

WRITING ON THE WALL

1

IT WAS VIENNA, 1933–1934. I had a room in the Hotel Regina, Freiheitsplatz. I had a small calendar on my table. I counted the days and marked them off, calculating the weeks. My sessions were limited, time went so quickly. As I stopped to leave my key at the desk, the hall porter said, ‘Some day, will you remember me to the Professor?’ I said I would if the opportunity arose. He said, ‘–and ah, the Frau Professor! There is a wonderful lady.’ I said I had not met the Frau Professor but had heard that she was the perfect wife for him and there couldn’t be – could there? – a greater possible compliment. The porter said, ‘You know Berggasse? After the – well, later when the Professor is no longer with us, they will name it Freudgasse.’ I went down Berggasse, turned in the familiar entrance; *Berggasse 19, Wien IX*, it was. There were wide stone steps and a balustrade. Sometimes I met someone else coming down.

The stone staircase was curved. There were two doors on the landing. The one to the right was the Professor’s professional door; the one to the left, the Freud family door. Apparently, the two apartments had been arranged so that there should be as little confusion as possible between family and patients or students; there was the Professor who belonged to us, there was the Professor who belonged to the family; it was a large family with ramifications, in-laws, distant relatives, family friends. There were other apartments above but I did not very often pass anyone on the stairs, except the analysand whose hour preceded mine.

My hours or sessions had been arranged for me, four days a week from five to six; one day, from twelve to one. At least, that was the arrangement for the second series of sessions which, I have noted, began the end of October 1934. I left a number of books and letters in Switzerland when I left there, actually after the war had begun; among them was my 1933 Vienna diary. I am under the impression that the Professor had arranged the second series to accord with the first, as I had often said to him that that near-evening hour was almost my favorite of the whole day. Anyhow, I had five weeks then. The last session was December 1, 1934. The first series began in March 1933 and lasted somewhat longer, between three and four months. I had not planned on coming back to Vienna, but a great deal had happened between the summer of 1933 and the autumn of 1934. I had heard the news of the Dollfuss affair with some anxiety, but that had not caused any personal repercussions. I came back to Vienna because I heard about the man I sometimes met, coming down the stairs. He had been lecturing at a conference in Johannesburg. He flew his own plane there. On the way back, he crashed in Tanganyika.

2

I DID NOT always pass him on the stairs. He might be lingering on, prolonging his talk in the Professor's study or consulting room, in which case, after hanging up my coat in the hall, I might miss him. I would be ushered direct into the waiting room. Or it might happen that my predecessor emerged from the Professor's sanctum at the same time that I was about to enter. He would be reaching for his coat or his hat while I was disposing of mine. He was very tall, he looked English – yet

English with a catch. He had, it later appeared, spent some time at Oxford, before or after receiving his Continental degree – in any case, he was not German, not American; but how does one know these things? He was, as it happened, exactly what I thought him, 'English with a catch,' in fact, a Dutchman.

I did not know that his name was J. J. van der Leeuw until afterwards. Once he spoke to me at the Professor's bidding, about exchanging hours. That was a summer day in the big house outside the town, at Döbling, where the family moved for the hot months. It would have been a day late in June or early July 1933. The arrangement for receiving us there was more informal, and one did not have quite the same sense of authenticity or *reality* as in the Professor's own home. However, I did not say good-bye to Vienna in the house of a stranger on its outskirts. I came back.

I told the Professor why I had come back. The Professor was seventy-seven at the time of our first sessions. I was forty-seven. Dr. van der Leeuw was considerably younger. He was known among them, the Professor told me, as the Flying Dutchman. He was an eminent scholar. He had come officially to study with the Professor with the idea of the application of the principles of psychoanalysis to general education, with the greater practical aim of international cooperation and understanding. He was wealthy, influential, well-born. He owned vast plantations in the Dutch East Indies and had traveled in India for the purpose of occult investigation. He had contacted a teacher or young devotee there, had been influenced by the Eastern teaching, but that had not satisfied him. He wanted to apply the laws of spiritual being to the acute problems of today. It seemed to me that he was the perfect man for the perfect job. The Professor had not told me that J. J. van der Leeuw was himself aware of a deeply

rooted desire or subconscious tendency connected with his brilliant aviation. The Flying Dutchman knew that at any given moment, in the air – his element – he was likely to fly too high, to fly too quickly. ‘That was really what concerned me,’ said the Professor. ‘I can tell you now that that was really what concerned us both.’ The Professor added, ‘After he left, last time, I felt I had found the solution, I really had the answer. But it was too late.’

