

In a more cheerful mood, Schreber and his wife immediately got the prescribed drug and went to his mother's house where the 'prolific sleep' was to occur. It was there that his psychosis erupted fully when the narcosis was attempted. He states: 'Naturally I did not get to bed (in my mother's house) as early as 3 o'clock, but (possibly according to some secret instruction which my wife had received) it was delayed until the 9th hour. More serious symptoms developed again immediately before going to bed. Unfortunately the bed was cold because it had been aired too long, with the result that I was immediately seized by a severe rigor and was already in a state of great excitement when I took the sleeping drug.' The drug was without effect, and during a sleepless night Schreber made what seems to have been a half-hearted suicidal attempt. Early the next morning Doctor Flechsig rushed his patient to the hospital. Schreber's illness progressed rapidly thereafter. His nights were sleepless and his days melancholy. He again attempted suicide because 'sleep could no longer be procured'.

Although during the next several weeks he was able to visit daily outside the hospital with his wife, Schreber continued to suffer from tension, anxiety, and extreme insomnia. His condition worsened and an 'important chapter' in his life began on 15 February, 1894, when his wife left for four days on an *urgently needed* holiday. Schreber's condition 'deteriorated so much in these four days' that after one more visit with his wife he refused to see her again. He then developed the delusion that she was dead: 'when ... I did see her again ... I no longer considered her a living being. ... Decisive for my mental collapse was one particular night; during that night I had a quite unusual number of pollutions (perhaps half a dozen).' In the next sentence Schreber then adds: 'From then on appeared the first signs of communication

with supernatural powers, particularly that of nerve-contact which Professor Flechsig kept up with me. ... From then on I also gained the impression that Professor Flechsig had secret designs against me. ...' The multiple nocturnal emissions, apparently unaccompanied by any dream, may have been accompanied by dreams which were forgotten or by 'blank dreams'. Lewin's work (33) suggests that such orgasms can indicate tension from archaic, oral impulses rather than genital sexual excitement. Evidence from the *Memoirs* supports such an hypothesis.

Like Schreber, Freud (11) suggested that the departure of the wife contributed importantly to the further decline in Schreber's condition. He felt that the wife's presence had protected Schreber from being homosexually attracted to the men about him, and that her absence allowed his homosexual libido to erupt—the multiple nocturnal emissions being the result of the upsurge of unconscious homosexual fantasies. These homosexual longings, which were first directed towards Flechsig and later towards God, were transference repetitions of Schreber's infantile longing for the father he once loved. The paranoid delusions were a denial of these affectionate longings, the 'I love him' being transformed into 'I hate him because he persecutes me'. From the frame of reference of oedipal conflict such a formulation of the case is possible. It is, however, incomplete; especially so in that it fails to consider the pregenital, oral impulses towards the mother-figure. To a great extent, I believe, the wife, Flechsig, and God represented such a mother-figure to Schreber.

In order better to focus attention on such oral conflicts with the mother, an attempt to formulate the psychodynamics of the early phases of Schreber's breakdown is now in order. To avoid repeating cumbersome, qualifying phrases, I will state my formulations in direct and positive terms, noting here that I realize they are constructs and not proven facts. Hopefully, they do fit the data now available and even a little extend our understanding of the Schreber case and other cases like it.

In the sixth decade of his life, Schreber was an outwardly active and successful man. Beneath the façade of vigour and efficiency provided by his compulsive character structure there lurked an intensely needful, primitive, oral tension. He was married to an immature woman who was too much of a little girl to be maternally supportive of him. His own masculinity and creative abilities had been called into question by six (perhaps four) full-term, but stillborn, children in the preceding eight years. His lineage was threatened with nearly certain extinction. He was faced with the most demanding professional task of his life and with the knowledge that his career was now approaching its zenith. He had reached the same age, 51, that his father was when his final decline occurred. Pressures of various kinds converged on him, making this a critical juncture in his existence.

Early in life and long before he was willing to, Schreber was forced by his mother, or mother-figures such as nannies, to abandon his early, oral-dependent impulses towards her. She did this under continuous pressure and interference from an intrusive, tyrannical husband who, at least in spirit, stood constantly behind her peering suspiciously over her shoulder lest, during some lapse into maternal love, she give the baby on her lap a bite of the forbidden pear instead of teaching him the 'art of renouncing'. A better way to arouse rage, mistrust, and a pervasive, destructive, greedy hunger for dependent-oral satisfactions can hardly be imagined. In this manner the father invaded and disrupted that special intimacy which a mother shares with the child at her breast. He disturbed whatever mutuality the mother was capable of finding with her baby, and perhaps made her behave ambivalently and inconsistently towards her infant. Of course, it is not known that the actual nursing situation was thus intruded upon by the father, but his description of the proper training in renunciation—especially the emphasis on the forbidden pear—suggests that he was eagerly, perhaps jealously intent upon wresting his children from their mother's breast.

Being forced to relinquish the mother—being in a sense deserted and forsaken by her—Schreber defended himself against this loss and the unresolved, infantile, oral tensions within him by an early, primitive identification with the mother which was, in turn, defended against by an all-out identification with the father.<sup>3</sup> Like the father, he became an outwardly competent,

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<sup>3</sup> Klein (29) makes a similar point. She states: '... the struggle against an overwhelming identification ... often drives people to identifications with objects that show the opposite characteristics.'



compulsively conscientious, and successful professional man. Like the father, he was also highly ambivalent in his close personal relations—perhaps especially ambivalent towards his own stillborn children. Beneath this compulsive masculine identification Schreber remained secretly an infant who wished to be the sole possessor of the mother—possession possible only by magical, primitive identification with her—a symbolic, magical merging with her.

