Three Letters from Sigmund Freud to Andréa Breton
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PSYCHOANALYSIS, ORIGINATING IN VIENNA and in the mind of a single brilliant man, has come to have worldwide recognition (if not acceptance) and has influenced the development of concepts in such diverse fields as anthropology, art, history, sociology, literary criticism, and law. One of the clearest examples of such an effect may be found in the work of André Breton, the founder of Surrealism.

In 1916 Breton served as a medical aide in the psychiatric center at Saint-Dizier where he came in contact with mental patients evacuated from the front. It was here that he first heard of psychoanalysis and began to read Freud's works. He recorded patients' hallucinations and delusional experiences and subsequently tried to "interpret" them, relying on psychoanalytic principles. After the war, Breton along with other Dadaists experimented with what came to be known as automatic writing. This consisted of writing rapidly without pausing to reread or correct, or writing while in self-induced trance states, or recording the hypnagogic phenomena that occur just before sleep. Several years later, by then the acknowledged leader of the Surrealists, Breton utilized actual dream material in his poetry and lyrical "interpretations." Some of the early Surrealist works are recordings of the dreams of artists and writers, and for a time there was actually an agency in Paris for the collection of dreams from the populace at large. Breton first corresponded with Freud in 1919, and paid him a visit in 1921. Through this direct contact and from reading
(particularly *The Interpretation of Dreams*), Breton utilized psychoanalytic ideas in the development of his concept of “lyricism” in poetry. By this he meant expression free from conscious control—spontaneous composition. In the two *Manifestos of Surrealism* (1924, 1930) and other writings, the “discovery” of the unconscious mind and its influence on artistic expression became one of the main ideological tenets of the Surrealist movement.

Freud’s reaction to this enthusiastic embrace of his ideas (Breton’s *Les Vases communicants* was dedicated to him) was polite but skeptical. While Breton was writing *Vases*, which contains some 50 dreams collected by various surrealist artists, he asked Freud to make a contribution. In response Freud said, “... a mere collection of dreams without the dreamers’ associations, without the knowledge of the circumstances in which they occurred, tells me nothing, and I can hardly imagine what it could tell anyone.” ¹ Despite the master’s rather cool response, Breton continued his explorations of “unconscious” phenomena, although in later years his interests turned more to mysticism and the occult. Nevertheless, and despite Freud’s caveat, psychoanalysis has contributed important elements to the Surrealist view and, contemporarily, to the critical response to art.

In 1932 Breton published *Les Vases communicants* (“The Communicating Receptacles”) and sent a dedicatory copy to Freud. This prompted the following rather acerb letters and Breton’s “retort.” ² I have been unable to obtain Breton’s letters to Freud. While not explicitly stated, it seems clear from the third letter that the originals were written in German.

Vienna, December 13, 1932

Dear Sir:

You may be assured that I will read with care your little book, *Les Vases communicants*, in which the explanation of dreams plays such a prominent part. Up to now I have not gone very far in this reading, but if I am writing to you already it is because on

¹ I have not been able to obtain a copy of this letter. The comment is quoted in Gombrich (1963, p. 31).

² Translated by Jean Paul Gagnon from the Appendix to the 1955 edition of *Vases*. 
page 19* I have come across one of your "impertinences"** that I cannot readily explain to myself.

You reproach me that there is no mention in the bibliography of Volkelt who discovered the symbolism of the dream, although I have used his ideas. This is serious, for it is contrary to my usual practice.

As a matter of fact, it is not Volkelt who discovered the symbolism of dreams, but Scherner who published a book in 1861, while that of Volkelt's is dated 1878. Both authors are mentioned many times in the corresponding passages of my text, and they both appear in the passage where Volkelt is shown as a follower of Scherner. Both names are also contained in the bibliography. Thus, I have the right to an explanation from you.

In your defense I notice at this moment that the name of Volkelt is not to be found in the bibliography of the French translation (Meyerson, 1926).

