Chapter 7

EVIDENCE OF ESTRANGEMENT
Notes on the Correspondence of Wilhelm Stekel to Sigmund Freud
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Introduction

The fracture between Freud and Stekel belongs to one of those “fateful moments” in early psychoanalytic history about which there is a fair amount of information. The issue receives ample attention in virtually all Freud’s letters from this period (see the Freud–Jung and Freud–Ferenczi correspondence in particular). Moreover, scattered throughout the collected works occasional remarks on this event come to the surface (Freud, 1914; 1925), while historians of science were able to fill in some of the missing information (Jones, 1953–1957; Roazen, 1975; Gay, 1988). There is, furthermore, a fair amount of coherence between these sources. Many agree on the opinion that this was not a major event in Freud’s life and that, in 1912, his patience with Stekel had simply run out. It was not scientific differences that led Freud to decide to break with Stekel but only personal motives: the “character and behavior” of the other, as Freud wrote to Stekel on 13 Jan. 1924. Understandably perhaps, Stekel strongly objected to this conception, but he was unable to convince historians of his viewpoints and was thus destined to become psychoanalysis’ marginal. It does not alter the fact that the dynamics that led to this fracture have remained largely obscure.

In this chapter we aim to recover these dynamics by exploring Stekel’s side of the story more fully. By thereby completing the picture, it is not our intention to rewrite history. Nor do we wish to attach more importance to the rupture than has already been given, and neither do we
aim to cast doubt on Freud’s motives (or Stekel’s, for that matter). Our aim is to provide an insight into the *interactional logic* that led to Stekel’s drifting apart from psychoanalysis. Ultimately, this may help us understand the growth and transformation of psychoanalytic discourse in its early history.

To do so, we discuss the hitherto unpublished Freud–Stekel correspondence conserved in the Freud Archives of the Library of Congress (Washington), as well as four related items (including one letter of Stekel to Jung). The correspondence is clearly incomplete, in as much as only five letters of Freud have been preserved, and that all of Stekel’s letters prior to 1910 and a number from after 1912 are missing. Therefore, while the correspondence formally covers the 1904–1938 period, the bulk of the letters date from the crucial years 1910–1912. In other words, they record the main period of estrangement between the two men. Chapter 9 presents the full correspondence for the first time in its incomplete form as it is preserved in the archives.

While the reasons why Freud kept this part of the correspondence (and presumably destroyed the rest) are unknown, the fact that they cover their break implies, we believe, that he might have kept them for reasons similar to organizations when they keep a “paper trail” of an unwanted employee: as a collection of evidence in a case against him. Consequently, we read these letters as documentation of a particular historic relationship on the one hand, and as the exact opposite of that on the other: as proof of its deterioration.

By way of introduction to the correspondence, we present a brief overview of the historical background against which the letters are set and discuss the dialectics of this estrangement.

**Historical Background**

The earliest items from the Stekel–Freud correspondence comprise two short notes from Freud dated 1904 and 1905 respectively, interesting in themselves from an “evolutionary” point of view: as missing links that bridge the gap between the end of the Fliessian period (1904) and the beginning of the orchestrated correspondence with his followers (1907). Thus Freud’s 1904 note plainly acknowledges Stekel’s role in the foundation of the “psychological society,” a fact that he would come to veil in later years (Freud, 1925, p. 43).

There is a five year gap between Freud’s notes and Stekel’s first preserved letter of 28 February 1910. During these years, the local, Vienna-based informal group of followers had developed into a movement with followers in several European countries and America who had gathered together for the first time in 1908 in Salzburg. With the second congress scheduled to take