

The art of imitation:

Wilhelm Stekel's *Lehrjahre*

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In the early history of psychoanalysis, the work of Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940) was by and large neglected, even though he wrote a considerable number of psychoanalytic studies, some of which should be considered to have had a major influence on Freud's early thought. Freud, in turn, had much greater influence on Stekel than is commonly believed. In this article, the authors aim to uncover some of these mutual influences, in particular in the field of practice, by focusing on the elements of autobiography and self-analysis. The authors have identified a number of covert autobiographical passages in the work of Stekel, and attempt to link one of these 'revelations' to an equally covert response to it by Freud. In the closing section of this article, the authors argue that Stekel's attempt to imitate Freud's self-analysis contributed to the fracture between the two of them.

Keywords: Wilhelm Stekel, Sigmund Freud, early history of psychoanalysis, autobiographical narratives, self-analysis, training analysis, masturbation, blind spots

Flecte quod est rigidum—Fove quod est frigidum [Bend what is rigid—Cherish what is cold]

From the medieval hymn 'Veni, Sancte Spiritus', *Laudes Vespertinae*, attributed to Archbishop Stephen Langton.

Introduction

Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940) was one of Sigmund Freud's earliest and most important followers, who worked in close collaboration with him for over 10 years and was among the first to practise psychoanalysis after Freud. Or was he?

Stekel (1950a, p. 113) claimed that he began practising psychoanalytic psychotherapy in 1903 and that his first 'real case'—a 42-year-old rabbi, whose case is described in his book on *Nervous anxiety states* (1921)—was referred to him by Freud. After his break with Freud in 1912 he continued to call himself a psychoanalyst (although he would refer to the practice as 'Psychanalyse')² and believed, in the

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²The only other analyst who referred to it as 'Psychanalyse' was the Swiss analyst Oskar Pfister, who believed this to be a linguistically more correct spelling.

account of Fritz Wittels, that Freud's school had become 'entangled in mysticism and philosophy', whereas he himself had remained faithful to 'true analysis, the medical work' (Timms, 1995, p. 114).

While far from acknowledging this claim, Freud did admit in a letter to him after their ways had parted that Stekel had remained 'loyal to psychoanalysis'. However, he added, even if he had been 'useful to it' (i.e. psychoanalysis), he had also 'done it great harm' (Freud to Stekel, 13 January 1924, in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 1960). It is well known that the break with Stekel was a considerable relief to Freud, and he would come to speak of him in a less than friendly manner, referring to him in public as someone who had gone 'totally astray' (1914, p. 19) and, in private, reserving much worse terms for him, such as the characterisations 'morally insane' (Freud to Ferenczi, 13 September 1912, cited in Jones, 1953–7, Vol. II, p. 137) and 'imbecile' [*schwachsinnig*] (unpublished letter of Freud to Rank, 13 September 1912). Moreover, Freud had always been reluctant to acknowledge publicly Stekel's position within the 'movement', he rarely hinted at their one-time close collaboration and, never in the 50 or so references to Stekel throughout the 24 volumes of the *Standard Edition* did he ever refer to him as his (former) 'follower'.³ Instead, Stekel is referred to as 'a colleague' or 'an experienced colleague' or, more often, simply as 'Dr Stekel' or 'Wilhelm Stekel', a fact that had not escaped Stekel's attention: 'Freud quoted me repeatedly "Herr Dr Stekel", which otherwise with other authors (Adler etc.) was never the case' (1926, p. 553).⁴ His defection is only dealt with in passing in the polemical 'On the history of the psychoanalytic movement' (Freud, 1914), as if it were an entirely insignificant event. Only in 1925 would Freud publicly say something about Stekel's former capacity as a psychoanalyst, admitting even that he himself had at one time been 'under his influence'. In a passage added to chapter 5 of the 6th edition of *Psychopathology of everyday life*, Freud wrote,

That writer [Stekel], who has perhaps damaged psychoanalysis as much as he has benefited it, brought forward a large number of unsuspected translations of symbols; to begin with they were met with scepticism, but later they were for the most part confirmed and had to be accepted ... Stekel arrived at his interpretations of symbols by way of intuition, thanks to a peculiar gift for the direct understanding of them. But the existence of such a gift cannot be counted upon generally, its effectiveness is exempt from all criticism and consequently its findings have no claim to credibility (1901, p. 350).

A man with only an intuitive understanding of dream symbolism who had little patience with scientific enquiry and whose work was a nuisance to science *because* it is so often correct: by and large, this is the historical image that has stuck to Stekel (Sachs, 1945; Jones, 1953–7; Roazen, 1975). Even Fritz Wittels, who sided with Stekel's camp in his conflict with Freud (but later switched sides) and consequently came to know him fairly well, reflects this image, writing of Stekel that he was a 'dream interpreter whose equal I have never seen' (cited in Timms, 1995, p. 112), yet scientifically he seemed to have been 'like the mental arithmeticians who call out

³There is one exception: in the 1907 and 1910 editions of *The psychopathology of everyday life*, Freud used the expression 'my colleague Wilhelm Stekel' (1901, p. 120, fn.), but dropped this title after 1912.

⁴All quotes from sources in the German language are the authors' translations.

the results without using any observable method' (p. 114). Indeed, 'Stekel's method was not to have any' (p. 115).

In this paper we shall challenge the assertion that Stekel was not a 'true follower' of Freud because he lacked scientific integrity and had a different (faulty) understanding of psychoanalysis.⁵ Focusing on the autobiographical element in Stekel's publications, we aim to show that, to all intents and purposes, Stekel's work was much more in line with that of Freud than is commonly believed; more specifically, we shall claim that Stekel's method of dream interpretation was copied from Freud's in several respects, and that this imitation contributed to his distancing from Freud.

