

In Celebration of Father Schreber

Jonathan J. Detrixhe

If we turn to Mark Kuras 2006¹, we encounter the rare interpreter of Schreber willing to resist for a moment gazing upward into the rambunctious rainbow realm of nerves and rays and look downward instead – downward, even if only for a moment – down and down into the shallow ditch of Schreber’s childhood, his early conditioning. If I say the name *Schreber* and we look down, not up, I say what we encounter instead of kaleidoscoping angels and miracles is a frozen mud-puddle swirl: crusty browns and dried-blood blacks, splintery blocks of wood and rust on shackles, a coruscation of shit and oil, and beneath, something darker still, a black rainbow resolving into form, slowly becoming clear. It is the face of a man.

Hear Kuras: “Schreber’s father was a prominent physician and educator, particularly influential in child care/developmental theory. He created a system of child rearing tied exclusively to the Enlightenment premises of late nineteenth-century thought.”² And we should add: a very successful and popular theorist and educator and mental health professional. Moritz Schreber was the Maria Montessori and – dare I say it! – Erik Erikson of his day. A German physician and professor at the University of Leipzig, he became director of the Leipzig sanatorium in 1844, and according to Alice Miller, his books on early childhood education “were so popular in Germany that some of them went through forty printings and were translated into several languages.”³

Hear Father Schreber himself:

¹ Kuras, Mark. “Numinosity/femininity.” *The Idea of the Numinous: Contemporary Jungian and Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. Eds. Ann Casement, and David Tacey. New York: Routledge, 2006, 68-83.

² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³ Miller, Alice. *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*. New York: Macmillan, 1990. P. 4.

Our entire effect on the direction of the child's will at this time will consist in accustoming it to absolute obedience.... The thought should never occur to the child that his will could be in his control, rather should the habit of subordinating his will to the will of his parents or teachers be immutably implanted in him.... There is then joined to the feeling of law a feeling of impossibility of struggling against the law; a child's obedience, the basic condition of all education.⁴

Kuras goes on to note that Schreber's father was an inventor of devices designed to control the movements of children and young adults. The blueprints are available online, if you want to see them, surprisingly readily available after nearly 200 years. Some were designed to keep a child from speaking (a metal cap with a jaw strap), others to support perfect posture and keep a child's head up while reading (a kind of reverse vest with a bar extending up the back to a cap and fitted to a chair); still others to prevent masturbation in bed (manacles attached to bedposts). Kuras, as well as Alice Miller and Morton Schatzman, author of *Soul Murder*⁵, quite logically connect Schreber's adult illness to his childhood experiences as the experimental subject of his father's theories, practices, and devices. But does Schreber the son also make this connection?

Lacan⁶ notes that Schreber in his *Memoirs*⁷ does not mention his father except once when he seeks clarification of some of his own sexual thoughts by referring to one of his father's books, *Manual of Bedroom Gymnastics*. Lacan finds this title, as well as the Schreber's attitude – “golly, what would Papa say about *sex*?” – amusing, and it is, in a way – but I think we can also responsibly speculate, based on this deferential fact-checking with Papa, how Schreber thinks of his father, at least consciously: not as his torturer unto psychosis but as a reference, a source of knowledge, perhaps high up on the shelf and only to be taken down occasionally but still: a

⁴ Cited in Kuras, p. 77.

⁵ Schatzman, Morton. *Soul Murder: Persecution in the Family*. London: Allen Lane, 1973.

⁶ Lacan, Jacques. *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III*. 1981. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Russell Grigg. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997. P. 284.

⁷ Schreber, Daniel Paul. *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. 1955. Ed. and Trans. Ida Macalpine. New York: New York Review of Books, 2000.

manual, positive, useful and conflict-free. But of course we're talking about Schreber's *conscious* mind here: It is clear to many interpreters of Schreber – Kuras and Schatzman, at least, state this specifically – that Schreber expresses his *unconscious* knowledge of the role his father played in his adult illness in the “soul murder” sections of the *Memoirs*. He does *know* his father did this to him but without any *knowledge*; that is to say, the knowledge exists only down, down in the inaccessible depths of his mind.

