

## **THE MIRROR IMAGE OF THE PRESENT: FREUD'S THEORY OF RETROGRESSIVE SCREEN MEMORIES**

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### *Introduction*

Freud used the term "screen memory" to denote any memory which functions to hide (and to derivatively express) another, typically unconscious, mental content. Freud distinguished between three types of screen memory: those in which a recollection from childhood "screens" or conceals some event contemporary with it, those in which a later recollection stands for a memory of a childhood event, and those in which a childhood recollection represents a later concern (Freud, 1901*b*; Freud, 1899*a*). Freud called the latter variety "retrogressive screen memories" (*Ibid.*).

Freud does not often give examples of retrogressive screen memories. Eissler states that the analysis of the memory of his nursemaid's thefts, which appears only in the correspondence with Fließ, and the memory of the meadow with the yellow flowers, which was presented in Freud's paper on "Screen Memories", are the *only* two examples of the original theory of retrogressive screen memories to be found in Freud's writings (Eissler, 1978: 461-517).<sup>1</sup> It is hardly surprising that there has been little work on this theory since 1899. Indeed, with the exception of Langs (1982; 1992*a*; 1992*b*), I am not aware of any psychoanalytical writers who have contributed to this subject.<sup>2</sup>

In the present paper I will review the development of the retrogressive screen memory concept in the context of Freud's self-analysis, reconsider aspects of his analysis of one of his own screen memories and finally delineate the relationship between the screen memory theory and Freud's seduction theory.

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1. But see footnote 14.

2. Langs was ignorant of Freud's pioneering work on retrogressive screen memories when he hit on what in essence was the same idea.

*Origins of the Theory (1897-1898)*

After listing the reasons for his loss of faith in his *neurotica*, his seduction aetiology for the neuroses, Freud remarked in the famous letter of 21 September, 1897, that: "It seems once again arguable that only later experiences give the impetus to fantasies, which [then] hark back to childhood" (Freud, 1887-1904: 265).<sup>3</sup>

Less than a month later, in the letter of 3/4 October, Freud noted in relation to his recovered memories of seduction at the hands of his nanny, Resi Wittek, in Freiberg that "A harsh critic might say of all this that it was retrogressively fantasied instead of progressively determined" (*Ibid.*: 270). He concluded that the presence of a strange and unexpected feature of such memories – in this instance the reddish bathwater in which he recalled being washed, apparently tinged by Wittek's menstrual blood, provided the *expenmenta crucis* (*Ibid.*: 270) allowing him to decide in favor of the genuineness of the memory. Notwithstanding this judgement, Freud interpreted at least some of these memories that came to mind as associations to a dream, as revealing the dream's *contemporary* meaning. Freud's dream image of a pile of ten-florin notes – his wife's weekly housekeeping money – was associated with his onetime seducer having made him steal ten-kreutzer coins.<sup>4</sup> Thus, wrote Freud: "The dream could be summed up as 'bad treatment'. Just as the old woman got money from me for her bad treatment, so today I get money for the bad treatment of my patients" (Freud, 1887-1904: 269).

It is important to notice that Freud distinguished the issue of the *veracity* (or otherwise) of early memories from their *meaning* as associations to a dream. In this self-analytic example, Freud regarded his memory of giving his sexual abuser money as a model of his own

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3. The locution "once again" is curious. It conceivably refers to the views on fantasy expressed in Draft M in Freud's letter to Fließ of 25 May, 1897. Freud coined the marvelous term "Rückdrängung" in this letter to denote the process of temporally "pushing back" a fantasy.

4. Anzieu claims that this dream is mentioned in *The Interpretation of Dreams* "I took out a subscription in S.& R.'s bookshop for a *periodical* costing *twenty florins* a year" the source for the dream is described as "My wife had reminded me the day before that I still owed her *twenty florins* for the weekly household expenses" (Freud, 1900a: 166). But this doesn't fit. In his letter to Fließ, Freud mentions that there was a *heap* of ten florin notes in the dream, and furthermore that this heap was *Martha's weekly housekeeping money*. The housekeeping money was part of the manifest rather than the latent dream. Freud returned to the dream in his letter to Fließ of 15 October (Anzieu, 1986).

psychotherapeutic activity.<sup>5</sup> He, Freud, demands money from his patients/victims just as his nursemaid demanded money from him. The early memory is understood as an unconscious representation of a contemporary event or situation.

On 7 July, Freud suggested that C.F. Meyer's novel *The Monk's Wedding* ... "(...) magnificently illustrates the process occurring in later years in the formation of fantasies (...) A new experience is projected in fantasy back into the past so that the new persons become aligned with the old ones, who become their prototypes. The mirror image of the present is seen in the fantasied past, which then prophetically becomes the present" (*Ibid.*: 320).

In this view it is a real contemporary experience that is *aligned* with earlier experiences. Six months later he wrote to his friend: "A small bit of my self-analysis has forced its way through and confirmed that fantasies are products of later periods and are projected back from what was then the present into earliest childhood; the manner in which this occurs also emerged – once again by a verbal link" (*Ibid.*: 338).<sup>6</sup>

#### *The Culmination of the Theory (1899)*

Freud's paper on "Screen Memories" presents a disguised autobiographical example, an analysis of that example and a theoretical discussion.<sup>7</sup> The disguised autobiographical example runs as follows: "I see a rectangular, rather steeply sloping piece of meadow-land, green and thickly grown; in the green there are a great number of yellow flowers - evidently common dandelions. At the top end of the meadow there is a cottage and in front of the cottage door two women are standing chatting busily, a peasant woman with a handkerchief on her head and a children's nurse. Three children are playing in the grass. One of them is myself (between the age of two and three); the two others are my boy cousin, who is a year older than me, and his sister, who is almost exactly the same age as I am. We are picking the yellow flowers and each of us is holding a bunch of flowers we have already picked. The little girl has the best bunch; and, as though by mutual agreement, we – the two boys – fall on

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5. Freud did not specify any other allusions in the dream to his contemporary situation, although he mentioned to Fließ that "The *whole* dream was full of the most mortifying allusions to my present impotence as a therapist" (*Ibid.*, p. 269, italics added).

