

SCHREBER'S HALLUCINATIONS ABOUT THE 'LITTLE MEN'¹

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In his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Neurotic*, Schreber describes how, in the beginning of his psychosis about March of 1894, he was aware of 'little men', tiny figures of human shape but only a few millimetres in size, coming down upon his head and leading a brief existence there.

Before entering into a discussion of this peculiar phenomenon, I shall first acquaint you with certain facts which are needed for the understanding of these hallucinations. The pre-psychotic period, which is the period in which Schreber had already changed considerably but without yet showing any delusions or hallucinations, is of very great importance. At one time during this period, when Schreber was in a state between waking and sleeping, the thought occurred to him how wonderful it would be to be a woman submitting to intercourse. All the symptoms which Schreber showed during the pre-psychotic period had the task of warding off the danger contained in the idea that being a woman submitting to intercourse would lead to sexual orgasms. Schreber's defences against this idea contained the anticipation of this danger. They failed when in one night he had six emissions. Immediately thereafter his psychosis began.

It was Schreber's delusion that a conspiracy had been formed against him by Professor Flechsig, the object of this conspiracy being the murder of Schreber's soul. In the event of the conspiracy being successful, Schreber would lose his soul to Flechsig, and his body too would be abused by Flechsig, or by the male nurses in Flechsig's clinic, as a kind of prostitute, and thereafter abandoned and left to decompose. Analysis of this delusion reveals that Schreber was sexually aroused by Flechsig and by the male nurses. The attempt at murdering his soul means that Schreber, in his excitement, felt the temptation to masturbate, with the

accompanying thought that he was a woman being sexually abused by Flechsig or by the male nurses. If Schreber were to yield to this temptation, not only would he lose his soul but his body too would be destroyed.

Schreber was successful in warding off Flechsig's attempts. In the process of doing so, he tried to establish a contact with God. After a struggle of two years, signs of femininity in his body induced Schreber to accept the idea that at some time in the future he would be transformed into a woman in order to become the wife of God. His acceptance of this idea marked a turning-point in his illness. From that time forward he began to masturbate, imagining, while fondling himself, that he was a woman with voluptuous feelings. It was necessary to offer God this picture of himself, for otherwise God would turn away from him. A conspicuous fact is that his masturbation did not result in erections or emissions. The danger that his penis might react no longer existed!

Schreber was therefore able to accept transformation into a woman at the time that he succeeded in suppressing his erections.

During his psychosis two types of masturbation played a rôle.

One type of masturbation Schreber warded off, for fear that it would lead to penis activity. His thoughts connected with this type of masturbation were directed towards Flechsig. According to Schreber, if he indulged in masturbation, the end result would be the loss of his penis or even total self-destruction.

The other type of masturbation centred around the thought of God. In this type penis activity was excluded, and therefore no threat to his genitals existed. This type of masturbation Schreber considered a desirable one, but he was able to practise it only after a period of two years.

¹ Paper read at the 16th International Psycho-Analytical Congress, Zürich, August, 1949.

We may ask ourselves how Schreber succeeded in preventing the outbreak of genital activity during the first part of his psychosis when he was not yet able to suppress his erections completely during sexual excitement. He succeeded through the formation of various symptoms. As an example, I shall take Schreber's hallucinations about the 'little men'. To quote Schreber's own words: 'It has already been mentioned that because of my steadily increasing nervousness and thereby enhanced powers of attraction, an ever-increasing number of deceased souls felt themselves drawn to me. Primarily these were always ones who had retained a special interest in me that carried over from personal relationships during life. Finally the souls evaporated upon my head or in my body. The process frequently resulted in the souls concerned leading a brief existence upon my head as so-called "little men"—tiny figures of human shape, but only a few millimetres in size, perhaps—and after a while disappearing altogether. I assume that these souls, which at the time of their first approach were perhaps still composed of a great many nerves and therefore still possessed a fairly strong consciousness of their identity, paid for each approach with the loss of a part of their nerves to my body by virtue of the attraction.² In the end they consisted, I suppose, of only a single nerve, which then assumed the shape of a "little man", in the above-mentioned sense, as the last form of existence of the souls concerned, prior to their complete disappearance, on the basis of a miraculous, not further explicable connection. . . .