A brief overview of Stekel's main works

Stekel's publications date back as far as 1895 when his first medical paper appeared—a study on 'coitus in childhood'—which was cited by Freud in 1896. However, it was not until around 1901 that he became personally involved with psychoanalysis when he read *The interpretation of dreams* (1900) and went into brief therapy with Freud. Consequently, Stekel began to devote much of his time and energy to propagating psychoanalysis (for example, Stekel, 1907a). By 1912, the year he broke with Freud, he had written a considerable number of newspaper articles and booklets on psychoanalysis as well as four larger volumes on this subject: *Nervöse Angstzustände* (a clinical book on anxiety neurosis), *Dichtung und Neurose* (on the psychology of art and artists), *Die Sprache des Traumes* (on dream symbolism) and *Die Träume der Dichter* (on the psychology of poetry and crime). Apart from these works, he had also published several books on loosely related subjects, such as *Nervöse Leute* (1911b, a collection of popular tales on psychology) and *Äskulap als Harlekin* (1911a, a popular book with humorous sketches from the practice of a medical doctor, in which, however, neither Freud nor psychoanalysis are mentioned).

Sure enough, by this time Stekel was considered to be the most important psychoanalytic author after Freud. His book on anxiety neurosis (1921)⁶ drew much attention, as can be gathered from a letter from Jung to Freud dated 19 June 1908 (Freud and Jung, 1974, p. 157), and it probably won many physicians over to psychoanalysis. His influence on the early reception of psychoanalysis is easily underestimated.

After his break with Freud, Stekel continued to practise psychoanalysis, although his modification of it markedly differed from that of the Freudians: for one thing, he was one of the first to practise short-term therapy, which greatly enhanced his 'cultural authority' in the United States (Park, 2004). For another, he cared much less for transference during therapy and, in fact, only accepted analysands if he could get along with them on personal terms (Stekel, 1950a, p. 117). Stekel also remained as productive as before. His most important post-1912 publication is the large ten-volume series 'Disorders of the instincts and emotions', published between

⁵Kuhn arrives at a similar conclusion (1998), but on different grounds.

⁶We refer to the 3rd, much enlarged, edition of *Nervöse Angstzustände*; the first book edition appeared in 1912. An even earlier version was published as an article (Stekel, 1907a).

1912 and 1928, his *magnum opus*. All of these volumes have been translated into English (but not the entire series as such). Books on dream interpretation (1943) and technique in analytical psychotherapy (1950b) are among his last published works. His autobiography (1950a) appeared posthumously.

While it is difficult to give a precise estimate of the total number of publications by Stekel, it is easier to characterise his work in general. (In addition to almost 40 books and booklets, Grinstein (1958) lists some 300 articles that can be attributed to his name; but recently Clark-Lowes (2001) claims to have identified well over 500 articles.) In contrast to Freud, Stekel always remained a clinician first. His ‘Disorders’ series is, in fact, a huge project that focuses exclusively on the description of case material. The literally hundreds of cases described therein are virtually void of the sort of metapsychological speculation Freud was fond of. But Stekel had always and would always content himself with a simple theoretical framework and abhorred all the finer distinctions Freud made, and was consequently often criticised for ‘confusing concepts’ and ‘jumbling up everything’ during the discussions of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society (Nunberg and Federn, 1962–75, Vol. I, pp. 178–9, 208, Vol. II, p. 7).

Of all these books and articles, only a few are referred to by Freud. Apart from the above-mentioned paper on coitus in childhood, Freud explicitly mentioned the following six sources: a 1904 newspaper article on ‘unconscious confessions’ (a discussion of which takes up two full pages in the 1909 edition of *The psychopathology of everyday life*); his 1908 book on ‘anxiety neurosis’ (in three different places); a 1909 paper on dream symbolism, and the large 1911 book on the same subject (discussed in *The interpretation of dreams* as well as in several papers); and two 1911 papers that were published in the *Zentralblatt* (in two technical papers, see Freud, 1912a, 1912b).

This may seem a meagre score considering Stekel’s enormous output but, compared to references Freud made to other followers, and considering the fact that there are many more references to Stekel without a specific source indication, one should actually conclude that Stekel occupied no insignificant place in Freud’s discourse. We return to this observation in the last part of our paper, but shall first focus on those features of Stekel’s discourse that provide the strongest links to that of Freud—the autobiographical narrative.

The autobiographical Stekel

Freud’s first step into the new sciences that was to become psychoanalysis was, as is well known, his famous ‘self-analysis’, and the two books in which this self-analysis is explored most thoroughly and carefully are *The interpretation of dreams* and *The psychopathology of everyday life*. The accounts in these books about Freud’s life are presented to the reader half as case histories and half as autobiographies. That is to say, in both books, the personal is very much intertwined with the epistemological part of the story: to understand a particular (symbolic) element in the narrative, intimate knowledge of the narrator’s life is required. However, that in itself is not enough; one must also understand the generic logic that lies beneath the symptom formation. The

play of interpretation therefore consists in connecting the personal and the general in such a way that the target of the interpretation (the narrator) cannot deny its validity. This is what has come to be known by Grünbaum as the ‘tally argument’ (1984): the fact that an interpretation must ‘tally with what is real’ in the unconscious. There is, however, an unintended consequence to this tying of the self to its own accounts, which could be called the autobiographical trap: all accounts lose their innocence and are forever referred back to the autobiographical self since no one can escape his self. Consequently, ever since Freud it has become common practice to demand from people that they reveal their autobiographical self in their accounts.

