

ELIZABETH ANN DANTO, Ph.D.

AN ANXIOUS ATTACHMENT: LETTERS FROM SIGMUND FREUD TO WILHELM REICH¹

Abstract: Wilhelm Reich was a leading thinker of the second generation of psychoanalysts after Freud and, though arguably its most original theorist, always its most controversial. In a series of 10 letters (archived in the U.S. Library of Congress) that span the years 1924 through 1930, Reich and Freud respond to a unique worldview, a specific fusion of activist politics and psychoanalysis. Reich treated workers, farmers, students, maids, soldiers, and bureaucrats at the Ambulatorium, the free psychoanalytic clinic in Vienna of which he was the assistant director. There he realized how vitally individuals are inseparable from their social environments. Like an analysis which frees the individual from inner oppression and releases the flow of natural energies, so—Reich believed—the political left would free the oppressed and release their innate, self-regulating social equanimity. And in these letters, we find the depth with which Freud agreed.

Keywords: Wilhelm Reich, free clinics, letters of Sigmund Freud, history of psychoanalysis

WILHELM REICH AND SIGMUND FREUD WERE unconventional men. In 10 letters from Freud to Reich, their particular dialectic of science and humanism unfolds and two psychoanalysts' complementary quests, each imbued with historical importance, reflect the other to maximum effect. The letters are beautiful, powerful, and delicate in the way of Schoenberg's *Second String Quartet*: their idealism is intense though transitory, and inevitably they evoke more questions than they answer. Did I read what I think I read? What was that? In this way I began to engage with one of the Freud Archives' many folios of letters from the 1920s and early 1930s, some of which have been recently released to the public ("derestricted" is the official term) by the U.S. Library of Congress Freud Archives' enthusiastic post-Eissler director, Harold Blum. Earlier letters, such as Freud's correspondence with Fliess and Ferenczi, though

¹ This article is based on selections originally presented in October 2004 to benefit the Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Endowment Fund. (See Danto, 2007).

far greater in number, make for an uneven, more typical kind of epistolary exchange with little special relation to their setting. The years of the Reich letters, 1924–1930, were close to the midpoint of Freud's psychoanalytic maturity, and they coincided with the last surge of belief in modernist progress, an era with which both men should be equally associated. The letters have a gripping effect on the reader, and are perhaps a little upsetting, like being swept away by a personal discovery of something that everyone has always known.

Reich was the premier psychoanalyst of the second generation and perhaps its most innovative, if controversial thinker, a sign of his future avant-garde reputation. He came from a prosperous farming family in Galicia; his father was a stern learned man, his exalted mother a careworn wife. He had vivid early experiences with sexuality and anti-Semitism. After serving in World War I, he studied medicine at the University of Vienna, where he took classes in anatomy with Julius Tandler, the governing Social Democrats' Commissioner of Public Welfare and a champion of modern social work. In 1920, at the age of 22, Reich joined the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. "I was occupied with psychoanalysis in a most intensive way," he said, "not only due to an objective interest in this completely new science but also because of a vague sense that through it I might approach certain obscure regions of my own ego" (Reich, 1920, p. 131). Reich became a fixture at the Ambulatorium (the analysts' free clinic in Vienna), and maintained an on-and-off collegiality with Grete and Eduard Bibring, Otto Fenichel, Eduard Hitschmann, and Paul Federn. Between 1922 and 1927, the Ambulatorium occupied the basement of a unique trauma and cardiology unit at 18 Pelikangasse. The general hospital was around the corner; medical offices substituted for austere treatment rooms; and the analytic couches were metal gurneys. Yet the whole psychoanalytic enterprise was animated by the conviction that, in a city teeming with social services, the Ambulatorium was the most innovative and socially conscious. Reich was, throughout his life, a venturesome if irreverent man, and the Ambulatorium was a perfect venue for his passionate idealism. He assembled the first clinical case seminar there, confronted his colleagues on their clinical errors and, instead of analyzing an individual's distinct or reactive emotions, developed an influential characterological model of psychoanalysis.

