

Introduction

Reappropriating Freud

Does the world need another biography of Sigmund Freud? The answer is an emphatic yes. Utilizing what we have learned from Freud Studies, advances in psychoanalytic theory, the feminist critique of the field, infant research, attachment theory, and extensive clinical experience working with the “unclassical patient” in the last half-century, a new biography will allow us to sort out important unanswered questions concerning Freud’s life and address critical issues in contemporary psychoanalysis and philosophy.¹

Before I began work on this volume, I tended to be skeptical about the hermeneutical principle that it was necessary for each generation to reappropriate the classics for itself.² What I saw as its relativist implications seemed unacceptable. Conducting the research for this biography, however, has changed my thinking on the subject. Although I had been studying, teaching, and writing about Freud as well as practicing psychoanalysis for over three decades, I had not undertaken a systematic reading of his oeuvre since I was a graduate student and a psychoanalytic candidate in the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, I had intermittently perused the more recent biographical literature and the burgeoning field of Freud Studies in the intervening years, but I had not kept abreast with them in a serious fashion. When I commenced my “second sailing” and returned to a systematic reading of Freud’s texts for this project, something virtually

¹ See Sheldon Bach, “Classical technique and the unclassical patient,” *Narcissistic states and the therapeutic process* (New York: Jason Aranson, 1993), 177–198.

² See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, second revised edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshal (New York: Continuum, 1994), 284–290.

leapt off the page that I had failed to recognize earlier: *If the figure of the mother – especially the early pre-Oedipal mother – is not entirely absent, she plays a minimal and marginal role in Freud’s thinking.* The mother is largely missing from Freud’s self-analysis and from *The interpretation of dreams*, the work that grew out of it; from his *Case histories*, where she cries out for inclusion; from his theories of development and pathogenesis; and from his patriarchal theories of culture and religion. In what the philosophically trained psychoanalyst Hans Loewald calls his “official” doctrine, *Freud* focused almost exclusively on the figure of the father and maintained that the Oedipus complex was the “nuclear complex” not only of neurosis, but also of civilization. It can even be argued that Freud’s austere construction of the psychoanalytic “set-up” and his theory of technique is Oedipal, insofar as it stresses neutrality, distance, abstinence, and cognition and eschews relatedness, gratification, and experience.

But if the mother is largely absent from Freud’s work, her absence is itself a “presence.” As the feminist theorist Madelon Sprengnether observes in her important work *The spectral mother*, she assumes “a ghost-like function,” haunting the margins, shadows, lacunae, and interstices of Freud’s oeuvre.³ The early mother is in fact at the center of what Loewald refers to as Freud’s “unofficial” position, and it will be our task to draw her out.

Once I recognized the fact of the missing mother, I had to ask myself why I had not recognized it three decades earlier, and I arrived at the following answer: When I began my research for this biography, I was situated within a different “hermeneutical horizon” – a different historical-interpretive context – from the one I had been located in when I read Freud as a graduate student and a psychoanalytic candidate. That earlier horizon can be sketched like this.⁴ Though many of the tenets of the classical Freudian theory were still in place and the *ancien régime* had not yet crumbled, by the 1970s and 1980s the psychoanalytic establishment – especially the New York Ego Psychologists – was being challenged from multiple directions. The Second Wave Feminists’ attack

³ Madelon Sprengnether, *The spectral mother: Freud, feminism, and psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 5.