The interpretation of dreams and *The psychopathology of everyday life* had only just been published when Stekel first met Freud, but they found a fruitful interpreter in him.⁷ He was not only quick to understand that there are always hidden symbolic meanings behind every narrative, but he was also quick to draw the conclusion that nobody could escape the autobiographical trap, not even—or perhaps, in particular, not—the master himself. When Freud presented a dream of his own to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, Stekel was the only one who dared allow the dream to point back to Freud—and he was not contradicted by him either (see Nunberg and Federn, 1962–75, Vol. II, pp. 180–7, meeting of 1 January 1911). He was perhaps the first in what has become a whole industry of discovering Freud beneath Freud. However, the autobiographical trap has implications for the position of the interpreter as well: he, too, cannot escape his own discourses. If a critique of Freud is not to bounce back immediately, it should be levelled from a point of view that is at least equal to that of Freud. And this is precisely what Stekel aimed to achieve, as we shall attempt to show below. However, in our reconstruction of Stekel’s position we aim to stay clear, as far as possible, from ‘*hineininterpretieren*’ and instead intend to draw parallels between the discourses of Freud and Stekel based on rhetorical properties of those discourses.

In what ways, then, can Stekel’s and Freud’s discourses be compared? First, much as with Freud in the famous *aliquis* case in *The psychopathology of everyday life*, Stekel, too, often presents his case histories in a novel-like style, frequently using the first person singular to create an immediate understanding with his audience. In large chunks of dialogue Stekel makes his appearances as a Socratic interviewer; he knows all and almost effortlessly directs the patient to his unconscious drives. The patients in these narratives, in turn, seem focused very much on him as well, often misspelling or forgetting his name and thereby betraying his real intents, or otherwise dreaming about him. However, unlike Freud’s examples, Stekel’s cases never leave room for doubt. They are always complete successes. Freud somewhat cynically wrote of Stekel’s book on dream symbolism, ‘The aura of optimism that hovers over the whole performance—we are always right, all our findings fit together, are useful, and so on—may repel us, but the practitioner won’t mind it at all; they welcome illusions’ (Freud to Jung, 13 August 1908, Freud and Jung, 1974, p. 168).

⁷Stekel had a copy of both books with a dedication by Freud acknowledging their friendship and, above all, his early appreciation of psychoanalysis—Stekel wrote a positive book review of *The interpretation of dreams* in 1902—(see Stekel, 1926, p. 553).

It is true that many of Stekel's cases seem to fit too perfectly, as if they were made up. They are sometimes so crude, even to the point of being fantastic, that they appear to be almost a parody of psychoanalysis. It is well known that some analysts (in particular Tausk) thought that Stekel made up his own case histories. Stekel, who was well aware of this accusation, somewhat clumsily replied, 'If I had invented my cases I should undoubtedly be a greater poet than Shakespeare' (1950a, p. 142). His proverbial 'Wednesday evening patient' has nevertheless continued to be a testimony to his unscrupulous unscientific methods. It may well be, however, that the impression of forgery is actually prompted by Stekel's attempt to imitate Freud's narrative style. The following case history, one of many, may serve as an example (Stekel, 1921, pp. 323–4): a patient dreams about *being with a doctor, even as she is about to leave. While dressing herself, some slimy substance drips from her hand on to a piece of paper. 'Of course I am the doctor', explains Stekel, and 'dressing herself is the reverse of undressing herself', and yes, 'the slimy substance is sperm. It's about coitus'* (pp. 323–4).

Such self-glorifying narratives obviously made Stekel even more vulnerable to critique than already was the case. Moreover, it becomes even worse when the rivalry between Stekel and Freud surfaces in the dreams of his patients, as happens in *Die Sprache des Traumes*, where a patient dreams of *going up on a ladder* and shortly afterwards dreams of *a professor*. The patient, who is a psychoanalyst himself, 'resists the uncovering of his inner secrets'; he wants to 'complain about Stekel to Freud', says Stekel. 'He wants to stand above me, he wants to triumph over me with the help of Prof. Freud' (1922a, p. 393).

His rivalry with Freud had already surfaced during the meetings of the Vienna Society, but the autobiographical trap made it almost impossible for Stekel to criticise the master openly. Consequently, some of the more critical narratives found their way into the 'popular works', where they are covered up with humour or a pseudonym (or both). His 1911 *Åskulap als Harlekin*, for example, contains a barely concealed complaint about Freud appropriating his ideas. This book, which was published under a pseudonym, appeared at a time when he had made public two of his most important findings: 'the law of bipolarity' (the hypothesis that every act is determined by two opposing forces) and the discovery that all dreams are 'polymorph criminal' [*universell kriminell*], a rival to Freud's hypothesis of the 'polymorph perverse unconsciousness'. Both ideas were unanimously denounced at the meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Freud is quoted as saying, for example, that the concept of the 'criminal instinct' does not explain anything, that it is the viewpoint of an outsider (Nunberg and Federn, 1962–75, Vol. III, min. 155), and others were quick to reduce the 'law of bipolarity' to a mere rephrasing of what the Professor had already said. Interestingly, from Lou Andreas-Salomé's diary notes (1987, p. 94), we learn that it seems as if Freud did not think so low of the concept of 'polymorphous criminality', which, although considered by him to be a 'methodological leap', apparently hit a deeper meaning: the anxiety about oneself. Stekel himself complained of how they made fun of him in the society, nicknaming him 'Stekel with his Bipolarity' (1950a, p. 132). The disappointment he felt about this hostile reception is reflected in the first story in his *Åskulap* book,

which is about a humorist who desperately wants to have an idea of his own. When he finally finds one, he bumps into 'his old professor', bureaucrat X: 'The Professor assures me I am a real original thinker (what irony!). He reads my stories with great pleasure. I ought to write something nice again real soon'. When he leaves the 'Professor', the idea is mysteriously gone: 'Is it that between one's own thoughts and bureaucracy professors stand, or is there between these ideas and professors who are bureaucratic, an enmity?' (1911a, p. 4). The story ends with the humorist being committed to an asylum, where his case is presented to an assistant with the following speech: 'an interesting case of monomania ... This man suffers from the newest illusion of grandeur. He believes he owns an idea of his own' (p. 6).