I said to the Professor, ‘I always had a feeling of satisfaction, of security when I passed Dr. van der Leeuw on the stairs or saw him in the hall. He seemed so self-sufficient, so poised – and you had told me about his work. I felt all the time that he was the person who would apply, carry on the torch – carry on your ideas, but not in a stereotyped way. I felt that you and your work and the future of your work were especially bequeathed to him. Oh, I know there is the great body of the Psycho-Analytical Association, research workers, doctors, trained analysts, and so on! But Dr. van der Leeuw was different. I know that you have felt this very deeply. I came back to Vienna to tell you how sorry I am.’

The Professor said, ‘You have come to take his place.’

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I DID NOT consciously think about the Flying Dutchman or connect him with my own work or weave him into my reveries. My own problems, my own intense, dynamic interest in the unfolding of the unconscious or the subconscious pattern, did not seem to include him. He was so personable, so presentable, apparently so richly intellectually and materially endowed. I envied him, I think, his apparently uncompl-

icated personality. He was an intellectual type but externalized, the diplomatic or even business type; one did not think of him as tortured or troubled; there seemed nothing of *Sturm und Drang* about him. He appeared scholarly, yes, but not in a bookish introverted sense. You would have said that his body fitted him as perfectly and as suavely as the grey or blue cloth that covered it; his soul fitted his body, you would have said, and his mind fitted his brain or his head; the forehead was high, unfurrowed; his eyes looked perceptive with a mariner’s blue gaze, the eyes were a shade off or a shade above blue-grey yet with that grey North Sea in them. Yes – cool, cold, perceptive yet untroubled, you would have said. When later I came to think of it, yes, then it did seem that he was mercurial, Mercury.

I do not think that the name of the winged messenger, Hermes of the Greeks, Mercury of the Romans, ever came up in my talks with the Professor, except once in a roundabout way when I had a dream sequence that included a figure from the famous Raphael Donner fountain in the Marktplatz. This is a very beautiful fountain with reclining figures of river gods, two women and two men. My dream was connected with a young man of my acquaintance in London; his name is not Brooks but his name does suggest streams and rivers so we may call him Brooks. I connected this young Mr. Brooks with the figure of the younger of the male river gods in my dream sequence. It was then that I said to the Professor that the reclining bronze fountain figure had certain affinities with the poised Bolognese Mercury. We agreed that the Raphael Donner figure was the more attractive and original of the two, but that if you should raise the reclining river god and stand him on his feet, he might faintly resemble the Mercury – or in reverse, set the Mercury down to lean on his elbow and he might almost take the place of the bronze fountain figure. It

was in any case our Professor's charming way to fall in with an idea, to do it justice but not to overstress unimportant details. For this seemed unimportant at the time.

Perhaps it is not very important now. It is interesting, however, to note in retrospect how the mind hedges away. I connected the Raphael Donner figure, and by implication the Mercury, with a charming but not very important young London acquaintance, while the actual personable image is there in Vienna and was there – had been there – reclining on this very couch, every hour just before my own session. As I say, I did not consciously think about Dr. van der Leeuw or weave him into my reveries. Nor did I think of him as Mercury, the Messenger of the Gods and the Leader of the Dead, after he crashed.

He was a stranger. I did not really know him. We had spoken once in the house at Döbling, outside Vienna. The Professor waved him across the large, unfamiliar drawing room. Dr. van der Leeuw bowed, he addressed me in polite, distinguished German, would the *gnädige Frau* object to altering her hour for one day, tomorrow? I answered him in English, I would not mind at all, I would come at four, he at five. He thanked me pleasantly in friendly English, without a trace of accent. That was the first and last time I spoke to the Flying Dutchman. We had exchanged 'hours.'

4

THE PROFESSOR WAS seventy-seven. His birthday in May was significant. The consulting room in the strange house contained some of his treasures and his famous desk. The room looked the same, except for the desk. Instead of the semicircle of priceless little *objets d'art*, there was a carefully arranged

series of vases; each contained a spray of orchids or a single flower. I had nothing for the Professor. I said, 'I am sorry, I haven't brought you anything because I couldn't find what I wanted.' I said, 'Anyway, I wanted to give you something different.' My remark might have seemed a shade careless, a shade arrogant. It might have seemed either of these things, or both. I do not know how the Professor translated it. He waved me to the couch, satisfied or unsatisfied with my apparently casual regard for his birthday.