In terms of the psychosocial stages of ego-development which Erikson (4) proposed as complements to the psychosexual stages of libido-development, Schreber never really settled the trust-mistrust crisis. He bypassed it, so to speak, denying its continued presence by encapsulating that unresolved problem within layer after layer of compulsive character structure built up through his identification with the father. With these compulsive strengths he *seemed*, as far as we know, successfully to cope with his childhood and adolescent stages of ego-development—the stages of autonomy, initiative, industry, and ego-identity.<sup>4</sup>

It was then at the stage of intimacy that the ancient and unsolved problems with the mother returned as he attempted to form another intimate relation with a woman, his wife. His late marriage at the age of 36 is one indication of his problem with intimacy. The onset of hypochondriasis just before his marriage is another.

If, as Ferenczi (9) suggested, adult sexual intimacy is at one level a symbolic return to the womb, that is, a symbolic merging again with the mother, it is all the more understandable that Schreber's latent, primitive longing for such a total fusion with the mother might have become pathogenically intense at the time of his marriage. In ego-psychological terms, Erikson (4) deals with this issue in his description of the crisis of intimacy versus isolation when he states: 'Body and ego must now be masters of the organ modes and of the nuclear conflicts, in order to be able to face the fear of ego loss in situations which call for self-abandon: in orgasms and sexual unions, in close friendships and in physical combat, in experiences of inspiration by teachers and of intuition from the recesses of the self. The avoidance of such experiences because of a fear of ego loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption.' Loewald (34) has also discussed these questions, suggesting that the fear of loss of ego through regression to the 'primary narcissistic identity with the mother' is one of man's deepest dreads—the dread of the 'engulfing, overpowering womb'. Federn (8) has, of course, also dealt extensively with the sense of loss of the ego, but not in terms directly relevant here.

In 1884, after six years of marriage, Schreber (aged 42) first became acutely psychotic under the stress of competition for a seat in parliament and of two full-term stillbirths suffered by his wife. No doubt oedipal conflicts and anxiety over castration by the father were stirred up by the marriage, parenthood, and professional competition. However, without the presence of intense, oral longings which both invited Schreber to regress to the earliest, undifferentiated mother-child relation and also threatened him with engulfment by the preoedipal mother, it seems doubtful whether he would have become psychotic. If the oedipal conflicts alone were the major difficulty, as the classically psycho-analytic formulation of the case suggests, then it would seem more likely that he would have developed an anxiety state, or an obsessive-compulsive disorder, or a depression of only neurotic proportions.

Erikson's concept of the generativity stage of ego-development is useful in understanding this first psychotic break which Schreber suffered. Possibly unsuited for parenthood by his own unresolved, voracious need for sole possession of the mother and by his identification with the ambivalent father, Schreber was very likely quite ambivalent towards his own children. By being born dead, *especially by being born both full-term and dead*, each child added a further strain on Schreber's compulsive defences against his own jealous, destructive impulses towards these newcomers. Each denied to him the opportunity to make reparation to it and to the objects of his greed in childhood—reparation which might be made by becoming the good parent for whom he had himself once longed instead of feeling destructive jealousy towards his own children as his father had towards him. Each child withheld from him that enrichment of the ego which Erikson attributes to a sound resolution of the generativity crisis, a resolution aided

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of another case from the point of view of Erikson's concept of stages of ego-development, see Chapter VIII of *Young Man Luther* (5). There Erikson suggests that a sense of trust, firmly established in the earliest relation between mother and child, saved Luther, who was also nearly consumed by conflict with his father, from a flagrant psychotic regression. Lacking this asset, Schreber did regress into a psychosis.

by successful parenthood. Suspicion that these babies died because of his syphilis may have heaped further guilt on Schreber.

In 1893, nine years after this first breakdown, Schreber, then aged 51, reached a new stage in life when he was appointed *Senatspräsident*, the equivalent of Chief Justice of the court. This probably was the highest professional position he could hope to attain. The appointment stamped as 'final' this chapter of his life. Thus Schreber entered the life crisis which Erikson has called ego integrity versus despair. Within a few weeks he began a long struggle to resolve this final life crisis by a psychotic regression to his first and never settled crisis with the mother—the trust-mistrust crisis.

Schreber was elevated to this high position at the same age as his father was when he received the blow on the head which started his decline. As *Niederland* has suggested, this coincidence no doubt provoked intense guilt and castration anxiety. However, as I indicated earlier, any effort to explain his final breakdown solely in terms of oedipal formulations must surely remain incomplete.

In addition to whatever oedipal conflict the appointment itself provoked in Schreber, the demands of the post prompted an intense longing to relinquish this strenuous, adult position and to flee from these arduous demands back to what he fantasied was the effortless, blissful, omnipotent state of the infant cuddled at the mother's breast or within her womb. The compulsive strivings for professional perfection which Schreber clearly described in himself most likely covered an intense passive longing for those oral satisfactions which he had never been given in sufficient quantity when he was an infant. This oral-dependent longing was further intensified by his marriage to a childlike woman who bore him only stillborn children—stillborn children who silently accused him both of murder and of inadequacy as a generative being. The man appointed as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court—the Supreme Judge, as it were—was perhaps not too sure but that it was he who should be judged.

