FREUD'S FRIEND, FLIESS

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ABSTRACT

Fliess, a Berlin Rhinologist, was for many years Sigmund Freud's closest friend and confidant. They both believed that sexual problems were the chief cause of neurosis. Fliess postulated that *reflex nasal neurosis* was based on the important physiological connection between the nose and the genitals. He described specific *genital spots* located on the nasal inferior turbinate. Fliess developed other fanciful theories about universal animal bisexuality and innate animal *vital periodicities*. He believed that the symptoms of all disease in both genders followed regular 28-day cycles like female menstruation. He further proposed a male 23-day "menstrual" cycle, which again occurred in both men and women, which he centred specifically on the nasal turbinate. This eccentric rhinologist however, exerted a profound influence on Freud's conception of human development, which is often undervalued.

KEY WORDS

Wilhelm Fliess, Sigmund Freud, Nasal Reflex Neurosis, Naso-Genital, Nasal Turbinate, Male Menstrual Cycle, Bisexuality.

FREUD'S LETTERS

Wilhelm Fliess was born in 1858 in Choszczno, Poland. He was a Laryngologist with a thriving practice in Berlin at the end of the 19th century and died there in 1928. In 1887, Fliess visited Vienna for postgraduate studies, where he met Sigmund Freud, at that time a junior doctor with a great interest in neurology. This meeting was not fortuitous and had almost certainly been orchestrated by Josef Breuer, Freud's boss.¹ Although the cachet, the Father of Psychoanalyis is usually attributed to Freud,

the epithet should really go to Breuer, who laid the foundations and developed the concept for his protégé, Freud to develop.

In 1909 in Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Freud says, "I was a student and working for my final examinations at the time when Breuer, first (in 1880-2) made use of this procedure. ... Never before had anyone removed a hysterical symptom by such a method."²

Author: Mr John Riddington Young West Barton Farm Horwood Bideford EX394PB United Kingdom riddingtonyoung@hotmail.com At the time of the first meeting with Fliess, Freud was terribly unhappy and his superior Breuer had realised that he was beginning to feel emotionally and intellectually isolated because of his own obstinacy about the paramount importance of sex in neurosis (an idea, which at that time was not shared by Breuer). Breuer thought therefore that Freud would be delighted to meet up with another doctor who also believed in the overwhelming importance of sex in human life.

Breuer was undoubtedly right because from that day onwards they became very close friends. Indeed, it is generally held that his was the closest friendship in Freud's lifetime and that Fliess even played the part of a "transference figure" in Freud's selfanalysis.³

Freud wrote letters to his friend Fliess, often of a deeply personal and intimate nature and happily these letters have survived and provide a wonderful archive of not only their amity, but also of the development of many of Freud's theories.

These ideas made a profound impact on Western philosophy and altered the way in which we viewed sexual matters and how

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Fig. 1.

Josef Breuer. (1842 – 1925) Freud's boss and friend, who in 1877 arranged the meeting between Freud and Fliess. He was a distinguished Austrian physician who discovered the vagus nerve. He was the true Father of Psychoanalysis, which was then developed by his protégé Sigmund Freud.



Fig. 3. Wilhelm Fliess 1858 – 1928

STUDIEN CREB HYSTERIE DR. JOS. BREUER UND DR. SIGM, FREUD IN WIEN. Nein Mann, which inge has by Grig demane Joann ! Sa Commenter an Bornes gestern Jargen, bibrat, brigt Marbeth. LEIPZIG UND WIEN. FRANZ DEUTICKE. 1895.

Fig. 2.

Freud was working with Breuer on this book when Fliess came to Vienna in 1877. At that time, Freud was deeply depressed by the fact that Breuer would not accept his ideas on the paramount importance of sex in the cause of neurosis. This copy was Freud's own copy offered to Fliess. The line at the bottom are a translation into German of a passage of Macbeth (Act IV, final scene). It was noted by Ernest Jones (1879-1958) that Freud constantly quoted Shakespeare to Fliess during their friendship

(Christies, Haskell F. Norman Library, Part III,p.348).



Fig. 4. Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Fliess met at a Conference on Neurosis in Vienna in 1877

open we should be about it. He is considered (with Marx and Nietzsche) as one of the greatest revolutionary thinkers of the late 19th century.