⁴ This sketch most accurately describes the situation in the United States in general, and New York in particular.

on psychoanalysis for its misogynist bias was in full force – with *enragés* like Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, and Germaine Greer leading the charge – and they demonized Freud as the arch-ideologue of patriarchy; infant research was, as it were, in its infancy; the encounter between psychoanalysis and attachment theory had yet to occur; the question of how to treat “the unclassical patient” was at the top of the clinical agenda; and the theories of D.W. Winnicott, Margaret Mahler, and Heinz Kohut, which focused on the pre-Oedipal phase of development and the significance of the early mother-of-separation, were being hotly debated. The field, in short, was in a state of upheaval.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the dust had largely settled and the discipline had substantially reconfigured itself. (This is not to say that contemporary psychoanalysis has resolved all its major theoretical and clinical questions – far from it.) Under the impact of the feminist criticisms and thanks in part to the contributions of feminists who had themselves become analysts – for example, Juliet Mitchell, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Jessica Benjamin, and Nancy Chodorow – psychoanalysts had entered a prolonged and intense period of reflection and self-criticism. (The criticisms arising from the gay and lesbian movements, which followed in the wake of the emergence of Second Wave Feminism, has also had a propitious effect on the field.) Consequently, mainstream psychoanalysis jettisoned many of its mistaken and embarrassing doctrines about female psychology and sexuality and radically transformed its views about femininity. Predictably, not only did the reconceptualization of femininity correct the absence of the mother in Freudian theory, but it also introduced the early mother into the center of its investigations. These developments in turn dovetailed with the expansion of infant research into a diverse and productive field and led to a rapprochement between psychoanalysis and the adjacent field of attachment theory. Through these developments, analysts acquired extensive knowledge regarding the earliest stages of development and the infant–mother relationship – topics with which they had previously been relatively unfamiliar.

The pre-Oedipal turn in psychoanalysis was also motivated by an urgent clinical concern – namely, the so-called “widening scope of psychoanalysis.”⁵ How, it was asked, should the supposedly new, non-neurotic

⁵ See Leo Stone, “The widening scope of psychoanalysis,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 2 (1954), 567–594.

patients who were appearing in analysts' consulting rooms with increasing frequency be approached? By the 1950s, analysts were regularly confronted with unclassical patients who did not conform to the "classical" picture of neurosis – that is, patients for whom the standard psychoanalytic technique had presumably been designed. Furthermore, it was often difficult to reach these patients, much less to help them, employing an unmodified version of classical technique.⁶

Spearheaded by Anna Freud, conservative analysts, who argued for the preservation and defense of classical theory and technique, occupied one pole of the debate surrounding "the widening scope."⁷ They maintained that analysts should hold their ground and continue to do what they knew best – that is, only treat patients in the neurotic range of psychopathology and exclude non-classical patients from their caseloads. Located at the opposite pole of the debate were analysts who advocated widening the scope of psychoanalysis in two respects – regarding the range of patients the field treated and the scope of theory it fashioned to understand them.⁸ And for analysts who managed to tolerate the uncertainty and who possessed the flexibility, curiosity, and perseverance to stick with these patients, the work often proved to be enormously productive and in fact led to a qualitative expansion of the scope and depth of psychoanalytic understanding.

⁶ Whether the "classical patient" – "the good neurotic" – for whom it was claimed Freud devised "classical technique" ever existed is a debatable question. The relatively florid pathology of many of Freud's early supposedly hysterical patients seems to locate them beyond the neurotic range of the diagnostic spectrum. It may be the case that the early analysts did not understand enough about non-neurotic pathology to accurately diagnose the clinical syndromes they were observing. Many contemporary analysts argue, moreover, that primitive non-neurotic parts are constituents of every individual's personality, and it is only now, with our more finely tuned clinical perception, that we can accurately recognize them. Indeed, today it is often maintained that if the more primitive strata of the psyche are not reached and worked through, an analysis will remain radically incomplete.

⁷ See Anna Freud, "Difficulties in the path of psychoanalysis," *Problems of psychoanalytic training, diagnosis, and the technique of therapy: the writings of Anna Freud*, vol. II (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), 124–156.

⁸ For an attempt to rebut Anna Freud's conservatism see André Green, "The analyst, symbolization and absence in the analytic setting," *On private madness* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1986), 30–59.