' Simultaneously, very frequently the stars or constellations which served as the place of origin of the souls or "from which they hung" were named to me; they were names which in part agreed with the usual astronomical terminology and in part did not. Thus, among the names mentioned especially frequently were Cassiopeia, Vega, Capella, and a star "Gemma" (I do not know whether this latter corresponds to any astronomical terminology); further, the Crucians (perhaps the Southern Cross?), the Firmament, and many others. There were nights in which the souls like "little men" by the hundred, if not by the thousand, on to my head, so to say, dripped down. I always warned the souls of the danger

of approaching me, because, from previous experience, I was conscious, every time, of the limitless attraction exerted by my nerves, whereas the souls would first consider such a menacing attraction incredible. . . .

Let us attempt to analyse Schreber's statement. The picture of his increasing nervousness exerting more and more of an attraction on the souls is a projection of the fact that Schreber felt himself increasingly drawn to other men and that these homosexual feelings greatly excited him. These souls assumed the shape of tiny human beings, thereby representing what remained of men who had died and who, according to Schreber, still retained a special interest in him based upon a personal relationship during life. Here again we meet with a projection. It was Schreber who still retained, from his normal days, a personal interest in these men, and the tiny creatures symbolized his friends, who continued to incite in him homosexual longings.

It is significant that the place of origin of these little creatures is the stars. In another chapter of his autobiography Schreber mentions that the sun and the stars are God's organs through which, for instance, He could impregnate Schreber. It is therefore easy to see that in this connection the stars represent the male genitals of God.

In a brief article which I have written on Schreber's loss of the world,³ I have tried to make clear that Schreber's God represents parts of Schreber himself and therefore God's male organs symbolize Schreber's own genitals. Accordingly the 'little men' descending from the stars may be interpreted as spermatozoa. Having accumulated this knowledge, we are now in a position to interpret Schreber's statement that there were nights when the 'little men' dripped down on to his head by the hundreds, if not by the thousands. Clearly this description is symbolic of a nocturnal emission. The primary process made possible the condensation through which the 'little men' represented not only the men to whom Schreber felt himself still attracted but also his own spermatozoa. In this connection death refers both to spermatozoa in a nocturnal emission and to these men. Schreber's warning to the 'little men' not to approach him because, through the attraction which he exerted, the

² i.e. the attraction which Schreber exerted on them.

³ M. Katan: 'Schreber's Delusion of the End of the World'. *Psychoanal. Quarterly*, 18, 1949.

'little men' would end their lives upon his head, is a projection of his own warning to himself of the danger involved in his own sexual excitement, from which he feared destruction.

Let us remember that only a short time before the development of his hallucinations, Schreber became so aroused by the men surrounding him at the clinic that he had a nocturnal outburst of six emissions. The danger represented by this orgy forced him to sever his ties with reality.

In Schreber's hallucinations, in which nocturnal emissions are symbolically represented, Schreber felt himself no longer threatened by destruction. Rather, the men to whom he felt a feminine attraction died. Furthermore, in these hallucinations the element of sexual excitement is completely lacking. Only a few weeks before (in the period of the pre-psychosis), thoughts about these other men would have aroused in Schreber intense homosexual feelings.

One point now becomes clear. At the basis of Schreber's hallucinations are thoughts about other men, and we find that exactly the same kind of thoughts occur in the pre-psychotic period. In this pre-psychotic period a contact with reality still exists, and therefore the hallucinations have their origin in a part of the personality which still maintains contact with reality. From then on, the hallucinatory process takes a different course from that of the pre-psychotic process. In the pre-psychotic period, Schreber's homosexual thoughts lead to direct sexual excitement. The process of the hallucination does not wait until such excitement develops, but an interference takes place and the hallucination occurs instead of the excitement. The danger connected with the excitement is anticipated and is successfully prevented through the formation of the hallucination. In the hallucination sexual excitement does not occur at all, and instead of the idea of Schreber perishing, we find the idea of the other men losing their lives.

