

MEMOIRS OF  
MY NERVOUS ILLNESS

Daniel Paul Schreber



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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

SCHREBER'S *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* must be the most written-about document in all psychiatric literature. Over the years, a huge bibliography of books and articles—chiefly in German and in English—has accrued. Successive generations of psychiatric writers have used the book as the nub of successive theories. From the time that Freud's celebrated paper about it was published in 1911,<sup>1</sup> everyone has had something to say about Schreber.

Schreber himself believed his book to have a message for the world: not only to expose the nature of the illness he had suffered but, more importantly for him, to pass on some kind of cloudy divine revelation. For the writing comes straight from the borderline between sanity and madness. Based on jottings made at the peak of his illness, the book was put together when he was approaching recovery, with some of the resources

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1. Freud, S. (1911) "Psycho-analytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoides)," *Standard Edition*, 12:9-79.

of his fine mind once again available. He wanted it to become known, and so it has; because in its vividness and abundant detail it touches on so many of our assumptions about reality, about the structure of our perceived world, its space and time and objective identity. Schreber in his suffering and insanity saw all these dissolve away, and re-form into the stuff of myth and nightmare.

The *Memoirs* were recognized as remarkable from their publication in 1903; medical reviewers recommended colleagues to read them. Nevertheless if Freud had not been so intrigued by them, Schreber's story might by now be forgotten. Both Freud and Jung were fascinated by the book, and already in 1910 Freud was writing jokingly to Jung that the "wonderful Schreber" ought to have been made a professor of psychiatry and director of an asylum. It was Jung, always particularly interested in psychosis, who had first drawn his colleague's attention to it, and the two men would borrow Schreberisms such as *flüchtige hingemacht*, or "fleetingly-improvised," in their correspondence. After the break between them, however, Jung described Freud's interpretation of the Schreber case in terms of homosexual wishes as "very unsatisfactory." In recent times Schreber has been discussed particularly in relation to the writings of his father, a renowned German authority on child-rearing—firstly by the psychoanalyst W.G. Niederland and then in a more popular version in Morton Schatzman's *Soul Murder* (1975).

Moritz Schreber was in fact hugely influential. As late as the 1930s (I am told by a German friend) German children were being threatened with the Schreber *Geradehalter*, a contraption of boards and straps, if they did not sit up straight. He had a system and a manual for everything—the cold-water health system, the system to cure harmful body habits, indoor gymnastic systems for health preservation, outdoor play systems, the lifelong systematic diet guide. But of his two sons,

one committed suicide and one (Paul, author of the *Memoirs*) went mad; Moritz himself entered a deep and isolating depression ten years before his death and while Paul was still in his teens.

Paul Schreber was born in 1842 and grew up to become a lawyer, and then a judge; he married, but the couple had stillbirths and miscarriages and no surviving children. His first breakdown came when he was 42; he recovered well from it until 1893, when at the age of 51 he lapsed disastrously again and disappeared into the hospital, voluntarily at first, for nine years. The *Memoirs* were written while he was in Sonnenstein public asylum, as an account of what he believed were his unique experiences and as a plea for release.

After two years of legal wrangles, Paul Schreber was released to his home and spent some apparently peaceful years with his wife and adopted daughter. But when his wife Sabine had an incapacitating stroke he fell ill again, and from then until his death in 1911 remained in the asylum. "Speaks only very rarely with the doctor," his hospital records noted, "and then only that he is being tortured with the food that he cannot eat, etc. Continually under the tormenting influence of his hallucinations. Sleep at night mostly poor. Moans, stands in bed, stands rigidly in front of the window with eyes closed and an expression of listening on his face." From time to time the tragic patient would scribble words on scraps of paper: "miracles"—"tomb"—"not eat." His wish had been that "when my last hour finally strikes I will no longer find myself in an Asylum, but in orderly domestic life surrounded by my near relatives, as I may need more loving care than I could get in an Asylum." It was not to be granted.