These unclassical patients, Loewald observes, often manifest bizarre “psychotic and psychotic-like states,” appear intransigent in their rejection of the common-sense rationality that most of us take for granted, and can be extremely frustrating – even exasperating – to work with. But, he argues, they can also teach us something about “fundamental issues” concerning human nature. These individuals “are transfixed by” concerns possessing a “genetic depth and antiquity” that are not readily observable in higher-functioning patients. “There is,” Loewald observes, something archaic about their mentality.” It is not, however, only “archaic . . . in the sense of [being] antiquated . . . but also in the sense of belonging to the origins of human life and thereby to its essence and core.”⁹ Nonclassical patients

often give one the feeling that they are struggling with basic, primary dilemmas of human life in forms and contents that seem less diluted and tempered, less qualified and overshadowed by the ordinary, familiar vicissitudes of life, than is generally true of neurotic patients.¹⁰

When these people are able to articulate their experience, they provide us, Loewald maintains, with insight into the “psychotic core” of the personality, which is rarely accessible in higher-functioning individuals, though it is present in all of us.

In other words, the unclassical patients can offer us insight into the most archaic strata of the psyche, before significant differentiation between subject and object has occurred, and where the separation-individuation process is incipient at best. Unlike most of us, they do not take individuated life and separate existence “for granted.” For them, “the objectivity of the object and the subjectivity of the self” that are presupposed in consensually validated public reality remain problematic.¹¹ As a result of the encounter with the “post-classical patient,” the nature of the subject and the nature of the object have, in other words, become a problematic topic for psychoanalytic theory, a fact that in turn has important

⁹ Hans Loewald, “The waning of the Oedipus complex,” *The essential Loewald: collected papers and monographs* (Hagerstown, MD: University Publishing Group, 2000), 399–400.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 400.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 399–400.

ramifications for philosophy, especially modern subject-centered philosophy. Perhaps most importantly, “owing in part to analytic research” into the archaic dimension of the psyche, “there is a growing awareness of the force and validity of another striving, that for unity, symbiosis, fusion, merging, identification – whatever name we wish to give to this sense of and longing for nonseparateness and undifferentiation.”¹² Freud, for reasons we will explore in detail, showed little interest in this striving; on the contrary, he manifested a powerful aversion to it.

As the developments I have enumerated indicate, the hermeneutical horizon that provided the backdrop for my “return to Freud” was shaped by two things: the assimilation and working-through of the feminist critique of psychoanalysis and the “pre-Oedipal turn” in the field. And this fact points to the answer to another question, namely, how it had been possible for earlier generations of analysts to “scotomize” (block the perception of) “the missing mother” in Freud’s thought and work when today her absence is so apparent that it cries out for commentary. That our predecessors had been situated within a different hermeneutical context from ours – one which had not only been created by Freud, but which, for reasons that will become clear, had also systematically excluded the significance of the of pre-Oedipal mother – helps to account for the scotomization.

This explanation of how earlier analysts could scotomize what today appears to be an obvious fact also helped to convince me that the hermeneutical principle was correct.¹³ As my research progressed and it became increasingly clear that the concepts of finitude and omnipotence occupy a central position in Freud’s scientific worldview, I recognized that the hermeneutical principle was not only consistent with *but also demanded by* Freud’s own position. As I hope to demonstrate, the acceptance of finitude – “resignation to *Ananke*” – is a fundamental desideratum of Freud’s project. And to deny the contextuality of human knowledge, that it is always situated in a *particular* horizon, is to deny the finitude of human existence. Only an infinite disembodied mind could attain Absolute Knowledge that is *independent* of all particular contexts. And, as I will argue, contrary to the

¹² *Ibid.*, 401–402.

¹³ This is not to say that I am no longer concerned with the problem of what might be called framework-relativism. It is only to say that whatever solution one arrives at must do justice to the full force of the hermeneutical claim.

popular caricature of Freud as a dogmatic positivist, for him, science in the prescriptive sense, does not consist in the certainty of Absolute Knowledge but is in fact its methodical adversary.