This point affords us further insight. The death of these men represents the fulfilment of Schreber's wish that they should die. He desired their death in order to ward off his homosexual attachment to them, for if they were dead, the danger would no longer arise. Under prepsychotic conditions, when Schreber was still in contact with reality, he was unable

to free himself from his homosexual desires. However, the hallucination made it possible for him to do so. The content of the hallucination deals not only with the homosexual urge and the danger resulting from it, but also with the defence against this urge. Thus we see that all the factors constituting the prepsychotic conflict have become conscious in the psychotic manifestation.

What is the structure of the hallucination? This question cannot be answered without first giving a description of the structure of the delusion. You will understand that in the time permitted, it is not possible for me to give more than a brief outline of this difficult subject.⁴

Let us take as an example the delusion of persecution: a father figure persecutes the patient with homosexual intentions. In the pre-psychotic period (and what I am about to say is true in every case of schizophrenia) the patient has a feminine attachment to the father figure which can no longer be warded off by reality means. Therefore, in order that the patient may escape the conflict, the connection with reality is severed and a delusion is developed in which the homosexual attachment is projected.

Two explanations of this delusion are possible:

A. In order to keep his own homosexual feelings repressed, the patient accuses the other person of having homosexual intentions toward him (= the patient). Such a mechanism belongs to the group of denials: e.g. not I, but the other person is a homosexual.

In this mechanism a strong connection with reality exists, for it is reality which compels the ego to repress its homosexual urge.

In my opinion, this mechanism is *not* responsible for delusion formation, for it does not enable us to differentiate between a neurotic symptom and a delusion.

B. The second explanation differs completely from the first. Again the projection mechanism is in the centre, but the conflict between ego and unconscious homosexual urge has now been changed by projection into a conflict between ego and persecutor. What was originally id in the pre-psychotic period, has now been externalized and has become outer-world. The structure between ego and id is abandoned in that part of the personality which is affected

⁴ See M. Katan: 'Structural Aspect of a Case of Schizophrenia'. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 5, 1950.

by the psychosis. This fact explains why many psychotic patients give the impression that the unconscious has become conscious.

The outer-world now consists of parts which originally belonged to the patient's own personality. When the connection with the outer-world is severed, the cathexis of ideas representing reality is withdrawn within the personality. Ego development, in its early stages, goes hand in hand with differentiation between one's own self and the outer-world. The abandonment of reality means regression to a beginning state in which ego and id are no longer differentiated.

The attempt at restitution then creates a new 'psychotic' ego, as well as a new psychotic outer-world. The conflict arising from the urge toward femininity in the pre-psychotic period cannot be mastered by reality means and therefore finds a solution through delusion formation.

How much of this second explanation of the delusion can be applied to the structure of the hallucination?

The hallucination belongs to the order of the delusions. The hallucination therefore must have the same structure as the delusion. A conflict which cannot be mastered on a reality basis finds a solution in an unrealistic way in a hallucination.

Let us return now to the example under consideration. Homosexual thoughts about male friends were a threat to Schreber because such thoughts could lead to sexual orgasms. Accordingly the ego attempts to anticipate the danger by acting as if the danger were already present.

What next happens is a regression in which both the ego and the id cathexes of the representations connected with the danger situation are withdrawn; i.e. in the affected part of the personality regression has reached the undifferentiated state. The genital apparatus is now completely isolated because its contact with the rest of the personality has been interrupted. The organic process which would normally lead to orgasms and emissions is therefore blocked in its further development. The danger which threatened has been prevented. The attempt at restitution then uses the withdrawn energy in creating the hallucination. We have already seen, from the content of the hallucination, that Schreber warded off the danger by having the men die who had previously attracted him. In his pre-psychotic state, prevention of the danger was impossible. Thus we see again confirmation of the fact that mechanism and content are both engaged in the solution of the same problem and are supplementing each other. This idea was expressed many years ago in a stimulating article by Robert Waelder.⁵

What is the difference between the delusion proper and the hallucination? This question can be answered by keeping in mind the danger situation.

The hallucination is an observation which serves the purpose of anticipating in a psychotic manner the threatening danger. In the delusion, on the other hand, the danger cannot be avoided, for it has already developed its results. The delusion, therefore, does not anticipate the danger, but masters the danger only afterwards through an attempt at restitution.

⁵ Waelder, Robert: 'The Principle of Multiple Function'. *Psychoanal. Quarterly*, 5, 1936.