6. According to Kris (Freud, 1887-1902), it was a piece of self-analysis that was written up in Freud's paper on "Screen Memories". This seems unlikely, as there is a reasonably clear reference to the memory in Freud's letter of 3 October 1899.

7. First identified as such by S. Bernfeld (Bernfeld, 1947: 3-19).

her and snatch away her flowers. She runs up the meadow in tears and as a consolation the peasant woman gives her a big piece of black bread. Hardly have we seen this when we throw the flowers away, hurry to the cottage and ask to be given some bread too. And we are in fact given some; the peasant woman cuts the loaf with a long knife. In my memory the bread tastes quite delicious – and at that point the scene breaks off" (Freud, 1887-1904: 311).

Freud emphasises that the yellow of the dandelions and the delicious taste of the bread seemed disproportionately prominent. He describes two occasions when the memory emerged.

The first occasion was when, at the age of sixteen, he spent a holiday in Freiberg, his birthplace and the local of the memory, and fell in love with the daughter of the family with whom he was lodging, whom we now know to have been Gisela Fluss.<sup>8</sup> After a few days Gisela went off to school "and it was separation after such a short acquaintance that brought my longings to a really high pitch" (Freud, 1899a: 313). Freud regretted the fact that economic catastrophe has forced the family to leave this town, and fantasised about having remained and married Gisela.

"A strange thing. For when I see her now from time to time – she happens to have married someone here [in Vienna] – she is quite exceptionally indifferent to me. Yet I can remember quite well for what a long time afterwards I was affected by the yellow colour of the dress she was wearing when we first met, whenever I saw the same colour anywhere else" (*Ibid.*: 313).

The second occasion of the memory's recurrence relates to Freud's visit, at the age of nineteen, to his half-brother Emanuel (Freud describes him as an uncle) in Manchester, where he was reunited with the niece Pauline and nephew Johann (cousins) who featured in the memory. Freud's two half brothers had emigrated to Manchester in 1859, the year that the remainder of Freud's family had also left Freiberg. Freud departed aboard The Huddersfield from Hamburg to Grimsby at midnight, 20 July 1875 and remained in Ardwick, Manchester for approximately seven weeks. Freud was, at the time, passionately absorbed in his University studies. According to the account presented in "Screen Memories" his father and uncle had clandestinely plotted that Freud should settle in Manchester, abandon his proposed scientific career in favor of some practical occupation, and marry his cousin. Later, when he was struggling to earn a living and find professional recognition, Freud reflected upon this episode

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8. Freud claims that he was seventeen, but Strachey notes in his editorial introduction that this is inaccurate.

and felt that the plan was intended as a compensation for "the loss in which the original catastrophe has involved my whole existence" (*Ibid.*: 315) – the earlier displacement of the family from Freiberg to Vienna. It was during this period that the memory recurred to him.

There was, of course, a *third* recollection of the memory, which Freud does not analyse. This seems to have occurred at some point between 27 September and 3 October 1897, on the evidence of Freud's letter to Fließ written on October 3 which states: "I have also long known the companion in my misdeeds between the ages of one and two years; it is my nephew, a year older than myself, who is now living in Manchester and who visited us in Vienna when I was fourteen years old. The two of us seem occasionally to have behaved cruelly to my niece, who was a year younger" (*Ibid.*: 268).

Freud interprets the content of the screen memory as follows:

1. The *yellow flowers* pertain to the *yellow dress* worn by Gisela Fluss in the first context and a *yellow alpine flower* associated with the second.
2. The *delicious bread* refers to the imagined comfort and pleasure of remaining in Freiberg and marrying Gisela: "how sweet the bread would have tasted for which you had to struggle so hard in your later years" (*Ibid.*: 315) as well as the *bread and butter* occupation planned for Freud by his father and half-brother (*abandoning the flowers for the bread*).
3. *Stealing the flowers* refers to the desire to *deflower* Gisela.

Freud makes a number of theoretical assertions in the "Screen Memories" paper, from which I have selected the following fundamental claims.

1. Retrogressive screen memories are produced when a *contemporary* thought is repressed and finds some associative contact with an earlier memory. The screen memory portrays the contemporary concern.
2. Screen memories take the form of scenes, involving visual representation.
3. Retrogressive screen memories can be interpreted only in light of the life-context during which they are recalled.
4. The fact that a memory assumes a screening function does not mean that it is a complete fabrication, although this process may modify the content of the memory in some respects.

In the final analysis, Freud wonders whether *all* of our childhood memories are not screen memories. "It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories from our childhood; memories *relating* to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods

when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves" (*Ibid.*: 322).

#### *The Decline of the Theory (Post-1899)*

A brief allusion to a retrogressive screen memory can be found in the account of the dream of the botanical monograph in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900a: 173).<sup>9</sup> Four paragraphs are devoted to the subject in the first edition of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which recapitulate aspects of the discussion presented in "Screen Memories", compares the formation of screen memories with the forgetting of names and claim that memories displaced *forward* in time are more common than the retrogressive variety. Several examples of such progressive screen memories are added in 1907 and a further example is included in 1920. Freud's *only* specific reference to a retrogressive screen memory in these later editions occurs in the context of a discussion of his memory of looking for his mother in a cupboard (reported to Fließ on 3/4 October 1897) which includes the remark that his nursemaid's practice of forcing him to give her ten kreutzer coins is "a detail which can itself claim to have the value of a screen memory for later experiences" (Freud, 1901b: 50).