For me, however – and certainly as a result of the forthcoming idiosyncratic associations rather than any scholarly rationale – I hear Schreber speak most directly about his childhood and his experiences with his father in the talking bird passages of the *Memoirs*. Talking birds are not a massive subject in the *Memoirs*, but in my opinion, they make for some particularly beautiful and frightening content in Chapter 15, the chapter on play-with-human-beings, miracles, and cries of help.⁸ Here Schreber vividly describes his environment in the asylum: the snap of door-locks in the corridor, the muttering attendants entering his room, the flash of the sun in the garden, and the enormous physical and mental agony of his moment-to-moment existence: He describes, just sitting in his room, “Then a sensation of a painful blow directed at my head which calls forth a very unpleasant feeling as soon as God has withdrawn to an excessive distance, and may be combined with the tearing off of part of the bony substance of my skull – at least that is how it feels.”⁹ And over and again the thoughts of the miracles and rays pressing in and retreating, and the mind of God – the will, emotions, desires, strategies of God which he cannot pause in analyzing lest the horrible, annihilating bodily voluptuousness arrive – and as Schreber says in his inimitable calm, “All of these phenomena happen hundreds of times of a day.”¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

And out of these hundreds, one more...the talking birds.

In his *Memoirs*, Schreber says the birds are created by miracles and granted a special immunity to his most dangerous infirmity, bodily voluptuousness, so that they may fly in and out of him without being negatively affected. The birds seem to be natural birds that have had individual human souls, as he puts it, “crammed”¹¹ into them; he sees them in the garden; he gives them girls’ names, the names of specific girls he remembers from childhood. The birds are tasked by God with flying through his body and repeating phrases “learnt by rote,” lessons and challenges to which Schreber must attend or risk annihilation.¹² The birds don’t understand what they are saying, but since the words have similar sounds, sometimes the rhymes can “make [the birds] forget the rest of their mechanical phrases and they suddenly pass over into genuine feeling.”¹³ They become actual presences, more like friends. The birds’ occasional lapses in their duty to God please Schreber and he likes to provoke them. “To confuse these talking birds,” he says, “by deliberately throwing in similar sounding words became a kind of pastime in the voices’ almost unbearably tedious twaddle which afforded me a somewhat queer amusement.”¹⁴ The talking birds are also a subject for intelligent study and rigorous observation, so more than a little distraction or amusement; Schreber’s a bit of a Junior Audubon when it comes to these birds...or maybe should I say Meta- or Uber-Audubon, since when Schreber goes birding, it is across multiple perceptual realms – out in the garden, passing through his body, organized in his mind, and speaking the contents of the mind of God. Hear Schreber, the talking bird naturalist, the discoverer of *loquentes avis*:

I want to add something about the birds created by miracle; it is queer that the individual nerves or souls which are in them appear in the shape of different *kinds of birds*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

according to the season of the year. The same nerves are in the spring contained in the bodies of finches or other singing birds, in the summer in those of swallows, and in the winter of the sparrows or crows.¹⁵

So let's pause here briefly with the birds. I think there is a *possibility* here, if you are with me, of feeling closer to Schreber and his experience of hearing voices; I propose there is some entry point for us all in this experience with birds. I don't think it is that uncommon to hear human voices or words in the sounds that birds make. Indeed, many birds take their names from their songs: If you've ever heard a Bobwhite, it sounds like this: bob...*white!* bob....*white*; and the Blackcaped Chickadee, *chickadeedeedeede*; the killdeer, when a predator approaches, *kill-dee, kill-dee, kill-dee*; and the Poorwill, *Poor-will, poor-will*. I had the recent experience of being on vacation with my family in a tropical place, and sitting by the pool, it seemed that whenever I would have a desire, even fairly innocent, such as *Man, any chance I can get away from Mother in Law today*, a large bird with a yellow breast would arrive and say, *In your dreams, in your dreams!*