Reich called his clinical approach, derived from his intense sociological observations and sexology interests (shared by Otto Fenichel and Karl Abraham, among others) "character analysis." The two essential pre-

mises of character analysis—that everyone develops an integral personality and that no one really wants to give it up—continue to inform most clinical instruction programs today. Reich's first writings on the subject, the psychoanalytic essay "On Character Analysis" and the expansive text, *The Function of the Orgasm*, both from 1927, are more akin to practice than theory. They address a recurring clinical problem that Freud noted in 1926 (p. 21): "What happened to the instinctual impulse which had been activated in the id and which sought to be gratified?" To this Reich answered that one had to look at the whole person, not just the symptom. If you were a Viennese psychoanalyst in the early 1920s, and if you had time to attend a Thursday evening meeting of the Technical Seminar, you would learn the difference between symptom and character analysis. Where Freud's symptoms carried individual diagnostic urgency even in their names (e.g., "signal anxiety," "war neurosis"), Reich's concepts (e.g., "orgastic potency") come out of the clinic, the field, and the community. In focusing on the total personality, Reich found it rewarding to discard distracting "symptoms," and instead called to mind a well-designed diagram of energy systems, their flows, and their obstructions. Thus, by the early 1920s, he had made symptom-specific analysis avoidable and urged candidates to observe that a patient's defenses are repressed and revealed as much by the body's unconscious as by the mind's.

Freud found this perspective different from those of other analysts. Only one, Sándor Ferenczi, was experimenting with such a holistic form of treatment, whereas most others believed that character analysis would impose a preexisting behavioral template on the patient who should, instead, drive the course of the treatment. Freud was deeply fond of Ferenczi (the two men exchanged over 1,200 letters in 25 years), though personally ambivalent about his "modern" technique. Freud was similarly hesitant and protective toward Reich. In 1923, he questioned Reich's sense of morality but found him "otherwise diligent, eager and respectable" (Freud, 1923). And Ferenczi (1924, p. 144) said that "Dr. Reich's suggestions have many points in contact with the theory of genitality; certainly Reich is demonstrating himself to be an originally gifted therapist."

Thus, **Letter 1** plays across a wide range of traditional epistolary genres (e.g., friendship, work, saga), and alludes to the field's newest clinical developments: "psychoanalytic therapy has now become more flexible due to the current innovations of Ferenczi," Freud wrote, suggesting that

“flexible” exchanges between patient and analyst should be acknowledged as overtly interdependent. Besides, analysts may be surprised how flexibility, with its higher level of patient involvement, can prove to be surprisingly uncomfortable. Paradoxically, Reich was offering to produce what seemed like a “less flexible” psychoanalytic unilateralism. Yet in outlining his intrinsic, progressive logic, Reich aimed for the social subtext of human life, a psychoanalytic stance that he would later rename “social work” because he believed that the individual and society are inseparable. Although an analysis should build on a careful examination of selected unconscious character traits (later called “ego defenses”), ultimately the individual should accept his or her natural/sexual self within society.

What seemed to attract Freud’s interest in **Letter 2** (December 2, 1924) was not Reich’s exploration of the unknowable mind, but rather his articulation of the unconscious struggle between individuals (i.e., the moral self) and their environment (i.e., people, places, or power). When Reich described this to Freud, he had been working at the Ambulatorium as assistant director under Eduard Hitschmann for about six months. He was 27. And though his so-called *Steckenpferd* (hobby-horse) (i.e., that all individual or social neurosis is rooted in sexuality) made Freud smile, Reich was well regarded for his charismatic chairmanship of the new Seminar on Psychoanalytic Technique (Reich, 1969, p. 13). To their surprise, the participating analysts found that his new in-depth case conference focused on the analyst’s errors, not on patient symptoms. “I have worked for many years to obtain insight into the circumstances of successful and unsuccessful analyses,” Reich (1952, pp. 148–152) wrote. “[I was] the only one who, in courses and in publications, reported on failures and tried to clarify these in common discussion.” Today, although we rarely concentrate on our mistakes except in the most restricted supervisory settings, the case conference persists as the standard protocol for discussing clinical challenges in mental health settings.