#### *Contradictions in Freud's 1899 Account*

There are several features of Freud's account of the *second* recollection of the memory of the meadow with the yellow flowers reported in "Screen Memories" which seem puzzling and call for more thorough investigation.

When describing the conspiracy between his half-brother and father, Freud states that he *believes* that they had concocted this plot and "I fancy I must certainly have been aware of its existence" (Freud, 1899a: 314). Taken together these two statements imply that Freud *retrospectively conjectured* the existence of the conspiracy and his awareness of it at the time. Freud's correspondence with Silberstein makes *no* mention of such a plot. In fact, Freud wrote to Silberstein that it was *he* who was attracted to

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9. Freud writes that his childhood memory of tearing colored plates out of a book was "a 'screen memory' for my later bibliophile propensities". This example appears to fall foul of criterion (1) above.

move to England. "Let me confess to you: I now have one ideal, a practical one having been added to the theoretical one of earlier years. Had I been asked last year what was my dearest wish, I would have replied: a laboratory and free time, or a ship on the ocean with all the instruments a scientist needs; now I waver about whether I should not rather say: a large hospital and plenty of money in order to reduce or wipe out some of the ills that afflict the body. That is to say, if I wished to influence a large number of people instead of a small number of readers or fellow scientists, England would be just the place for that purpose. A respected man, supported by the press and the rich, could do wonders in alleviating physical ills, if only he were enough of an explorer to strike out on new therapeutic paths" (Jones, 1953: 127).

Freud also states that he "must sometimes have reflected" (*ibid.*: 127) on the conspiracy during the period when the screen memory was recalled for the second time. Freud does not remember having reflected on the conspiracy during this period. The relevant event is again only conjectured to have taken place. These points are not mere translators' artefacts. They are preserved in the German original of the text.

It is also interesting to observe that according to a letter to Eduard Silberstein written on 9 September 1875 Pauline had "until recently" been unknown to him (Freud 1871-1881: 127). This might imply either that he had not yet experienced the recollection or that he had not yet recognised the girl in the memory as his niece (because he had been unaware of her existence); evidence from the letter to Fließ of 3 October 1897 supports the latter interpretation. It seems that it was only on the *third* appearance of the memory that Freud was able to determine the identity of the characters involved.

The uncertainty of the events surrounding the second recollection of the memory undermines the plausibility of Freud's interpretation of the unconscious significance of that recollection.

### *The Publication of "Screen Memories"*

There are facts about the "Screen Memories" paper that may throw light on Freud's decision to present such an implausible and self-undermining piece of analysis. We know that Freud took considerable pains to maintain his incognito in the paper. Jones informs us that Freud did not include the paper in the *Sammlung kleiner Schriften* or the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. When the 1925 *Gesammelte Schriften* was being prepared, his refusal to include the paper "would have been too pointed and would

have certainly aroused their [the editors'] suspicion of a mystery" (Jones, 1953: 27-28). Freud allowed "Screen Memories" to appear in the *Gesammelte Schriften* but deleted a reference to a facial scar in the 1925 edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* which would have betrayed his identity (*Ibid.*: 28). "It is therefore plain that Freud regarded the story in the screen memory, or rather the deep personal feelings connected with it, as something specially intimate, though the grounds for this are far from evident to anyone else" (*Ibid.*: 28).

### *Dating the Second Recollection*

Freud provides sufficient information for us to establish a chronology for the second recollection. It occurred during the period when, as he said, "I was a newly-fledged man of science and hard pressed by the exigencies of life and when I had to wait so long before finding a post here" (Freud, 1899a: 314) and also during the period when he "first made the acquaintance of the Alps" (*Ibid.*: 315). The latter seems particularly critical for a precise dating, as Freud describes it "as it were a stamp giving the date of manufacture" (*Ibid.*). Freud had been *newly fledged* in March, 1881 when he passed his medical examinations. He worked as a Demonstrator in Brücke's Physiological Institute from May, 1881 to July, 1882 and did some unsuccessful work on the analysis of gasses at Ludwig's Chemical Institute.<sup>10</sup> Freud met and fell in love with Martha Bernays in April, and became engaged to her on 17<sup>th</sup> of June. It was also in June 1882 that Brücke suggested to Freud to abandon research in favor of medical practice. "The turning point came in 1882, when my teacher, for whom I felt the highest possible esteem, corrected my father's generous improvidence by strongly advising me, in view of my bad financial position, to abandon my theoretical career" (Freud, 1925d [1924]: 10).

Freud inscribed himself for post-graduate clinical training in the Vienna General Hospital on July 31, 1882, beginning in the department of surgery. He entered Nothnagel's Division of Internal Medicine as clinical assistant in October. In May 1883 Freud transferred to Meynert's Psychiatric Clinic where he was appointed junior *secondarzt* and moved into a room at the Hospital.

Freud formulated the intention to specialize in neuropathology in July, 1883. It is clear that he suffered from a sense of inferiority with regard to

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10. He described 1882 as "the gloomiest and least successful year of my professional life" (Jones, 1953: 66).



his decision to specialize (Jones, 1953: 66). He felt unprepared to seek qualification as a general practitioner, the more exciting and lucrative alternative which would free him to go "to the country, to England, to America or to the moon" (*Ibid.*: 218).