Now I can imitate these songs, I can speak the names of birds as the sounds of birds; now imagine the birds answering...because they often do. The human attempt to imitate bird sound in hopes of a response is called pishing, and to pish, what you do is, you go out into the woods or the park with your binoculars and your pishing manual and, through a great deal of practice, you imitate the birds with your mouth. And if you're a good pisher, they come to you and they speak back. So people are, this very summer, likely today, out in the forests talking to birds right now and no one comes to criticize them. Now, this may seem like a bit of an esoteric practice, but it clearly suggests a basic human desire to talk to birds. Now I've passed out some bird calls, and I propose just a minute of imitating birds together, talking bird talk in honor of Daniel Paul.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

[Pass out Raven, Owl, Duck and Yard Birds to volunteers. Take turns, then all together.] So with these sounds in our heads, fly with me to these images, the space that comes to me when I combine in my head talking birds, Schreber's childhood, and Schreber's father.

I see Daniel Paul Schreber as a young boy strapped to the chair; the metal vest, the bar up the back, the chin strap, the manacles, the leg straps – and pinioned there, not merely at study time or risky masturbation time but simply for punishment. Some kind of disobedience has occurred, some kind of expression of willfulness on his part, rebellion against his father's law – let us say running in the house. So he must go in the chair. But where in the house do they keep such a thing, this chair, his father's prototype, patent pending? Hidden in a closet? Off in an infrequently used spare room? Is there any shame about the chair? I imagine not. I imagine the chair was placed prominently in the parlor, so that guests could admire the invention and so that young Schreber, when strapped down, would set an example to his younger siblings (of which he had four)? Even more specifically and most clearly in the image that comes to me, that flies into my head, is that they put the chair before the window – as an advertisement of the device, as a shaming of the son, and as a way of increasing the punishment: look outside at the freedom you have lost.

And so he sits there. In the chair. Before the window.

Shadows move across the lawn. Neighbors pass. Friends see him sitting there, perhaps they wave, laugh, turn away. And birds fly by.

They fly by in repetitive patterns. A barn swallow swoops low across the lawn, hunting worms. A pigeon roots in in the gutter. A crow clears its throat, flaps anxiously in a circle. Their sounds are similar, they repeat the little twittering verses, miniature croaked-out rhymes. There is little other stimulus for the child and stimulus is child oxygen. The birds are a breath of air. And

he must breathe in the chair, must survive in the chair, and not only that, he must be *okay* in the chair, not complaining in the chair, not wiggling, okay for father, father must be proud of his stillness and obedience to the law in the chair. So watch the birds, grateful for the birds, thank god for the birds, pray for more birds.

Hours pass. He is returned to this position over a period of days, weeks, months. The birds changes with the seasons. He invents games with the birds, gives them girls' names, girls he longs to speak to. And they begin to speak to each other; why not; it's all in his head; no one will know.

And then one day the great horror.... He survives. He *is* good in the chair. He *is* okay for father. It all starts to seem normal, maybe even pleasant, even fun, same as running in the house, running in his mind. The patterns in the birds' sounds are all mapped out now, predictable, even responsive, seemingly patterned on his own patterns, his own thoughts.

I am hearing these birds and feeling these birds. Soul crammed into me, crammed in this chair, birds cramming into me. I am thinking these birds and thinking Father and praying to god and god answers in the birds and in the voice of father...obey!

And we may in this moment see the child Schreber as the most complete student of his father's education program, which was, recall, to join the feeling of law to a feeling of the impossibility of struggling against the law. The law wins; Schreber sits still in the chair. Now I know that by Law in his pedagogy Father Schreber is referring to public laws and social rules, but I can't help but see THE LAW here in capital letters, The Law as in the ultimate law with which we help our patients struggle in psychoanalysis, and at our most healing, I believe, aid them in overcoming: *the law of noncontradiction*. This law from propositional logic, that A cannot also be B at the same time, that an apple cannot also be an orange; this law which