A third sense in which Stekel is present in his own work is where he relates his own dreams, slips, mistakes etc. Again, Freud, who with the famous Irma dream in *The interpretation of dreams*, opened the door to a whole array of autobiographical pseudo-confessions, sets the example. In the above-mentioned 1904 newspaper article, for instance, Stekel narrates several examples of unconsciously determined actions: he accidentally expresses the exact opposite of what he should have said ('I hope you will *not* leave your bed soon', to a patient) or clumsily unfastens the dress of a lady friend etc.; examples that support Freud's thesis as developed in *The psychopathology of everyday life* and that were, for that reason, quoted by him (Freud, 1901, pp. 68–9). More autobiographical material appears in the *Die Sprache des Traumes* (Stekel, 1922a, pp. 341–2), where he links the numbers 14 and 41 in a dream with a fear of masturbation (he was 14 years of age when he read a popular book by Dr Retau warning its readers against this practice, which upset him terribly). The theme of the fear of masturbation returns time and again in his works, as, for example, in his series of educational letters to a mother (1927–9), where he again relates of his reading Dr Retau's book and the terrible consequences it had. Masturbation was also the last topic to be discussed in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society before Stekel was expelled from this society (Nunberg and Federn, 1962–75). Against Freud's opinion that adult masturbation is harmful in a psychological as well as a physical sense, Stekel (1950c) strongly advocated this practice, arguing that those who *repress* the urge to masturbate become neurotic (see Groenendijk, 1997, for a discussion of the differences between Freud and Stekel on the topic of masturbation).

The implicit suggestion in the masturbation debate is that Stekel himself is the living proof of his thesis. Or, in other words, that there is a fourth set of self-narratives, which are the autobiographical narratives in disguise. Thanks to the publication of his *Autobiography* (1950a), it is now easy to see that a number of case histories published by Stekel are really covert autobiographical accounts. Particularly, his book on dream interpretations (1943) contains many accounts of covert autobiographical narratives, but even his very first article on 'coitus in childhood' (1895) can be reconstructed as a narrative about his own childhood, as the editor of his *Autobiography* already noted in a footnote (Stekel, 1950a, p. 33). In many of these narratives, masturbation again plays an important role. In the next section of this paper we shall explore one such case in detail; suffice it for now to observe that here, too, Stekel had followed the example Freud set in *The interpretation of dreams* and *The psychopathology of*

everyday life, which are, as is well known, full of self-narratives as well as covert autobiographical accounts. Perhaps Freud's readers, including Stekel, were more aware of that fact than we realise.

The discussion of the autobiographical position therefore makes it clear that, in order to become an analyst, Stekel strongly identified with Freud and followed him in detail (see Bos, 2003, for additional evidence to support this claim). However, his identification with Freud's style is only the first step in the transformation of his identity. As we shall explore, the next step consists in the appropriation of Freud's self-analysis.

Confessions and conjectures: The case of a lost flute

When Stekel wrote his *Autobiography* in London during the last months of his life, he aimed to sketch a picture of his inner drives in an open and unreserved way, so that future generations of students could use it 'as a source for analytic research' (1950a, p. 12, editor's preface). He believed to be more or less following the example set by Rousseau, who had spoken freely and unreservedly about his own sexuality (p. 29). Indeed, Rousseau seemed 'obsessed with publicising unsavoury incidents, chiefly sordid sexual scenes', says Peter Gay (1995, p. 107).

Interestingly, Stekel had analysed Rousseau's *Confessions* extensively in his book on psychosexual infantilism (1922b). His main argument therein was that, thanks to Rousseau's 'infantile exhibitionism', he could uncover the deeper layers of the artistic drive in general, which are made up of a specific combination of homosexuality and paranoia. Unlike the average neurotic, the artist himself transcends these 'darker drives' and becomes a creative human being.

If Stekel had meant to follow Rousseau's example, it is remarkable, to say the least, that none of the elements he found in his predecessor surface in his own work. Stekel's 'confessions' are neither candid nor unreserved. There is no reference to any overt or covert homosexual drive (in fact, there is a heavy emphasis on heterosexuality) but, more importantly, the autobiography certainly does not leave the impression of a man who was able to transcend the average. Instead, we engage with someone who apparently suffered from delusions of grandeur, and who had not mastered his 'complexes', that is, his lifelong struggle with Freud.⁸

In fact, the *Autobiography* does not in the least resemble a confession. It is probably more accurate to say that it was modelled on Goethe's 1795 novel *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship* (1995), about a man's search for a vocation. This book was written as an unusual mixture of autobiography and art—*Wahrheit und Dichtung*, to use the old master's own words. It is for this reason that historians of psychoanalysis generally dismissed Stekel's *Autobiography* as a one-sided, untrustworthy account. Yet, with all its faults and inaccuracies, it does provide clues to Stekel's private life and, more importantly, it allows us to reread his work in a new light, one that in the

⁸The *Autobiography* was still incomplete at the time Stekel died and it is difficult to assess how much the editor altered or changed the manuscript to complete it. Stekel's son, Eric-Paul Stekel, however, expressed considerable doubt about its reliability (see Timms, 1996, p. 48fn.).

end also contributes to a better understanding of Freud's influence, we believe. We restrict our reading of this work to one story.

