

## Freud by Leo Rosten

<sup>1</sup>THEY CAME TO HIS FLAT on Vienna's Berggasse with ailments for which there was no physical cause: a "paralyzed" arm or suicidal depression, fits of hysteria or peculiar compulsions. Herr Doktor Freud had treated more bizarre neurasthenics—using hypnosis, under the celebrated Charcot in Paris, to open startling portals to the traumas a patient could not ordinarily remember. He had achieved some dramatic cures; but not everyone could be hypnotized, and some symptoms vanished only to be replaced by others...So now he asked his patients to lie on the couch (behind which he sat, minimizing his presence) and say whatever came into their minds--anything, everything, however trifling or foolish or distasteful. He urged them to talk, that is, not in order to make sense, but with a resolute effort to disregard it.

<sup>2</sup>Freud listened. He noticed the odd twists and turns of this new kind of talking: the rush of words abruptly stopped, in a blush or sweat or stammer; the unexpected coupling of far-removed ideas; the concatenation of facts and fantasies that mixed the now, the then, the never in a timeless jumble. "Free association" simply *could not remain meaningless*: a silly pun resurrected some childhood anguish; a slip of the tongue betrayed some secret shame or sin—real or but-imagined. Irrationality itself did not stay irrelevant. The unstructured ruminations uncovered buried truths and horrid cravings. Patterns emerged—persistent and soon predictable-- from even that carnival of masks we call dreams.

<sup>3</sup>Freud listened. Occasionally, he might suggest to a patient that today's

headache was self-punishment for yesterday's self-pity, or remark how a forgotten name had erupted in some angry outburst. Every symptom seemed to serve a purpose. Behind a tic, a phobia, an obsession, sexual conflicts unfolded. And the talking, without medicines, even healed. Could symptoms be "substitute gratifications"? Could sickness represent neurotic needs, or act as expiation for unbearable guilt?

<sup>4</sup>In 1896, Sigmund Freud described some of his case findings to Vienna's Society of Psychiatry and Neurology. The storm that soon broke around him never abated. He was branded a charlatan, a sex-ridden sensationalist "descending into filth" to peddle theories of "bosh, rot and nonsense." No man less fitted so unsavory a role. Freud was a most moral—even prudish—bourgeoisie, an exemplary father, and husband who loved to walk in the mountains, pick wild flowers, collect modest antiquities from Egypt and Greece. He disliked small talk, hated quarrels, disapproved of even mildly off-color jokes. He was addicted to cigars (20 a day) and enjoyed a weekly game of cards with friends. Dignified, proud, aloof, he wore a neatly trimmed beard and studied visitors with a direct and most penetrating gaze.

<sup>5</sup>A brilliant student, he had entered medical school in Vienna at 17, remaining remarkably poised in the face of the anti-Semitism he encountered. "I could never grasp why I should be ashamed of my origin," he once wrote. "At an early date, I became aware of my destiny to belong to the critical minority...[and developed] a certain independence of judgment."

<sup>6</sup>His scientific record was impressive: first-rate laboratory research in physiology, neurology, brain anatomy; work in psychiatric clinics; a pioneer discovery of cocaine's analgesic properties (about which his too-hasty enthusiasm darkened his career). He read six or seven languages and had translated a volume of John Stuart Mill into German. He had studied for a year in London and passionately loved Shakespeare and Milton.

<sup>7</sup>Now, exploring the new domain he named psychoanalysis, he sacrificed his meager medical practice by presenting men with a picture of man that destroyed our cherished self-serving self-images. For 40 years, his lectures, clinical papers, books scandalized and, like Darwin, horrified the righteous. Our behavior, said Freud, is only partly governed by reason or will. In each of us, below awareness, rages the "id," an underworld of instinctual energy—savage lusts, primitive greeds, criminal aggressions—from which ego and conscience, too, are formed. "Libido," the source of sexuality, drives us all, even in our infancy. The boy's incestuous yearnings for his mother, the girl's for her father, are the terrible crucibles in which human character is formed. Siblings compete for parental love, and may murder each other in their fantasies.

<sup>8</sup>Love and hate are interwoven, and torment us with "ambivalence." We are each born part male, part female, he observed, and toss throughout life between homo- and heterosexual strivings. Our personality traits are rooted in early "fixation" in eroticized zones: oral, anal, phallic. Intelligence, science, art, ambition, achievement—all use "sublimated" libidinal energy.

<sup>9</sup>Our unconscious churns with contradictions, ignores time, is blind to

sense or proportion. It operates with its own system of logic, its own rewards, reprisals, symbolic transactions. We punish ourselves for our wishes no less than our deeds. Guilt, the merciless offshoot of civilization, is our helmsman and our scourge. And when the endless, tragic war between desire and taboo becomes intolerable, we escape by a "flight into illness." Our defenses against our destructiveness are sometimes too vulnerable to maintain our virtue, or too inflexible to preserve our sanity.