When all these factors are put together, Schreber is seen as a man who, upon reaching his sixth decade in life, suddenly does a double-take. In the terms proposed by Erikson, Schreber was unable to accept that his one and only life cycle was itself the ultimate of life. With despair he realized the time was short and no new beginnings were possible, a realization made more distressing by the impending end to his lineage. Appalled by the dreadful disparity between his outer façade of Chief Justice and his innermost core of needful infant, Schreber despairingly accused himself of being a fraud, and accused life of being pointless. He felt his innermost self to be a hungry, greedy, possessive infant longing for a mother—a longing which no amount of professional success could satisfy, and which his wife could only aggravate. The will to go on being the capable *Senatspräsident* collapsed. The inner, voracious, angry infant returned with a vengeance to snatch back the pear.

Schreber's image of his mother was fused with that of the father. The mother was, to a great extent, an agent of the father who clearly was the higher power behind her. She probably was as thoroughly dominated by the father as were the frightened nannies of Leipzig. The father was, after all, one of the leading authorities on child rearing in *all* Germany as well as a person of awesome personal characteristics.

Not only was the father a trespasser on the maternal realms, he was an ambivalent trespasser deeply divided in his intent. On the one hand, he intruded into those very private matters between mother and baby out of the most worthy medical motive and out of the most understandable paternal hope—to ensure that his son developed into a strong, morally sound, healthy man, free of weak, childish, or effeminate traits. On the other hand, his intrusion into the mother's role was such a fanatical and vengeful one that it arouses suspicions that other motives were at work—suspicions that the intrusion was both a defence against the father's own intense, possessive, needful (homosexual, if you like) longings, and an expression of his intense envy and jealousy of the nursing baby. The cruel teasing of the child with the mother's pear was quite probably a vengeful withholding from the child of that which the father himself secretly wanted and envied. What more fitting revenge can a son later inflict upon such a father than to become the very kind of person the father most feared that he himself was and that the son would be? In turning his back upon the crowning achievement of a brilliant career and regressing to the primitive level of his psychosis, Schreber did exactly that. He thus symbolically repossessed the mother, mocked and defied the father, and punished himself for doing both.

After this formulation of the psychodynamics of the early stages of his breakdown the significance

of the desertion of Schreber by his wife may be clearer. When she left him he immediately developed the delusion that she was dead. She thus became the first victim of his world-destruction fantasies. Excerpts from the *Memoris* will make clear that after his wife 'died' Schreber developed the delusion that her nerves entered his body. It was the influx of these female nerves which caused his feminization, his unmaning. His unmaning and change into a woman can be interpreted at one level as an identification with the lost wife (mother)—a primitive and symbolic method for holding on to the mother by magically incorporating her and thereby *becoming* her. One of the most important delusional results of the influx of female nerves into Schreber's body was that he developed womanly breasts. He thus became the sole possessor of that which he had so reluctantly renounced so many years earlier. This feminization could also be considered as a re-emergence of the very early identification with the mother which occurred when she forsook little Daniel and withdrew from him as she taught him the 'art of renouncing'.

After losing his wife, Schreber transferred to Flechsig the full intensity of his devouring impulses. Precisely *then* Schreber developed the belief that Flechsig had established 'nerve-contact' with him. The accusation that *Flechsig* (and later God) had established nerve-contact *with Schreber* was, as we shall later see, clearly a projection on to Flechsig of the archaic, destructive-dependent impulses which *Schreber* felt *toward Flechsig* as a mother-figure.

For a time after Schreber believed his wife was dead, he considered Flechsig the only person whom he 'knew definitely to be among the living' (35p. 70)—the sole object of his hopes, needs, and impulses. Then, like Schreber's wife, Flechsig deserted him for a vacation. In Schreber's delusions Flechsig met a violent and deserved death on this holiday trip which took place in March, just a month after the wife's 'fatal' holiday. Schreber 'had visions [that] ... Flechsig had shot himself'. These visions were, he noted, 'revelations of divine opinion on what *ought* to have happened to Professor Flechsig' (p. 91). The lost Flechsig was then immediately regained by primitive, oral incorporation.

After Flechsig 'shot himself', Schreber commented, 'about that time I had Professor Flechsig's soul and most probably his *whole* soul temporarily in my body. It was a fairly bulky ball ... , which had been thrown into my belly by way of a miracle, presumably to perish there. In view of its size it would ... have been impossible to retain this soul in my belly, to digest it so to speak; indeed when it attempted to free itself I let it go voluntarily, being moved by a kind of sympathy, and so it escaped through my mouth into the open again. I have ... in quite a number of other instances ... received souls or parts of souls in my mouth, of which I particularly remember distinctly the foul taste and smell which such *impure* souls cause in the body of the person through whose mouth they have entered' (p. 92).

In his delusions Schreber killed Flechsig and orally incorporated him, thereby vengefully destroying the doctor for deserting him but at the same time taking sole possession of him in this engulfing fashion. This manoeuvre, the same that Schreber used when he was deserted by his wife, demonstrates both the dependent and the destructive nature of his primitive oral impulses. So boundless was his hungry needfulness that when it was unleashed it consumed the very person whom he so desperately needed. The consequences inherent in this needfulness were as dire for Schreber as they were for the objects of his impulses. Whether he consumed them or whether they escaped that fate by forsaking him, the result was the same: he no longer could possess the object for which he longed, on which his life depended.

