Freud’s preface to the published account of his treatment of Dora reads less like an introduction than a warning; more like a battlecry than an invitation. Peter Gay, in his biography of Freud, calls its tone “combative” (1988, 247). Freud waited five years to publish the case and it was only then that the preface was finally composed. He had a long time to think about it. It’s fair to assume his remarks were carefully considered. They comprise as forceful a statement as the text that follows.

There is no mistaking that Freud assumed this book would be rejected by its audience. He anticipates criticism, ridicule, condemnation, even “ill-will.” He wastes little time in striking back at the expected onslaught that he imagined would follow. Gay suspects that Freud’s mood and apparent emotion were the result of unresolved feelings about Dora and the abrupt termination of her analysis. While Gay falls short of suggesting that Freud was in love with her, he does allude to his “involvement” with Dora and how it was probably “more unsettling than Freud suspected” (247). No doubt Freud still felt a degree of passion about the case if not Dora herself. And no doubt Freud was in anguish when he wrote the preface, and frustrated with the same public that more or less ignored his Interpretation of Dreams, published the same year Dora was analyzed. Five years later, Freud was still struggling to achieve the recognition and acceptance for his ideas that he eagerly anticipated.

Dora was to have been his “test case.” The original title, Dreams and Hysteria, was eventually abandoned sometime after the treatment ended so precipitously and prematurely, hence the revised title, Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria. Freud had hoped to demonstrate how dream interpretation could cure a hysterical neurosis. What he got instead was a
lesson in how unpredictable an analysis can be! If nothing else, the preface
serves to alert us that a psychoanalysis is not an easy thing to complete,
and how important the completion of it is if one hopes to meet with
success.

Freud opens his "Prefatory Remarks" with a warning: don't expect too
much from the case you are about to read. The nature of the criticism
Freud anticipates is extraordinary. It wasn't his lack of success that espe-
cially concerned him. After all, no one else was succeeding in treating
hysteria, so Freud could hardly be faulted for encountering the same
difficulties himself. He says he was criticized for a poverty of case materi-
als to substantiate his theories, then predicts that "now I shall be accused
of giving information about my patients which ought not to be given"
(1953a, 7). Freud felt he was damned if he failed to publish details about
his work (in order to substantiate his rationale for it), but would be
damned as well for publishing those very details once the public (in fact,
Freud's medical colleagues) discovered its nature. This is probably the
first time a physician was ever compelled to conclude that his method of
treatment would create a scandal once it was disclosed. What was it about
psychoanalysis that was said to be scandalous? Does that scandal continue
to haunt psychoanalysis, or do we reserve our disapproval for Freud
alone?

Freud confesses his apprehensiveness from the start. Because hysterical
symptoms are the expression of the individual's most secretive desires, the
only hope for relief from these symptoms and the condition that underlies
them must derive from "the revelation of those intimacies and the betrayal
of those secrets" (8). But how many patients would enter into analytic
treatment in the first place if they understood from the beginning that its
success depended on revealing their best-kept secrets to a person they
didn't even know? Of those who are, however, willing, how many would
remain committed if they suspected their secrets would some day be
published? Freud, nevertheless, felt it was his duty to tell the story to the
scientific community in the interests of reaching those people who might
benefit from psychoanalysis. Obviously, the publication of one's failures,
and the reasons for them, would be just as invaluable as championing the
successes. But wouldn't patients stand to be even more embarrassed by
the public disclosure of these failures than their analyst? After all, it would
be the analyst's decision, not theirs, to have these details published.
Freud was understandably sensitive to the matter of disclosing secrets learned in confidence—learned to a considerable extent without the knowledge of the patients who, after all, show more than they realize. He employed every caution to prevent Dora’s identity (Ida Bauer) from being learned. But what if Ida Bauer herself comes across Freud’s account of “Dora’s” treatment and recognizes this woman as herself? Mightn’t she be shocked—even dismayed—at all the things she now discovers about herself that she hadn’t learned when she was being treated? Incredibly, Freud says that even if she were to read his report, “she will learn nothing from it that she does not already know” (9). This is a remarkable thing to say, when you take into account all of the many details that he discloses about Dora’s character; her sexual proclivities; her attitude toward men, women, and her family; her bitterness; and all the other things we learn about her. It’s astonishing that Freud would conceal none of these details from her and, presumably, his other patients. How many analysts today would make such a claim? His audacious candor may partly explain why Freud was so concerned about the future of his great enterprise. And what about the enmity of those patients who failed to hold the course, or the medical colleagues who were, at best, suspicious of his motives or, perhaps, envious of his achievement? Freud excized a number of things from his account of the treatment in order to protect Dora’s identity. But he refused to omit some graphic details he believed had to be disclosed. Freud was unusually candid with all his patients, even with the young Dora.

Beneath the semiapologetic tone of Freud’s less than successful experience with Dora, and the combative—even hostile—remarks against his colleagues, two important themes were introduced in his preface to this case. The first concerns a question of ethics and the obligation of protecting one’s patients from harm. Ironically, the potential danger that Freud had in mind wasn’t the analysts themselves but those colleagues he feared would use his revelations to attack his former—and through them, potential—patients. The second cause for concern is even more ironic. Psychoanalysis aims at uncovering secrets. These secrets are of an extraordinary nature, because they refer to the innermost longings and beliefs of the person being analyzed. Neurotics suffer from these secrets because they deny them to themselves and guard them from discovery by others. The only way out of this impasse is to willingly—though not necessarily
"wittingly"—disclose these secrets to another human being. In so doing, the peculiar form of alienation that characterizes neurosis—in this case, a hysterical neurosis—is transformed.

But this makes psychoanalysis—the experience of it and one's compliance with it—a scary proposition. It involves a risk with no guarantee of reward. The paranoid would approach this arrangement with considerable reluctance, if at all. There has to be some capacity for trust on the part of the potential patient or the requisite confidences will never be shared; if shared, they will only lead to even deeper mistrust. This was one of the crucial lessons learned from Dora's analysis. The willingness to share one's secrets is essential to the success of treatment. Freud also learned how difficult it is to overcome the paradox of neurosis. If one holds onto secrets out of fear, increasing the anxiety until it is intolerable, how will one ever find the courage to disclose these secrets—while still afraid of them—in order to diminish the fear one was harboring in the first place? How, in turn, can one describe such a process to the public without frightening them away before they've even begun? These were some of the questions that perplexed Freud when he finally decided to publish the most controversial of all his analyses.