The *Autobiography* opens with an account of his youth in Boyan, Bukovina. Stekel outlines his first recollections, which seem 'indifferent, without emotion and without importance' (1950a, p. 31). Such a disclaimer, as any reader of Stekel should know, must of course be taken for the exact opposite—and we shall see why. Stekel remembers the house he lived in, located at a crossroads, and he sees a simple cart in which his grandmother is sitting. A second memory: his grandmother has died and Stekel's mother goes to her funeral. Between these two events, the author situates an event that 'determined my whole life'. He is about 2½ years old and he visits his grandmother in Boyan. While walking on the street, he meets a girl who asks him to play with her. Off they go and play

the favourite game of children, 'father and mother' ... Nearby is an improvised shed, which I distinctly remember ... We entered the shed and looked cautiously around us. Then we continued to play 'father and mother', and this time we enjoyed the physical side of our 'marriage' (p. 32).

Thirty years later Stekel meets the girl again, now as his patient. She has completely forgotten about their playing together, all she remembers is how his brother once knocked her down: a 'screen memory', Stekel concludes. Did he see her a second time? he asks himself. He does not know; all he remembers is seeing himself, sitting in a cart, riding home.

I have made a small wooden flute like those which peasants make. I try to play on it. The flute falls from my hand to the road. I cry bitterly. The carriage stops. Some of the men go down to look for the flute. The passengers are in a hurry. They shout to the driver 'Go on! Go on!'. The cart rumbles and creaks over the dusty road. I sadly look back. My crying has been in vain. The hot sun presses the tears against my cheeks. The wonderful flute is lost for ever (p. 33).

We have quoted considerably from this peculiar mixture of dreamlike recollection and autobiography because it corresponds largely with a case history narrated in the first volume of *Impotence in the male* (Stekel, 1971). The case history, presented to us as an important '*document humain*', is about a 40-year-old medical doctor who goes by the initials of 'NM'. In this case history, the subject remembers how he, at the age of 3, played 'being married' with a girl. They creep into a hayloft and he looks at her genitals, has a strong erection and actually attempts coitus.

I do not recall whether I repeated this game with the girl. I believe I only visited my grandmother, who lived in the country, for a day, and had to return to the city the next day. This recollection is mixed up with a second one, which I consider a 'screen memory'. I received a cheap shepard's flute from my grandmother, and let it fall from the wagon while we were rapidly driving to the city. The wagon stopped; an unsuccessful search was made for it; and I cried bitterly. The lost flute! Is it not a symbol for the abandonment of the pretty girl, the first of my long series of erotic adventures? (p. 117).

A few details do not match exactly: Stekel is 2½ years old, 'NM' 3 years of age; the shed is a hayloft; the girl's 'screen memory' is now his own, but, even so, these two accounts

are clearly identical and the identity is positively established by the ‘insignificant recollection’ of the grandmother sitting in the cart that encases the ‘life-determining’ event. ‘NM’ can be none other than Stekel himself.⁹ This fact is not insignificant precisely because the case history of NM does not end here, but, in fact, gives detailed information about its subject, in particular about his sex life. We thus come to know the hero of the story as a sexually active person who, at a very early age, had already had very intimate relations and later even becomes something of a sexual athlete. What remains vague in the autobiography is clearly expressed in the case history: the ‘father and mother’ game means intercourse. It continues: by the time the subject goes to Gymnasium he practises masturbation on a daily basis; aged 14 he visits a brothel for the first time; and at the age of 17 he has an affair with a chambermaid, which unfortunately results in hysterical impotence. After two years of suffering he meets the woman who will later become his wife; this relationship cured him of his impotence and he was now ‘able to carry out coitus seven times and subsequently ten times in a brief interval of time’, an observation that could be ‘confirmed by his wife’ (p. 126).

The basic psychological model behind this narrative is the following: a healthy sexual condition is spoiled by feelings of doubt and fear induced by an unnatural, repressive voice (warning the child that masturbation ruins one’s health), which only later results in impotence. Health is only restored when ‘insight’ is gained, allowing the adult to become sexually free again.

Indeed, in the covert autobiographical case history we encounter a strong, self-confident Stekel, athletically built, a free-thinker and a confirmed atheist, free of complexes. ‘I aspire to the high plane of a *Nietzsche* who believes every person has his own morals’, he has NM proclaiming. ‘But my inner (unconscious) morals are stronger than my intellect. In the course of the years, I have learned to listen to this inner voice, and, since I have done it, know that I will never be impotent again’ (p. 126).

Again and again, Stekel would replicate this successful model in the narratives of his patients, whose neurotic problems were often traced back to the repression of masturbation or some other psychological conflict during childhood, and were completely cured after only a brief but ‘active’ therapy with Stekel.¹⁰

The story of the lost flute is presented to the reader without virtually any interpretation, a peculiarity in itself for a writer who was quick to recognise a

⁹There is, of course, another possibility, namely that Stekel appropriated NM’s story and made it his own, rather than the other way around. We believe this to be unlikely, however, in the light of other biographical information given about NM, not discussed here. Another indication that the letters ‘NM’ stand for Stekel is that, in Latin, these two letters mean *Nomen Meum* (‘my name’). In either case (whether it is truly his story or only a story he ‘borrowed’ to make his own), our reading of it as an account of an auto-analysis remains the same.