Yours faithfully,
Freud

Vienna, December 14, 1932

Dear Sir:

Please excuse me if I again mention this matter about Volkelt. To you it may not mean very much, but I am really sensitive to such a reproach, and when it is from André Breton it is very painful.

I wrote you yesterday that the name of Volkelt is mentioned in the bibliography of the German edition of The Interpretation of Dreams but that it is omitted in the French translation. This vindicates me and in a certain way justifies you too, although you could have been more careful in your explanation of this matter. (You wrote: "an author about whom the bibliography . . . very significantly says nothing.") It would seem in this instance that it is only an omission of no importance by the translator, Meyerson.

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* Page 21 in this edition
** Allusion to the dedication accompanying the copy of "Les Vases communicants" which I had sent to him.
But he is not guilty himself. I have looked into the matter further and found what follows: my *Interpretation of Dreams* has had eight editions from 1900 to 1930. The French translation is made from the seventh German edition. The name of Volkelt appears in the bibliography of the first, the second, and the third German editions, but it is missing in actual fact in all the subsequent editions, so the French translator never saw it.

The fourth German edition (1914) is the first one which has on the title page the statement "with the contribution of Otto Rank." Since then, Rank has taken the bibliography upon himself, and I have had nothing to do with it. It must be that the omission of the name of Volkelt (between page 487 and 488) just escaped him. One cannot impute to him any particular intention. The occurrence of such a mishap should be excused, especially in view of the fact that Volkelt is not the one whose authority is to be considered in the matter of the dream symbolism, but without any doubt another person, whose name is Scherner, as I have mentioned many times in my book.

Believe me yours very truly,
Freud

Vienna, December 26, 1932

Dear Sir:

I thank you very warmly for your detailed and kind letter. You could have answered me more succinctly: "So much ado...."* But you took into consideration my particular susceptibility about this matter, which is no doubt a form of reaction against the unbounded ambition of childhood, successfully overcome. I cannot take exception to any of your other critical remarks, although I can find in them many causes for controversy. Thus, for example: I think that if I have not pursued the analysis of my own dreams as far as that of others, the cause is only rarely due to timidity toward sexual matters. The fact is that very often I would have had to discover that the secret basis of all the series of dreams had to do with my relations with my father who had just died. I maintain

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* In French in the text.
that I had the right to set a limit to the inevitable exhibition (also to the childhood tendency which I have surmounted).

And now a confession which you must accept with tolerance! Although I receive so much evidence of the interest which you and your friends show toward my research, for myself I am not in the position to explain what Surrealism is and what it is after. It could be that I am not in any way made to understand it; I am at such a distant position from art.

Very cordially yours,
Freud

RETORT

If in the first part of Les Vases communicants I have felt that Volkelt and not Scherner should have had the principal credit for the discovery of the sexual symbolism of the dream, it is because it has seemed to me, as Freud himself has given evidence, that Volkelt was historically the first one to bring to a scientific level the imaginative symbolic activity now under discussion. Poets like Shakespeare, among many others, were aware long ago of the sexual characteristics of this activity. But the consideration of these "occasional asides of intuitive knowledge," as Rank describes it, must not conceal the most brilliant idea in systematization—formulated before Freud—which was to be the origin of psychoanalysis. "Mystical muddle," "grandiloquent nonsense," those are expressions used in turn by Volkelt and Freud to appraise the work of Scherner. In view of this, I did not believe that I was singularizing myself by giving all the credit and the responsibility to Volkelt for the orientation and the truly scientific stimulus to the problem. According to Freud, Volkelt is the one who "has endeavoured to know better" in its nature the imagination of the dream, "and to incorporate it exactly afterwards in a philosophical system."

It goes without saying that I have never insinuated that Freud had deliberately calculated to keep silent the work of a man to whom he could be intellectually indebted. An accusation of such magnitude would be in opposition to the high esteem that I have
for him. Upon noticing the omission of Volkelt’s book in the bibli-
ography of the French edition, as well as that of a much earlier
German edition, at the most I recalled the principle which says
that “in any case the omission is motivated by an unpleasant feel-
ing.”