<sup>10</sup>Freud saw men's basic experiences as universal. Genius, dolt, Oxonian, Zulu—we are each the product and the prisoner of our childhood. Everything we do or dream or wish is *caused*. We may forget through fatigue, or the erosions of time, but most of our forgetting is purposeful: We "repress," rather than forget, pushing the painful, the loathsome, the threatening out of mind. But the repressed materials return and break through—in symptoms, irrational conduct and dreams.

<sup>11</sup>Freud found every dream, however grotesque, packed with meaning. Dreams are a secret language, different for each man, which we can learn to decipher. For our dreams, like our art and myths, are "wish fulfillments" in which forbidden impulses masquerade—evading the censors of conscience (superego) and the controls of reason (ego). In the symbols of night's reveries, balconies may stand for breasts or buttocks; the sea for birth; a snake or arch the organ each resembles. The dream is "the royal road to the unconscious."

<sup>12</sup>We break down not because we are immoral, said Freud, but because we try to be moral; flaws in the psychic structure impair a man's capacity to adjust his needs to society's taboos. Parents can cripple a child emotionally by punishing him for his natural explorations of his

own body, or curiosity about where babies come from, or interest in the “primal scene” of parental copulation.

<sup>13</sup>Freud made the most astounding correlations, linking paranoia to homosexuality, miserliness to early fascination with excrement, philanthropy to penance for secret guilt, saintliness to “overreaction” against sadistic temptations. The furore provoked by such outrageous concepts was magnified by his unadorned words: “Masturbation...penis envy...homosexuality...castration anxiety...anal eroticism...Oedipus complex.”

<sup>14</sup>In this chilling, furibund landscape, this harrowing world where “dark, unfeeling and unloving powers” shape our destiny, what hope does psychoanalysis offer? A new technique of thinking, as well as therapy. A method of self-understanding that enlists the irrational in the service of reason. A way to explore the buried continent of the unconscious, to unmask our hidden tyrants and rob them of their power. A way to restore mercy to conscience gone blind and vengeful. A brilliant transformation of the random into the revelatory, and the “trivial” into the explosive.

<sup>15</sup>The psychoanalyst is a neutral figure who neither advises 'nor consoles nor condemns, to whom the patient “transfers” his deepest affections and hostilities (as if to father or mother, someone loved or hated). The analyst helps the patient surmount his “resistances” to confront his deepest impulses—until he no longer needs his neurotic defenses, or the analyst's support. Psychoanalyzed, men are free—to cope with the inescapable miseries and frustrations of living.

<sup>16</sup>As if all this were not enough, Freud crossed psychology's frontiers to dissect

man's most sacred values with corrosive scalpels. He modified the sardonic opinions that follow, but they were not forgotten. Morality? It rests “on the inescapable exigencies of human cohabitation.” The meaning of life? “Nobody asks...the purpose of the lives of animals.” God? A naive projection of the good, protecting father whom children invent. Religion? Once a bastion against the beasts within us, it is now a “mass obsessional neurosis...patently infantile...incongruous with reality.” Love? “One is very crazy when in love.” Sexual morality? “As society defines it...[it is] contemptible.” Peace? He doubted that man will conquer his aggressions.

<sup>17</sup>History had no parallel for so harsh and clinical a vision. Freud refused to appease men with emollient consolations. His theories, his bluntness, his candor seemed to drain virtue out of childhood, and stripped even motherhood of its encrusted sentimentalizations. This cool, skeptical, ever-analyzing doctor treated sin as sickness, replaced the soul with the personality structure, substituted insecurity for innocence.

<sup>18</sup>He offered men no uplifting messages— only bleak, blinding clarifications. He saw maturity as an honest acceptance of unpleasant realities. He was, says Philip Rieff, the first irreligious moralist in history. Is it surprising that Rome denounced psychoanalysis, Moscow ranted against such “decadent” aberrations, preachers and teachers voiced outrage over doctrines so “diseased...perverted...obsessed with sex”?

<sup>19</sup>Yet, for all the fulminations, no twentieth-century figure but Einstein so profoundly altered our thinking, even unto our new clichés: “She's neurotic...He isn't bad; he's sick...That cold is psychosomatic.” Freud inspired writers and painters to explore symbolism, break

traditions of art, fiction, and drama, invent new forms for the expression of nonrational creativity.

<sup>20</sup>He was stubborn and opinionated, difficult to know, easier to admire than love, ridden by inner conflict between systematic inquiry and his “daemon of creative speculation.” A naïve judge of men, he often complained of having been betrayed. (“An intimate friend and a hated enemy have always been indispensable to my emotional life.”) He never forgave Jung and Adler for their “apostasy.” His published love letters attest to the most turbulent jealousy and indecision. He guarded his privacy intensely, even with his six children, but was notoriously indiscreet about his patients and colleagues. He held a gloomy view of mankind, once blurting in a letter: “most men are trash” or, again, expressing “contempt of people and the detestable world.”