After Fliess's death in 1928, Frau Ida Fliess discovered that Wilhelm had kept all the 287 letters and wrote to Freud (with whom she had never had much affection) to ask if he would send to her any reciprocal letters from her husband. This alarmed Freud who liked to keep his personal life very private; he said that he had burned all his letters from her husband and said he hoped that Frau Fliess would similarly destroy all his letters immediately. She was far more canny than this however and realised the great celebrity which late husband's friend had developed and therefore saved them for a rainy day.



Fig 5.

Princess Marie Bonaparte, the buyer of the Feud/Fliess letters. She was obsessed with sexual frigidity and was probably frigid herself. She engaged in research in which she measured the distance from the clitoris to the vaginal introitus in 243 women.

She sold the whole collection to a Berlin dealer who then sold them (for 12,000 francs) to Princess Maria Bonaparte, who was also Princess George of Greece and Denmark. The Princess was "forty-three years old, wealthy, neurotic (a previous patient of Freud), intelligent, beautiful, and frigid but promiscuous" (one of her lovers is said to have been the French Prime Minister).⁴

This astute woman clearly saw their value and when the Germans annexed Austria, she took them to the Greek Embassy in Vienna for safekeeping. She later smuggled them out of the country in the Greek diplomatic bag to Paris, where they remained in the custody of the Danish Legation until the end of the war. In May1946, she took them to London, where she showed them to Freud's daughter, Anna (Freud had died in 1939).⁵

The Princess was then beseeched by the Freud family not to publish them, but they reached a compromise and in 1950 she published a heavily expurgated collection of 168 letters entitled *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis. Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, drafts* and notes: 1887-1902. ⁶

It was not until 1985 that Masson published the letters in their entirety⁷ and it is from this valuable archive that we can gain insights into the relationships between the two men..

From the first letters we realise how unhappy Freud was in Vienna in 1887. He was living in an apartment with his parents (see next page). He felt claustrophobic and we are told that he was expected by his matriarchal mother, Amelie to play card games (tarock) most afternoons with the family and friends. We also learn that he was neurotic himself and intensely hypochondriacal, believing that he had cardiac problems and suffered from angina. He confided all this in letters to his friend, Fliess.

Also in 1877, he was working on a groundbreaking book, *Studies on Hysteria* (later published in 1895⁸ *see figure opposite page*) under the supervision of Breuer and was feeling desperately frustrated by Breuer's non acceptance of what he called the "jewel" of his part of the work – the overwhelming importance of sexual "perversions" (by which he mainly meant coitus interruptus, the use of condoms and masturbation) in the cause of neurosis.



The caustrophic household in which Freud was living, when Fliess came to Vienna to meet him. Freud and his wife were living with Jakob and Amelie Freud in a traditional Jewish family situation.

Unlike Breuer, Wilhelm Fliess also believed in the paramount importance of sex and was therefore described by Freud as his *alter ego*. Indeed Freud was reliant on Fliess and hero-worshipped his colleague. This is evident in the letters in which he makes such statements as "I still do not know how I won you" "I felt somewhat overwhelmed by your superiority. In the very first letter, Freud appears to be in awe of Fliess and compliments him on one of his (Freud's) patients who had already been treated in Berlin by Fliess. It later becomes apparent in the epistles that this feeling of adulation is not at all reciprocated.

Between the years of 1894 and 1900 Fliess was possibly the only person whom Freud could share and discuss his new insights into the origins of mental illness. Fliess shared many of Freud's views.

The two friends differed, however, on a very fundamental point, which was eventually to drive them apart. As Freud's interest in neurosis developed, he became increasingly convinced that the causes were principally psychological. Fliess, on the other hand, was fundamentally a surgeon and was only interested in physical causes. This fact only became clear to Freud many years later. Nevertheless their initial collaboration and communication exerted an influence upon Freud's theories, which is often undervalued and misunderstood.



The Flow of Life: Foundation For Precise Biology. The title page of Wilhelm Fliess's opus vitae, a bewildering collection of numerology, astrology and evolution.





