

Schreber the plaything

By Alex Pheby

'From the first beginnings of my contact with God up to the present day my body has continuously been the object of divine miracles. If I wanted to describe all these miracles in detail I could fill a whole book with them alone. I may say that hardly a single limb or organ in my body escaped being temporarily damaged by miracles, nor a single muscle being pulled by miracles, either moving or paralyzing it according to the respective purpose. Even now the miracles which I experience hourly are still of a nature as to frighten every other human being to death; only by getting used to them through the years have I been able to disregard most of what happens as trivialities. But in the first year of my stay at Sonnenstein the miracles were of such a threatening nature that I thought I had to fear almost incessantly for my life, my health or my reason.'

D.P. Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, 1903

Since its publication, the German jurist Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* – according to Rosemary Dinnage “the most written about document in all psychiatric literature” – has been enmeshed in a complicated set of textual, intellectual and historical webs, and has been misread in any number of important and interesting ways. If you try to read Schreber's dense, contradictory, and often disturbing writings on the nature of God, and one man's relationship with him, you'll misread it, too.

Picking up this book in its most recent edition will cause us, if we follow the blurb on the back, to misread it as an account of the experiences of a man suffering from what we would now call schizophrenia. It is, it's written, “a revealing dispatch... from the far side of madness”. It would be tempting to allow this interpretation to stand. If we skip the introduction and prefaces, ignore the appendices, and enjoy the *Memoirs* for the bizarre and arresting details of Schreber's “crisis in God's realms”, the miracles directed at him with the aim of transforming him into a woman, and the post-apocalyptic world he creates of “fleeting-improvised-men”, it would certainly make for fascinating reading. We would learn of the posterior and anterior realms of God, the forecourts of heaven, the systems of writing-down and tying-to-celestial-bodies, the soul-language, and play-with-human beings. There are little men who live on Schreber's eyelids, lesser-Satans, and talking birds. We would find much to shock, entertain, and educate us in this record of a man's delusions. But the content of *Memoirs* was not written as a record of a man's delusions. Schreber did keep a diary, but this is not it.

If we ignore the blurb and proceed to the introduction we will find that it's a “cloudy divine revelation”, but it wasn't written as that either. Nor was it written as a clinical study, despite how often it is interpreted as such in the psychiatric literature. *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* had a more specific purpose, once we “disregard the trivialities”, one which pitched his story into the real world of mental illness, rather than these (perhaps) more enjoyable fantasies – it was written to free Schreber from imprisonment in an asylum.

In 1900 Schreber lost the legal right to manage his own life, lost the right to return home from Sonnenstein Asylum where he was being treated, and entered the tutelage of the state. Control of his financial affairs was removed from him, and any eventual release was at the discretion of his doctors. As a lawyer and judge, Schreber knew his best hope of freedom was a legal challenge to the order placing him under state control, and he began an appeal. The primary audience of Schreber's *Memoirs* (in its early drafts) was the appeal court. The contents of *Memoirs* (including many of the appendices we might be tempted to ignore) were written for, and included with, this appeal. They were constructed in order to demonstrate a legal point, namely that he was not in possession of a “clouded intellect”. Schreber writes in rational, academic, legal prose, specifically to demonstrate the clarity of his thought. Schreber was not writing to establish that he was different from us, some prophet of a new religion, chosen to bear

a new race of men, he was trying to show that he was the same. When we read him, we need to bear this in mind.

The content of *Memoirs* is nonetheless bizarre, but even here we need to be careful. Schreber calls on what he considers unquestionable intellectual authorities to support the objective accuracy of his experience of the world, and to demonstrate his sanity to the appeals court. The writing is suffused throughout with borrowings from popular religious and scientific books that would have informed the everyday dinner table conversations of the German middle-classes. Much of this material – on eugenics, hypnosis, and spiritualism, for example – is considered now to be nonsensical, and reads as something only a sufferer of delusions might believe, but this was not the case at the time. There is a difficult task awaiting the reader of *Memoirs* to identify elements that are hallucinated, those that were used to appeal to the believers of now discredited fields of study, and those which were designed to return him home to his wife.

The complexities don't stop there. Schreber was *successful* in demonstrating his ability to think rationally with *Memoirs*, his tutelage was rescinded, and the book we read is the result of revisions to his manuscripts done after the event, along with appendices of medical reports and legal argument, and an addendum – *Under What Circumstances Can a Person Considered Insane be Detained in an Asylum Against His Own Will?* This was prefaced with an open letter to his erstwhile doctor Emil Flechsig accusing the neurologist of causing his illness through influences emanating from his nervous system. He arranged for the book, now clearly an attempt to re-establish his reputation, to be published by the same publishing house (Oswald Mutze Verlag) that published many of the intellectual authorities Schreber had called upon to demonstrate his rationality during his appeal – Carl Jung, for example (whose doctoral thesis on the pathology and psychology of occult phenomena was published by them in the previous year), the spiritualist Aleksandr Aksakow, and writers on the popular evolutionary scientist Ernst Haeckel (who, like Schreber, located the existence of the human soul in the cells of the nervous system). The book went on to be marketed to “theologians, philosophers, physicians, jurists, particularly psychiatrists... and all educated persons interested in questions related to the hereafter”. People like us.