Reich presided over weekly meetings of this Technical Seminar from 1924 until 1930 when he moved to Berlin. Though a mere 27 pages of handwritten minutes of the Seminar’s case reports have survived, the analysts’ lively exchanges and imaginative critiques make clear why these sessions were some of the most valuable activities of the Vienna Society (Lobner, 1978). The analysts met in the windowless basement of the Ambulatorium and, in at least the discussions of January 9, February 6, March 5, May 7, and October 1, 1924, examined how they treated all those who

requested clinical treatment without regard to fee. When Reich entered the conference room, his relative youth vanished. He spread an electrifying energy all his own; his deep-set eyes, wavy hair, and the high forehead of a rebellious Austrian intellectual were barely tempered by military mannerisms acquired in the army.

Since 1918, the psychoanalysts surrounding Freud had sought ways of implementing his call for “out-patient clinics where treatment will be free” (Freud, 1918, p. 167). The first free psychoanalytic clinic was opened in Berlin by Max Eitingon and Ernst Simmel in 1920. The Berlin Poliklinik was extraordinarily dynamic. Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Bruno Bettelheim, Alfred Adler, Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Helene Deutsch, Otto Fenichel, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann—these were just some of the free clinic analysts who later fanned out across the Western world, some carrying the torch of progressivism and others burying it. Today they are known for their theoretical revisionism and for the many ways in which they followed, transformed, or broke away from classical Freudian theory. But in the 1920s and early 1930s, the same analysts saw themselves as brokers of social change for whom psychoanalysis was a challenge to conventional political codes, a social mission more than a medical discipline. Reich fit in perfectly, but in his own way, never did.

Down in the gray-blue gloom of the Ambulatorium basement where the Viennese analysts had worked since May 1922, and especially after the medical establishment’s attacks (led by Julius Wagner-Jauregg), Reich decided to upgrade the clinic. He formalized staff protocols, instituted statistical record keeping, and changed clinical reporting from symptom-laden descriptions to narrative portraits interspersed with numbers, diagnostics, and carefully worded follow-up case notes (e.g., an analysis is “symptom free” instead of “cured”) on discharged patients. But with all of this ritualized supervision and accountability, what would happen to the spontaneous exchange of clinical ideas, the satisfying core of collegial exchanges? Some of the stories are incredibly sad. An anorexic 16-year-old girl is in love. Her loss of appetite is total, and she is losing body weight so rapidly that her hair is drying up and falling out. Should her treatment be individual analysis or couple therapy with her boyfriend? A 16-year-old boy suffers from attacks of wanderlust. Maybe he “longs to die in a far away, sunny landscape, the opposite of the narrow womb” or maybe he is running away from an abusive home. Is this adolescent’s exhibitionism in fact a sign of schizophrenia? Yes, because he suffered

from delusional body images even as a 4-year-old. Reich enjoyed these clinical debates immensely. Whatever intellectual confrontations inflamed Vienna's psychiatric traditionalists, Reich treated distressed workers, students, maids and butlers, army officials, and especially women and girls as though they were whole individuals escaping from the dual constraints of troubled character and the rigid capitalism that he refused to ignore. Freud, who had much the same energy as Reich, the same refusal to be either disregarded or wronged, concurred. "If a book on technique is truly in demand," he wrote to Reich on December 21, 1924, (**Letter 3**), "I would prefer that you write it instead of an unknown probably less expert person."