¹⁰When, in 1925, the Ufa film company proposed making a film about psychoanalysis, Freud flatly refused to co-operate. The film was then made with the aid of Hanns Sachs and Karl Abraham and released as *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (Secrets of a Soul) in 1926 under the directorship of GW Pabst. The movie is about a man who becomes impotent when a childhood conflict re-emerges later in his life. He is completely cured during what appears to be active psychotherapy. Although Freud did not see the film script beforehand, nor was it likely that he ever saw the completed movie, it was the Stekelian-type of vulgarisation of psychoanalysis that put him off, as he wrote to Abraham that he did not think it was possible to represent psychoanalytic abstraction in any respectable way on film (Freud to Abraham, 9 June 1923, Freud and Abraham, 1965).

symbolic meaning behind almost everything. Thus in the *Autobiography* the story ends on the sad note that ‘the wonderful flute was lost for ever’ (1950a, p. 33). But in the case history of NM, the account breaks off at the point where the narrator ‘knows that [he] will never be impotent again’, whereupon Stekel concludes with the rhetorical question: ‘Is [the flute] not a symbol for the abandonment of the pretty girl, the first of my long series of erotic adventures?’ (1971, p. 117). Considering the fact, however, that the ‘patient’ was impotent for over two years and that he regains his potency only when he returns to a situation that closely resembles the childlike situation of his youth, it is difficult to see how the ‘lost flute’ can be anything but a symbol for precisely this lost potency. However, Stekel purposely chose not to interpret his covert autobiographical account in psychoanalytical terms; he wanted it to remain ‘blind’. In fact, ‘in simple cases’, Stekel wrote, ‘recovery may be induced by nothing more than suggestion without going into the deeper motives’ (p. 127).

Stekel’s blind spots: The analysis that failed

If the case history of NM is really a covert autobiographical narrative, as we have argued, then why is it so un insightful; why does it not clarify its subject’s psychology? The answer to this question can be found if we contrast Stekel’s methodological viewpoint with those of Freud.

From the autobiographical case of NM, we learn that Stekel was convinced that it is an analyst’s duty to actively interfere in the patient’s life: ‘The psychotherapist must ... convince the patient that fear makes him impotent’ (1971, p. 127). In order to do so, he should have an immediate understanding of the patient’s needs and troubles. He believed that he himself was luckily endowed with the gift of interpretation, as not even Freud would deny. ‘I think it will be generally acknowledged that I have some skill as interpreter of dreams’, he once said (1943, p. 71). To him, psychoanalysis resembles an art; an art for which one needs to be equipped with a certain sensitivity to learn it, which not everybody has: ‘It’s an artist’s assignment and it can never become a trade’ (1922a, p. 442).

Having said that, he acknowledged at the same time that

every analyst has his own complexes which psychoanalysis does not clarify to him if he is not conscious of them. I call this the ‘psychoanalytic scotoma’ [blind spots]. It is therefore necessary to learn from one’s own dream analyses and to accept oneself in the first place (p. 442).

These scotoma make analysts ‘BLIND TO SUCH COMPLEXES HE HIMSELF HAS’, he wrote in capital letters in his book on dream interpretation (1943, p. 511), because ‘every psychotherapist who is under the dominion of an overcharged idea will tend to introduce this idea into any dream he analyses’ (p. 512).

The key problem of blind spots calls forth the question of training, which, as is well known, began to surface in psychoanalysis for the first time at about the time that Stekel was expelled from the movement in 1912, and which was a question that was not to be resolved until after the Second World War (see Wallerstein, 1998, for a history of the debates on this issue). It is generally believed that it is precisely at this

point when psychoanalysis began to professionalise that unorthodox analysts such as Stekel, whose ‘wild’ and ‘intuitive’ methods made him unfit for the profession, were finally done away with. It will come as a surprise, then, that Stekel’s position in the question of training analysis was actually quite sophisticated and, in many respects, in accordance with Freud’s beliefs on the matter—albeit not in *all* respects.

Building on the assumption of ‘blind spots’, Stekel argued first of all, in a section on ‘auto-analysis’ in his book on dream interpretation, that it is not sufficient for an analyst to analyse his own dreams:

When my pupils ask me whether auto-analysis is possible, I usually say: ‘It is as impossible for a man to analyse himself as it is for a man to play chess against himself. One cannot at the same time be accusing counsel, judge, defending counsel, and reporter. Every attempt at auto-analysis leads swiftly to a frontier which the would-be auto-analyst cannot cross’ (1943, p. 184).

Consequently, he argued, it is imperative that

every analyst should himself have been analysed, if only as a preliminary to his practising dream interpretation. Of course this would only be a perfect safeguard if an analysis could be relied upon to free the analysand from complexes. But that, alas, is too much to expect. A psychotherapist who is unduly self-centred will not give the requisite attention to the dream his patient relates. Successful intuitive interpretation presupposes that the interpreter can achieve full imaginative insight into the working of the patient’s mind. One who is himself preoccupied with cares, doubts, shattering experiences, or is subject to a parapathy [neurosis], may fail to interpret a dream because he is incapable of imaginative insight (empathy) (p. 512).

For this reason, Stekel also warned against turning former patients into analysts, and fiercely opposed lay analysis. In his book *Technique of analytical psychotherapy*, Stekel wrote that it is a ‘mistake’ when an analyst educates his ex-patients to become psychoanalysts: ‘It is obvious that this is the path taken by many of those doctors who become psychoanalysts’ (1950b, p. 390).

In short, psychoanalysis was to Stekel not a trade you could learn by reading Freud’s books, but an art that one could only learn through a proper analysis of oneself, analogous to the master–pupil apprenticeship of old, restricted to those few who have an innate sensitivity for it and who are medically trained. In other words, in all but the last point did he concur with Freud.