*General Background for the Second Recollection of the Screen Memory*

In this section I will consider a number of issues in Freud's life, which have at least some thematic relationship with features of the screen memory. Let us begin with Freud's relationship with Breuer, his most important friendship during this period. Breuer was Freud's mentor, companion and financial sponsor – providing the material support that Jacob Freud was unable to provide for his son. According to Hirschmüller, Breuer "certainly tried to talk Freud out of any illusions about his professional future" (Hirschmüller, 1989: 134). Hirschmüller goes on to say that: "Jones suggests that Breuer saw his relationship to Freud as like that of father to son. I am more inclined to think that Breuer may have seen in Freud a kind of younger brother (Breuer's brother Adolf, who had died a few years previously following a protracted illness, had been around Freud's age). Freud, however, according to Jones, regarded Breuer at the same time as both a father and a brother figure" (*Ibid.*).<sup>11</sup>

The theme of marriage was also important to Freud at this time. After all, he had abandoned his dream of a career in research in order to marry. The theme of a wish to deflower a girl, taken from the analysis of the first recollection, gains poignancy from Freud's unconsummated longings for Martha. Like Gisela, Martha went away – whisked off by her mother to Wandsbeck in the north of Germany scarcely a year after they became engaged.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this was apparently the first time Freud had been in love since his infatuation with Gisela exactly ten years before. Turning now to the memory itself, the salient theme is *acquiring something possessed by someone else*.<sup>13</sup> Envy and frustrated ambition were recurrent themes during 1882-1883. In one context, we can speculate that this may have to do with his relationship with Frau Bernays. Equally, and perhaps more problematically, it may have been relevant to Freud's relationship with Breuer whose material, social and professional success must have at times been difficult for Freud to bear. The theme of pressure to give up one's ideals for a *bread and butter* occupation does indeed accord with his

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11. Jones comments that: "Breuer had always stood in a father relation to Freud, had helped supported and encouraged him. More than that, he had lent him (...) a considerable sum of money" (Jones, 1953: 338). On at least one occasion Breuer entered Freud's name in a Gasthaus register as his brother (*Ibid.*: 184).

12. Eissler notes that, like Gisela, Resi Wittek abruptly disappeared after Freud had become emotionally attached to her (Eissler, 1978).

13. In fact, Gisela Fluss appears to have married a businessman named Rosenzweig, or a businessman named Popper or both consecutively. When Freud heard of this he was distraught and contemplated suicide (Freud, 1871-1881: 137).

position in 1882-1883. We know that the possibility of Freud's advancement in Brücke's Physiological *Institute* was obstructed by the fact that Fleishl von Marxov, a brilliant young neurophysiologist, was Brücke's assistant. It was because of this that Freud was forced into a medical career.

*Immediate Triggers for the Second Recollection of the Screen Memory*

Freud's first visit to the Alps, the second occasion when the memory recurred, took place during the last week of July, 1883 when he accompanied Breuer for a few days to a house in Gmunden am Traunsee, that Breuer had rented for the holidays (Jones, 1953). Hirschmüller mentions that Breuer's family were also at the Gmunden house (Hirschmüller, 1989). Jones describes this visit as *unforgettable*, remarking that "Freud had seldom been so far away from Vienna or gazed at such beautiful scenery, and he wrote a long lyrical account of this wonderful experience" (Jones, 1953: 184). Jones published extracts from two of the four letters that Freud wrote to his fiancé from Gmunden (Jones, 1954: 81-84). Most of the published extracts from these letters deal with the appearance of the town and surrounding landscape. Apart from this, Freud comments quite a bit about the *wild book* that he is reading: Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Anthony*. In describing their outward journey, Freud writes: "I took out the book he [Breuer] had given me for the journey, the *Tentation de St. Antoine* by Flaubert. I didn't read much and the full impression of this remarkable book, a very intense one, came only on the following day" (*Ibid.*: 82).

Three days later he went for a walk at eleven at night and went back to the *Temptation*. He awoke at five, and went out for a further expedition. At half past six he returned to the house and finished his book. "At the end I was quite dizzy and so deeply stirred that throughout the day I felt its presence most burdensome. I was already excited by the splendid panorama and now on top of it all came this book which in the most condensed fashion and with unsurpassable vividness flings in one's face the whole dross of the world, for it calls up not only the great problems of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), but the real enigmas of life, all the conflicts of feelings and impulses, and it confirms our awareness of the perplexity in the mysteriousness that reigns everywhere. These questions, it is true, are always there, and one should always be thinking of them. What one does, however, is to confine oneself to a narrow aim every hour and every day and one gets used to the idea that to concern oneself with these enigmas is

the task of a special hour, in the belief that they exist only in those special hours. Then they suddenly assail one in the morning and rob one of one's composure and one's spirits" (Jones, 1954: 83).

The dual impact of the scenery, which may have caused Freud to think of his rural childhood and his adolescent revisiting of it, and the book, which inspired him to reflect on aspects of his own life, seemed to bring about a special and intense mental state which, in turn, may have contributed to the recollection of the screen memory.<sup>14,15</sup>

The final sentence in the passage reproduced above may allude to what Jones calls Freud's "anxieties and moods of depression from which he suffered considerably during those years" (Jones, 1954: 84). Jones remarks that these moods would disappear when Freud was abroad, giving way to an intense restlessness and elation. Despite this, Freud admitted to suffering from a severe travelling phobia. He would suffer attacks of acute anxiety at the moment of embarking. Jones believes that Freud's attitudes to travel suggest that travel was connected, for him, with something forbidden ... "(...) either because of the importance of reaching a given goal or because of the wish to escape from something unpleasant. In Freud's case there are good reasons for thinking that both of these factors were operative" (*Ibid.*: 84).