By May 1925, Reich had moved very close, some would later say precariously close, to the epicenter of psychoanalysis. Yet he felt that his position looked tenuous: "At that time, about 1925, the psychoanalysts in the technical seminar didn't like my work on genitality. . . . Nobody dared touch it. I touched it fully" (Reich, 1952, p. 14). He dared Freud to pursue the libido theory to its fullest, to find its fundamental physiological properties. Then he raised the stakes higher until he reached the primary fork in the system: "It's not either libido or society. The libido is the energy which is molded by society. There's no contradiction" (p. 23). Reading Reich as a pioneer psychoanalyst shows us a methodologist with vast intellectual reserves and mischievous passion. But it can also remind us that the last 90 years of efforts to demonize him—that human liberation (of sexuality, of character, of political resolve) will lead to chaos; that Reich's theories on energy will expel us into fringe worlds—are unnecessary. Reich had all the characteristics of the early 20th-century revolutionary who did not shrink from confrontation. He lived in the city center in a series of small apartments near the University of Vienna, earned a paltry income as a tutor, and enjoyed the café company of medical students for whom psychoanalysis was the cutting edge of progressive social thought. He was a Jew, and a quick-witted thinker who stood firm against all forms of repression. "We were rebels, in our own ways," said Grete Bibring (1973), a Viennese psychoanalyst who studied alongside Reich in medical school and taught at Harvard after Hitler's takeover. "We stood with the poor, and wanted to fight for their interests. For us psychoanalysis promised personal 'liberation' not for its own sake, but so that we could work to 'liberate' others. Political social and activism, they were a big part of our lives." So too with Freud. With his surprisingly activist opinions on social issues facing the governing Social Democrats of the

era known as Red Vienna, but reluctant to be ranked as Oedipal father (even as he cultivated the position), Freud testified to Reich's psychoanalytic proficiency in its broadest terms and to his "especially thorough training in the theory and practice." In addition to Reich's work at the Ambulatorium, Freud wrote on May 28, 1925 (**Letter 4**), "he has proven his excellence in a series of lectures to the [psychoanalytic] society as well as through publications. I do not hesitate to confirm that he has a fully well-founded claim to the title of specialist." Freud, whose official letters are often laced with sarcasm, wrote this one at Reich's request.

Reich was an unusually forward thinker even for an activist era. His mentors, Sigmund Freud and Julius Tandler, were intensely caught up in the Viennese social democratic movement at its most progressive. In the wave of modernism that overhauled the city's social welfare system after World War I, Red Vienna was "not so much a theory as a way of life . . . pervaded by a sense of hope that has no parallel in the 20th century" recalled the social psychologist Marie Jahoda (1983, p. 343). Articles in the German language press, such as "Die Entwicklung der Psychoanalyse" in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung's* issue of October 13, 1926, celebrated Freud's civic spirit on the occasion of his 70th birthday. "There is a sociological aspect to psychoanalysis," the newspaper wrote, "which is sympathetic to social progress." When Freud gave a third of his colleagues' Psychoanalytic Jubilee Fund to the Ambulatorium, his gesture was not mere charity. The redistributive economic policies of Red Vienna's financial decision makers, Robert Danneberg and Hugo Breitner, had taken hold and surplus funds were turned over to social welfare agencies. Reich, however, was skeptical of the Social Democrats' incrementalist policies. His memoirs of Red Vienna speak of "everything in confusion: socialism, the Viennese intellectual bourgeoisie, psychoanalysis" (Reich, 1920, p. 74). It was only in the mid-1920s, when he started the first of his essays on character analysis, that he found a way forward.

A month before Freud left Vienna for his annual summer vacation in 1926, he read Reich's contribution to the *Festschrift* that Federn and Ferenczi had assembled in his honor. Reich's work was taking a political turn: What if his first draft of *Funktion der Orgasmus* (1940) denied the existence of the death instinct? How would that affect use of the symptom-specific libido theory, which Freud believed (now that the theory's champion, Karl Abraham, had died in Berlin) to be on the verge of losing ground to analysis of overall character? At that point, according to **Letter 5** (July 9, 1926), Freud decided not to start a prolonged theoretical, and