In my opinion it can only be a symptomatic action, and I must
say that Freud’s agitation does not make me forget my first
impression (he writes me two letters in the interval of a few hours,
exculpates himself vigorously, attributes his apparent error to
someone who is no longer his friend . . . to finally plead in his
favour the unmotivated omission!). The last paragraph of the third
letter, in which is evident, separated by the distance of twelve
days, the (very entertaining) desire to give blow for blow**,
confirms my idea that I have touched a very sensitive spot. “The
unbounded ambition of childhood”: Has Freud, in 1933, “happily
surmounted it?”

The reader will be judge if, besides that, it is fitting to disregard
the paradoxical reserve of the self-analysis in *The Interpretation of
Dreams*, considering the striking contrast offered by the sexual
content in the interpretation of the author’s dreams and that of
the dreams which are narrated to him. It still seems to me that in
such a field the dread of exhibitionism is not a sufficient excuse
and that the intrinsic search for objective truth demands certain
sacrifices. The pretext put forward—Freud’s father was dead in
1896—will appear here, however, much more precarious, since the
seven successive editions of his book from 1900 have given Freud
all the occasions to come out of his early reticence or at least to
explain it summarily.

I want to make this very clear, that even though I refute them,
these diverse contradictions of which Freud is still the center do
not in any way weaken the respect and the admiration which I
have for him, but instead bear witness, in my opinion, to his mar-
velous sensibility always in a state of alertness and only increase
his value to me.

1933

A.B.

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* *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life.*

** “Behind all this one can see the little Sigmund defending himself: ‘I threw him on the
ground because he threw me on the ground’.”
Breton was a highly original, creative man whose influence on twentieth-century art has been wide. Like many artists he was passionate, impulsive, domineering. In addition to several wives and innumerable mistresses, he maintained close, intense, ambivalent friendships with men, usually ending with disagreements about theoretical positions and subsequent bitterness and recriminations. His relationship with Freud, while not a personal one, had the same ambivalent quality. His works contain a great many references to Freud’s ideas and how they influenced him. Yet, as Balakian (1971) has pointed out, he sometimes argues with Freud, seeing him as too narrow and cautious in his theorizing. It is very likely that Freud’s refusal to contribute to Breton’s “dream book” was taken as a personal affront and led to the provocative “imper- tinent” remarks in the letters.

Freud’s rather defensive response to the implied accusation of plagiarism shows that he was very sensitive to the charge (although it seems clear that he bore no responsibility for the omission of any names in the bibliography). His sensitivity is understandable, for on a number of occasions in his career the allegation was made that he used others’ ideas without giving proper credit—most notably by Fliess, Moll, and Janet. These and other allegations of plagiarism, which Freud always took seriously but felt exonerated from, are extensively discussed by Eissler (1971).

The remarks about the lack of sexual material in Freud’s own dreams and the accusation of intellectual timidity must have been very galling to a man with such a bold and forceful mentality. Yet again, and oddly, Freud seems to have felt an explanation (justification?) was necessary. In both this and the plagiarism charge, Breton seems to have struck a vulnerable spot.

Perhaps Freud provides a reason for this vulnerability where he speaks in his letter of the “inevitable exhibitionism” and the childhood tendency that had been surmounted. As Freud’s biographers have pointed out, he was the favored child, considered destined for great things. In reading his works one is struck by how often Freud humbly professes how tentative, how incomplete, how subject to revisions his ideas are. But these same ideas were in their time seen by many as revolutionary and outrageous, and were vi-
olently denounced. So we get a picture of a man who has described himself as an explorer, a conquistador, and yet often presented his work as that of a humble scholar. It would seem, then, that Freud had not completely come to terms with the intellectual aggressiveness that was his genius.

REFERENCES


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