After hinting at some fairly obvious oedipal clichés, Jones considers these matters in light of... "(...) the ineffaceable memory of the terribly hard years of his childhood and youth, with its poverty, privation and hardship. And after all, it was his father who was responsible for plunging him into those distressing circumstances, after tearing him away from his happy early childhood in the Moravian countryside" (*Ibid.*: 84).

Freud discusses his travel anxiety in the very letter in which he had announced his screen memories to Fließ. Freud attributed the origin of this symptom to his journey from Freiberg to Leipzig, i.e. to the catastrophic departure from his childhood home in Moravia. Typically, Freud

14. Freud describes to Martha that: "Besides the Traunstein there is a serie of mountain peaks with a contour as I have sketched it for you; popular fantasy sees a human profile in it, the classical profile of a sleeping Grecian woman" (Jones, 1954, p. 82). This may be relevant to the present analysis in that Freud described Gisela's beauty to Silberstein as "wild, I might say Thracian" (Freud, 1871-1881: 18)

15. Flaubert's book is a powerful account of the temptations afflicting the Egyptian anchorite St. Anthony: temptations of power, wealth, sex, and so on. All of this was, of course highly relevant to Freud himself both at the time of his second recollection. There is also an obvious and immediate connection between the book and the content of the screen memory. Flaubert's book *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, begins as follows: "The setting is the Thebaid, high on a mountain, where a platform curves to a half-moon, shut in by large boulders. The hermit's cabin occupies the rear. It consists of mud and reeds, with a flat roof and no door. Inside of it are visible a pitcher and a loaf of *black bread* (...)" (Flaubert, 1983: 61).

speculates that the anxiety stemmed from having seen his mother naked and the consequent arousal of his sexual instincts (none of which he actually *remembers*). In the letter of 3 December 1897 he does produce a memory. "Breslau also plays a role in my childhood memories. At the age of three years I passed through the station when we moved from Freiberg to Leipzig, and the gas flames which I saw reminded me of spirits burning in hell.<sup>16</sup> I know a little of the connections. My travel anxiety, now overcome, also is bound up with this" (Freud, 1887-1904, letter of 3 December 1897: 285).

Freud's thoughts of Breslau were manifestly related to the idea of meeting Fließ in Breslau. However, Breslau has a special link with the screen memory and therefore the Freuds' move from Freiberg. Freud's separation from Gisela Fluss took place when she left for Breslau (Freud, 1871-1881: Introduction).

What about Breuer? Might Freud's proximity to Breuer have played a triggering role for the recollection? Freud speaks of Breuer in his letter of 23 July from Gmunden. He writes: "To travel with a man whose mind is so alive, a man of such keen judgement, wise knowledge and freely flowing thoughts, was a pleasure that was disturbed only by the consciousness of my own inferiority" (Jones, 1954: 82).

Given the fact that Freud stayed with Breuer and his *family* in Gmunden, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Freud would have been inclined to have an acute sense of being a part of that family, i.e., that Freud would experience Breuer as a father surrogate.

In the letter to Fließ of 3 October 1897, Freud had stated apropos of the screen memory of the meadow with the yellow flowers that his relationship with Johann – the nephew of the memory – played an important role in determining "what is neurotic, but also what is intense in all of my friendships" (Freud, 1887-1904, letter of 3 October 1897: 268). Freud's relationship with Breuer was, of course, one such friendship. In the memory Freud and Johann engage in a violent, conspiratorial relationship which, in the analysis, alluded to intense sexual longings.

In the first letter from Gmunden dated 23 July, 1883, Freud describes a conversation with Breuer which may throw some light on these matters. "At the railway station Breuer greeted a couple whose curious story he related to me. The woman was 36 years old and the man 26. He had wooed her for ten years. When she finally yielded to his pleas she was so ashamed because of the difference in their ages that the wedding had to take place secretly. Breuer asked me to explain this curious relationship,

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16. Perhaps this memory resonated with the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* on the Gmunden visit.  
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and I replied that an immature man is often attracted by a mature woman and that such marriages are usually successful. You must be wondering where I get such wisdom from" (Jones, 1954: 82).

I take this account to be significant in two connections. First, we know from the correspondence with Silberstein that once Gisela had left for Breslau, Freud claimed to Silberstein that he was in love with her mother, Eleanore. I have been unable to discover Eleanore's date of birth, but we know that Freud was 16 – like the man of Breuer's acquaintance – when he became attracted to the older woman. This may well have evoked memories of Freiberg for Freud. The second connection is more significant for the present discussion. If we take Breuer's remarks as expressing an unconscious meaning in addition to their conscious meaning, this may be revealed by their main theme *a love relationship about which one is ashamed*.

This shameful love relation may well represent Breuer's relationship with his famous patient Bertha Pappenheim (*Anna O*). Breuer first discussed Bertha Pappenheim with Freud on 18 November, 1882. A further discussion took place on the sweltering evening of 13 July, 1883, shortly before the excursion to Gmunden (Jones, 1953: 226). Later the same evening Freud mentioned this discussion in a letter that he wrote to Martha Bernays: "(...) your friend Bertha Pappenheim also cropped up – and then we became rather personal and very intimate and he told me a number of things about his wife and children and asked me to repeat what he had said only 'after you are married to Martha'" (Freud, 1873-1939: 56).