perhaps unsolvable, clinical argument but instead to critique Reich on form. As the Oedipal father, Freud was careful to mitigate disapproval with praise. "Your work is far too extensive, poorly organized and therefore appears confusing," he wrote. Freud's concern was not that Reich would renege on the place of human sexuality in psychoanalysis but that his future direction—of analyzing the entirety of character—would stop him from pursuing the clinical system he designed to defeat human rigidity. "I find the work valuable, rich in observation and thought. . . . You know," Freud wrote almost sweetly, "I do not oppose your interpretation." This letter also implied that, whatever Reich was doing at the Ambulatorium to loosen the destructive biopsychological armoring that held back the clinic's poor and working-class patients, Freud would find a way to work with him. Reich's 1925 discourse on *The Impulsive Character* gives us solid clues to his socioclinical approach. First, the refusal of the Social Democrats' (or the psychoanalysts, or other groups) to criticize one another openly while scapegoating selected troublemakers repelled Reich so thoroughly that he never ceased to defy it. Second, political repression (and its coexisting human/sexual repression) was a frightening prospect—but fascism was an actual, ominous possibility worldwide and required unending resistance.

On January 30, 1927 an Austrian protofascist agent randomly shot into a crowd of Social Democrats in Schattendorf, a small town near the Hungarian border. On July 14, the same *Heimwehr* (homeland guardian) member was acquitted and released. For Reich (1936), as infuriated by the judicial corruption as by the attack, the deadening nexus between individual and mass character armoring had appeared. "Down with all politics!" he wrote. "Let's get to the practical demands of life!" He was an impassioned believer in individual liberation even in the mass tumult of 1927, and shunned organizational life even as he sought it (he was now formally accepted by the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and by a medical group associated with the Communist Party.) Likewise, Reich made as many friends as enemies, so although 1927 may have marked some kind of turning point in his relationship with Freud, one would not know it from **Letter 6**. "I am well informed about your circumstances," Freud wrote to Reich then recovering from tuberculosis in a Davos sanitarium. Though the "practice prohibition for non-Swiss citizens seems to me a big obstacle indeed," he hopes that Oscar Pfister and Emil Oberholzer will send him analytic patients. "Keep me further posted and I," Freud concludes, "will keep you in mind."

Even this letter fails to capture the extraordinary mix of raffishness and affection that made the Freud-Reich friendship go on. **Letter 7**, written one day after the infamous July 14 judicial decision, has the same effortless, almost lyrical flow of an Austrian conversation, and also Freud's perennial intensity of allusion. Reich would be leaving Vienna on July 19, probably for Berlin, and he wanted to meet with Freud before that to discuss his stressful position at the Ambulatorium and also his decision to expand Sex-Pol. "I didn't devote myself to the mental hygiene movement just to cure a few people or to improve their health," he said. "I started it after the fifteenth of July 1927, when a hundred people were killed and about a thousand were wounded in the street" (Reich 1952, p. 78). The ensuing letter releases Reich from his mundane obligations and Freud from his patriarchal role. Given the "uncertainty of the next few days," he thought it wiser to postpone the meeting until September "if the world still exists by then." Freud could make every event in Reich's life look like the natural congruence of historical forces.

Reich's catalog of *faux* moralities in *The Sexual Revolution* expresses the rage of lost lives more than politics, studies of inner struggle rather than impressions of tyranny. Almost all the essays are organized around the idea that people are naturally whole and that environmental repressions (i.e., multileveled opposites of freedom) fragment human character and preclude self-regulation. We become isolated and depressed, imprisoned by the superego's demand for compliance with mediocrity, by the bourgeois demand for social conformity. Reich raged against this ugly weight everywhere in Vienna, in the Psychoanalytic Society, at the Ambulatorium, within political parties, within the groups of demonstrators themselves. Freud had more equanimity. Yes, envy and bitterness are part of our landscape, he seemed to tell Reich in **Letter 8**, "but one need not overrate such emotions: the internal conflict is sort of like a family—and its heightened emotions—but this doesn't prevent it helping in emergencies and acknowledging serious achievement." Where Reich insisted that his psychoanalytic "enemies" hated his clinical innovation, and that gossipy criticism was a ruse to rid him from the Technical Seminar, Freud was disarming ("I think you can relax") and his message was both caring and straightforward: Reich's kind of psychoanalytic research should continue unfettered by peer criticism, but in teaching psychoanalysis ("nobody in Vienna can do it better," Freud writes), Reich must forfeit his narcissism.

