

Freud

William Todd Schultz
Department of Psychology
Pacific University
Forest Grove, Oregon 97116

(2001, *The Encyclopedia of Life-Writing*.)

Published in: M. Jolly (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Life-Writing*. London: Fitzroy-Dearborn.

Freud's importance for the enterprise of life writing can't be exaggerated. Ninety years ago he wrote the first psychobiography--*Leonard da Vinci and A Memory of His Childhood*--and "biography has not been the same since" (Elms). Both in his immediate wake and still today--to the chagrin or the delight of many, depending on their allegiances--the biography of a person is the *psychoanalytical* biography of a person. The subject's Oedipal crisis, her psychosexual development, early "object" relations, typical ego defenses, history of repressions --all such questions constitute virtually obligatory subjects for those taking up the study of any individual life. While it is possible from within personology to make a case for the dominance of newer theoretical models, especially life story or script theories of personality (McAdams, Tomkins), psychoanalysis remains for many the theory of choice. And why shouldn't it? It has unmatched scope. It assumes that everything--from the mundane to the miraculous--is interpretable. And in the essentials of dream theory (condensation, displacement, manifest and latent content, overdetermination), it provides a method for going beneath "text" to "subtext," to the off-stage voices of the unconscious, a category of mental life now happily embraced by cognitive psychologists. Furthermore, in a way that would inspire those to come, Freud never dismissed the importance of the single case. As he once wrote, "A single case does not give us all the information that we should like to have. Or, to put it more correctly, it might teach us everything, if we were only in a position to make everything out, and if we were not compelled by the inexperience of our own perception to content ourselves with a little" (see Freud, 1996, 165[-]166). Finally, as Runyan has speculated, "perhaps psychoanalytic theory has a special relevance to the kinds of explanatory or interpretive problems encountered in psychobiography in that it seems effective in explaining just those odd or unusual patterns of behavior that the psychobiographer feels are most in need of explanation," things like neurotic repetitions, puzzling inconsistencies, or traumatic life encounters (Runyan, 1982, 220).

Why did Freud turn to biography? For a number of reasons, some personal, some academic. He disliked pathography and hagiography both, and wrote his famous Leonardo book

as a corrective to such misguided endeavors. It would not do, said Freud, either to demean one's subject or to idealize him. Freud also regarded lives as testing grounds for theoretical ideas. With Leonardo, for instance, he sought to fine-tune his thinking about subjects like sublimation and homosexuality. In fact, it is worth noting here that Freud dismissed experimental confirmation of his concepts, calling it unnecessary. All the support he needed came from case histories like those of Dora, the "Wolf Man," and "Little Hans," clinical evidence, his own autobiography, and the analysis of historical figures.

A few of the personal sources for Freud's interest in biography are adduced by Alan Elms in his outstanding chapter on Freud's Leonardo. It seems that, in writing of Leonardo, about whom precious little is known, Freud was also writing of himself. Though not acted on, Freud's sexual feelings for both Wilhelm Fliess, an early mentor, and Jung are well known. Consequently Leonardo is portrayed by Freud as "passively homosexual." For a complex of reasons Freud's sexual life with his wife came to an early end, one possible result being a re-channeling of eroticism into work. Consequently Leonardo is depicted as a "perfect and rare" type of individual who from earliest infancy sublimated all desire, funneling it into art and scientific activity. A large body of research likewise finds evidence of identification in Freud's work on Moses, a book that "plagued him like a ghost not laid" (see Alexander, 133). Moses and Freud are both discoverers, but also "propagators and guardians of the law, recipients of important revelations" (Alexander, 135). Like Moses, Freud too can be seen as an authoritative, competent patriarch protecting something whose value he appreciated and fostered. *In Moses and Monotheism* Freud speculates that Moses was killed because of the hardships his ideas imposed on people who then disowned them, while a small set of followers remained faithful, at least in memory (Alexander, 145). Freud wrote this in 1934, five years before his death, so it comes as little surprise that fears about the fate of psychoanalysis found their way into his examination of another "Great Man."

Additional psychobiographical writings by Freud include "The Moses of Michelangelo," "Dostoevsky and Parricide," and "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dr. Schreber)."

Of course, most of Freud's life writing did not concern itself with historical figures. His subjects were closer at hand, and far better known to him. They were his patients. What one notices first about these "case histories," apart from their occasionally excessive reductionism or their evident tendentiousness, is Freud's style of rhetoric. He is anything but dogmatic. He anticipates incredulity, marches ahead with self-proclaimed hesitation, and pleads for the reader's patience. He often seems almost apologetic (see, for example, the "Wolf Man" case, in which Freud repeatedly expects the reader's belief to "abandon" him). But this style's effects—and it is a style not without influence—become in the long run salutary. The reader's trust is paradoxically

increased, and Freud's conclusions meet with less skepticism than predicted. Clearly Freud knew what he was up to. His choice of style, hardly accidental, increased his arguments' persuasiveness.

Introducing a set of the most famous case studies, Philip Rieff (in Freud, 1996) points to what he considers Freud's supreme gift: offering an astonishingly clear yet sufficiently complex analysis of the world's most complicated thing--a human being. Rieff's is an important observation. It speaks to the artistic requirements for an effective biographical narrative. Freud succeeds where others fail precisely in combining historical, scientific, and literary approaches to human experience. Though he never tired of asserting the scientism of psychoanalysis, in his life writing Freud behaved like an artist. He juggled clarity and complexity, detail and generality, mystery and mundanity with a skill rivalling the novelist's.

