

The year is 1882. Sigmund Freud, a young physician a year out of medical school, with no real chance at a career in academia, and in dire financial straits, finds himself facing the prospect of becoming a practical doctor. This new orientation also has much to do with a new acquaintance, Martha Bernays, whom he meets in the spring of 1882 and with whom he very quickly falls in love. On June 2, the two have their first private conversation during a walk in the Vienna suburbs, a walk up the popular Kahlenberg. In the earliest letter to survive, dated June 11, Martha speaks of presents. Freud sent her a special edition of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. They meet tête-à-tête but most often socially. In keeping with bourgeois conventions, the sexes meet observed by others, in circles of family and friends. It becomes clear that Freud, penniless, may not have his wishes granted. An official relationship, an engagement or marriage, depends on her family's assent. And the family expects a marriage with a financially potent man able to provide for her. Sigmund and Martha therefore keep their relationship a secret. Further complications emerge: Martha is supposed to spend the summer months in Wandsbek near Hamburg while Freud will remain in Vienna. The problem thus arises of how to maintain contact, how to keep up a correspondence and at the same time conceal it. On Freud's part, moreover, the imminent separation prompts moments of jealous »distrust«: »I can't believe«, he writes on June 15, »that for months I am not to see the dear face, can't believe that I am not in danger when new impressions have their effect on Martha.«¹ This is not just about the withdrawal of personal presence, the fading of the traits of the beloved face. It is not just about experiences Martha will have in faraway Wandsbek that might displace her experiences with Sigmund. Also present here is the knowledge that the living lines

of a face will become written lines, that shared experiences will become the reading of letters, the knowledge, in other words, that *the written* produces impressions and that this change of media poses a »threat« to Freud's I. Immediately prior to her departure for Wandsbek, Martha hands Sigmund a ring of her father's that her mother had given her.² From this highly symbolic moment onward, Sigmund and Martha conceive of themselves as secretly betrothed. On this day begins a time of engagement that is kept alive, across long periods of separation, in the mode of writing. Only four years and 1500 letters later do Sigmund Freud and Martha Bernays marry in September of 1886. Four big volumes of this correspondence have now been published, one more is to follow, and »experts« already consider these letters an »eminently important source for the biography of Freud and the history of psychoanalysis«.³

In what follows, I am interested in the question of representation: the fact that this »source for the biography of Freud« yields knowledge about Freud's life by staging it as a *written* life. And I am interested in the fact that the texts themselves reflect on life's being written. This takes place not only in the letter in which Freud fears the withdrawal of the »dear face« that from now on would be transformed into lines of language. It takes place explicitly when literature shows up in the letters and with it the question of how writing is to be read, of how it can refer to one's own life, and of how both, life and literature, are to be understood in their reciprocal relationship.

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In the very first letter after Martha's departure for Wandsbek – dated June 19 – Freud refers to Goethe's fairy tale, *The New Melusine*. What triggers the reference are his suffering from Martha's absence, a photo of Martha, and a »little box«, a present that Martha gave him to keep her letters in. He keeps the photo, Freud writes, in the little box, and since her departure he has already taken it out repeatedly to, as he says, »refresh my memories«. Mingling with these attempts at representing the absent beloved by means of the little box is the recollection of Goethe's

Melusine, in which a man carries his »beloved around with him in a small box«. Freud reports on rereading the fairy tale, a rereading that confirms his recollection. But that is not all that he finds. In the fairy tale, he discovers »more than I was looking for. The most teasing superficial allusions kept coming up now here, now there, lurking behind every line of the little story was a reference to us«.⁴ Reading between the lines of the fairy tale, Freud finds »a reference to us«, to the life of Sigmund and Martha. This connection between one's own experience and the literary, however, is not without dangers. While Goethe does indeed offer the image of the beloved carried around in a little box, the tale also contains allusions that break forth unexpectedly and far exceed what the I is looking for. The literary text not only provides the image of a love possessed but evokes a surplus of associations »lurking« in the text. In one of these associations, Freud recalls »how much my girl values my being taller than her«, which prompts him to »throw away« the fairy tale, »half vexed, half delighted«.⁵ The image of the beloved in the little box develops aporetic traits: while it lays out stable relations of magnitude and possession, it at the same times creates a less appealing flipside. For, as we know, in Goethe's *Melusine* the marriage of the small beloved with the tall man fails because the tall man does not want to become small, does not want to live in the little box of a happy marriage. It may have been this flipside of the fiction of the little box that haunts Freud, »half vexed«, and prompts him to »console« himself with the »assurance« that »my Martha is not a mermaid but a beautiful child of man«.⁶ However, this attempt at rectifying the scale and separating literature from life when it risks raising doubts about marriage is successful only up to a point. For what can be controlled even less is how the other side in the exchange of letters, how Martha will read *The New Melusine* and the references lurking there. Freud continues: »We do not yet understand each other when it comes to humor, so you might find yourself disappointed when you look up the little story.«⁷ *We do not yet understand each other when it comes to humor* probably means *we may read this tale and its ›most teasing‹ dimensions differently and in such a way that we will not find each other there*. Put differently: while Freud finds, in reading, an image he is looking for, the beloved in the little