The second discussion may therefore be a relatively proximal trigger for the recollection. This discussion must have been on Freud's mind during his stay in Gmunden, and it must have been followed by more discussions of a similar nature, because Jones claims that Freud wrote to Martha at the beginning of August, immediately after having returned from Gmunden, giving her a full account of Breuer's treatment of Bertha (Jones, 1953). Unfortunately, this letter remains unpublished. Of course, there is considerable obscurity surrounding the fate of Breuer's treatment of Bertha Pappenheim. Freud claimed that Breuer's patient fell in love with him, and that he reacted by terminating the treatment (Freud, 1925*d*: 26). Freud's explicit account, given to Stefan Zweig in a letter of 2 June 1932 (Freud, 1873-1939: 408-409), involving the dramatic tale of Bertha's phantom pregnancy, is avowedly a reconstruction and is certainly inaccurate (Hirschmüller, 1989: 131; Borch-Jacobsen, 1996: 29-48). However, Freud states that Breuer's daughter confirmed his 1925 version of events. There is clear evidence in the correspondence between Freud

and Martha showing that Breuer's relationship with Bertha gave rise to marital tensions. Breuer was quite involved – emotionally and perhaps sexually – with Bertha Pappenheim. According to Hirschmüller, Bertha suffered a relapse and was admitted to the Inzersdorf sanatorium near Vienna on *30 July, 1883*, i.e., at the end of the Gmunden holiday. Breuer was clearly aware of this. Freud wrote to Martha on 5 August that Breuer had told him that his former patient was very ill and that he wished that she would die so as to be released from her suffering (Jones, 1953: 225; Forrester, 1986: 341).<sup>17</sup>

Bertha was a friend of Martha Bernays. Breuer's discussion of Bertha with Freud was therefore a considerable betrayal of his patient's confidence. The conspiratorial aspect of the memory may well speak to this aspect of their relationship. More graphically, the theme of stealing flowers from a girl only to throw them away may be Freud's unconscious portrayal of Breuer's involvement with and rejection of his patient.

Bertha was very much on Breuer's mind at the time of the holiday, and this was clearly something affecting his relationship with Freud. Recall that it was *Breuer* who presented Freud with *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* just prior to the Gmunden journey. I do not think it far-fetched to speculate that Breuer did this to convey to Freud something about his own moral struggles with respect to Bertha.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Third Recollection of the Screen Memory*

There was, of course a *third* occasion when Freud recollected the meadow with the yellow flowers: early in October, 1897. On the analogy of my suggestions about the Gmunden recollection, the third recollection may have been triggered by Freud's interaction with Fließ. Freud had visited Fließ a few days previously, discussing ideas and patients. Freud states in his letter of October 3: "For the last four days my self-analysis, which I consider essential for clarification of the whole problem, has

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17. Eissler was struck by Freud's readiness to withdraw from the implications of Breuer's account, suggesting that: "One has to draw the inference that the cathartic method, filled with close id derivatives, was unacceptable to Freud at the time and aroused such strong defenses as to make him blind to its true meaning (...)" (Eissler, 1978: 495).

18. The book certainly fell on fertile ground. On 29 August 1883, he wrote to Martha: "I remember something that occurred to me while watching a performance of *Carmen*: the mob gives vent to its appetites, and we deprive ourselves. We deprive ourselves in order to maintain our integrity, we economize in our health, our capacity for enjoyment, our emotions; we save ourselves for something, not knowing for what. And this habit of constant suppression of natural instincts gives us the quality of refinement (...) Why don't we fall in love with another person every month? Because at each separation a part of our heart would be torn away (Freud, 1873-1939: 65).

continued in dreams and has presented me with the most valuable elucidations and clues" (Freud, 1887-1904, letter of 3 October 1897: 268).

In other words, the two screen memories were recalled *immediately after* the visit to Fließ. Furthermore, in the analysis of the dream about Freud's nanny, which Freud interprets as alluding to the abusive and seductive nature of his own therapeutic work, Freud refers to a remark made by Fließ during the visit: "Just as the old woman got money from me, so today I got money from the bad treatment of my patients. A special part was played by Mrs Q., whose remark you reported to me: that I should not take anything from her, as she was the wife of a colleague (he of course made it a condition that I should)" (*Ibid.*: 269-270).

This situation of Freud and his friend discussing a patient known to the both of them is strikingly similar to the circumstances preceding the Gmunden recollection. Freud does not apparently notice that the theme of *stealing from a woman* coheres with the theme of *stealing flowers from a girl* as well as the account of stealing ten-kreutzer coins. Continuing along these lines, we might conjecture that the recollected scene of the meadow with the yellow flowers expresses Freud's bad conscience: his awareness that his modification of his patient's confidentiality had a violently sexual and conspiratorial quality. In this context Johann would stand for Fließ and Pauline for Mrs. Q. The scene of stealing the flowers might also represent the violent and intrusive therapeutic procedures. He is rewarded with bread – money on Freud's interpretation. Once again, we have an image which might be construed as a derivative portrayal of *money for bad treatment*, a claim for which I will supply additional support below. Before leaving the subject of money, it is perhaps relevant that Freud was preoccupied at this time with having fallen out with Breuer whilst owing him money (Freud, 1873-1939: letter to Breuer of 7 January 1898).

It is worth noting that each of the three recollections occurred at an important turning-point in Freud's life: the transition from childhood to youth, from youth to manhood, and at the most acute moment of mid-life crisis.<sup>19</sup> At each point, there was a decisive personal re-orientation and a profound sense of loss.<sup>20</sup> Newton writes of the visit to Freiberg: "As he

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19. Freud wrote that the memory illustrated the *most momentous turningpoints* of his life (Freud, 1899a: 316).