After his destructive oral incorporation of Flechsig, Schreber found that his digestive tract was no match for the doctor's soul. With a dyspeptic burp Schreber set it free. The Senatspräsident's insistence that sympathy and not a bellyache caused him to free Flechsig is, I think, questionable. More likely a primitively bad conscience, a dread of persecution from an internalized bad object, caused Flechsig's release—not sympathy.

Flechsig and God, already nearly interchangeable in Schreber's mind, now became more or less identical. God, by division into maternal, nurturing, curative *anterior realms*, and paternal, stern, threatening *posterior realms*, became more definitely differentiated into good and bad objects. Stored in the anterior realms were the beneficent, sleep-inducing states of Blessedness (also called 'the nerves of God'). So boundless was Schreber's oral greed for them that the entire supply of these states of Blessedness was consumed soon after nerve-contact between God and Schreber began—the result of the 'uninterrupted influx' (p. 60) of states of

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<sup>5</sup> Thorner (49), in a brief reference to the Schreber case, comments: 'We would interpret [Schreber's] idea of having attracted all the "rays of God" to [himself] as an expression of oral greed.' Thorner does not elaborate further. Rosen (43) has also made passing reference to Schreber's oral needfulness. To my knowledge these are the only references in the literature which deal directly with the importance of oral impulses in Schreber's psychosis.

Blessedness into Schreber's body.<sup>5</sup> The resulting shortage deprived the souls of all other persons 'who have since died or will die' (p. 60) of their chances to live eternally. Thus Schreber caused the death of these souls—in fact murdered them. Next God Himself was in grave danger of being totally consumed. His struggle to free Himself from Schreber's body became a recurrent theme. According to Schreber, God constantly attempted '... to withdraw from me (to "forsake" me)' (p. 129), 'to stop the attraction, ... to break free again from my nerves' (p. 98), 'to withdraw again as far as possible from the power of attraction of my over-excited nerves ...' (p. 119).

When at last the anterior realms were totally depleted, the gruff-voiced posterior realms of God first appeared to Schreber, appearing initially in the person of the lower god, Ahriman (p. 124). Later, the upper God, Ormuzd, appeared. As I will later discuss, in Zoroastrianism Ahriman was the god of Evil; Ormuzd was the god of Goodness.

Gradually Schreber made peace with the posterior realms of God—first placating and winning over the lower god, Ahriman, and finally the upper god, Ormuzd. As the rapprochement between God and Schreber progressed, the tormenting, persecutory voices and miracles either ceased or took on a harmless quality, and God's threats to punish or annihilate the *Senatspräsident* became milder. Although it is conjectural, I cannot escape the impression that by his symbolic and delusional return to the mother's breast, the anterior realms of God, Schreber obtained there the nurture withheld from him in infancy and by feeding there as long as the breast flowed he partially appeased his oral need, a kind of self-attained delusional symbolic realization. The curative, sleep-inducing character of the supplies which flowed into Schreber from God during nerve-contact are vividly described on pp. 117 and 126 of the *Memoirs*.

With some semblance of trust regained from this regressive recapitulation of the earliest months of life, with some reservoir of inner goodness obtained from the anterior realms of God, Schreber was then prepared to re-enact his autonomy struggle. Schreber describes this struggle in several places, but notably so on p. 175. Originally subjugated cruelly in this contest because of the paternal invasion into mother-work, Schreber had another go at it. In this recapitulation, the battle of wills between God and Schreber raged until both were near to exhaustion. Then with guilt assuaged from the torment of this struggle, with honour satisfied by a fight well fought, with respect established each for the other, amicable relations between God and Schreber were again established. Thereafter Schreber began to improve and was eventually able to leave the hospital. This improvement continued until his mother died and his wife suffered a sudden severe stroke. These events again threatened Schreber with desertion by mother-figures and his psychosis recurred. Even at the age of 65 Schreber apparently was mostly an infant who only in small measure had learned the 'art of renouncing'. But all this anticipates data to which we should now turn.

### **The Eternal Life of Souls**

Before taking up Schreber's concept of 'soul murder' and of 'nerve-contact', a brief summary of the life cycle of the soul according to Schreber's delusional system is in order. The human soul 'is contained in the nerves of the body' (p. 45). After the death of the body, God's rays draw the soul-containing nerves from the corpse up to God. There, after undergoing a process of purification, they are awakened to 'a new heavenly life' (p. 48). This process of purification depends upon the presence of a supply of 'states of Blessedness' which are stored in the 'anterior realms of God'.<sup>6</sup> All this 'shows that they [souls] did not perish'; that they were 'granted eternal existence'; and that 'it was a continued life' which they gained by means of attaining these 'states of Blessedness' (p. 52). Accordingly it is logical that any person who knowingly or deliberately deprived the souls of the dead of these 'states of Blessedness' would deprive them of eternal life, that is, would commit soul murder. Schreber, by his depletion of the anterior realms of God (pp. 53, 60) did just that.

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<sup>6</sup> By carefully reading passages on pp. 52, 53, 60, 61, and 73, and combining the information scattered over these pages it becomes clear that the anterior realms of God were the repository of these states of Blessedness.