In biography Freud's shadow clearly looms. The case is the same for autobiography. For those telling their own lives, psychoanalysis offers a ready-made superstructure, an implicit theory of self. At the very least, a kind of "tabloid Freud" snakes its way into numberless mass-market outpourings of identity. Confession seems to be that particular genre's *sin qua non*, as if a life has not been adequately revealed unless some sordid memory gets uncovered or some sexual practice disclosed. Less absurdly, life--to some autobiographers--is the surreal Freudian dream we interpret or even "dream" through the act of writing. We don't necessarily understand it, and we don't even feel as though we authored it on occasion, but it must be made sense of if we seek self-liberation. Obviously, the Freudian metaphor runs deep. Evading its determining influence actually requires active effort. For if we feel like a "mystery unto ourselves," like a conflicted, warring "cast of characters," like a "jumbled grouping" of "infantile motives" straining towards adulthood, we do so because Freud pictured personality in just those terms; he invented the story forms so seemingly irresistible to life-writers. In fact, the fractured, split-up self of postmodernism now in vogue finds its source in psychoanalysis, a theory assuming self-division along with self-inscrutability.

The very doing of psychoanalysis requires autobiography. Freud was an assiduous autobiographer. He wrote his life story for a series entitled "Contemporary Medicine in Self-Portrayals," though that work's aim was less autobiography than the tale of the birth of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1925-26). But Freud wrote letters, too, and through them left a clear impression of self. Especially revealing are those to Wilhelm Fliess and Jung. Both men Freud adored with an investment of admitted sexual energy, and both relationships fell into strained disrepair.

As for autobiography and the institution of psychoanalysis, dogma asserts that analysts must be analyzed before analyzing. And as Marcus notes, there is even a sense in which psychoanalysis itself is founded on autobiography. Freud "turned autobiography into science"

(82). He was his own case study. In his life--his dreams, memories, and sexual history--he located psychological truths which seemed representative of human mental life in general. To Freud, the story of his life and the history of psychoanalysis were "intimately interwoven" (1925, 71). He writes, "Psychoanalysis came to be the whole content of my life. . . No personal experiences of mine are of any interest in comparison to my relations with that science" (71). Moreover, "I have been more open and frank in some of my writings (*The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*) than people usually are who describe their lives for their contemporaries or for posterity" (73). Is psychoanalysis Freud's own life? Derrida asks, "How can an autobiographical writing, in the abyss of an uninterminated self-analysis, give to a world wide institution *its* birth?" (quoted in Marcus, 82). Others wonder how a theory of the concealed nature of personality and the impossibility of autobiography could be derived from looking within. But then, all theory is covert autobiography. Like those to follow, Freud first hoped to understand himself. Indeed, the truly unifying theory of personality ought to account not only for 1) the life of the theorist, and 2) the phenomena to which other theories address themselves, but for 3) the other theories, as well. And as "each theory is the expression of the limits and biases of the theorist, . . . other persons' interest in and resonance to the theoretical ideas are equally strongly affected by subjective ideological factors" (Atwood & Tomkins, 1976, 167). We invent theories to understand ourselves and we gravitate to theories which seem to tell our story.

Life writers set off on a perilous path when they dismiss the colossal contributions of Freud. His work merits close and careful study. He invented psychobiography, he used the most nimble of theories to bring coherence to apparent chaos, he practiced an arresting narrative style, and he told very good stories about people. If, as fashion goes, a life is a story, then biographers must become storytellers, the more captivating, the better. In this Freud sets a standard well worth emulating.

FURTHER READING

Alexander, I, *Personology: Method and Content in Personality Assessment and Psychobiography*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990

Atwood, G and S. Tomkins, "On the Subjectivity of Personality

Theory," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 12 (1976):

166-177.

Clark, R, *Freud: The Man and the Cause*, Norwalk Connecticut:

Easton Press, 1980

Elms, A, *Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology*, New York: Oxford, 1994

- Freud, E (editor), *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, New York: Basic Books, 1960
- Freud, S, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, New York: Norton, 1964
- Freud, S, *Moses and Monotheism*, New York: Knopf, 1939
- Freud, S, *Three Case Histories: The "Wolf Man," the "Rat Man," and the Psychotic Dr. Schreber*, New York: Touchstone, 1996
- Freud, S, "The Moses of Michelangelo," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 13 (1914)
- Freud, S, "Dostoevsky and parricide," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 21 (1928)
- Freud, S, "An Autobiographical Study," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* 20 (1925-26)
- Freud, S, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, New York: Norton, 1965
- Freud, S, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, New York: Norton, 1953
- Gay, P, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, New York: Norton, 1988
- Jones, E, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, New York: Basic Books, 1953-1957
- Kaufmann, W, *Discovering the Mind (Volume Three): Freud Versus Adler and Jung*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980
- Kerr, J, *A Most Dangerous Method: The Story of Jung, Freud, and Sabina Spielrein*, New York: Knopf, 1993
- Marcus, L, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1994
- Masson, J (editor), *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985
- McAdams, D.P, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, New York: Guilford, 1993
- McGuire, W (editor), *The Freud/Jung Letters*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974
- Runyan, W.M, *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method*, New York: Oxford, 1982
- Sulloway, F, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind*, New York: Basic Books, 1979
- Tomkins, S, "Script theory," in Aronoff, J, A. Rabin, and R. Zucker, *The Emergence of Personality*, New York: Springer Publishing, 1987