Sigmund Freud, the Never-Ending Storyteller

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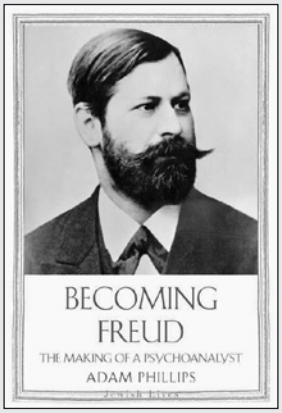
With Sigmund Freud, there are always two ways to begin. Here's the first: Sigmund Freud was *the* genius of the twentieth century, without whom we would not know ourselves as intimately as we do. And here's the second: Sigmund Freud was a colossal fraud who ruined innumerable lives. Freud long ago became a messiah to some and a pernicious phony to others. But no matter your stance, it's difficult to deny the insistent reasons we're still squabbling about this man, nor is it easy to dismiss the reality that Freud's ideas had a torsional influence on nearly every element of twentieth-century thought. Modernity just doesn't seem possible without him.



Becoming Freud: The Making of a Psychoanalyst. **By Adam Phillips. Yale University Press, 2014. 192 pp. HB, $25.**

Once you study Freud deeply, once you comprehend and internalize his severe storytelling, his literary antiscience of the mind, it's impossible to see your own childhood, or your own children, the same way again. It's because of Freud that millions who've never read a word of Sophocles feel perfectly at ease telling you all about Oedipus, and never mind if they usually don't know what they're saying, if they get the Theban King all wrong, as Freud himself seems to have done. Attic tragedy can't be psychoanalytical or Freudian because it cares nothing for sexuality, because unlike our childhoods and our psyches, tragedy is a heroic collision of the accidental and the ordained. Freud fixed on the Oedipus myth because it's a perfect detective story, and what's psychoanalysis but two detectives—the analyst and the analysand—attempting to solve the baffling crimes of the unconscious?

Adam Phillips's new study, *Becoming Freud: The Making of a Psychoanalyst*, is an effective breviary and defense of Sigmund Freud, and not because it dazzles with a tightrope act of theory, but because it simply and directly underscores Freud's tremendous accomplishments of comprehension. It also sugarcoats or ignores altogether Freud's immense flaws and the toxic harm he caused to actual lives, but we'll come to that. Where many write about Freud as if he were either *der Übermensch* or its opposite, Phillips does a fine job of humanizing this cerebral behemoth, of spotlighting the importance of Freud's wife and children. The Freuds had six children in eight years at just about the time Freud was beginning to formulate the catacomb credos that would become psychoanalysis. It's unlikely that psychoanalysis would have come into being at all if the Freuds hadn't been exposed daily to the wail and tumult of a diapers-and-bottles domesticity.

Nor would psychoanalysis have happened

if its founder hadn't been a self-conscious Jew ever vigilant of the role of Jewish history in Europe. Along with Christ, Karl Marx, and Albert Einstein, Freud is one-fourth of the Jews of literal and intellectual revolution, the quartet who made the planet quake. Borrowing from a brigade of top scholars who have examined the nexus between psychoanalysis and Freud's conception of his own Jewishness—including Harold Bloom, Peter Gay, and Philip Rieff, each of whom goes unmentioned in this connection—Phillips rightly believes that European Jewish history helped make Freud possible, because however else we'd like to describe psychoanalysis, it is foremost a Jewish reading of the psyche in the world, an outsider's psycho-emotional apprehension for other outsiders. Freud was nervous, though not unduly, about his theories being tagged "Jewish" because he understood that the tag was normally wielded in the snaky lisp of the anti-Semite.

Phillips writes that "the modern individual Sigmund Freud would eventually describe was a person under continuous threat with little knowledge of what was really happening to him"—a Jew, in other words, as Freud himself admitted in *The Resistances to Psychoanalysis*. The paradoxes at the hub of Freud—the heaving dichotomies of life/death, sex/death, past/present, present/future, sickness/health—are human paradoxes, to be sure, but they are human paradoxes expertly manifest in Hebraic mythos. Phillips contends that "Freud's work shows us . . . that nothing in our lives is self-evident, that not even the facts of our lives speak for themselves." Consider how that assertion applies both to the Torah and to the indispensible modern Jewish writers, from Bruno Schulz and Franz Kafka to Primo Levi and Isaac Bashevis Singer, and you'll begin to see how psychoanalysis in general and the Freudian unconscious in particular—that dark swamp of our minds—was from the beginning a Jewish literary enterprise.

Here is one of Phillips's many cogent encapsulations of Freud's importance:

> We spend our lives . . . not facing the facts, the facts of our history, in all their complication; and above all, the facts of our childhood. . . . [Freud] will show us how ingenious we are at not knowing ourselves, and how knowing ourselves—or the ways in which we have been taught to know ourselves, not least through the conventions of biography and autobiography—has become the problem rather than the solution. What we are suffering from, Freud will reveal, are all the ways we have of avoiding our suffering; and our pleasure, Freud will show us—the pleasure we take in our sexuality, the pleasure we take in our violence—is the suffering we are least able to bear.

If by that synopsis Freud sounds nothing like a medical man and rather like a mash-up of novelist-poet-seer, well, that's precisely what he was. Phillips shelves Freud with Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, and James Joyce because "psychoanalysis makes sense only as part of the larger cultural conversation in the arts that became known as modernism."