Schreber also makes clear that it was his fantasy of the peaceful existence of the infant at the breast or within the womb which he symbolized in his delusional conception of the blissful, eternal life of souls, and which he greedily wished to withhold from others by soul murder. The life of souls who had attained the state of Blessedness consisted of 'uninterrupted enjoyment combined with the contemplation of God. The idea of perpetual idleness is unbearable for a human being, because man is accustomed to work and ... it is only work which makes life sweet for him. But ... souls are different. ... Souls' greatest happiness lies in continual revelling in pleasure...' (pp. 51–52).

### The Method of Committing Soul Murder

Schreber says he 'was forced by ... experiences to assume, that if God [by nerve-contact] were permanently tied to my person, all creation on earth would have to perish ...' (p. 60). Thus Schreber's nerve-contact with God caused first the destruction of all humanity. Not content with that sizable accomplishment, Schreber, through his nerve-contact with God, proceeded to annihilate in the life beyond the souls of the people he had killed on earth. He notes 'the ... uninterrupted influx of God's nerves into my body has led to the total loss of all the states of Blessedness which had accumulated until then and made it impossible for the time being to renew them; the state of *Blessedness* is so to speak suspended and all human beings who have since died or will die *can for the time being not attain to it*' (p. 60).

Recall that an adequate supply of the state of Blessedness was necessary to ensure the continued existence of souls after death of the body. Continue to accept for the moment the premise that nerve-contact was a disguised representation of Schreber's possessive, jealous, devouring, oral impulses towards God. Now Schreber's guilt as a soul murderer is hardly questionable. Elsewhere he further indicts himself on this same count by stating 'at first Flehsig was named as the instigator of soul murder but of recent times in an attempt to reverse the facts I myself have been "represented" as the one who had committed soul murder' (p. 55). This seems an especially transparent denial.

### Motives of Soul Murder

Although in one place Schreber states that soul murder is similar to Faust's bargain with the Devil, elsewhere he makes it clear that it is quite different.<sup>7</sup> In Schreber's soul murder no person forfeits his *own* soul to the Devil in exchange for some worldly advantage. Quite to the contrary, it is an act wherein one person takes '*possession of another person's soul* [italics mine] in order to prolong one's life at another soul's expense, or to secure some other advantages which outlast death' (p. 55). Such acts occurred 'originally perhaps ... out of jealousy' (p. 55) although 'ambition and lust for power ... could possibly lead to soul murder ...' (p. 58). Other motives noted were the wish to appropriate another's mental powers or to attain some personal immunity (p. 58). Elsewhere Schreber links soul murder to the childlessness of his marriage by saying that its objective was 'the detriment of the Schreber race, perhaps in the direction of denying them offspring ...' (p. 57), one of many passages revealing concern that the Schreber line was at an end. Other passages also suggest that Schreber felt he had committed soul murder on his stillborn children. I can now advance with greater certainty the assumption that Schreber's primitive, oral impulses towards his wife (as a mother-figure) made him feel destructive jealousy of the babies inside her and that this jealousy made each stillbirth pathologically distressing. He felt, I think, that he had in fantasy murdered these unborn souls. Further support for this assumption will soon be put forward.

That Schreber longed to be an only child and, by implication, wanted no competitors for the mother is suggested by his saying 'since God entered into nerve-contact with me exclusively, I became in a way for God the only human being, or simply the human being around whom everything turns, to whom everything that happens must be related and who therefore, from his own point of view, must also relate all things to himself' (p. 197). Soul murder, I believe, symbolizes primarily Schreber's conflict over his destructively greedy, oral impulses. My hypothesis about the meaning of soul murder differs considerably from that proposed by Katan (22). Katan interprets soul murder, like almost all Schreber's delusional system, in terms of conflict over masturbation. Freud (11) too suggested, in his brief references to soul murder, that it concerned conflict over masturbation. He also proposed that Schreber's accusation

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<sup>7</sup> The symbolic meaning of such pacts with the Devil has been studied by Freud (15) and by Klein (29).

that Flechsig was the soul murderer was in fact a self-accusation.

## Nerve-contact

Generally speaking, God established 'nerve-contact' only with the dead—doing so by sending His 'rays' to 'draw their nerves ... out of their bodies and up to Himself ... thereby awakening them to new heavenly life.' In exceptional circumstances, God might establish nerve-contact with living human beings—especially with 'highly gifted people (poets, etc.), in order to bless them (particularly in dreams) with some fertilizing thoughts and ideas about the beyond. But such "nerve-contact" was not allowed to become the rule, ... because ... the nerves of *living* human beings, particularly when in a state of *high-grade excitation*, have such power of attraction for the nerves of God that He would not be able to free Himself from them again, and would thus endanger His own existence' (35p. 48).

In this very crucial passage Schreber describes the essential features of 'nerve-contact'. That the 'highly gifted' person was himself is suggested in many ways. The reference to inspiration through dreams, such as Schreber had early in his illness, is one indication. The second is his repeated statement that the nerves of the living human being in a state of 'high-grade excitation' are both especially attractive and extremely dangerous to God—for example: '... everything concerning human nerves must be of particular interest to God, starting with His instinctive knowledge that an increase of *nervousness* among men could endanger His realms' (p. 56); 'the power of attraction ... according to which rays and nerves mutually attract one another, harbours a kernel of danger for the realms of God. ... Growing nervousness among mankind could and can increase these dangers considerably' (p. 59); '... attempts to cure my nervous illness alternated with efforts to annihilate me as a human being who, because of his ever-increasing nervousness, had become a danger to God Himself' (p. 75). Schreber's projections on to God of his own greedy, destructive, oral longing, and his consequent paranoid feelings of persecution by God have a distinctly Kleinian ring to them. For example, Klein (28) remarks: 'Since the phantasied attacks on the object are fundamentally influenced by greed, the fear of the object's greed, owing to projection, is an essential element in persecutory anxiety: the bad breast will devour him in the same greedy way as he desires to devour it.'