I had not found what I wanted so I did not give him anything. In one of our talks in the old room at Berggasse, we had gone off on one of our journeys. Sometimes the Professor knew actually my terrain, sometimes it was implicit in a statue or a picture, like that old-fashioned steel engraving of the Temple at Karnak that hung above the couch. I had visited that particular temple, he had not. But this time it was Italy; we were together in Rome. The years went forward, then backward. The shuttle of the years ran a thread that wove my pattern into the Professor's. 'Ah, the Spanish Steps,' said the Professor. 'It was those branches of almond,' I said; 'of all the flowers and the flower baskets, I remember those best.' 'But,' said the Professor, 'the gardenias! In Rome, even *I* could afford to wear a gardenia.' It was not that he conjured up the past and invoked the future. It was a present that was in the past or a past that was in the future.

Even I could search Vienna for a single gardenia or a cluster of gardenias. But I could not find them. Another year, I wrote from London, asking a friend in Vienna – an English student there – to make a special effort to find a cluster of gardenias for the Professor's birthday. She wrote back, 'I looked everywhere for the gardenias. But the florists told me that Professor Freud liked orchids and that people always ordered orchids for his birthday; they thought you would like to know. I sent the orchids for you.'

5

IT WAS SOMETIME later that the Professor received my gardenias. It was not a birthday, it was not Vienna. I had been to see him in London, in new surroundings. He had arrived lately, an exile. It was a large house with a garden. There had been much discussion and anxiety concerning the Professor's famous collection of Greek and Egyptian antiquities and the various Chinese and other Oriental treasures. The boxes had at last arrived, although the family expressed some doubt as to whether or not the entire treasure-trove, or even any of it, would be found intact. At least, the boxes had come, due to the influence and generosity of the Professor's friend and disciple, Madame Marie Bonaparte, the Princess George of Greece; 'the Princess' or 'our Princess,' the Professor called her. I had expressed surprise at seeing several Greek figures on his desk. It seemed to be the same desk in a room that suggested that summer room in the house outside Vienna of my first visit in 1933. But this was autumn 1938. 'How did you manage to bring those from Vienna?' I asked him. 'I did not bring them,' he said. 'The Princess had them waiting for me in Paris, so that I should feel at home there.' It was a treacherous, evil world but there was yet loyalty and beauty in it. It had been a flying, frightening journey. He had told me, five years before in Vienna, that traveling was even then out of the question for him. It was distinctly forbidden him by the distinguished specialist who was always within beck and call. (If I am not mistaken, this devoted friend accompanied the Professor on his journey across the Continent.) It was difficult, seeing the familiar desk, the familiar new-old images on the desk there, to realize that this was London. Indeed, it was better to think of it in terms of a temporary slightly familiar

dwelling, as that summer house at Döbling. This pleasant district was geographically, in a sense, to London, what Döbling had been to Vienna. But there was no return to Berggasse, Freudgasse that was to have been.

6

BUT IN IMAGINATION at least, in the mist of a late afternoon, I could still continue a quest, a search. There might be gardenias somewhere. I found them in a West End florist's and scribbled on a card, 'To greet the return of the Gods.' The gardenias reached the Professor. I have his letter.

20 Maresfield Gardens,
London, N. W. 3
Nov. 28th, 1938

Dear H.D.,

I got today some flowers. By chance or intention they are my favourite flowers, those I most admire. Some words 'to greet the return of the Gods' (other people read: Goods). No name. I suspect you to be responsible for the gift. If I have guessed right don't answer but accept my hearty thanks for so charming a gesture. In any case,

*affectionately yours,
Sigm. Freud*

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I ONLY SAW the Professor once more. It was summer again. French windows opened on a pleasant stretch of lawn. The Gods or the Goods were suitably arranged on ordered shelves.

I was not alone with the Professor. He sat quiet, a little wistful it seemed, withdrawn. I was afraid then, as I had often been afraid, of impinging, disturbing his detachment, of draining his vitality. I had no choice in the matter, anyway. There were others present and the conversation was carried on in an ordered, conventional manner. Like the Gods or the Goods, we were seated in a pleasant circle; a conventionally correct yet superficially sustained ordered hospitality prevailed. There was a sense of outer security, at least no words were spoken to recall a devastatingly near past or to evoke an equivocal future. I was in Switzerland when soon after the announcement of a World at War the official London news bulletin announced that Dr. Sigmund Freud, who had opened up the field of the knowledge of the unconscious mind, the innovator or founder of the science of psychoanalysis, was dead.