Freud's basic interpretation of the case—drawn from the *Memoirs*, for he never tried to meet the man—was what might be expected from his views at the time: Schreber's fantasy of being turned into a woman (one of his psychotic symptoms)

indicated repressed homosexual love for his father in the shape of the asylum director Flechsig (Flechsig figures as a sort of malign demigod throughout the *Memoirs*). One has to agree with Jung that as an interpretation this was very limited—though Freud did add that “much more material remains to be gathered from the symbolic content of the fantasies and delusions of this gifted paranoiac.” When Schreber in his isolation began to believe that the whole world had been devastated, with only himself chosen by God to repopulate the world from his womb, he was surely representing his own life’s devastation rather than expressing a homosexual wish. And since he and his wife had failed to produce a living child, it would be compensated for by the new Schreber race that God planned to bring out of him. This was not so much a matter of desiring men as of identifying with the fecundity of women—but Freud put the father-son relation at the center of his analysis and, as usual, left women and mothers well out of the picture.

Again, in writing that he came to have “a thing between [his] legs which hardly resembled at all a normally formed male organ,” Schreber would seem to have been summing up all his degradations in the asylum, the loss of his friends and profession, the disappearance of his married life. As Professor Zvi Lothane has pointed out in his reassessment of many implications of the case, out of all the writers who have had their say about it, only one—Thomas Szasz—has criticized Freud for devoting page after page to speculations on the nature of Schreber’s illness but not a word to the miseries of his imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> People put into the hospital because their mental life has smashed may be describing the horrors they are going through currently, as well as the traumas of childhood.

It is not hard to see why in Schreber’s fantasies his psychiatrists were cruel and all-powerful. Flechsig, director of the

2. Lothane, Z. (1992) *In Defense of Schreber. Soul Murder and Psychiatry*.

first asylum, was primarily a neuroanatomist, with a guiding maxim that “mental disorders are brain disorders.” Drugs and physical restraints—straps, railings, padded cells—were his methods of treatment; women patients might have their ovaries or uterus taken out. In any case, he confided to a colleague, he had little real interest in psychiatry, which he considered a “hopeless science.” The head of the public asylum to which Schreber was sent afterwards, Guido Weber, was of the same kind, and opposed Schreber’s eventual discharge from the asylum strongly enough to delay it for some time.

Freud himself, however, for all that his interpretation of the case now seems so wrong-headed, did see the delusions that characterize madness as the real and interesting creations of a human being. Creating them was for Freud a work, a process—*Wahnbildungsarbeit*, or the “work of delusion-formation.” Even more strikingly, Freud proposed the idea that delusional systems are a means of keeping the patient going, holding a world together:

The end of the world is a projection of this internal catastrophe: his i.e. the paranoiac’s subjective world has come to an end since his withdrawal of his love for it. And the paranoiac builds it again, not more splendid, it is true, but at least so that he can once more live in it. He builds it up by the work of his delusions. *The delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction.* [Italics Freud’s.]

Such an insight would have been quite foreign to a Flechsig or a Weber.

If much of the delusional world that Paul Schreber describes in the *Memoirs* reflects the real world around him, behind that we can see the structure of his upbringing within the

Moritz Schreber childcare system. As expounded in Moritz's thirty-odd books, this was indeed sinister. Suppression, control, total obedience are the keynotes. The child's "crude nature" and "ignoble parts" are to be erased at all costs. Obedience must be blind: "The idea should never cross the child's mind that his will might prevail." Even babies conform: "respected threatening gestures" will be enough to silence them. Some of the books are illustrated by pictures of special equipment, which certainly seems not unlike that used in the asylum by Flechsig: the head holder, the bed straps, the chin band, and of course the *Geradehalter*. There are, certainly, some references in the books to loving attitudes, occasional "playing-together" and "joking-together." But one feels that the joking-together of the Schreber family may have had a certain grim quality.

The capricious, punitive God of Schreber's delusionary world does seem made in the image of his father. God, like the paterfamilias of the childcare manuals, "did not really understand the living human being and had no need to understand him, because, according to the Order of the World, He dealt only with corpses"; this has "run like a red thread through my entire life." Moritz Schreber in effect forsook his son, too, by withdrawing into depression and then by dying so early. As well as this, the boy must have grown up among the contradictory messages that writers such as R.D. Laing find typical of schizophrenics' families: the child hears that everything is being done for the best, while getting messages of anger or hate at the same time. In the asylum, it was a most irrational God that tormented him. His particular misfortune was to be reared not just by a stern father but by the famous child-rearing expert, celebrated for his Orthopedic Institute, his books, his *Schrebergärten*. How could he be wrong?

