

The Complete Letters of  
**SIGMUND FREUD**

to

**WILHELM FLIESS**

1887 – 1904

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## Theory Transformed



September 21, 1897

Dear Wilhelm,

Here I am again, since yesterday morning, refreshed, cheerful, impoverished, at present without work, and having settled in again, I am writing to you first.

And now I want to confide in you immediately the great secret that has been slowly dawning on me in the last few months. I no longer believe in my *neurotica* [theory of the neuroses]. This is probably not intelligible without an explanation; after all, you yourself found credible what I was able to tell you. So I will begin historically [and tell you] where the reasons for disbelief came from. The continual disappointment in my efforts to bring a single analysis<sup>1</sup> to a real conclusion; the running away of people who for a period of time had been most gripped [by analysis]; the absence of the complete successes on which I had counted; the possibility of explaining to myself the partial successes in other ways, in the usual fashion — this was the first group. Then the surprise that in all cases, the *father*, not excluding my own,<sup>2</sup> had to be accused of being perverse — the realization of the unexpected frequency of hysteria, with precisely the same conditions prevailing in each, whereas surely such widespread perversions against children are not very probable. The [incidence] of perversion would have to be immeasurably more frequent than the [resulting] hysteria because the illness, after all, occurs only where there has been an accumulation of events and there is a contributory factor that weakens the defense. Then, third, the certain insight that there are no indications of reality in the unconscious, so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect. (Accordingly, there would remain the solution that the sexual fantasy invariably

seizes upon the theme of the parents.) Fourth, the consideration that in the most deep-reaching psychosis the unconscious memory does not break through, so that the secret of childhood experiences is not disclosed even in the most confused delirium. If one thus sees that the unconscious never overcomes the resistance of the conscious, the expectation that in treatment the opposite is bound to happen, to the point where the unconscious is completely tamed by the conscious, also diminishes.

I was so far influenced [by this] that I was ready to give up two things: the complete resolution of a neurosis and the certain knowledge of its etiology in childhood. Now I have no idea of where I stand because I have not succeeded in gaining a theoretical understanding of repression and its interplay of forces. It seems once again arguable that only later experiences give the impetus to fantasies, which [then] hark back to childhood, and with this the factor of a hereditary disposition regains a sphere of influence from which I had made it my task to dislodge it — in the interest of illuminating neurosis.

If I were depressed, confused, exhausted, such doubts would surely have to be interpreted as signs of weakness. Since I am in an opposite state, I must recognize them as the result of honest and vigorous intellectual work and must be proud that after going so deep I am still capable of such criticism. Can it be that this doubt merely represents an episode in the advance toward further insight?

It is strange, too, that no feeling of shame appeared — for which, after all, there could well be occasion. Of course I shall not tell it in Dan, nor speak of it in Askelon, in the land of the Philistines, but in your eyes and my own, I have more the feeling of a victory than a defeat (which is surely not right).

How nice that your letter has arrived just now! It induces me to advance a proposal with which I had intended to close. If during this lazy period I were to go to the Northwest Station on Saturday evening, I could be with you at noon on Sunday and then travel back the next night. Can you clear that day for an idyll for the two of us, interrupted by an idyll for three and three and a half [of us]? That is what I wanted to ask. Or do you have a dear guest in the house or something urgent to do elsewhere? Or, if I have to leave for home the same evening, which would then not be worthwhile, do the same conditions obtain if I go straight to the Northwest Station on Friday evening and stay with you one and a half days? I mean this week, of course.

Now to continue my letter. I vary Hamlet's saying, "To be in readiness": to be cheerful is everything! I could indeed feel quite

discontent. The expectation of eternal fame was so beautiful, as was that of certain wealth, complete independence, travels, and lifting the children above the severe worries that robbed me of my youth. Everything depended upon whether or not hysteria would come out right. Now I can once again remain quiet and modest, go on worrying and saving. A little story from my collection occurs to me: "Rebecca, take off your gown; you are no longer a bride."<sup>3</sup> In spite of all this, I am in very good spirits and content that you feel a need to see me again similar to mine to see you.

There remains one small anxiety. What can I still understand of your matters? I am certainly incapable of critically evaluating them; I shall hardly be in a position to comprehend them, and the doubt that then sets in is not the product of intellectual work, like my doubt about my own matters, but is the result of mental inadequacy. It is easier for you; you can survey everything I bring and criticize it vigorously.

I have to add one more thing. In this collapse of everything valuable, the psychological alone has remained untouched. The dream [book] stands entirely secure and my beginnings of the metapsychological work have only grown in my estimation. It is a pity that one cannot make a living, for instance, on dream interpretation!

Martha came back with me to Vienna. Minna and the children are staying in the country another week. They have all been exceedingly well.

My pupil, Dr. Gattel, is something of a disappointment. Very gifted and clever, he must nevertheless, owing to his own nervousness and several unfavorable character traits, be classified as unpalatable.