8

I HAD ORIGINALLY written *had gone*, but I crossed it out deliberately. Yes, he was dead. I was not emotionally involved. The Professor was an old man. He was eighty-three. The war was on us. I did not grieve for the Professor or think of him. He was spared so much. He had confined his researches to the living texture of wholesome as well as unwholesome thought, but contemporary thought, you might say. That is to say, he had brought the past into the present with his *the childhood of the individual is the childhood of the race* – or is it the other way round? – *the childhood of the race is the childhood of the individual*. In any case (whether or not, the converse also is true), he had opened up, among others, that particular field of the unconscious mind that went to prove that the traits and tendencies of

obscure aboriginal tribes, as well as the shape and substance of the rituals of vanished civilizations, were still inherent in the human mind – the human psyche, if you will. But according to his theories the soul existed explicitly, or showed its form and shape in and through the medium of the mind, and the body, as affected by the mind's ecstasies or disorders. About the greater transcendental issues, we never argued. But there was an argument implicit in our very bones. We had come together in order to substantiate something. I did not know what. There was something that was beating in my brain; I do not say my heart – my brain. I wanted it to be let out. I wanted to free myself of repetitive thoughts and experiences – my own and those of many of my contemporaries. I did not specifically realize just what it was I wanted, but I knew that I, like most of the people I knew, in England, America, and on the Continent of Europe, was drifting. We were drifting. Where? I did not know but at least I accepted the fact that we *were* drifting. At least, I knew this – I would (before the current of inevitable events swept me right into the main stream and so on to the cataract) stand aside, if I could (if it were not already too late), and take stock of my possessions. You might say that I had – yes, I had something that I specifically owned. I *owned* myself. I did not really, of course. My family, my friends, and my circumstances owned me. But I *had* something. Say it was a narrow birch-bark canoe. The great forest of the unknown, the supernormal or supernatural, was all around and about us. With the current gathering force, I could at least pull in to the shallows before it was too late, take stock of my very modest possessions of mind and body, and ask the old Hermit who lived on the edge of this vast domain to talk to me, to tell me, if he would, how best to steer my course.

We touched lightly on some of the more abstruse transcendental problems, it is true, but we related them to the familiar

family-complex. Tendencies of thought and imagination, however, were not cut away, were not pruned even. My imagination wandered at will; my dreams were revealing, and many of them drew on classical or Biblical symbolism. Thoughts were things, to be collected, collated, analyzed, shelved, or resolved. Fragmentary ideas, apparently unrelated, were often found to be part of a special layer or stratum of thought and memory, therefore to belong together; these were sometimes skillfully pieced together like the exquisite Greek tear-jars and iridescent glass bowls and vases that gleamed in the dusk from the shelves of the cabinet that faced me where I stretched, propped up on the couch in the room in Berggasse 19, Wien IX. The dead were living in so far as they lived in memory or were recalled in dream.

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In any case, affectionately yours . . . I did not know what enraged him suddenly. I veered round off the couch, my feet on the floor. I do not know exactly what I had said. I have certain notes that I jotted down while in Vienna, but I never worked them over and have barely glanced at them since. I do not want to become involved in the strictly historical sequence. I wish to recall the impressions, or rather I wish the impressions to recall me. Let the impressions come in their own way, make their own sequence. 'There will be plenty of memoirs about the Professor,' Walter Schmideberg said to me. 'I expect Sachs and the Princess have already done theirs.'

The analyst Schmideberg spoke ironically; he was a young Austrian officer on the Russian front, in the First World War, a 'captain of horses' as he described himself to me in the earlier

days before his English had become so set. 'Captain of horses' conveyed more to me than 'cavalry officer' or 'officer of the guards'; just as 'needle-tree,' to which he referred one day, than 'pine' or even 'evergreen.' So the impact of a language, as well as the impact of an impression may become 'correct,' become 'stylized,' lose its living quality. It is easy to be caught, like Schmideberg, in the noose of self-criticism, it is easy to say, 'Everybody will be scribbling memoirs,' but the answer to that is, 'Indeed yes, but neither the Princess George of Greece nor Dr. Hanns Sachs aforetime of Vienna and Berlin, later of Boston, Massachusetts, can scribble exactly *my* impressions of the Professor.' Moreover, I don't think anyone could give us a more tender, humorous account of the Professor (if he would let the impressions carry him out of himself) than the former young Rittmeister Schmideberg, who became the world's adept at smuggling cigars to Berggasse during the darkest days of that war, and with whom the Professor kept faith during his bitter year of confinement in an Italian prison-camp, ironically after the war had ended.

10

SO MUCH FOR the Princess, Hanns Sachs, and Walter Schmideberg, the one-time Rittmeister of the 15th Imperial Austro-Hungarian Hussars of His Royal Highness, Archduke Francis Salvator. For myself, I veer round, uncanonically seated stark upright with my feet on the floor. The Professor himself is uncanonical enough; he is beating with his hand, with his fist, on the head-piece of the old-fashioned horsehair sofa that had heard more secrets than the confession box of any popular Roman Catholic father-confessor in his heyday.