As an account of an illness, *Memoirs* is surrounded by some very complex contexts. Its delusions are part of the world, even when they purport to be something separate. Even if we wanted these delusions to be separate, for our comfort or convenience, we'd find ourselves caught up in the difficult reality that provoked them, and in which they were read. We'd have to work out how we could unpick all of this in order to get to Schreber.

Once *Memoirs* came into the public domain, despite the Schreber family's attempts to suppress it (his sister's husband – another Carl Jung: a soap maker and perfumer – attempted to buy up and burn all the copies, unsuccessfully) it was taken into an entirely new context: the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis. Despite never having met Schreber (even though he was available and under treatment during the writing of the case study) Freud wrote a long and detailed interpretation of *Memoirs*, most famously known now for establishing the mechanism of paranoia as a defense against homosexual desire. Freud stripped away most of Schreber's contextualization to reveal the core of the psychological process, and this account entered the history of twentieth century psychology, psychiatry, sociology, philosophy, history, literature, and theatre, drawing disciplines to it wherever it was encountered, and taking Schreber with it. Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Calasso, Canetti, Churchill, and many, *many*, more writers wrote on Schreber in the twentieth century. All of these appropriations, examinations and understandings of the work coloured what they observed, and once read they cannot be unread. It is through these coloured readings that we generally approach Schreber. If we want to find him now, how do we remove these filters?

After *Memoirs* was translated into English in 1955 and research into Schreber moved past his writing and into his biography, his father's writings came into play. Moritz Schreber, writer of popular volumes on child-rearing emerged: disciplinarian, child-torturing proto-Dr Spock to some; moderate advocate of medical gymnastics, and skilled chiropractor to others. *Memoirs* was introduced into another literary context: as a response to a forgotten body of writing from pre-existing Schreber family authors dating back centuries, all the way to Martin Luther.

Around the same time, popular interest in psychosis flourished with the success of *Sybil* – Flora Rheta Schreiber’s book on dissociative personality disorder. Tales of abusive authority figures, pathogenic family structures, sexual torture, and dictatorial control of children found purchase in those who read Schreiber, whose relationship with God – the ultimate domineering patriarch – was taken as emblematic of everything that was wrong in mainstream culture. Plays were written taking *Memoirs* and their reception as source material. Burt Lancaster and Anthony Burgess met to discuss a proposed film (never made) of Schreiber’s life story, influenced heavily by the bestselling *Soul Murder*, by Morton Schatzman, scripted by Burgess, and helmed by the director of *Moses the Lawgiver* for ITV.

Whatever Schreiber experienced, whatever his illness was on a strictly human level, was never further from us. Perhaps it was never available in the first place. Instead there was the molding of Schreiber into whatever position we wished him to fit, and the use of him for whatever purposes were required – progressive or regressive.

There was a backlash in the late eighties and early nineties: two enormous and rigorously researched doorstops by Han Israëls and Zvi Lothane addressed every attempt to co-opt Schreiber’s story with facts that refuted them: defences of Schreiber’s father’s reputation, the rubbishing of the work of those who went before them, and, eventually, the denial that Schreiber ever suffered paranoia, or schizophrenia, but rather a mood disorder.

Towards the end of the 20th century Eric Santner took Schreiber’s book as a “nerve-bible” of the 19th century preoccupations that eventually coalesced into National Socialism, and Schreiber was read as a Nazi *avant la lettre*.

And the story continues. In my most recent novel, *Playthings*, I use Schreiber in different ways. I use him as means of making the experience of mental illness understandable to an audience for whom it is too often made mysterious, couched in medical terms, or given to us as a means of engendering shock, fear, and disgust. I use him to allegorise the reactions of the state to those things that it is threatened by. I use him to explore our relationship with our own memories, with our own histories, and to demonstrate how tenuously we exist in the present. I use him to look at the mechanics of the family, and to edge us towards understanding our obligations and the power we exert over each other. And I use him to quietly expose the traumas of my own life, and so allow myself to face them, in part.

None of these things – not the things that I have done, nor that my predecessors did, nor that Freud did, nor that Schreiber himself did, can be seen as getting to the truth of anything – they do not allow for accurate readings. They are things that we write for ourselves, in complex contexts, about ourselves. They allow us to work at understanding ourselves whether it’s personally, or on the level of the state. This is how and why Schreiber’s *Memoirs* are important and useful to us – they combine and catalyse all these experiences and contexts whether we recognise them or not, and allow us to play them through.

And it’s not a trivial occupation. Under the Action T4 plan from 1939 to 1941 Sonnenstein, the asylum Schreiber was held in during the writing of *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness*, and Dösen, the asylum where he eventually died, were used to house and then execute thousands of the mentally ill, and those with developmental and intellectual disabilities. They were considered by the right wing state “ballast existences”: a drain on the overstretched welfare budget. Schreiber, had he been alive, would certainly have been euthanized. Now, when even the most basic provision for each other’s wellbeing is increasingly considered unaffordable in an age of “austerity”, this work of understanding ourselves and our contexts is essential. Our stories, like Schreiber’s, intersect with politics, with the law, with history, with philosophy, with medicine, with genocide, with the arts, with everything, and we must continue to read and misread them, or repeat the mistakes of the past.

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