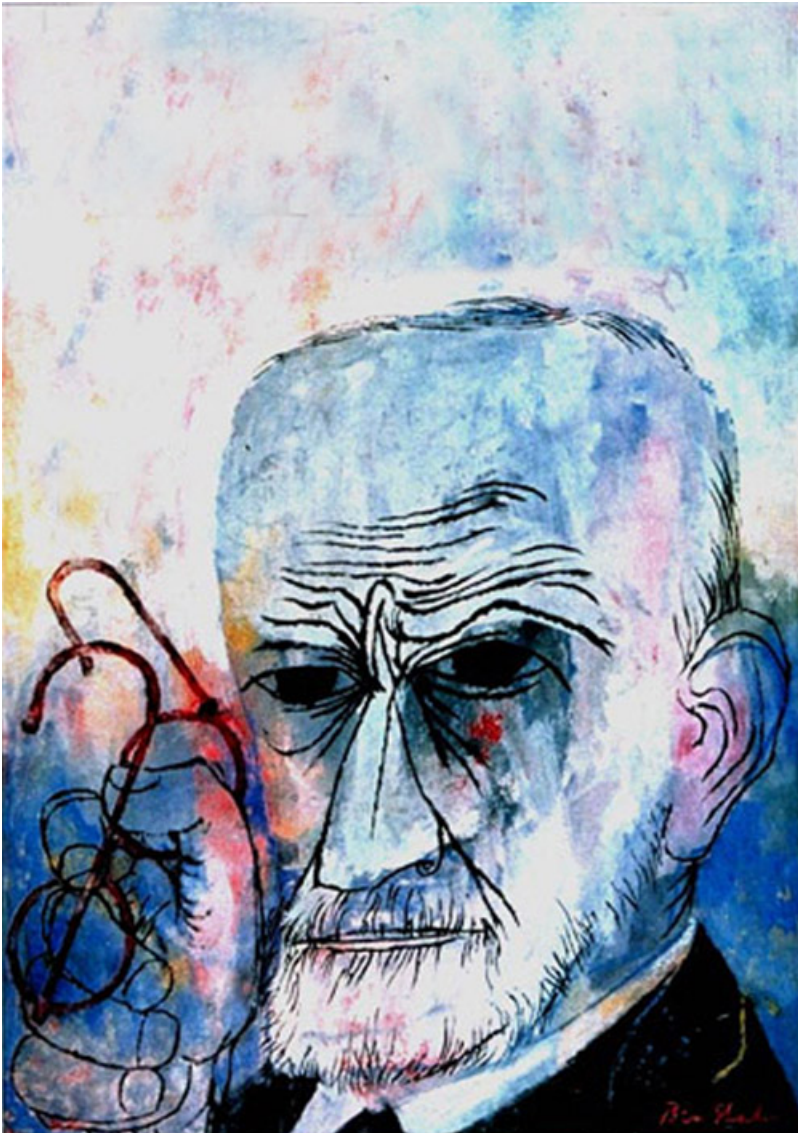


Freud Again

by Samuel Hux (November 2017)



Sigmund Freud, Ben Shahn for Time Magazine, 1956

There's little new on the Freud front. Reservations about Freudian analysis have increased over the last few years, decades really; and that's legitimate, even though the reservations, amounting actually to practical rejection, have become the new wisdom, with critics like Frederick Crews ([In Memory of Sigmund Freud](#)) are essentially right, they are still a good deal less than the truth. There was a vindictive tenacity that "autocratic pose" and "paternal strictures" do

not quite capture. Freud was fond of a saying of Heine: "One must forgive one's enemies—but not before they have been *hanged*." But Freud was capable of his own anathemas. In a letter to Arnold Zweig he wrote of Alfred Adler's death in Scotland: "I don't understand your sympathy for Adler. For a Jew boy out of a Vienna suburb a death in Aberdeen is an unheard-of career in itself." Wilhelm Stekel, "a giant close at hand," Freud said he had overlooked while he "made a pygmy great" (Adler), was later accused of "moral insanity," and all overtures from the penitent were rejected for over twenty-five years. Freud could say of his wayward "son" Otto Rank, "Now, after I have forgiven everything, I am through with him."