Ten months later, in a letter that he never sends to Freud but in which

the tone of controlled anger portrays a man confounded by the struggle to survive his colleagues' scorn, Reich (1952, p. 153) lets loose his resentment of Federn's "hateful, high-handed tone" and forecasts a joyless future in psychoanalysis for himself and his students. Reich's sense of the group mired in its own apathy, its imploding *embourgeoisement*, can be read either as a projection of his own distress or as the beginning of a concerted effort to scapegoat him. Both were true. And reading Freud's **Letter 9**, in which he revealed that he had agreed to Reich's November 1928 "resignation of the leadership of the Seminar" is like watching a slightly nervous judge read accusations against someone ambiguously proved not guilty. Freud was among the last to reject Reich—the delay, depending on which psychoanalyst you believe, resulting either from prudence or admiration. But one can see the signs of malaise along with apology. Clearly, Federn had initiated the ouster and his reasons, which remain speculation, range from Reich's intimidating clinical brilliance to sibling rivalry to a grandiloquent personality conveniently interpreted by Jones, Anna Freud and others, as psychological deterioration. Nevertheless "[the Seminar] may not be taken from you against your will," Freud insisted. It was an awkward balance: on the one hand he knew that Reich needed time to develop Sex-Pol and, on the other, Freud felt obligated to invoke the common privileges of the harried father (he started it, you stop it), "I hope you and [Federn] will get along with each other better."

As to their perennial debate concerning the struggle between "individual" and "culture" for ascendancy, Reich believed in altering culture to meet human needs whereas Freud thought that individual change would transform culture. Nevertheless, both men, whose personal worldviews were inseparable from their talents and ideas, shared profoundly complementary yet idiosyncratic temperaments. But they clashed, in 1930 as today, in their roles as icons of culture. **Letter 10** tells the story of Reich's departure from Vienna (whether or not he left voluntarily) and Freud's lasting efforts to reassure him that he could "regain his former position" if he so chose. The family moved to Berlin where he joined his friend Otto Fenichel and the celebrated *Kinderseminars* at the Poliklinik. Reich wrote for Ernst Simmel's journal, *The Socialist Physician*, promoting free sexual expression and, in a prescient word he often used, "social work." Increasingly though, after the political upheavals of 1927, Reich launched himself as a reformer with few organizational ties except his own. Like an analysis that frees the individual from inner oppression and releases the

flow of natural energies, so—Reich believed—the political left would free the oppressed and release their innate, self-regulating social equanimity.

In the end, what is remarkable about Reich is how fully he shows that individual human beings—all of us—come to possess an inherent character, or personality, as opposed to the authority conferred on us by discrete “symptoms, inhibitions and anxiety” in Freud’s paradigm. In spite of everything environmental, character is irreducible. The 10 letters are like an exchange of self-portraits. Freud is the benevolent but enigmatic father; Reich the simmering, sensual son. It has been a long time now, 80 years after these letters and 50 years after Reich’s death, since that scenario of love and estrangement. But it echoes still, in psychoanalysis as in the world.

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Elizabeth Ann Danto, Ph.D., is professor of social work at Hunter College, City University of New York. Her book, *Freud's Free Clinics: Psychoanalysis and Social Justice, 1918–1938* (Columbia University Press, 2005), was awarded the Gradiva Book Award and the Goethe prize.

*Hunter College School of Social Work
City University of New York
129 East 79th Street
New York, NY 10021
edanto@hunter.cuny.edu*