Fliess's book is based on the natural history of the sea squirt, (also called Ascidian), a member of the invertebrate class, Ascidiacea (subphylum. Urochordata). Sea squirts are primitive marine animals, found in the intertidal zone of all the seas. The adult forms are sessile and permanently attached to structures such as ships' hulls, pier piles or shells.

THE FLOW OF LIFE

Fliess's conviction in the importance of sexual considerations in the cause of neurosis was just part of the trilogy of his philosophy of biology, which he eventually published as a book in 1906. He called it *Der Ablauf des Lebens, Grundlegung zur exakten Biologie* (or *The Flow of Life, the (Precise) Foundations of Precise Biology.)*⁹

This somewhat bewildering book (*left* page) is, believe it or not, based on the life of the humble marine invertebrate animal, the Sea Squirt or Ascidian. Fliess had studied the life cycle of what might well seem an unimpressive little animal and then relied heavily on three great world renowned contemporary zoologists to develop and formulate his thesis.

The first of these was Alexander Kovalesky, the Russian marine biologist, who had discovered that ascidians have a primitive notochord.¹⁰ Since the notochord is the forerunner in evolutionary terms of the spinal chord, Fliess extrapolated that this lowly creature was of great significance to all vertebrates. The sea squirt also has a reproductive cycle which is dependent on the tides and the phases of the moon. It therefore has an innate periodicity.



Fig.9 Alexander Kovalesky (1840-1901)

The second great biologist was Charles Darwin who himself had later used Kovalesky's discovery of an ascidian notochord to support his famous theory of evolution. He had also postulated in *The Origin of the Species* $(1859)^{11}$ that all life originated in the sea and ergo it follows just as night follows day that we have evolved from the ascidians.



Fig. 10. Ernst Haeckel had discovered pheromones in marine invertebrates and called them "erotic Chemotropins." This finding was Fliess's basis for his belief about the importance of the nose in the sexual life of all higher vertebrates

Another ardent Darwinian, Ernst Haeckel (*above*) had seized on Kovalesky's work and posited a theory of "erotic chemotropism" in which chemically based sex stimulants affecting taste and smell were phylogenetically the primal source of all sexual attraction in nature.¹² It is interesting that Freud was clearly aware of this evolutionary context from which Fliess' theory had developed: in Freud's copy of Haeckel's book, the primal smell theory of sex had been especially marked in the margin.¹³



Fig. 11.

Haeckel was also a talented artist who published a series of beautiful pictures in his book of lithographic and halftone prints, Kunstformen der Natur (Art Forms in Nature). According to Haeckel's scholar Olaf Breidbach, the work was "not just a book of illustrations but also the summation of his view of the world." The over-riding themes of the Kunstformen plates are symmetry and organization. This plate shows marine invertebrates.



Fig 12.

Fliess's three vital periodicities or human biorhythms; a 28day female cycle based on the ovary, but then a 23-day male cycle based on the inferior turbinated body and a bisexual 33 day cycle. Fliess held that all three cycles were present in both genders.

The thrust of Fliess's *Flow of Life* then is threefold.

Firstly because we are all evolved from ascidia, who are hermaphrodites, then it follows that all life including mammals and of course *Homo sapiens* have an innate bisexuality.

Secondly and again on account of our evolutionary ascidian legacy, since sea squirts have a vital periodicity based on tides and the moon, it also therefore follows that all life has an innate vital periodicity, which can also be called biorhythmicity.

The final conclusion in his book followed from Haeckel's primitive pheromones (which were chemically based sex stimulants affecting taste and smell in invertebrates). Since these were phylogenetically the primal source of all sexual attraction in nature, it necessarily followed that the nose in all mammals including man is an important secondary sexual organ.