God's irresistible attraction to the nerves of an emotionally upset person is explained by Schreber in a footnote appended to his statement above about the dangerous power of attraction of human nerves. In this footnote he says the 'idea of a *force of attraction* emanating from individual human bodies' which draws God's nerves to that body might seem ridiculous if that attraction is conceived only in terms of mechanical forces. He states: 'This phenomenon will perhaps be somewhat comprehensible and brought nearer human understanding if one remembers that the rays are *living beings* and therefore the power of attraction is not purely a mechanically acting force, but something like a *psychological motive power*: the rays too find that "attractive" which is of interest to them. The relationship therefore appears to be similar to that expressed by Goethe in his "Fisherman": "Partly she dragged him down, partly he sank hither"' (35p. 48).

Thus Schreber denies that it is his dependent needfulness for God which motivates nerve-contact. On the contrary, it is God's needfulness for Schreber which is responsible. That these disowned needful longings are potentially destructive because of their insatiable and voracious nature is also made clear. It will be recalled that it was the needfulness which Schreber disowns in this fashion which depleted the 'anterior realms of God' of all of the states of Blessedness, thus denying eternal life to the souls of every person except Schreber, and endangering the existence of God Himself. Just how great the danger was to God from His being thus attracted to Schreber is made clear in numerous passages, particularly the passage in which Schreber states that his 'power of ... attraction' was so great for God as to threaten the 'dissolution in my body of ... [His] rays' which 'amounts to the end of their ... existence, like death to a man'. Consequently, God had to 'make all attempts to avoid the fate of having to perish in my body' (p. 150).

That this dangerously intense attraction felt by God for Schreber was the projection of Schreber's destructive-dependent impulses toward the maternal aspects of God is further suggested in the startling similarity between God's longing to enter Schreber's body and the longing to enter his body which Schreber attributed to the soul of his wife.

Schreber reveals his thinly disguised, projected,

primitive wish to devour his wife in his comment: 'I repeatedly had the nerves belonging to my wife's soul in my body or felt them approaching my body from outside. ... These soul parts were filled with ... devoted love ...; they were the only souls who showed willingness to renounce their own further existence and find their end in my body, expressing it in the basic language as "let me".' Here in a footnote Schreber states: 'This expression ["let me"] could be rendered, grammatically complete, in the following words: "Let me—you rays that are trying to pull me back—do let me follow the power of attraction of my husband's nerves: I am prepared to dissolve in my husband's body"' (p. 116). Although it is purely conjectural, I can well imagine Schreber's mother saying, or perhaps only thinking, 'let me give little Daniel the pear' only to be restrained by the stern father. Thus she, as well as her husband, may have been highly ambivalent and inconsistent in her behaviour towards her infant.

Schreber's wife was orally incorporated with fatal consequences when she deserted him for her holiday of which she was in urgent need, apparently having been as depleted as the anterior realms of God later became. Finally, then, it is God Himself who is in danger of annihilation by Schreber's oral impulses—impulses which are projected as the irresistible need of God's nerves to flow into Schreber's body. Nearly irrefutable evidence that Schreber projects onto God his destructively needful, pregenital, oral impulses towards a mother-figure is present in his reference to Goethe's poem, 'The Fisherman', of which he quotes only one line. Schreber could hardly have picked a more perfect artistic statement than this poem to express his own primitive wishes to merge with a mother, to possess her exclusively, to return to the healing peace of her inside, to be made *sound* again by the nurture he receives from her, to rip ruthlessly from her belly competitors for that nurture. It also expresses his fear of again being engulfed by the mother—a danger which stemmed largely from the intensity of his own needfulness for her. The following literal translation of the poem is used because literary excellence in an English translation obscures meanings which are important for purposes of psychological analysis.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE FISHERMAN

The water rushed, the water swelled;  
A fisherman sat by it.  
He looked at his fishing rod,  
Peaceful and cool, clear to his heart.  
And as he sat and as he listened  
The rising flood divided itself,  
Out of the moving waters  
A moist woman rushed up.  
She sang to him, she spoke to him.  
Why do you lure my brood  
With human wit and human cunning  
Up into the deadly glow?  
Oh, if you only knew how well the  
little fish is  
Down in the depths  
You would descend as you are,  
Then you would become really sound.  
Does not the dear sun refresh itself,  
And does not the moon, in the sea?  
And does not her face having breathed  
the waves  
Return doubly beautiful?  
Does not the deep heaven lure you?  
The moist clear blue?  
Does not your own face lure you  
Into the eternal dew?  
The water rushed, the water swelled,  
Wetted his naked feet.  
His heart grew so full of yearning,  
As at the most beloved's greeting.  
She spoke to him, she sang to him,  
And then it was all over with him.  
Half she pulled him and half he sank  
hither,

And was nevermore seen.