20. Eissler emphasizes that the Gisela episode seems to have led to Freud's curious decision to study medicine rather than the humanities. The second recollection corresponded to the decision to change his career from medical research to medical practice. As Eissler puts it: "Ten years after the Gisela trauma a turning point occurred in Freud's life. It became clear that the plan of becoming a great physiologist devoted to the unravelling of the secrets of brain structure was a dream" (Eissler, 1978: 489). Arguably, the third instance also corresponded to the career change ... to psychoanalysis!



wrote in his paper on screen memories, Gisela reminded him of his childhood home in Freiberg and aroused a longing, which would never leave him, for the beautiful meadows, woods, and mountains of his birthplace, all of which had been forfeited by his father's business failure, a failure that was then made perpetual by the long and difficult years in the Leopoldstadt ghetto that had followed it" (Newton, 1995: 56).

It seems that Freud's *catastrophic* loss of his childhood home in the country, was re-evoked on each occasion.

### *Screen Memories and the Seduction Theory*

I have shown above that Freud's first articulation of the notion of retrogressive screen memories was made in the context of his disavowal of the seduction theory. In stating that: "It seems (...) arguable that only later experiences give impetus to fantasies, which [then] hark back to childhood" (Freud, 1887-1904, letter of 21 September 1897: 265). Freud implicitly conjectured that *the data that he had previously explained by means of the seduction theory might now be explained in terms of retrogressive screen memories*. But what was that data? Cioffi appears to have been the first scholar to remark on the fact that, contrary to Freud's later retrospective accounts (Freud, 1906a, 1914d, 1925d [1924], 1933a) the hysterical patients whose experiences provided the evidential base for the seduction theory definitely did *not* routinely report experiences of seduction to Freud (Cioffi, 1972: 172-174). Schimek shows that Freud induced experiences in his patients that he (somewhat tendentiously) described in the seduction theory papers as *reproductions* (Schimek, 1985: 937-965; Freud, 1896a, 1896b, 1896c). Freud *inferred* the occurrence of infantile seductions on the basis of these *reproductions*. "The patients produced the material in response to Freud's continuing pressure (verbal and physical), and his repeatedly asking 'What did you see?' or 'What occurred to you?' They seem to have produced visual scenes, often of hallucinatory intensity, accompanied with some display of affect, physical sensations, and motoric gestures (...). The reproduction of the seduction scenes may have often been a kind of minor hysterical attack, with both verbal and nonverbal expression, in a somewhat altered state of consciousness (Freud mentioned the similarities between the pressure technique and hypnosis). Freud readily admits that the occurrence, if not the main contents, of these episodes was strongly influenced by his insistent suggestions and relentless pressure" (Schimek, 1985: 943-944).

The material itself was ambiguous. The purported infantile traumas ... "(...) were not directly reported by the patients but were (re)constructed by Freud on the basis of his interpretation of a variety of more or less disguised and partial manifestations and *reproductions*, with the likelihood of a strong transferential element" (*Ibid.*: 944).

It is also important to note that: "It is clear that these *reproductions* were not presented as memories, thus were not acknowledged and recognised by the patient. It is Freud who concluded that the material refers to a trauma that actually took place in the patient's childhood" (*Ibid.*: 943).

Although Freud does not provide us with any examples of what the reproductions consisted in, it seems warranted to assume that there was *some* thematic resonance between the data produced by his patients and the inferences which Freud extracted from this data.

In spite of Freud's remark to Fließ, there is no evidence that Freud systematically re-worked the seduction theory data in light of the theory of retrogressive screen memories.<sup>21</sup> There is no evidence of his use of the theory outside the context of his self analysis until 1903. Leopold Löwenfeld reproduced a passage taken from a letter written by Freud in his book on *Psychic Obsessions*: "*As a rule it is the experiences of puberty which have a harmful effect. In the process of repression these events are fantasied back into early childhood following the pathways of sexual impressions accidentally experienced during the illness arising from the [sexual constitution]*" (Löwenfeld, 1903: 296).

This passage is consistent with Freud's first public statement on the seduction theory after 1896: "I have learned to explain a number of fantasies of seduction as attempts at fending off memories of the subject's *own* sexual activity (infantile masturbation)" (Freud, 1906a: 274).

This *new* conception of retrogressive screen memories is continued in Freud's later works.

"If we do not wish to go astray in our judgement of their historical reality, we must above all bear in mind that people's 'childhood memories' are only consolidated at a later period, usually at the age of puberty; and that this involves a complicated process of remodelling, analogous in every way to the process by which a nation constructs legends about its early history. It at once becomes evident that in his fantasies about his infancy the individual as he grows up *endeavors to efface the recollection of his auto-erotic activities*; and this he does by exalting their memory-

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21. Eissler notes that "Freud did not report retrogressive screen memories in any of his patients" (Eissler, 1978: 468).

traces to the level of object-love, just as a real historian will view the past in the light of the present" (Freud, 1909d: 206).

This revised version of retrogressive screen memories contradicts Freud's earlier thesis in two crucial respects.

1. The screen memories are no longer of direct *contemporary* significance. They are designed to retrospectively efface memories of earlier events.
2. The context in which the memories are recalled is no longer regarded as the key to their latent meaning. Thus, one of the central methodological strictures of "Screen Memories" is discarded.

If Freud had chosen to rework the seduction theory data in light of his original conception of retrogressive screen memories he would have been compelled to treat the content of his patients' *reproductions* as representing features of the context which evoked them, i.e., a psychotherapeutic situation in which Freud relentlessly applied physical and psychological pressure – "the strongest compulsion of the treatment" (Freud, 1896c: 204) – in his quest for erotically-tinged information. *I submit that Freud would have been compelled by his own logic to interpret his patients' accounts as portrayals of himself and his psychotherapeutic procedure.* Freud would have understood the reproductions as expressing the latent thought that he (Freud) was inappropriately imposing his sexuality upon his patients, thus corroborating the interpretation of his own dream of the night of 3 October 1897.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Appendix: The Return of the Repressed*

Elements pertaining to screen memory reported in Freud's 1899 paper emerge at least two occasions in his later writings. Both of these can be described as examples of countertransference, and bear testimony to the importance of these matters for Freud.