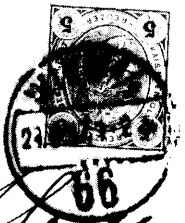
How all of you are and whatever else is happening between heaven and earth, I hope — anticipating your reply — to hear soon in person.

Cordially your  
Sigm.

1. The manuscript previously was misread here. The German text printed in *Anfänge* reads, "die fortgesetzten Enttäuschungen bei den Versuchen, meine Analyse zum wirklichen Abschluss zu bringen," which Strachey correctly translates as "continual disappointments in my attempts at bringing my analysis to a real conclusion." But the original manuscript reads *eine Analyse* (a single analysis), not *meine Analyse*.

2. Strachey (*S.E.* 1:259) resurrected this phrase, "mein eigener nicht ausgeschlossen," which had been omitted in *Anfänge* and *Origins*.

3. Schur (1972, p. 191) writes: "The meaning of this Jewish joke is obvious: 'You were once a proud bride, but you got into trouble, the wedding is off — take off your bridal gown.'" Another interpretation, which I believe to be correct, was suggested

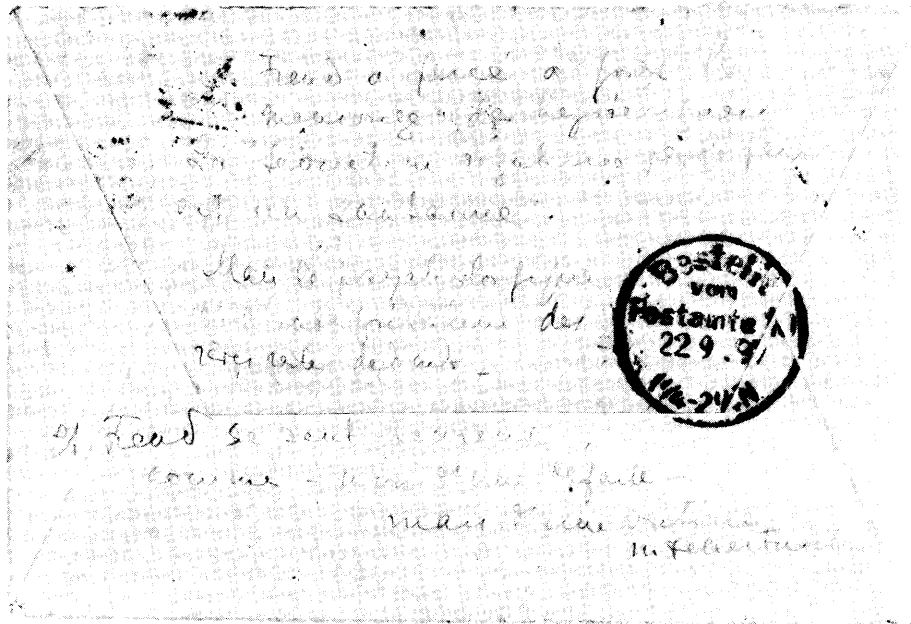


Herrn Dr. Wick. Fluss  
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The important letter of September 21, 1897.



to me by Anna Freud—namely, that Freud, with his theory of the neuroses, had believed himself privileged and happy as a bride. Those days were now over and he had to return to his earlier ordinary status; he had made no discovery. *Kalle* is a slang word that can also be used for a prostitute instead of a bride.



September 27, 1897  
IX., Berggasse 19

Dear Wilhelm,

Back home after a perfect trip (twelve hours of sleep in an isolation cell), completely without work, refreshed, stimulated, and full of new ideas, I begin with something entirely superfluous—namely, once again expressing the pleasure evoked in me, as old participant and new uncle, by your work, your state of health, your wife, and your child. As for me, I praise the happy decision, to which I have held fast since midsummer, to visit you at your home in Berlin.

My children have not yet returned. I found Martha with a harmless migraine, the first since Bolzano (August 20/21–September 27; for the collector). A new review<sup>1</sup> of I. C. ["Infantile Cerebral Paralysis"] in Wernicke's *Zeitschrift* taught me what beautiful, valuable books I am in the habit of writing.

Most cordial greetings, thanks, and soon more from your

Sigm.

1. The reference is to a long review by a Herr Mann of Breslau, published in the *Monatsschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie* (not the *Zeitschrift*, as Freud wrote). It is an extremely positive review, containing among many other praises, "The focal point of this book and its main contribution that cannot be valued highly enough . . . consist in its unsurpassingly clear and comprehensive presentation and critical appreciation of the entire clinical and anatomical material."

October 3, 1897

My dear Wilhelm,

My visit has had the advantage of acquainting me with the framework of your current work in its entirety, so that you can relate further details to me. You must not expect a response to everything, and with regard to some of my responses you will not, I hope, fail to take into account that your work is strange to me and my judgment weak. Nevertheless, each time I am grateful to you for every little item that you unselfishly let come my way. For example, your com-