

Remembering Anna O.



A CENTURY

OF MYSTIFICATION

MIKKEL BORCH-JACOBSEN

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Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen

Translated by Kirby Olson
in collaboration with Xavier Callahan and the author

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I did not question her at all, for fear that any questions of mine might suggest ideas to her that were not her own. One cannot be too careful: a magnetist, when it comes to questions of this kind, often ends up directing the patient, whom he then regards as an oracle, whereas she is merely his own echo.

—Tardy de Montravel,

Journal of the Magnetic Treatment of Miss N.

(London, 1785)

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The same goes for Peter Swales, who made his time

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and his vast knowledge of Freudian matters completely available to me, with a generosity bordering on the reckless. I thank him warmly for giving me access both to his personal archives (which for many of us have become an alternative to the Kafkaesque Sigmund Freud Archives) and to his unpublished lecture “Freud, Breuer, and the Blessed Virgin.” My own work owes a great deal to a reading of this remarkable lecture, as well as to the countless remarks and corrections that its author lavished on me while I was writing this book (saving me from, among other things, two egregious factual errors). This is the place to call attention to the extent of the unacknowledged influence that Peter Swales’s *unpublished* research has had on Freud studies over the last fifteen years, and to urge that he now let his work become known beyond the circle of his friends and colleagues.

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Our Myth

Every society has its therapeutic myths, meant to explain why we fall ill and why we get well, and our society is no exception. To be sure, we no longer imagine that our ills are caused by spirits or evil omens, nor do we believe any longer in curative powers derived from the laying on of hands or from magical formulas. But we are quick to believe that certain troubles, which we call *psychological* or *psychosomatic*, are due to traumatic events in our personal histories, and that by recounting these events to a doctor we will cure ourselves of their effects. It is necessary, we believe, to name the ill, narrate it, *make the evil speak*, in order to be rid of it. This idea is hardly new. Far from it: it stems from the Christian practices of confession and exorcism, by way of the Protestant “cure of the soul.” But with the “medicalization of confession” set in motion by Freud, it became one of the most widely accepted notions of our psychoanalytic century, now drawing to a