How did Stekel himself fit into this model? We remember that he had, indeed, been (briefly) in analysis with Freud around the turn of the century and became an analyst himself shortly afterwards. He wrote that it was from Freud that he learned ‘the art of dream interpretation’ (1943, p. 180). Nevertheless, recall that it was sexual problems (*Wirrnisse*, or ‘confusions’, as he wrote in a 1926 account) that first brought him to Freud. Freud diagnosed these ‘confusions’ to be related to a ‘mother fixation’. Stekel wrote, ‘I was astonished. My relations to my mother are like those of a normal human being, I was able to separate from her early’ (1926, p. 540).

So it was Stekel who broke off his therapy with Freud, allegedly after a mere eight sessions. However, the reasons why he did so are not entirely clear. He wrote of this unsuccessful analysis in the *Autobiography*, claiming that he disagreed with

Freud on the diagnosis of ‘mother fixation’. At this point, however, the narrative of his analysis abruptly breaks off, only to be continued with an account of how he fell ill, went to Abbazia in Italy, and how he recovered there without any help, *simply by ignoring his doctor’s advice*. ‘What did you do to produce this miracle?’ the doctor asked. ‘I confessed that I had not followed his instructions, that I had taken long walks. He repeated his warning, but I knew that my treatment was concluded’ (1950a, p. 110).

There is a threefold suggestion in these parallel stories, which is important for our understanding of both Stekel and Freud. In the way we understand it, the implication would be that Stekel was first of all properly trained by Freud, while he was at the same time cured of his ‘sexual problems’, which had never been psychological ‘complexes’ in the first place but mere ‘confusions’, and lastly, and most importantly, that he had equalled the master because he understood better than Freud his inner psychological condition. Indeed, Freud had *never* been analysed himself and, as a result of that, ‘Freud in *The interpretation of dreams*, overlooks important complexes where his own dreams are concerned’ (Stekel, 1943, p. 180).

With this conclusion in mind, we return to the lost-flute narrative, which we can now read as an imitation of Freud’s self-analysis in *The interpretation of dreams*. Much as Freud presented fragments from this auto-analysis but nevertheless did not reveal the Freud behind Freud (the unconscious Freud) and always remains a vague, ‘opaque person’ [*undurchsichtige Persönlichkeit*] in his own work, as Jaspers (1948, p. 646) aptly wrote, suggesting that none of his dreams reveals anything remotely neurotic, so does the covert autobiography of Stekel present its subject as an essentially sane person, free of serious complexes, without ‘blind spots’.

The idea of ‘scotoma’ or blind spots in relation to training analysis builds the last and perhaps most interesting link with Freud. In 1912, after Stekel’s book on the *Language of dreams* was published, in which the idea of ‘blind spots’ first surfaced, Freud wrote a short paper entitled ‘Recommendations on analytic technique’ (1912a). It was first published in the *Zentralblatt*, edited by Stekel, and it contains several rather disconnected sections on technical rules in analysis. One of them (section ‘f’) is on the question of auto- and training analysis. Freud writes,

Just as the patient must relate everything that his self-observation can detect, and keep back all the logical and affective objections that seek to induce him to make a selection from among them, so the doctor must put himself in a position to make use of everything he is told for the purpose of interpretation and of recognising the concealed unconscious material without substituting a censorship of his own for the selection that the patient has forgone. To put it in a formula: he must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient ... But if the doctor is to be in a position to use his unconscious in this way as an instrument in the analysis, he must himself fulfil one psychological condition to a high degree. He may not tolerate any resistances in himself which hold back from his consciousness what has been perceived by his unconscious; otherwise he would introduce into analysis a new species of selection and distortion which would be far more detrimental than that resulting from concentration of conscious attention. It is not enough for him that he should be an approximately normal person. It may be insisted, rather, that he should have undergone a psycho-analytic purification and have become aware of those complexes of his

own which would be apt to interfere with his grasp of what the patient tells him. There can be no reasonable doubt about the disqualifying effect of such defects in the doctor; every unresolved repression in him constitutes what has been aptly described by Stekel as a blind spot in his analytic perception (pp. 115–6).

Freud's argument in favour of training analysis and contra auto-analysis seems in perfect accordance with Stekel's position as outlined above. However, it is not too difficult to see how this particular section can be read as a covert critique of Stekel. In the first part, Freud emphasises how the analyst must use his unconsciousness 'like a receptive organ' in order to listen to the patients' unconsciousness, and we recall that it was Stekel who was famous for having such an intuitive understanding of psychoanalysis. When Freud argues that it is not enough that the doctor 'approximates a normal person', he may have had in mind the sort of critique he vented to Jung when he wrote that Stekel 'contents himself with approximations' (Freud to Jung, 13 August 1908, Freud and Jung, 1974, p. 168). The critical element in these passages is, however, located in Freud's ironic use of the term 'blind spots', when he writes that the control of conscious thinking is achieved in training analysis, so as to learn to recognise one's unresolved repressions or 'blind spots'. This is exactly what Stekel had failed to learn, in Freud's opinion. It echoes a critique that he had brought forward from 1908 onwards, when Freud said at a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society that Stekel 'has a flair for psychogenetic complexes ... the trouble is that he relies exclusively on his inspirations, instead of submitting them to the control of conscious thinking' (quoted in Nunberg and Federn, 1962–75, Vol. II, p. 10).

