

Freud's "anna o" and the meaning of private theater



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In the case history of Anna O., Freud's coworker Breuer makes no mention of when Anna coins the phrase "private theatre." The abstraction reveals in itself two distinct personalities, and thus a notable self-awareness. It cannot be that in the midst of a daydream, she described the experience, as then she would no longer be daydreaming. Nor does the thought seem haphazard. It is a most refined abstraction revealing at least a partial understanding of the nature of her fantasies, if not the nature of her disease. It is coherent and artful German, the product of intelligent reflection. It is a wonder both that she was capable of this level of understanding after three pages, and that Breuer and Freud's invisible hand never tell us exactly how far they had traveled in order to arrive there. Since the case history hides the context, the only way to make sense of the phrase is by trusting Breuer's explanation. He writes: "The girl, who was bubbling over with intellectual vitality, led an extremely monotonous existence in her puritanically-minded family. She embellished her life in a manner which probably influenced her decisively in the direction of her illness, by indulging in systematic day-dreaming, which she described as her 'private theatre.' While everyone thought she was attending, she was living through fairy tales in her imagination... She pursued this activity almost continuously while she was engaged on her household duties, which she discharged unexceptionally..." The long quotation is the best path to understanding the relationship of the phrase to the patient. What emerges first is a world of opposites: "intellectual vitality" pitted against a "monotonous existence"; "fairy tales" against "attending"; "activity" against "household duties." Thus "private theatre" is more than simply "day-daydreaming." It is an escape from a specific setting, a fortress buttressed against her "puritanically minded family." Yet her "household

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duties" are still "discharged." Unlike the final "direction of her illness," daydreaming is a silent and unnoticeable rebellion. At this point early on, the patient is "always on the spot when she was spoken to." Daydreaming is so tempered an activity, shows such restraint, that Breuer calls it a mere "embellishing" of life, a game of solitaire played for the same purpose. Only later will she act as "naughty" as she "hallucinate[s]." For now, the affliction is artistic, not violent. Hence the phrase "private theatre," as opposed to the public nuisance that it will become. Still, the phrase has not yielded up all of its meaning. Breuer likens the plays to "fairy tales," an analogy that strips the phrase of its realism by emphasizing vividness: a play is subject to rules that a fairy tale is not. Exact parody of real life is just as inessential, but a play is condemned to a stage whereon characters must move just as we do. Magic is possible, but dependent on the audience's ability to abstract. On a stage, a frog cannot actually morph into a prince. In that sense, "private theatre" foreshadows the actual symptoms of Anna's hysteria. This is a hint then that she daydreams of "throw[ing] the cushions at people," of "tear[ing] buttons off her bedclothes," since, of course, she cannot assume a supernatural prowess. If we put more pressure on the idea, we find that it is not clear whether Anna is the author or the audience (or, as is likely both). Indeed, she scripted the work in her unconscious and watches it in peak awareness. With her "great poetic and imaginative gifts," Anna crafts plays that exist in some impossible realm, since a play is by definition public. It is a spectacle for everyone's enjoyment. Thus a "private theatre" is an oxymoron as confusing as a "public diary." This contradiction is perhaps the subtext of any work of art that the artist creates only for himself. In the case of a hysteric, however, the seats of the theatre must fill up. Like the

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suicide note that Dora hides in her desk for her father to find, the characters must speak their lines to someone, even if the delivery is so muddled that only a psychoanalyst can be a fair critic. Hysteria then is the means of making public that private theatre. Anna was visited by a compulsive need to act out her own characters. The curtain of her psyche was slowly raised and out came the fits, the coughing, the squinting, and the whole cast of symptoms no longer content to toil for the director's eyes only. As Breuer says in his conclusion, " day-dreaming... prepared the ground upon which the affect of anxiety and dread was able to establish itself." This implies that the greater the tension between the play and the reality, the greater the tendency to hysteria. Dora likewise suffers from the tyranny of the kitchen. " She was," Freud writes, " on very bad terms with her mother, who was bent upon drawing her into taking a share in the work of the house." She attended " lectures for women" in order to run away, it appears, from the call of the dishrag. Again, the two worlds are too far apart to cohere. From thence the hypnoid states take their cue. Now that the plays are for our viewing, the stories capture our attention. No longer does Anna " attend." Instead she falls prey to " deafness brought on by being shaken" or by " fright at a noise." Both plots have " origins" in Anna's past. Both are reenactments. Dora too plays out events that had transpired years before, either in fact or fantasy. Thus if hysteria is theater, then only histories are on the playbill. " Hysterics," Freud and Breuer teach us in their " Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena," " suffer mainly from reminiscences." Accordingly, the cure must establish a clear relationship between the memory and the rememberer, between the play and the playwright. Just as an artist may say of his most disturbing work, " I didn't really write that" so too does a hysteric

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appeal to the unconscious principle,. " I didn't really experience that."

Implicit in " private theatre" is Anna's impossible belief that she has no part in the productions; theater is put on, always in the passive voice. The psychoanalytic method demands the absolute attribution of authorship, in daydreams, night dreams, and their physical expression, hysterical " scenes." The means to that end is speech. Anna " talk[s] away" her hysteria. Exactly as her " poetic vein dr[ied] up" as a result of unfurling her stores, her symptoms disappeared after she explained their origin. The work of Freud and Breuer was to enable Anna to understand what each symptom represented, to explain the workings of the play to its creator. Needless to say, authors are notoriously resistant to criticism. There is, however, a catch to drawing out Anna's metaphor as much as I have. How exactly is the concept of abreaction reconcilable to the model of private theater gone public? It would seem here that the director/playwright suddenly dissolves into his main character; the stage folds itself up; the audience is a part of the dialogue. " The particular symptom," writes Breuer of Anna, " emerged with greater force while she was discussing it." No longer does the memory prance about on the set, as the abreaction is by its nature a proportional reaction to the original occurrence. It is not so easy as to say this is merely the climax of the show, because abreaction is not a show. This problem is not simply the difficulty of achieving a literary trick. If Anna's clever phrase is an apt description of her state as Breuer indicates, then we must be able to trace its application across the whole logic of hysteria. In " Mechanism," Freud and Breuer argue that " if hypnoid states of this kind [e. g. private theater] are already present before the onset of the manifest illness, they provide the soil in which the affect plants the pathogenic memory." If the "

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consequent somatic phenomena" were not analogous to a grown plant, then this particular conception of the mechanism of hysteria needs severe revision. Likewise, abreaction cannot undo our understanding of the theater of hysteria, or else Breuer is one more draft short of perfection. Is it fitting that the culmination of the treatment circumvents Anna's metaphor? I believe the answer is in the question. The abreaction itself is entirely normal; it is, so to speak, a symptom of health. It is a reaction to the cause itself, as opposed to the twisted, unconscious memory of that cause. Thus it is not, nor should it be, on the stage of our psyche. At the end of treatment, the need to differentiate audience from actor from director vanishes, because the "talking cure" did away with the need to represent. "We may regard it as a second and theoretical aim to repair all the damages to the patient's memory," writes Freud. Thus psychoanalysis has reincorporated the story of the play into consciousness, thereby burning up the curtain. It might be argued that the hysteric retreats to "private theatre" exactly like the daydreamer since the language in both cases is private, whereas I have claimed that hysteria is the exteriorization of that intimate world. This is a semantic argument, rooted in the ambiguity of the word "public." A quick reworking of the terminology clears up the confusion immediately. An escape into "private theatre" is, in all cases, a dress rehearsal.