philosophers as distinct in time and method as Aristotle, Kant, Russell and Fredric Jameson have rejected, accepted, corrected and rejected again; this law which though it seems to stand when applied to the Newtonian physical world, absolutely falls apart at the quantum level; this law which every major world religion rejects – this law is nevertheless absolutely accepted as street-level common sense in Western culture and when applied to human feeling and thought yields absolutely nightmarish results. In our thoughts and in our feelings, an apple can most certainly be an orange; A can B; a bird can be a little girl; the therapist before me can be my mother and father; I can hate the ones I love; my desire to destroy can match my desire to create and with no negation on either side, only fusion and increase; and finally, the absolute and absolutely contradictory truth that we all most intimately know: if we obey we get to live AND if we obey then we die. Schreber has no professional assistance over the course of his life, not only in understanding his developmental course and the causal role of childhood trauma in his adult illness, but also no help in confronting and overcoming the law of noncontradiction and embracing the dualities and conflicts that don't merely complicate but define human existence. Indeed, it seems that more than most humans, due to his father's diabolical strictness and inventions, Schreber was required to choose one side of the conflicts, obedience and love over freedom and hate, with no life-saving, psyche-salving natural contradiction allowed.

Yet the birds. The birds, far from being some hallucination in the symptomatic, medical sense, the birds are his therapists, the birds are his friends, the birds are his solution: contradiction crammed in. His secret rebellion, his miniature army – father would never countenance something as creative, beautiful, and natural as talking to birds, and so his flight, his escape from the chair, his disobedience is a success, the law of non-contradiction falters as it must, and what is impossible becomes possible. Birds speak. They really do.

One last tweet before I stop. I deeply thank you for listening to me and having me here today. I beg your attention for one final message from my own circling birds. I am concerned with ending here and Father Schreber as the great villain of the story – Father Schreber as bad guy to Schreber’s good guy. I am curious in general about the idea of enemies and friends these days – particularly the way I find little places outside myself that feel safe to put my hate and love and so enjoy, without any inspiration to further thinking, a comforting sense of correctness. Indeed, permission for intellectual passivity seems to come as a reward for my ideal moral alignments. I encounter this same risk whenever I read my favorite poet, Antonin Artaud, who easily can be seen as Schreber’s kid brother, firstly in illness and brutal incarceration, and secondly in the crafting of beautiful writing. Beginning in 1937, Artaud spent nearly nine years in French asylums. Hear Artaud scholar Clayton Eschleman:

At Le Havre, he was held for seventeen days in a straitjacket, his feet strapped to the bed. Hallucinating cats and black men everywhere, he refused to eat or take medicine out of fear of being poisoned.... [So Schreber saw the birds, Artaud the cats.] While at Sainte-Anne, he was declared chronically and incurably insane and held in solitary confinement. Jacques Lacan, then in charge of diagnosis at Sainte-Anne, told Roger Blin, the only friend to visit him there, that Artaud was “fixed” and although he would live to eighty he would never write another word (Artaud later referred to Lacan as a “filthy, vile bastard”).¹⁶

Lacan arrives here in Artaud’s story as a match to Schreber’s father. Lacan’s diagnosis is Father Schreber’s device. The pinioning effort, the strap and manacle. I feel a surge of pleasure whenever I think, *The filthy, vile bastards*. But what I desperately want to do is *to appreciate Schreber without devouring his identity as fuel for my own and without making enemies of his father*. Because though the appreciation of the maligned outsider and the assignment of blame to the malignant victimizer *feels* right, this feeling of rightness in me leads to little more than stasis,

¹⁶ Eschleman, C. *Watchfiends & Rack Screams: Works from the Final Period by Antonin Artaud*. Eds. and Trans Clayton Eschleman and Bernard Bador. Boston: Exact Change, 1995.

comfort, a sighing self-satisfaction – all the customary rewards of the identity logical which come to the logician regardless of content, *viz.* Father Schreber’s confidence in his devices’ utility *feels* the same as my confidence in their pathology. Is an alternative approach to the Schreber story possible? If I answer yes with any certainty or authority or suggestion that you should also answer yes or attempt the same, that it is a greater grotesquery to me than having never asked at all. In desperation, my mind proposes something else, yet it appalls me. As surely as it must appall you. But here it is. I propose that we celebrate Schreber’s father. Now. Even if only for a few seconds. Even though we know that such a thing is an abomination and must not be – I feel we must celebrate him.