If further evidence of Schreber's archaic, devastating, oral impulses towards a mother-figure is needed, his dreamlike visions of burrowing into mother earth provide it. After becoming convinced that his wife was dead, that Flechsig and all other human beings were dead, Schreber decided that he was 'the last real human being left' (p. 85). In this forlorn condition he had 'innumerable visions ... that the world had perished'. A few of these visions are described: 'In one of them it was as though I were sitting in a railway carriage or in a lift driving into the depths of the earth and I recapitulated, as it

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Dr David Rapaport and to Professor Erik Erikson for help in understanding the connotations of the words in the German language version of 'The Fisherman'.



were, the whole history of mankind or of the earth in reverse order; in the upper regions there were still forests of leafy trees; in the nether regions it became progressively darker and blacker. When temporarily I left the vehicle, I walked as though across a large cemetery where, coming upon the place where Leipzig's inhabitants lay buried, I crossed my own wife's grave. Sitting again in the vehicle I advanced only to a point 3; point 1, which was to mark the earliest beginning of mankind, I dared not enter. On the return drive the shaft collapsed behind me, continually endangering a "sun deity" who was in it too. In this connexion it was said that there had been two shafts (perhaps corresponding to the dualism of the realms of God?); when news came that the second shaft had also collapsed, it was thought that everything was lost. Another time I traversed the earth from Lake Ladoga to Brazil and, together with an attendant, I built there in a castle-like building a wall in protection of God's realms against an advancing yellow flood tide: I related this to the peril of a syphilitic epidemic' (pp. 86–87). Here is another hint that Schreber was concerned about syphilis.

Both the poem and the dreamlike vision clearly reveal Schreber's intense primitive longing to relinquish the struggle of adult life and to return to a magical, blissful, restorative reunion with the idealized mother. They show the terror he also felt over the potential destructiveness of such wishes—potentially destructive to himself, to the mother, and to all competitors for her.

Schreber's yearning for such a primitive reunion with the mother and fear of it is, I believe, reflected in his symptom of longing for sleep while simultaneously being terrified of the regression necessary to be enveloped by sleep. The terror of regressing to the psychologically primitive and undifferentiated state of sleep can be interpreted on many levels—fear of loss of control over impulses, fear of dreams, fear of death, fear of being in a defenceless, passive condition, etc. I believe that in Schreber's case it represents, most basically, the dread of losing himself by regressing to a state of primitive, oral-dependent attachment to the mother. Such a regression would mean being engulfed by her out of his own need for her, much as God, in Schreber's delusions, is in danger of losing himself out of his need for Schreber. The sleep-disturbing danger of such oral longings has been noted by Rosen (43) as well as Lewin (33).

On the other hand such boundless, insatiable, and archaic dependent impulses endanger the very existence of the mother toward whom they are directed. Here then is the basic dilemma of the infant: the boundless oral need for the mother—the wish to possess her totally by oral incorporation—would, if literally carried out, destroy the very object upon which life itself depends. Klein (30) makes very much this same point. She states: 'The infant feels his primal object to be the source of goodness and life, and therefore irreplaceable. His anxiety lest he has destroyed it is the cause of major emotional difficulties. ...'

To the infant the mother is the world. To destroy her is to destroy the world. This suggests that world destruction fantasies may stem from primitive, oral-destructive impulses towards the mother. While frustration of later infantile needs may lead to retaliatory, hostile impulses towards the mother, that kind of hostile impulse is, I believe, on a higher and more differentiated level than the potential destructiveness for both mother and child inherent in the infant's earliest total dependence on the mother and the total, insatiable fashion in which he wishes at that stage to possess her.

The function of the preoedipal father in guiding his son out of infancy and away from these primitive, oral attachments characteristic of the undifferentiated mother-child unity of infancy could be profitably explored here. Freud (14) has noted that in the preoedipal period the little boy idealizes and wants to be like his father—an identification which 'has nothing to do with a passive or feminine attitude towards his father'. Loewald (34) has elaborated on the boy's positive, preoedipal relation to the father, emphasizing how that identification lends the boy 'powerful support against the danger of the womb', that is, against the little emphasized negative relation with the mother from which comes a primitive 'dread of the womb, dread of sinking back into the original unstructured state of identity with her ...' Fairbairn (6) has dealt with these questions, noting the infant's 'great conflict ... between a progressive urge to surrender the infantile ... identification with the object and a regressive urge to maintain [it]'. Surrender of the infantile identification causes separation anxiety, 'a fear of isolation', and holding to the identification causes a fear of 'being shut in, imprisoned or engulfed'.

Erikson (5) also refers to the supportive, non-castrating influences of a father on his child. He comments: 'In anxiety and confusion, children

often seem to take refuge from their fathers by turning back to their mothers. But this occurs only if the fathers are not there enough, or not there in the right way. For children become aware of the attributes of maleness, and learn to love men's physical touch and guiding voice, at about the time when they have the first courage for an autonomous existence—autonomous from the maternal matrix in which they only *seem* to want to remain forever.'

In one of his papers, Niederland (39) touched on these same issues, noting that Schreber's father was 'the type of "symbiotic" father whose all-pervasive presence, usurpation of the maternal role, and other domineering features ... lent themselves to their fusion into the bizarre God-Hierarchy characteristic of the son's delusional system.' How the place of Schreber's father can be integrated into the proposals I have made about the significance of the mother cannot be pursued any further than to note that Schreber's God was, I believe, divided into the breastlike, maternal, nurturing anterior realms and the gruff, more threatening, paternal posterior realms.<sup>9</sup> Schreber's repeated reference to the way that God remained above and behind the stars (35p. 46), above and behind the sun (p. 47), and the way in which the posterior realms of God were above and behind the anterior realms of God (p. 53), all strongly suggest that the God of Schreber's delusional system was a vague and poorly differentiated representation of both a mother-figure and a more powerful, threatening, intrusive, meddlesome father-figure above and behind her. Further support for this supposition can be found in Schreber's description of how the anterior realms of God spoke to him in a 'soft whisper'. Then when they were depleted because of Schreber's greedy attachment to them for the first time 'the posterior realms of God appeared on the scene'. In contrast to the soft whisper of the anterior realms, these posterior realms spoke to Schreber in a resounding 'mighty bass' voice. This was so frightening, he adds, that anybody 'not hardened to terrifying miraculous impressions as I was, would have been shaken to the core' (p. 124).