Contrary to Stekel, Freud never thought of Stekel's analysis as a success, nor did he consider it a training analysis. When Jung reproached Freud for having treated his pupils, in particular Stekel, like patients (Jung to Freud, 18 December 1912, Freud and Jung, 1974, pp. 534–5), Freud answered, '[It] is quite true that since Stekel, for example, discontinued his treatment with me some ten years ago, I have never said one word to him about the analysis of his own person' (Freud to Jung, 22 December 1912, Freud and Jung, 1974, p. 537), suggesting that his person was not free of blind spots.

Clearly, Freud not only disapproved of Stekel's incorrigible 'shallow psychology', he also abhorred the 'blind spots' in his analyses as well: the fact that all of Stekel's successful cures resemble his own unsuccessful analysis. In Stekel's work, the invariable reduction of problems to a psychological condition of doubt, related to the masturbation/impotence hypothesis, seemed like an endless repetition of his aborted analysis with Freud. But Freud failed to see what Jung clearly could see: that he himself was, in a sense, to blame for that, not only because he treated his pupils like patients, thus producing 'either slavish sons or impudent puppies' (Jung to Freud, 18 December 1912 Freud and Jung, 1974, p. 534), but also, we argue, because of the emphasis on the element of auto-analysis in his early publications. In his attempt to appropriate Freud's methods, Stekel had imitated Freud's autobiographical style to the detail, copying his use of (covert) self-analysis in his publications. His tragedy was that this did not bring him closer to the master but, in fact, only distanced him further from him.

Translations of summary

Die Kunst der Nachahmung: Wilhelm Stekels *Lehrjahre*. In den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse wurde die Arbeit von Wilhelm Stekel (1868-1940) im Großen und Ganzen kaum zur Kenntnis genommen, obwohl er eine beträchtliche Anzahl psychoanalytischer Untersuchungen verfasst hat, die auf Freuds frühes Denken einen wichtigen Einfluss ausübten. Freud wiederum hat Stekel weit stärker beeinflusst, als gemeinhin angenommen wird. In diesem Beitrag versuchen die Autoren, einige dieser wechselseitigen Einflüsse, die insbesondere auf dem Gebiet der Praxis erkennbar werden, aufzudecken, indem sie sich auf das Element der Autobiografie und der Selbstanalyse konzentrieren. Die Autoren haben in Stekels Werk eine Reihe versteckter autobiografischer Passagen entdeckt und versuchen, eine dieser „Enthüllungen“ mit einer ebenso versteckten Reaktion Freuds auf diese Passage zu verbinden. Im abschließenden Teil des Beitrags vertreten die Autoren die Ansicht, dass Stekels Versuch, Freuds Selbstanalyse zu imitieren, zum Bruch zwischen ihnen beitrug.

El arte de la imitación. Los *lehrjahre* de Wilhelm Stekel. En la temprana historia del psicoanálisis la obra de Wilhelm Stekel (1868-1940), autor de un número considerable de trabajos psicoanalíticos, fue poco considerada. Algunos de sus trabajos tuvieron gran influencia en el pensamiento temprano de Freud, quien a su vez, tuvo mucho más influencia sobre Stekel de lo que suele creerse. En este artículo, cuyo título alude a la novela semiautobiográfica de formación *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, de J.W. Goethe, los autores buscan sacar a la luz algunas de estas influencias mutuas, en particular en el campo de la práctica clínica, focalizando la atención en aspectos autobiográficos y de autoanálisis. Los autores han identificado un número de pasajes autobiográficos encubiertos en la obra de Stekel, e intentan vincular una de estas ‘revelaciones’ con una respuesta de Freud igualmente encubierta. En la última sección del artículo, los autores argumentan que el intento de Stekel de imitar el autoanálisis de Freud contribuyó a la ruptura entre ellos.

L’art de l’imitation. Le *Lehrjahre* de Wilhelm Stekel. Dans les premiers temps de l’histoire de la psychanalyse, les travaux de Wilhelm Stekel (1868-1940) ont été dans l’ensemble méconnus, alors même qu’il a écrit un nombre considérable d’études psychanalytiques, qui pour certaines devraient être considérées comme ayant eu une influence majeure sur la pensée de Freud à ses débuts. Freud, en retour, avait une bien plus grande influence sur Stekel qu’il n’est couramment admis. Dans cet article, les auteurs se proposent de mettre en lumière quelques unes de ces influences mutuelles, en particulier dans le champ de la pratique, en se concentrant sur l’autobiographie et l’auto-analyse. Les auteurs ont identifié de nombreux passages autobiographiques masqués dans l’œuvre de Stekel, et tentent d’établir un lien entre l’une de ces « révélations » et une réponse tout aussi masquée de Freud. Dans la dernière partie de l’article, les auteurs développent l’argument que la tentative de Stekel d’imiter l’auto-analyse de Freud a contribué à la rupture entre les deux hommes.

L’arte dell’imitazione: *Lehrjahre* di Wilhelm Stekel. Agli inizi della storia della psicoanalisi l’opera di Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940) restò per lo più negletta, anche se egli scrisse un numero notevole di studi psicoanalitici, alcuni dei quali dovrebbero essere presi in considerazione per il fatto di aver esercitato un importante influsso sulla prima fase del pensiero di Freud. Freud, a sua volta, esercitò su Stekel un’influenza assai maggiore di quanto comunemente non si creda. In quest’articolo gli autori si propongono di scoprire alcuni di questi influssi reciproci, in particolare nel campo della pratica clinica, focalizzando l’attenzione su elementi autobiografici e di autoanalisi. Essi hanno identificato nell’opera di Stekel un certo numero di passi velatamente autobiografici e cercano di collegare una di queste “rivelazioni” a un’altrettanto velata risposta di Freud. In chiusura d’articolo gli autori sostengono che il tentativo di Stekel d’imitare l’autoanalisi di Freud contribuì alla rottura tra i due.

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