Accounting for “the Missing Mother”

Once the fact of the missing mother has been recognized, two further questions arise. How are we to account for it? And what are its consequences for Freud’s life and thought, and, by extension, for the development of psychoanalysis? These are two questions that a contemporary biographer of Freud must confront, and providing answers for them will constitute a central task of my investigation.

Another relatively recent development will help us address the first question. At the same time that psychoanalysis was undergoing the transformations sketched above, Freud Studies was emerging as an independent academic discipline. In the past, research into Freud’s life and the history of psychoanalysis had been conducted for the most part by analysts – that is, largely by physicians who lacked solid scholarly training. Furthermore, because they were members of a guild that is infamous for its contentiousness, their work was often distorted by the profession’s internecine quarrels.

The members of the new field of Freud Studies, by contrast, are academically trained scholars who are better equipped to conduct rigorous research. While the emergence of this new discipline and the body of work it has produced undoubtedly represent a clear advance that should be applauded, it is nevertheless necessary to register a caveat. For the academic field of Freud Studies also creates its own distinct dangers – now from the opposite direction. Though the members of the new *Fach* are rigorously trained academics, they tend to lack the first-hand clinical experience that is sometimes believed to be a prerequisite for gaining a full understanding of psychoanalytic phenomena and ideas.¹⁴ Their

¹⁴ The work of Paul Ricoeur perhaps constitutes the most compelling counterexample to this belief. The French philosopher had no clinical experience, on the couch or behind it. Nevertheless, *Freud and philosophy*, his unsurpassed *chef d’œuvre*, exhibits a profound grasp of the deepest strata and innermost workings of Freud’s thinking. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and philosophy: a study in interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

scholarship runs the risk of becoming too professional, too tidy – that is, too intellectualized. When this occurs, their work fails to capture the sheer messiness of unconscious-instinctual life and thereby misses the affective-corporeal guts of true analytic experience. Ironically, despite their celebration of *jouissance*, indeterminacy, playfulness, desire, otherness, and so on, the tendency toward intellectualization is most pronounced in the dazzling theoretical acrobatics on display in the developments in French psychoanalysis inspired by Jacques Lacan – which are close relatives of poststructuralism. Their theoretical fireworks provide a way of circumventing the confrontation with what Freud called “the exigencies of life.”¹⁵

Be that as it may, one important contribution of Freud Studies is especially pertinent to our first question. Over roughly the last three decades, historians of psychoanalysis have devoted considerable attention to the first three years of Freud’s life, the years spent in Freiberg, a Moravian town, roughly 150 miles north of Vienna, now located in the Czech Republic. Prior to their work, knowledge concerning that era of Freud’s development was relatively scant. Furthermore, the more recent socio-historical studies of the Freiberg period have dovetailed with another new area of research that was stimulated by the pre-Oedipal turn in psychoanalysis and interest in the early mother: namely, Sigmund’s relationship to his own mother, Amalie Freud, during his first three years. As a result of this combined research, the received account of Freud’s early development and relation to his mother has been seriously challenged. The conventional version presented a highly idealized picture of Freud’s early years, depicting him as the beloved son of a young, beautiful, and adoring mother – what may be called the myth of “mein goldener Sigi” (“my golden Sigi”). The new research, however, suggests that the Freud’s early years were marked by significant trauma involving marital discord, the death of his infant brother Julius, financial problems, maternal depression and absence, the sudden disappearance of his beloved *Kinderfrau* (nursemaid), as well as the loss of his childhood home and extended family – and that the idealized picture of that period, to a significant degree, served

¹⁵ French Freud inherited this paradox from its progenitor, Surrealism. Though the Surrealists were the self-designated champions of the unconscious and the irrational, the highly intellectualized quality of the Surrealists’ work is often striking.

a defensive function, namely, to deny their traumatic nature.¹⁶ These idealizations, moreover, were initially promulgated by Freud himself and then taken over by his followers.