Schreber's division of the posterior realms of God into a lower God, Ahriman, and an upper God, Ormuzd (p. 53), also suggests that the posterior realms of God represented primarily the ambivalent father. In Zoroastrianism, Ormuzd (Ahura Mazda) was the supreme deity, the embodiment of love, goodness, and knowledge, and Ahriman (Angra Mainyu) was the essence of evil, the cause of death, destruction, and disease (32). This division of the posterior realms of God into Ormuzd and Ahriman very likely reflected Schreber's infantile image of the father—the father who was so deeply divided between his hateful, destructive impulses towards his son and his therapeutic, loving parental intentions.<sup>10</sup>

## Unmanning

Schreber's unmanning has generally been interpreted as genital castration by the avenging oedipal father. At one level this may well be true. There is much evidence in the *Memoirs* to indicate that at a more primitive level unmanning was a regressive expression of a wish to retain a pregenital attachment to the mother by becoming her, that is, by incorporation and identification with her and also by becoming her infant—in fact, by becoming an unborn infant inside her womb. I will cite only a few passages in support of this proposition. Schreber's description of his incorporation of the lost wife indicates his wish to incorporate and identify with the lost mother. This is related to unmanning in his comments that it is the influx of female nerves which caused his breasts to become womanly and his body generally to be feminized—that is, unmanned (pp. 120, 94). That unmanning also represented an identification with a baby—an unborn baby—and hence a realization of the wish to possess exclusively the mother is suggested in Schreber's comment: 'This process of unmanning consisted in the (external) male genitals (scrotum and penis) being retracted into the body and the internal sexual organs being at the same time transformed into the corresponding female sexual organs, a process which might have been completed in a

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<sup>9</sup> Freud (11) comments briefly on the female symbolism of the anterior realms of God and the male symbolism of the posterior realms. However, he does not suggest that the anterior realms are a symbolic representation of the mother.

<sup>10</sup> The 'policy of vacillation' pursued by God and Flechsig is another representation of the deep ambivalence of the poorly differentiated mother-father figures in Schreber's delusional system. Schreber complained that because of this policy of vacillation 'attempts to cure my nervous illness alternated with efforts to annihilate me as a human being who, because of his ever-increasing nervousness, had become a danger to God himself' (p. 75). Such ambivalence could well have created what Bateson *et al.* (1) called a 'double bind' in communication and what Searles (45) described as 'the effort to drive another person crazy'.

sleep lasting hundreds of years, because a skeleton (pelvis, etc.) had also to be changed. A regression occurred, therefore, or a reversal of that developmental process which occurs in the human embryo in the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy, according to whether nature intends the future child to be of male or female sex' (p. 74). The reference to the poem by Goethe and the dreamlike imagery of tunnelling into the earth both betray a primitive wish to regress to the omnipotent, effortless existence within the womb—an existence in which the child's need for closeness, warmth, food, etc., from the mother cannot be disturbed by a lesson in the 'art of renouncing'.

## SUMMARY

On theoretical grounds, it is reasonable to assume that primitive, oral, destructive-dependent impulses towards a mother-figure were important in the dynamics of Schreber's psychosis. Reanalysis of the *Memoirs* shows that disguised and symbolic representations of the mother and of such impulses towards her were, in fact, prominent in the case. The new historical data on Schreber's breakdowns and family also support this assumption. The basic defence which Schreber used against such impulses was that of projection—accusing God of needful, greedy, potentially destructive, oral longings for Schreber when in fact it was Schreber's jealous, possessive, infantile longing for God which was symbolically represented as 'nerve-contact', which motivated 'soul murder', and which threatened to destroy the entire world and even God Himself. Schreber's delusion of being unmanned was at one level an expression of the wish to regain that most primitive and least differentiated relation of the child to the mother which is enjoyed by the foetus. By being unmanned in the peculiar manner of his delusions, Schreber was simultaneously the foetus and the mother who carries the foetus.

The merged mother and father images in the God of Schreber's delusions, a God composed of maternal anterior realms and paternal posterior realms, quite likely reflected the intrusive way in which the father invaded the mother's role and function in Schreber's early infancy. The further division of these paternal posterior realms into a superior god of Goodness, Ormuzd, and an inferior god of Evil, Ahriman, was probably based on Schreber's infantile image of his pathologically ambivalent father. Such divisions could also result from an archaic separation of parental figures into good and bad objects.

Although the father was an important figure in Schreber's life, the mother was the central figure in the earliest and therefore the most pathogenic of Schreber's conflicts. To the infant the mother is the entire world. If a baby is forced too early in life, as Schreber was, to relinquish the subtle, life-giving, trust-endowing nurture which only the mother can give, if he is too soon forced to learn the 'art of renouncing', he comes, as Schreber did, dangerously near to losing his entire world.

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