BIORHYTHMICITY AND BISEXUALITY

Fliess' second major preoccupation is that regular vital periodicities are manifest universally in all physiological processes. He believed that neurosis, as well as attacks of migraine, nasal bleeding and indeed all other symptoms of dysmenorrhoea follow a regular 28-day cycle, like menstruation itself. His far more original, albeit rather eccentric rhythmicity theory was that of a second 23day *male* cycle. This 23-day cycle was the male equivalent of the female period and in the same way that the female cycle was dependent on the ovaries, the male cycle was centred specifically in the inferior turbinated body of the nose. He posited that both these periods were present in both sexes. It was this last claim that formed the foundations of Fliess's third crucial scientific insight – the essential bisexuality of all human beings.¹⁴ With this in mind, it is interesting to note that Fliess himself was rumoured as being homosexual, and Freud admitted to being attracted to him.⁶

Fliess's major work in 1906 (see p.110) encompassed all these three themes, sex and the nose, periodicity and bisexuality. The book contains bewildering and extensive use of mathematical formulae, with which he claims to confirm his theories. He utilised complicated higher multiples employing multiples of 28 for the female period and 23 for the male. Using these calculations he believed he could predict certain medical events including the length of someone's life and the date of their death.

He also claimed to be able to compute the onset and duration of major episodes of disease. However, he did not use only the numbers themselves, but their sum (51), and their difference (5).

He also considered related numbers like 23 squared, 28 squared, and so forth. In Switzerland during the 1960's a modification of this system of Biorhythms proved to be a fashionable and lucrative notion.¹⁵

However, in the modern Swiss system the three major cycles, which replace the female, male and bisexual ones are designated a 28 day "physical" cycle, a 23 day "emotional" one and a 33 day "intellectual" cycle (33 being 28+5; 23 remember is 28-5)! Since these sexual cycles are innate and congenital, it follows that infants too must have sexual periodicity, a fact which Freud seized upon to underline his own theory of spontaneous infantile sexuality, and later became crucial in his own formation of the *id*.¹⁶

REFLEX NASAL NEUROSIS

Fliess had in fact already come to believe that the nose was a secondary sexual organ and had published a paper entitled *"Reflex Nasal Neurosis"* as early as 1893.¹⁷

Fliess postulated а special physiological connection between the nose and the genitalia, an association he centred on certain "genital spots" located on the nasal turbinate. He further developed this concept a few years later in 1897. ¹⁸ Fliess' evidence for this nasal-genital connection was based on a number of factors. He had observed visible swelling of the turbinate bone during menstruation; the occurrence of nose bleeding was more prevalent during pregnancy and menstruation, and the fact that applying cocaine to the nose was capable of inducing abortions. He further believed that the primary symptoms of the nasal reflex were dysmenorrhoea, painful childbirth and stomach disorders.

Perhaps Fliess' unorthodox concepts encouraged Freud to believe they contained an unrecognised truth. Freud was so impressed with his friend's bizarre idea that he wrote in one of his letters, "Imagine if one were a physician trained like you able to investigate the genitals and the nose simultaneously: the riddle of neurosis should be immediately solved!"

Clearly both men believed that sexual perversions, in particular masturbation, played a key role in the causation of neurotic illnesses. They also both believed that *displacements* occurred in such illnesses.

Freud had coined the term *displacement* with respect to psychological illness. He believed that by shifting one's concern from the real problem, one could siphon off any anxiety by obliterating any connection with the true source of one's worries. A simplistic example of this would be that if a person has a hard time at work from his boss, he might go home and displace this by giving his family a hard time at home. Thus Freud believed in a psychological basis for displacement.

Fliess, on the other hand, believed that the displacement was physical and that all the pent up frustrated energy from a conflict in the mind (resulting usually from masturbating) would not be resolved by a mental mechanism but would shift anatomically from the genitals to the nose.

He further suggested that the only way to deal with such a problem then was to intervene physically by operating on the nose. Fliess believed the actual genital spots on the turbinate bone could be treated surgically: mild cases could be cocainised, intermediate cases cauterised with hot wires, and serious masturbators, who had developed hypertrophic rhinitis were treated with a turbinectomy.

THE EMMA ECKSTEIN TRAGEDY

As we have seen, Sigmund Freud himself was terribly hypochondriacal and neurotic. In early February 1895, he travelled from Vienna to Berlin to undergo nasal cautery by Fliess. He felt so much better, particularly with respect to his angina, that he decided to send his patient Emma Eckstein to the German capital for surgery. (*Masson 1985 pp. 106-130*)

This poor woman was Freud's somewhat celebrated "first analytic" patient. Her exact complaints are not clearly recorded, although it has been suggested that she suffered from menstrual problems.