But it is true that these were only words, and the men noted above Freud considered traitors in a hostile world, and he never hounded them into bankruptcy or hired a hit-man; it would be hard to prove that his grudge-bearing ruined their careers or put their psychic lives in great danger. The better case could be made, and Paul Roazen made it in [*The Ordeal of Civility*](#). Nor do I suggest the late Paul Roazen had any sordid motive: the focus of his book was *genius and suffering*—both that of the genius and that which he could not help but inflict on others to some degree.

Reading Roazen it was impossible to escape the impression that the story of Freud and his followers is one of the more convincing substantiations of Freud's theories: so often the autocratic father, so many rebellious sons, so often the father's fear of the offspring, so often the fear justified. And perhaps one of the strengths of Roazen's book was that it underlined how connected the evolution of psychoanalytic theory was to the biographies of the theorists (Freud observed to Rank, "The exclusion of the father in your theory seems to reveal too much the result of personal influences in your life"), and at the same time suggested how this is no

devastating criticism (as Rank answered Freud, “You know as well as I do that the accusation that an insight is derived from a complex means very little . . . and . . . says nothing of the value or truth of this insight”). It is logical enough, given the narrative method of classical analysis, how close to autobiography theory is. One thinks not only of so “autobiographical” a work as [The Psychopathology of Everyday Life](#)—the early works perhaps more significant in this context than the later *formally* autobiographical essays.

It is the nature of autobiography in any case, I think, to be dissatisfied with its ostensible function, and to strain toward a generalized projection onto others as exhortation, ethics, psychology. Such is the chemistry of our egocentrism. We single ourselves out as unique and thereby worthy of having our stories told, and then paradoxically enhance our uniqueness by suggesting it as representative. I intend no caviling here. Descartes’ [Meditations on First Philosophy](#) may be two of the most significant “autobiographies” of modern history.

The narrative nature of analysis aside, there remains the question of “science or therapy?”—an old question in relation to Freud, and judging by Freud’s statements and his practices it is truly difficult to assess his own priorities. Freud remarked his lack of any “craving” from the very beginning “to help suffering humanity,” and Roazen was probably right to suggest that “uppermost in his mind was the advancement of science” and that he was not as therapeutically ambitious as his followers. But on the other hand Freud was taking patients even up to the end and when his publishing days were over, prosthesis in mouth, hole in cheek, dying painfully in London, breathing the literal smell of decay. (An image of the man that still haunts me whenever I think the word *Freud*.) It’s easier to answer another question: Yes, Freud did wish his

findings and practice to be thought science rather than art, whatever his priorities. And science rather than “philosophy.” Nevertheless, he is a philosopher in a sense that medical investigators seldom are, and as he almost grudgingly admitted with his late socio-cultural works: [*The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and The Question of Lay Analysis*](#) in which Freud rather mockingly refers to defectors who have tried to free society from “the yoke of sexuality that psychoanalysis was seeking to impose upon it.” One of them (Adler) “actually declared that sexual life is merely one of the spheres in which human beings seek to put in action their driving need for power and domination.” Another (Jung) “explained that what is sexual does not mean sexuality at all, but something . . . abstract and mystical.” “They have met with much applause, for the moment at least.” These apostates in effect gave a *symbolic* value to the Oedipus Complex instead of accepting its literal sexuality. They are not the only ones, of course, to make of the complex a psychological symbol instead of a sexual experience, or generally to deemphasize its sexual content.

John Murray Cuddihy, in [*remarkably balanced review*](#) of Crews’s *epic bashing* (in *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2017). Commenting on Crews’s discussion both of Freud’s ambivalence (to say the least) toward the church and Freud’s rumored affair with his sister-in-law Minna Bernays, Menand quotes Crews: “To possess Minna could have meant, first, to commit symbolic incest with the mother of God; second, to ‘kill’ the father God by means of this ultimate sacrilege; and third, to nullify the authority both of Austria’s established church and of its Vatican parent—thereby, in Freud’s internal drama, freeing his people from two millennia of religious persecution.” About which Menand comments, and I italicize, “It all sounds pretty Freudian!”

It’s rather disconcerting that Frederick Crews, author of