Moritz's demand for blind obedience, Paul's rebound into delusions of omnipotence, have been linked—by Elias

Canetti,<sup>3</sup> later by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut<sup>4</sup>—with German totalitarianism. This may seem too far-fetched an association. And yet Hitler's generation was growing up at a time when Moritz Schreber's books of "household totalitarianism"—Schatzman's excellent phrase—were still popular. At the least the Moritz Schreber system seems to reflect a German obsession with the deadly obedience, also instilled in military academies, that was to be demanded of the SS.

In a sense, as Zvi Lothane has pointed out in *In Defense of Schreber*, the *Memoirs* are a rewriting of Moritz's message to posterity, an alternative version. In the asylums Paul discovered horrifying systems running the universe, and made it his quest to decode them, "patch over the rent" in the world. Flechsig and Weber, and their asylums, claimed to be caring for him, but transmitted a different message; his wife was said to love him, but did not visit. There must therefore be a plot

to hand me over to another human being . . . in such a way that my soul was handed to him, but my body—transformed into a female body and, misconstruing the above-described fundamental tendency of the Order of the World—was then left to that human being for sexual misuse and simply "forsaken," in other words left to rot. One does not seem to have been quite clear what was to happen to such a "forsaken" human being. . . . Naturally such matters were not mentioned by Professor Flechsig when he faced me *as a human being*. But the purpose was clearly expressed in the *nerve-language*. . . . Completely cut off from the outside world, without any contact with my family, left in the hands of rough attendants with whom, the inner voices said, it was my duty

3. Canetti, E. (1962) *Crowds and Power*.

4. Kohut, H. (1971) *The Analysis of the Self*.



to fight now and then to prove my manly courage, I could think of nothing else but that any manner of death, however frightful, was preferable to so degrading an end.

The key word is *forsaken*. The *Memoirs* are an account of what it is to be forsaken by everything familiar and real, and of the delusionary world that gets invented in its place. As Freud said, "the delusion is found applied like a patch over the place where originally a rent has appeared in the ego's relation to the external world."

The complicated, mythic universe that Schreber in his captivity created—an affair of rays and miracles, upper and lower gods, souls and soul murder, voices of nerve language, struggles against the "Order of the World"—concerned itself with issues of realness and unreality, identity and fusion, power and passivity. His own identity having been invaded, fragmented, distorted, and annihilated, a story had to be found that made sense of it. The more massive the violations, the more grandiose the explanations. He was forsaken; so "since the dawn of the world there can hardly have been a case like mine, in which a human being entered into continual contact . . . with the totality of all souls and with God's omnipotence itself." He was shut away and forgotten; so "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." Nobody cared if he lived or died; so "what detailed measures God would have to adopt after my death I feel I can hardly as much as speculate on." All meaning had left his life; so "it is still my conviction that this is the truth—that I had to solve one of the most intricate problems ever set for man and that I had to fight a sacred battle for the greatest good of mankind." He was totally lonely; so crowds of shadowy figures flitted in and out of his body (at one time, no less

than 240 Benedictine monks, led by a Jesuit Father!). His mind had been emptied; so it was taken over by compulsions—"the nature of compulsive thinking lies in a human being having to think incessantly; in other words, man's natural right to give the nerves of his mind their necessary rest . . . was from the beginning denied me by the rays." So the emptiness of his cell was filled up with tormenting activity. But as his plight became more terrifying, "bad news came in from all sides that even this or that star or this or that group of stars had to be 'given up'; at one time it was said that even Venus had been 'flooded,' at another that the whole solar system would now have to be 'disconnected.'"