The first example is found in Freud's analysis of the *Rat Man*. The Rat Man's cousin was named *Gisela* (Gisa) as was his girlfriend. In the original record of the case, presented as an addendum to the case in the *Standard Edition*, Freud wrote in the entry for November 18 that: "The details as told to me leave very little doubt that he made a sexual attack on

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22. As far as I am aware, this general approach to Freud's seduction theory data was first suggested by Langs (1982). I subsequently elaborated the thesis in relation to the screen memory theory in a book initially published in 1991, the second edition of which appeared in 1999 (Smith, 1999). The present, more detailed study rectifies some errors contained in the book.

the girl and that something in her, which she was unaware of, went part of the way to meet him" (Freud, 1909d: 280).

Freud makes it clear that this is a conjecture. One wonders whether issues personal to Freud influenced the construction, given that the theme of a sexual attack on a girl named Gisela is strongly resonant with Freud's analysis of his screen memory. Moreover, the theme of sexual relations with a cousin dovetails with aspects of Freud's analysis of the second recollection of the memory. Freud goes on to record that: "(...) he was very upset during the manoeuvres when Captain N. mentioned the name of Gisela Fluss (!!!)" (*Ibid.*: 280).

The triad of exclamation points is Freud's. One wonders if the remarkable coincidence of the emergence of this name influenced Freud's construction of the material presented earlier in the session. Three days later, Freud's records his analysis of the Rat Man's infantile *protective formula* – the magical formula "Glejisamen". Freud tells us that the Rat Man said that the letters *gl* stood for *glückliche* (happy) and that *j* represented *jetzt und immer* (now and ever). This is apparently *all* the information that the Rat Man provided about the formula during the session of 21 November. Freud then offers a conjecture. He claims: "It is easy to see" (*Ibid.*: 281) that the magical word is made up of the name Gisela combined with the word *samen* (semen) as follows:

GISELA  
S AMEN

Thus, writes Freud: "putting it bluntly, [he] had masturbated with her image" (*Ibid.*: 281). Freud's rather tortured interpretation would, of course, yield the word *Gliseamen* rather than the Rat Man's *Glejisamen*, so it was not so "easy to see" after all. Freud states that the Rat Man was convinced by this, offering the additional information that sometimes the formula had taken the form *Giselamen* but that he had only regarded this as a secondary assimilation to the name of his girlfriend, implying, of course that this revised version emerged during *adulthood*. The Rat Man's ostensibly corroborating evidence cannot therefore be regarded as validating Freud's hypothesis. Again, we might speculate whether the thought of masturbating with fantasies of Gisela was, in fact, of major personal importance to Freud, particularly as thoughts of Gisela Fluss had been evoked in the previous session.

The second example comes from the case of the *Wolf Man* (Freud, 1918b [1914]). The Wolf Man recounts an early memory to Freud

involving pursuing a butterfly with yellow stripes. The butterfly settled on a *flower*, and the *child ran away* in terror. It is easy to imagine that this account may have resonated with Freud's screen memory: the three elements of yellow, the flower and a child running away are all important elements of the 1899 report.

Freud informs us that he had concluded that this was a screen memory. And that: "One day he told me that in his language a butterfly was called *babushka*, 'granny'.<sup>23</sup> He added that in general butterflies had seemed to him like women and girls (...) So there could be little doubt that in this anxiety scene a recollection of some female person had been aroused" (*Ibid.*: 89).

Although plausible, Freud's conclusion seems a bit strong. Irrespective of this, however, the (interpretive) element of *pursuing a (yellow) girl* is even more evocative of Freud's screen memory. Freud next remarks that: "I will not hide the fact that at that time I put forward the possibility that the yellow stripes on the butterfly had reminded him of similar stripes on a piece of clothing worn by some woman".

Freud's admittedly inaccurate conjecture might be understood as a piece of countertransference extrapolated from the analysis of his own screen memory almost twenty years before. The isomorphy between the Wolf Man's screen memory and his own evoked in Freud the memory of Gisela Fluss wearing a yellow dress.<sup>24</sup>

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### Summary

*The Mirror Image of the Present: Freud's Theory of Retrogressive Screen Memories*

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23. I am informed by Annick De Coninck that the Russian word for butterfly is in fact *babotchka*, not *babushka* (granny).

24. Freud later makes it clear that he had been thinking specifically of a dress, stating that "(...) the yellow stripes were not on her [the nanny's] dress, but on the pear whose name was the same as hers" (*Ibid.*: 91).

Freud formulated the concept of retrogressive screen memories in 1897 to describe memories of past events which unconsciously portray contemporary situations. He used this concept at several points in his self-analysis and in the disguised autobiographical paper "Screen memories" (1899). The 1899 paper on screen memories contains contradictions and incoherences. Freud's correspondence allows us to reconstruct what may be the immediate triggers for Freud's recollections of the screen memory of the meadow with the yellow flowers described in 1899. Freud's theory of retrogressive screen memories seems to have been formulated specifically in order to reinterpret the data previously explained by the "seduction theory" of 1896. Freud never used the theory of retrogressive screen memories to reinterpret this data. It is suggested that if Freud had done this he would have been forced to conclude that his patients unconsciously regarded his psychotherapeutic approach as a form of seduction. Freud's screen memory of the meadow with the yellow flowers may have provided a source of countertransference in his treatment of the Rat Man and the Wolf Man.

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