Such an untenable position requires support, though the search for such is already doomed. I offer this first failure in advance. Artaud’s own description of the dialectic:

Yesterday Friday March 15th in the installation
of my suffering, the dialectic entered me like the derision of my living flesh
which suffers but does not understand.¹⁷

What I draw from this is that when difficult thinking arrives, thinking that defies common sense and falters the law of noncontradiction, it arrives, not akin to but *as* pain in the flesh – and more and worse than that, a rejection or mocking critique of the flesh. Cell-deep laughter at the fact of the cell. Contradictions tear not only at mind and body but at self and identity – what we experience as *being*; life itself is *derided*. To celebrate Schreber’s father is a negation of what we hold dear, what we most prize about ourselves – our sense of justice, humanity, progressive desires, our own set of laws – and yet if we realize we must do it and so do it wholeheartedly, the thought arrives as a condemnation of the whole that did the thinking in the first place. Yet pain is no good argument for action, unless we are committed to conscious masochism – far from

¹⁷ Artaud, Antonin. “Fragmentations.” 1974. *Watchfiends & Rack Screams: Works from the Final Period by Antonin Artaud*. Eds. and Trans Clayton Eshleman and Bernard Bador. Boston: Exact Change, 1995. P. 69.

Artaud's point. He merely predicts how we will feel if we celebrate Father Schreber and offers himself as good company should we choose to so install oppositions and thus deride ourselves.

Second, we can find support and another failure in Adorno. Let us consider together this difficult passage from *Minima Moralia*.

To the question what is to be done with defeated Germany, I could say only two things in reply. Firstly: at no price, on no conditions, would I wish to be an executioner or to supply legitimations for executioners. Secondly: I should not wish, least of all with legal machinery, to stay the hand of anyone who was avenging past misdeeds. This is a thoroughly unsatisfactory, contradictory answer, one that makes mockery of both principle and practice. But perhaps the fault lies in the question and not only in me.¹⁸

If there is something that we all must love and hate about critical theory, Adorno embodies it here: the employment of the enigmatic fragment and negative dialectic to constantly shove truth some distance ahead, avoiding allegiances which must comprise us but also perhaps responsibilities. The critical theorist is like a persistence hunter who after the long chase approaches the animal with his spear razor-sharpened, only to shoo his prey along. The animal lives and the chase continues, but the tribe goes unfed. Still I turn to Adorno here because I say that something resembling truth is within in our grasp if we repeat along with him that the fault lies in the question and not only in ourselves.

Why ask whether we should celebrate Father Schreber?

Of course we should celebrate him! His devices, techniques and theories are horrifying – so horrifying we must ask the next question: What *the fuck* did that man go through in his own childhood to even think of such things? What filthy, vile bastard came along and did what to the little boy Father Schreber? Perhaps he really did think he was helping kids. He thought, perhaps based on experience, that the chairs and devices were better than being beaten. If so, was there some kind of love hidden in the chair? And this line of thinking leads me to ask, what I hope are

¹⁸ Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. 1951. London: Verso, 2005. P. 56.

the right questions, at least for me, *How and why do I strap people to chairs? How do I pinion my patients? How do I strap them down with my identity and diagnoses? Why do I need to limit another person to feel movement within myself?* And today – maybe not tomorrow but today – I say that I am most like Father Schreber when I hate Father Schreber.

Thank you for your time today. I'll end with Artaud on thinking:

...Thinking means something to more to me than not being completely dead. It means being in touch with oneself at every moment; it means not ceasing for a single moment to feel oneself in one's inmost being, in the unformulated mass of one's life, in the substance of one's reality; it means not feeling in oneself an enormous hole, a crucial absence; it means always feeling one's thought equal to one's thought, however inadequate the form one is able to give it.¹⁹

¹⁹ Artaud, Antonin. 1974. *Watchfiends & Rack Screams: Works from the Final Period by Antonin Artaud*. Eds. and Trans Clayton Eshleman and Bernard Bador. Boston: Exact Change, 1995. P. 6.