Two of Freud's biographers, Max Schur and Peter Gay, mention that there may have been serious difficulties in Freud's early relationship to his mother that might have had "unfathomable biographical implications," but they mention this only *en passant* and do not assign the difficulties or their implications a central position in their studies.¹⁷ Schur, for example, wrote to Ernest Jones, Freud's first official biographer, "Altogether, there are many evidences of complicated pre-genital relationships with his mother which were perhaps never fully analyzed." But he not only cosigned his vastly understated observation to a letter and did not publish it, he also failed to analyse those difficulties himself.¹⁸ And while Gay raises the subject, it does not play an essential role in his narrative of Freud's life. Indeed, it is buried deep in his massive work, not appearing until page 505.¹⁹

In retrospect, Freud's excessive idealization should have raised a red flag indicating that something was amiss. These new additions to our knowledge regarding Freud's early development make it possible to formulate a thesis to account for the fact of "the missing mother." The psychological strategy that Freud adopted for coming to grips with his traumatic early experience involved the repression, dissociation, or splitting-off not only of the representation of the early mother but also, more generally, of the entire maternal dimension and realm of early experience. This does not mean that the memories, images, and feelings dating from the Freiberg era were simply extinguished. Psychic life does not operate that way.

¹⁶ Louis Breger's biography *Freud: darkness in the midst of vision* (New York: Wiley, 2000) first drew my attention to the new scholarship that challenged the received idealized account of Freud's early development. And Breger has rendered us an important service by bringing this recent research together and presenting a relatively comprehensive and lucid account of it. Breger, however, is a self-psychologist who obviously does not find Freud very appealing and has an axe to grind with him. Consequently, his study lacks hermeneutical charity toward his subject and has a "gotcha" quality to it. While his biography is factually informative and useful, his tendentiousness often distorts the analysis of the facts he has presented.

¹⁷ Peter Gay, *Freud: a life for our time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 503.

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 505.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 503–507. For a critique of Gay in these matters see Breger, *Freud*, 381.

It means, rather, that they were sidelined – that is, banished to the more marginal or remote regions of Freud’s psyche, where they maintained an “extraterritorial” existence that continued to have a powerful impact on Freud, although he was largely unaware of it. As Breger describes it,

The traumatic experiences of Freud’s first four years vanished from his awareness. In contemporary terms, the events and images were stored as physical and emotional sensations, but the memories were not available to consciousness; they were dissociated, not integrated into a coherent sense of self. They existed in a separate compartment [or compartments – JW] of his personality.²⁰

In general, a psychoanalyst’s theory can only advance as far as his own analysis has progressed. What Freud split off in his psychic life became split off in his thinking, thus determining the limitations in his “official” position, centering on “the father complex.” But while the material from these disavowed and dissociated regions of his mind were excluded from Freud’s “official” doctrine, as we will see, they appear in his “unofficial position,” and, following Loewald, it will be our job to ferret them out, analyse them, and assess their ramifications for psychoanalytic theory.

My Second Theme

In addition to “the missing mother,” the second theme that I will pursue in this study is “the break with tradition” – a theme that was also central to the major theorists of modernity. Freud’s interest in the topic arose directly from the circumstances of his life; his family lived through the massive social and cultural dislocations that accompanied the process of modernization in Europe. In the course of only three generations, the Freuds were transformed from traditional *Ostjuden* (Eastern European Jews), inhabiting one of the Austrian Empire’s easternmost provinces, Galicia, into relatively modern secular Jews living in its capital, Vienna. As a result of the way he experienced that transformation and integrated his particular, dual Jewish-German inheritance, Freud came to identify himself as a partisan of the Enlightenment. However, while he clearly saw himself as such – that is, as a representative of the *Aufklärung* – his position with regard to it is far from straightforward and requires

²⁰ Breger, *Freud*, 17.