Schreber's delusionary systems are a kind of unconscious parody of the preoccupations of philosophy: How did he know who he was? That anyone else existed? What was time? Was there free will? In particular: What was real and what was not? His views on this were formed by his forsakenness. As he was moved from Flechsig's private asylum to the more brutal public one of Weber, his ability to believe in the realness of other people waned, and he arrived at the concept of "fleetingly-improvised" people. These creatures—as perhaps they do for the infant—arbitrarily appeared and disappeared, no longer having the solidity he would once have ascribed to them. During the journey to Sonnenstein public asylum he caught a glimpse of the outside world, but "I did not know whether to take the streets of Leipzig through which I traveled as only theater props, perhaps in the fashion in which Prince Potemkin is said to have put them up for Empress Catherine II of Russia during her travels through the desolate country, so as to give her the impression of a flourishing countryside." He was inclined to believe, in any case, that the rest of the human race had in fact perished, for "the impression gained hold of me that the period in question, which, according to human calculation, stretched over only three to four months, had covered

an immensely long period. . . . [I] therefore thought I was the last real human being left, and that the few human shapes whom I saw . . . were only 'fleeting-improvised-men' created by miracle." He had no watch, and his shutters were locked at night, so that "I regarded the starry sky as largely, if not wholly, extinguished."

Schreber's identity underwent startling changes. These are reminiscent of William James's description of self-fragmentation during insanity in his *Principles of Psychology*:

One patient has another self that repeats all his thoughts for him. . . . Another has two bodies, lying in different beds. Some patients feel as if they had lost parts of their bodies, teeth, brains, stomach, etc. In some it is made of wood, glass, butter, etc.

"Attempts were also made," says Schreber, "to falsify my mental individuality in all sorts of ways." He was put into an inferior body, had to share his skull with other souls, acquired a profusion of heads. Flechsig's and Weber's souls insinuated themselves into his body. The inside of his skull was even lined with a foreign membrane so that he should forget who he was. Innumerable tortures were inflicted: the compression-of-the-chest miracle (which Schatzman and others have linked with the wearing of the *Geradehalter*), the head-compression machine, the stealing of his stomach, the invasion of the lung-worm. He was not allowed to sit, lie, or stand: "Rays did not seem to appreciate at all that a human being who actually exists *must be somewhere*."

At another time, he says, poison was injected into him—even though the voices had told him that if he must be forsaken, he should be forsaken with a pure body. Sometimes the voices said things that sound as if they came from Schreber *père*: "Do not think about certain parts of your body"; "A job

started must be finished." Sometimes, as when Virginia Woolf heard the birds outside speaking in Greek, the voices put themselves into birds who called out "Are you not ashamed?" when he fed them.

Freud in his paper on Schreber did not investigate the mystery of "voices": how it is that speech, presumably speech from the patient's mind, appears so forcibly to come from outside. Along with Socrates and Joan of Arc, Freud had in fact experienced this himself. He describes it in an early paper on aphasia:

I remember having twice been in danger of my life, and each time the awareness of the danger occurred to me quite suddenly. On both occasions I felt "this was the end," and while otherwise my inner language proceeded with only indistinct sound images and slight lip movements, in these situations of danger I heard the words as if somebody was shouting them into my ear, and at the same time I saw them as if they were printed on a piece of paper floating in the air.

There is a kind of awesome literary charge in the sheer fertility of the mad imagination. When the rays said that Schreber was to be reincarnated, it was to be as, first, a "Hyperborean woman," then a "Jesuit Novice in Ossegg," then a "Burgomaster of Klattau," then "an Alsatian girl who had to defend her honor against a victorious French officer," and finally "a Mongolian Prince." The whole cast of a surrealist play immediately springs into being. If there was in fact a compensation for poor Schreber in his sufferings, it was that the mind freed from reason is full of pictures. He speaks of the joy of "picturing"—

It has truly often been a consolation and comfort in the unending monotony of my dreary life, in the mental

tortures I suffered from the nonsensical twaddle of voices. What a joy to be able to picture again in my mind's eye recollections of journeys and landscapes, sometimes—when the rays behave favorably—with surprising faithfulness and true color.

Mountains, people, entire operas were called up at will. His deliberate picturing became a weapon against the involuntary hallucinations: "Seeing pictures purifies rays . . . they then enter into me without their usual destructive force. For this reason attempts are regularly made by counter-miracles to blot out what I have 'pictured'; but I am usually victorious. . . ."

