



## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# The Two Freuds

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | JULY 09, 2004 ✓ PREMIUM

I knew there was something a little old-fashioned about my psychoanalytic training institute when I saw a note in the catalog mentioning that smoking was permitted in the building -- Smoking? In New York? In the workplace? -- but only in the director's office. Ah, of course. I immediately thought of Freud and his famous cigars. The director is a small, elderly gentleman with a white beard and a heavy German accent. His office contains the traditional analytic couch and is cluttered with exotic wooden figurines, mostly of ancient gods and goddesses, in the style of Freud's famous consulting room. He keeps framed photographs of Freud on his desk, and there's a large picture of Freud hanging in the hall outside his office. The director smokes a pipe rather than a cigar, but the resemblance to his idol appears deliberately cultivated.

This old-fashioned feeling extends to our classes, where we are encouraged to address the teachers as "Doctor" if they have a Ph.D. or a D.S.W., or "Mister" or "Ms." if they don't. We, the students, on the other hand, are addressed by our first names, even those of us who also have Ph.D.'s. The consulting rooms are all furnished with couches, and the patients are called exactly that -- "patients" -- not "clients," as is the tendency these days in the mental-health profession. A friend and I sometimes refer to the institute as "Green Manors," after the Gothic asylum in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, where the psychoanalysts spend their days in white coats performing brain surgery on pajama-clad paranoids, and their evenings writing new volumes on the "guilt complex."

Much of my initial year of training has been spent on close readings of Freud. We began with his early writings, and over the next three years I will be required to take classes on transference and countertransference, dream interpretation, analytic technique, and other cornerstones of the Freudian method. Later on we will also have a chance to study

more-contemporary styles of psychoanalysis, such as object relations, group therapy, and self-psychology, and more-recent theorists, like Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg, and D.W. Winnicott. But the syllabus, like the institute, is deeply grounded in the Freudian method, and in certain classes we are encouraged to consider Freud's works in the way a trainee for the priesthood might study the Bible.

That might be a more onerous task if Freud were not such a consummate stylist; in fact, to me, it is partly his literary style that makes Freud's work so compelling. Like many other scholars in the humanities, I came to Freud through psychoanalytic literary theory, not through science. The Freud I am familiar with is a philosopher of the mind, whose fascinating insights have helped us consider human beings and their endeavors from a radical new perspective -- as, indeed, have the writings of other seminal thinkers, including Marx, Darwin, and Hegel.

In my own writing and research, I often use psychoanalytic theory as a tool for textual analysis; in my teaching, I frequently use Freud as a means of introducing students to the work of important post-Freudian theorists, like Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Zizek. For those and other seminal thinkers, Freud offers metaphors to understand social and cultural formations, particularly power, a fruitful way of addressing the complex relationship between the dominating and the repressed, the mainstream and the marginalized, the licensed and the taboo.

I'm also attracted to the enormous importance Freud gives to language -- metaphors, puns, word games, and stories -- as a key to those parts of ourselves of which we ordinarily remain unaware. In other words, what appeals to me about Freud is his art, not his science. Indeed, Freud himself realized clearly and early on that psychoanalysis had little to do with 19th-century definitions of scientific empiricism. "It strikes even me as peculiar that the medical histories I write read like novellas," he wrote in 1895, in "Studies on Hysteria," "and that they seem to lack the serious imprint of scientific-ness, so to speak." It has often been pointed out that his case histories, especially in the early work, have the structural integrity and the narrative tension of short stories or serial novels. Freud had an extensive cultural education, and his theoretical writings are rich in literary and artistic allusions to Shakespeare, Michelangelo, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Botticelli, Wilhelm Jensen, Heinrich Heine, and so on.

At my training institute, however, Freud is regarded as a scientist rather than a

philosopher or man of letters, and his works are often discussed as though they were supported by empirical evidence. Debatable Freudian assumptions are taken for granted -- for example, that child-rearing practices have a lasting impact on personality, that our thoughts and deeds are driven by repressed sexual and aggressive urges, that children harbor erotic feelings toward the parent of the opposite sex, and that religion developed as an outlet for neurotic personalities. Moreover, Freud's writing is often treated as though the themes he writes about were not present in psychology before him, or had not arisen elsewhere, outside of Europe, independent of his influence.

This is not to imply that my teachers are inflexible in their devotion to Freud, just that we are asked to take his clinical model very seriously; his case studies provide the basis for much of our primary course work. In later years, classes are offered emphasizing the work of other analysts, including Theodor Reik and Melanie Klein, and we are encouraged to read Freudian revisionists like Alice Miller and Judith Herman. I think all of my teachers would agree that Freud's work must be read in the context of his time, and it is taken for granted that a number of his theories, such as his early pathologizing of homosexuality and masturbation, are no longer tenable. Freudian technique is also taught in rather uneasy conjunction with the pragmatic design of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which allots the diagnostic codes necessary for insurance reimbursements.

Outside the psychoanalytic community, of course, most mental-health professionals regard Freud as little more than a dead weight. Modern psychology dismisses his theories as shaky science, and regards his case histories as contaminated by misogyny and manipulation. Most psychologists consider Freud's theories of the human mind in the same way that modern biochemists think of alchemy -- interesting historically, perhaps, but absolutely irrelevant to modern science. The Freudian method is now practiced by only a very small group of analysts even within the domain of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which tends to focus on the kinds of short-term counseling more likely to be covered by managed care.

My personal aim in embarking on this program is to gain a better understanding of the creative process, both in myself and in my artistically gifted (but often troubled)

students. I might, in time, begin to consider the possibility of a private practice, but that is still in the distant future. I do believe, however, that a background in literature is particularly appropriate for the analytic candidate, since the study of literature provides opportunities to appreciate the importance of narratives in making sense of our human experience.

Perhaps the best example of the scholar-analyst is Adam Phillips, who began his academic career studying literature at Oxford and was, until 1995, principal child psychotherapist at the Charing Cross Hospital, in London. The editor of volumes on Charles Lamb, Walter Pater, John Clare, and other literary figures, and author of books on psychoanalytic themes, Phillips was recently appointed series editor of the new Penguin Freud, in which each volume has a different translator, and there are no indexes or scholarly footnotes. In other words, Freud is being treated like other great imaginative authors.

Phillips is interested in the ways Freudian psychoanalysis can help us understand ourselves, our history, and culture. He believes that the implications of Freud's writings reach far beyond the traditional analytic dyad; in his book *Promises, Promises: Essays on Poetry and Psychoanalysis* (Basic Books, 2000), he defines psychoanalysis as "applied literature." At the same time, however, he is a practicing analyst deeply versed in Freudian theory, who appreciates the possibilities of the Freudian method. In books like *Monogamy* (Pantheon, 1996) and *Houdini's Box* (Pantheon, 2001), Phillips provides a richly illuminating perspective on Freud as a writer, a theorist, and a philosopher, without clinging to the iconic version of Freud as medical doctor and scientist of the mind. Phillips believes in psychoanalysis, but with significant and necessary reservations. As he slyly points out, "When psychoanalysis is being wholeheartedly endorsed it is not being taken seriously, because the understanding of psychoanalysis involves a continuing resistance to it. To accept psychoanalysis, to believe in psychoanalysis, is to miss the point."

Freud famously referred to psychoanalysis as "the talking cure," a description that my training institute would happily endorse. According to Adam Phillips, however, "psychoanalysis ... doesn't cure people so much as show them what it is about themselves that is incurable." Faced with that paradox, an easy merging of the two

Freuds -- the cultural and the clinical -- seems a distant pipe dream.

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