<sup>21</sup>He was as unillusioned about himself as he was about others. “I have never done anything mean or malicious and cannot trace any temptation to do so, so I am not in the least proud of it...When I ask myself why I [behave] honorably...I have no answer...Why I—and incidentally my six children—have to be thoroughly decent human beings is quite incomprehensible to me.” He had no high regard for his own talents (“I have always been dissatisfied with my gifts”) and admitted that after 30 years of research, he could not answer this question: “What does a woman *want*?” He was emphatically Victorian in wanting women to be gentle, adoring helpmeets to men. (His own wife apparently remained uninvolved in his work, and was not notably at home with his theories.) He was as self-critical as he was proud: “I am not really a man of science...I am by temperament...a conquistador,” he said, citing the central qualities of “curiosity,

boldness and tenacity.” When told he was a great man, he drily remarked that to discover “great things” is not to be great.

<sup>22</sup>He was a brave man, withstanding hatred and calumny (“It rains abuse”) for decades. During his “long years of ...painful loneliness,” he wondered how he could support his family “by such unconventional paths.” He once charged into a crowd that was chanting anti-Semitic slogans. And when storm troopers came to his flat, to confiscate his books, possessions, savings, passport, he stared the barbarians down with contempt.

<sup>23</sup>This man totally transformed psychology. He gave sociology the long-missing bridge between individual and group behavior, and anthropology the process by which child rearing projects itself into culture patterns. We have but to look around to recognize the magnitude of his influence: How many nurseries today accept love as the child's most precious anchor? In how many homes does “playing doctor” no longer incur savage reprisal? How many marriages separate passion from disgust? How many doctors trace stuttering to inhibition, impotence to fear, asthma to anxiety, ulcers to frustration?

<sup>24</sup>But it is folly to approach psychoanalysis as revelation, or render Freud more infallible than, say, Newton. Freud drew sweeping conclusions from meager evidence (and, unlike some of his disciples, admitted it). He elaborated theories that are supportable only within the scheme of his own assumptions. He wrote more like a novelist than a scientist (he won the coveted Goethe Prize for literature), apologized because his cases were so dramatic, seemingly devoid of “the serious stamp of science,” but always insisted that his theories rested on “the most extensive and laborious observations.” He was surprisingly

uninterested in the process by which we reason and learn—and underestimated the leverage of both on experience. He scrupulously distinguished observation from speculation, but was far more imaginative than systematic. His followers often do him a disservice, confusing insights with data, converting theories into dogmas, pushing inferences to conclusions in circular parodies of thinking. They have made analysis a theology. Psychoanalysis has yet to verify many theories through research not already committed to their validity.

<sup>25</sup>Yet all this is overshadowed by the sheer brilliance, originality and power of Freud's insights. He was a genius as an observer, an investigator of phenomena that (like nuclear physics) contradict the conventions of consistency, defy the modalities of logic, evade classical laws of causation. He constructed a new model of the human psyche. He discovered the dynamic process of the unconscious that thinkers from Plato to Nietzsche had but dimly envisaged. He located emotional disturbances in the family system itself. He devised original solutions to the ancient puzzles of dream, delusion, hallucination, insanity. He removed the traditional division between mind and body, between normal and abnormal, finding both in “the psychopathology of everyday life.” He discovered the far-reaching, many-faceted dominion of sexuality. He was among those historic figures “who disturb the sleep of mankind.”

<sup>26</sup>He had the courage to revise his theories again and again. When it dawned on him that he had been too credulous, that hysterical patients had traced their symptoms to “fictitious traumas,” creating in their fantasy scenes of having been seduced, he pressed on to assert that “psychic reality” can operate as “actual reality.” He enriched the study of man

more than anyone since Aristotle—and with a remarkable openness of mind to the unexpected, the implausible, the fantastic.

<sup>27</sup>Freud never moralized, yet he taught us new respect for the immense complexity of man's problems. He enlarged our compassion for human suffering. If his “cheerful pessimism” holds any promise, it is that we *can* learn to face the enemies within ourselves, whom our better selves can tame, if not destroy. Lucid, astringent, forever skeptical, he found his final faith in reason, moderation and simple decency. He was the Columbus and Copernicus of psychology, which still awaits its Euclid.

<sup>28</sup>Hitler drove Freud from Vienna, at 82. The old giant had borne excruciating pain without complaint for 16 years (over 30 operations for cancer), and he refused drugs to near the very end: “I prefer to think in torment than not to...think clearly.” He died in London in 1939, at 83, wondering how his “many beginnings” would fare in the future, characterizing his contributions as “patchwork,” hoping “that I have opened up a path-way for an important advance in our knowledge.” He had fulfilled a towering commitment to inquiry, to truth, with incorruptible courage—and honor. —LEO ROSTEN

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