Other kinds of imaginative work figured in the return to a precarious sanity that enabled Schreber to gain his release. First among these was playing the piano. One was put into his room for his sole use; his feelings on seeing it he expresses by a quotation from *Tannhäuser*: "I could only remember that I had lost all hope of ever greeting you again or ever raising my eyes to you." He began to remember how much he had forgotten. Music, having its own recollected laws, also defeated the rays: "During piano-playing the nonsensical twaddle of the voices which talk to me is drowned. . . . Every attempt at 'representing' me by the 'creation of a false feeling' and suchlike is doomed to end in failure because of the real feeling one can put into piano playing." Playing an aria from *The Magic Flute*—"Oh, I feel it, it has vanished, gone for ever"—he found music embodying truths that he recognized from afar. Other mitigations of his forsakenness—seeing a children's procession in the street, getting a letter from a relative with an identifiable stamp on—began to win him round to the idea that the human race still existed. He drowned the voices by learning pieces of poetry by heart; he played chess with other patients. What remains missing up to the end is feeling itself: no tears are recorded.

Though we know much—much that is all too grim—about Paul Schreber's father, we know too little about the women in his life. From family testimony it seems that his mother was a strong matriarch, indeed must have been when her husband withdrew into his long depression. In spite of his father's legacy of manly exhortations, she could have been the stronger figure for the son to identify with. Perhaps a suppressed femininity in Moritz had to be acted out by his son, perhaps the son had to throw out an unreal masculine ethos clamped on him like the *Geradehalter*. It is an irony, in any case, that the commanding Moritz Schreber is now remembered for being the father of a madman.

Too little is also known about Paul Schreber's wife Sabine. The chapter that was originally removed from the *Memoirs* for discretion's sake might have had many relevant secrets in it. She is known to have been close to her influential father, to have admired Flechsig and kept a photograph of him on her desk, to have consented to her husband's forced removal to a public asylum, and to have been far from eager to have him home. All could have been good cause for Schreber's anguish and protest. The couple's adopted daughter Fridoline told an interviewer in her old age that her adoptive father was "more of a mother to me than my mother"; she preferred him, because he was "loving, just and kind." There is some mystery about Fridoline's adoption and it has even been suggested that she was Sabine's illegitimate daughter, but there is no proof. There may have been further hidden dramas within the Schreber family.

The *Memoirs* will no doubt go on and on being written about. There is no one else who has been as mad, as vividly hallucinated as Schreber was, who at the same time has described with such detail and lucidity what he experienced. In following Schreber's testimony on what patterns the mind breaks up into when it goes wrong, it is as though we are also

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seeing a film reversed, one that records the putting-together of reality from infancy onwards. Step by step, the ordinary growing child puts together time and space and identity. Schreber deconstructs them.

—ROSEMARY DINNAGE

MEMOIRS OF  
MY NERVOUS  
ILLNESS

# Denkwürdigkeiten

eines

## Nervenkranken

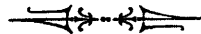
nebst Nachträgen

und einem Anhang über die Frage:

„Unter welchen Voraussetzungen darf eine für geisteskrank erachtete Person gegen ihren erklärten Willen in einer Heilanstalt festgehalten werden?“

von

**Dr. jur. Daniel Paul Schreber,**  
Senatspräsident beim kgl. Oberlandesgericht Dresden a. D.



Dewald Muge in Leipzig.  
1903.

### P R E F A C E

I STARTED THIS work without having publication in mind. The idea only occurred to me as I progressed with it; however, I did not conceal from myself doubts which seemed to stand in the way of publication: mainly consideration for certain persons still living. Yet I believe that expert examination of my body and observation of my personal fate during my lifetime would be of value both for science and the knowledge of religious truths. In the face of such considerations all personal issues must recede.

Of the whole work the following were written:

The Memoirs themselves (Chapters 1-22) in the period February to September 1900.

Postscripts 1-8 in the period October 1900 to June 1901.

Postscripts second series at the end of 1902.

The outward circumstances of my life have materially changed since the early beginnings of this work. While at the beginning I was living in almost prison-like isolation, separated from contact with educated people, excluded even from