In Freud's copy of Fliess' book, "*The* causal connection between the nose and the sexual organs", there is a marked passage that reads, "Women who masturbate are generally dysmenorrheal. They can finally be cured by an operation on the nose, if they truly give up this bad practice." It is thought that Freud marked this passage because he believed it described Emma, who was apparently very much concerned with the dangers of masturbation.

In Berlin, Fliess believed an operation on Emma's nose was the only way of curing her, and on the 21st February 1895 he spotted a suspicious area on her right inferior turbinate and performed a turbinectomy. Emma returned to Vienna by train. Things went disastrously wrong and she very nearly died.

On March 8th, Freud wrote;

Dearest Wilhelm, swelling...haemorrhages would not stop.... Foetid odour had set in and there was an obstacle on irrigation.

He called in the Viennese rhinologist Gersuny.

Gersuny inserted drainage tube... two days later... profuse bleeding had started again...pain and so on. There was still moderate bleeding from both the nose and mouth.

It was the evening and Freud was panicking. He telephoned Gersuny, but he was out on a call and so he asked his old friend Ignaz Rosanes, who came immediately

Rosanes pulled at something like a thread... kept on pulling...Before either of us think at least half a metre of had time to gauze had been pulled from the cavity. The a flood of blood. The next moment came patient turned white. Her eyes bulged and she had no pulse. Immediately thereafter however he again packed the cavity with fresh Iodoform gauze and the haemorrhage stopped. I felt sick. Immediately after she had been packed, I fled to the next room drank a bottle of water and felt miserable. The brave Frau Doctor then brought me a glass of cognac and I felt myself again.

It seems that poor Emma was more stoical than Freud as she made a sarcastic jibe at him about the weaker sex. It is clear from his letter that he was badly shaken and very remorseful about the situation. He goes on,

How wrong I was to urge you to operate in a foreign city where you could not follow through on the case. How my intention to do the best for this poor girl was insidiously thwarted and resulted in endangering her life.

But he then ends,

With cordial greetings Your Sigmund.



Fig 13. Contemporary methods of Chemical Cautery.



Fig 15. Fräulein Emma Eckstein before her nasal surgey.



Fig 14. Contemporary methods of Galvanocautery.



Miss Eckstein following her partial right sided turbinectomy. Her photographs after this never show the right side of her face.

His next letter (April 11th) starts very pessimistically, and it is very apparent that Freud is terribly worried about the probable consequences to both his patient and also to his closest friend.

Dearest Wilhelm, Gloomy times, unbelievably gloomy. Above all, this Eckstein affair which is rapidly moving towards a bad ending. He then goes on to tell of the removal of Rosanes' iodoform pack:

As soon as the packing was partly removed, there was a new life-threatening haemorrhage which I witnessed. It did not spurt; it surged. Something like a fluid level rising extraordinarily rapidly and then overflowing everything. It must have been a large vessel, but which one and from where? Of course nothing could be seen and it was a relief to have the packing back in again. Add to this the pain, the morphine, the demoralisation caused by the obvious medical helplessness and the tinge of danger and you will be able to picture the state that the poor girl is in. We do not know what to do. Rosanes is opposed to the ligation of the carotid that was proposed. The danger that she will run a fever is also not far off. I am really very shaken to think that such a mishap could have arisen from an operation that was purported to be harmless.

With the most cordial greetings to you and your dear wife, Your, Sigm.

We know that Emma was made of stern stuff and she must have taken a turn for the better after this since she is only mentioned at the very end of the next letter (May 25th). The letter is mainly about the acceptance by dear old Josef Breuer of their theories of neurosis.

Breuer ... has accepted the whole of your (nose) theory and is promoting an enormous reputation for you in Vienna, just as he has become fully converted to my theory of sexuality.

Towards the end of the letter, he says,

Emma E, is finally doing very well and I have succeeded in once more alleviating her weakness in walking which set in once again.

It is ironic that we hear no more of her for almost a year, when the fact that she been sent home on the train from Berlin to Vienna with a forgotten gauze pack in her nose and then had nearly died from osteomyelitis of the maxilla and massive blood loss appears to have been completely disregarded (one could almost say denied). It is difficult to believe that Freud could write to Fliess on May 4th 1896,

As for Eckstein, ... I am taking notes on her history so that I can send them to you... So far as I know, she bled out of longing. (Masson p. 186)

It would appear that Fliess too is in

denial, although sadly we do not have his replies to Freud. The letter above concludes,

I shall be able to prove that you were right that her episodes of bleeding were hysterical, were occasioned by longing and probably occurred at sexually relevant times (the woman out of resistance has not yet supplied me with her dates.)

There we have it; the two both conclude that the *"life-threatening haemorrhage*" Freud's own words in his letter (quoted above) of the previous year was not so much the result of turbinectomy (an operation which still can give rise to torrential bleeding) and failure to remove the pack before sending her home as a combination of a longing (which was a longing to be loved) and Fliess's vital periodicites (innate biorhythms).

Can this refusal to blame Fliess's shortcomings be directly related to Freud's need to rely on him at that time. In a letter of 1893, Freud had called Fliess, "the Messiah" (this was referring to his hope that his friend would discover an acceptable method of birth control to replace the perverted condom!) and in 1899 told him, "I felt somewhat overwhelmed by your superiority." But this was shortly to end.

THE END OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

In a letter of early 1900, Freud feels that the two friends are "...*becoming estranged*." He suggests a vacation meeting at Achensee. They had previously (1890) had pleasant walking holidays in Salzburg and Berchtesgaden,¹⁹ but there will be no hill walking in Achensee.

It is there that they have terrible arguments about Freud's plagiarism. Freud then suggests a walk in the mountains, which Fliess rejects. He told his family (and at least one friend) that he had a genuine fear that Freud planned to give him a quick shove, when no-one was around and that his consequent death could be made to look accidental.²⁰ Anna Freud, Sigmund's daughter who was also present at Achensee told this story to Peter Swales the historian, many years later in 1981 (when she was in her eighties).²¹



Fig.17 A less known book by Freud about aphasia, with a note by its author to "Dr.Wilhelm Fliess with cordial greetings,"

former Haskell F. Norman Library, Christies New York



Fig.18 "his dear Wilhelm, 24th October 1899"

The Traumdeutung was printed in October 1899 and, for commercial reasons, pre-dated 1900 former Haskell F. Norman Library, Christies New York

Freud himself mentions how he was

struck that morning by my companion's rejecting my proposal for a longish expedition and objecting during our short walk to taking a certain path which he said was too steep and dangerous.²²

Another book was written about the murderous intentions of Sigmund by an American clinical psychologist, Paul Scagnelli, suggesting his implications not only in the planned murder of Fliess, but also in the actual murder of Emmanuel Freud and furthermore in the disappearance of John Freud.²³

After the meeting at Achensee and this major disagreement, the letters were few. There was a row by correspondence in the Summer of 1904 and in the last letter Freud almost spurns his old friend:

...you have no longer shown an interest in me or my family or my work. By now I have got over it and have little desire for it any longer. I am not reproaching you and ask you not to reply to this letter. (Masson p. 467)

Not surprisingly this ended any further intercourse between them. A great friendship was thus over. Freud had a colleague and protégé in New York, Karl Abraham. Freud had confided to him (about Fliess) in 1911,

I once loved him very much.

When Abraham became seriously ill in 1925, he consulted Fliess in Berlin. Abraham wrote to Freud to tell him that Fliess had accurately foreseen and "*strikingly confirmed*" the phases of his illness and foretold precisely the date of his death at the age of 48. Freud must have been somewhat worried as a few years before, he had been told himself by Wilhelm Fliess that he would die at the age of 51.



Fig. 19.

Freud with his daughter Anna walking in the Tyrol. It was Anna who, when she was in her eighties in 1985 told the historian, Peter Swales about Fliess's fear that her father would push him off the foootpath in Achensee.





Fig 20a & 20b. Two of the books that give an account of Fliess's perceived danger that his old friend Freud was intending to murder him during a hiking trip near Achensee.





Fig 21. Cartoon by Ralph Steadman showing "Nasal intercourse between Freud and Fliess." (Courtesy of R Wentges and W. Pirsig)

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