No important critic or intellectual has apprehended Freud through a literary lens more often or intensely than Harold Bloom. In *Ruin the Sacred Truths,* Bloom speaks of Freud in the same breath as William Shakespeare, William Blake, and William Wordsworth: "Our map or general theory of the mind may be Freud's, but Freud, like all the rest of us, inherits the representation of mind, at its most subtle and excellent, from Shakespeare." Both Freud and Wordsworth are, says Bloom, "responsible for writing the Law upon our inward parts, and thus completing the Enlightenment's program of internalizing all values." In *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?,* Bloom dubs Freud "the Montaigne of his era, a superb moral essayist rather than a revolutionist who overturned our sense of humankind's place in nature." In *The Anatomy of Influence,* Freud becomes the "Emerson of the twentieth century," and in *The Western Canon* he is "the master of all who know."

In reference to every Freudian's loving or bitter impulse to tackle the august founder,

Bloom speaks of "the burden of the writing psychoanalyst, who is tempted to a battle he is doomed to lose," meaning that Freud can be an oily, protean subject, whether approached from the logical, biographical, or pedagogical angle. The one angle not doomed to failure is the one that Peter Brooks takes in *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* and that Adam Phillips emphasizes here (with no mention of Brooks): Freud the storyteller. Brooks calls psychoanalysis "not only narrative and linguistic but also oral, a *praxis* of narrative construction within a context of live storytelling." Say what you will about the psycholinguistics of Jacques Lacan, but Freud and his theory have always been about language, the language of the self telling stories, "this new language for the heart and soul and conscience of modern people," as Phillips phrases it. About the advent of psychoanalysis, Phillips offers this:

> We need a different way of listening to the stories of our lives, and a different way of telling them. And, indeed, a different story about pleasure and pain; a story about . . . the individual in his society; and a story with no religion in it. . . . Psychoanalysis, which started as an improvisation in medical treatment, became at once, if not a new language, a new story about these fundamental things, and a new story about stories.

In other words, Freud's work is a way of telling ourselves fresh and much-needed stories about the stories we tell of ourselves. As Phillips puts it: "We obscure ourselves from ourselves in our life stories." Why? Because the truth at our core, those ghastly desires, are often too parlous to bear; because self-deception is the human being's default mode; because self-preservation is our aim whether we realize it or not, and ensconcing the truth from ourselves is one way of preserving our frail sense of personhood. Freud's real genius was not that he invented the conception of the human being as resolutely hidden from himself—literature got there first—but that he emphasized and systemized it in a storytelling we'd never be able to forget.

"It was," writes Phillips, "precisely the stories we tell ourselves about our lives, and about other people's lives, that Freud put into question, that Freud taught us to read differently." And it was the "differently" that instigated the popularity of the Freudian revolution: different in its lurid apprehension of our dark inner spaces; different in its fantastical take on human unknowing; different in its literary promise of overcoming the ghouls who howl us down at midnight. Because civilization had lost its traditional wellsprings of meaning, because the First World War cut the jugular of the past and welcomed modernity with a bloody embrace, because God was simply nowhere, Freud was free to probe old spiritual problems with a system of psychology, and the intellectual tenor was attractive to those who knew that the dead gods of comprehension could never again be resurrected.

The one-time Freudian Frederick Crews, since the early 1980s Freud-killer par excellence, suggests in his essay "Analysis Terminable" that Freud's rabid popularity has a much simpler explanation: Most people are—there's no gentle way to say it—incurably stupid, and so given to irrational fancies of every stripe.

Phillips believes that Freud's program must be counted as part of the multifarious history of storytelling, yes, but also as part of the history of *speaking*, because psychoanalysis is, above all, not a "speaking cure" but a speaking exploration—an exploration of speaking more honestly and efficiently about those niggling issues we have so much trouble speaking about. This is why Freud's emphasis would be on lexicon and symbol and narrative, and why the architecture of psychoanalysis looks always like mythos and never like science. Science has its own language, to be sure, and it certainly has a story to tell, but that story doesn't necessarily require the agency of narrative or character, and it isn't contingent upon the stories that came before—it's contingent only upon observable facts.

"It would be in Freud's lifetime," writes

Phillips, "that the extraordinary languages of socialism, of Zionism, of feminism, and of psychoanalysis would first become current." One might get more specific here and add fascism/Nazism, communism/Stalinism to that mixed catalog, all of which forced us into a new glossary of hurt, and forced us to reevaluate the mythic foundation that feeds the stories we try to pass off as truths. Put more pointedly: We rely on propaganda to help situate ourselves in a chaotic world, and Freud's mission was to dismantle the personal propaganda we devise about our own histories, our childhoods in particular. The bold lines he drew between childhood and adulthood remain Freud's great innovation. As Phillips notes, "Childhood was a story adults made up about themselves. It was to be the story that caught on. And psychoanalysis would catch on as a story about why stories about childhood might matter."

But is the story *true*? Isn't that what really matters, why sensational memoirs are infinitely more popular than serious novels? Why the misnamed "reality television" continues to thrive among the sofa-sunk and brain-dead? Is Freud's storytelling telling us the truth about the darkness we harbor? "We take refuge in plausible stories, Freud tells us in his own partly plausible story called psychoanalysis," and that "partly" is an indication that Phillips won't be cubicled with zealous votaries who deem Freud an infallible deity. But he also won't hold Freud accountable for his harum-scarum practices, his hasty rationalizations, his dearth of strict method, his ruthless business tactics and egomania, his reckless medical posturing, or his bullying of suggestible, mostly female patients, all of which have been meticulously documented since at least the early 1970s.

Frederick Crews has pointed out that psychoanalysis can't possibly be true because it was predicated and contingent on the clinical work carried out in Freud's office, clinical work that wholly lacked scientific rigor and that was, from start to finish, an enormous failure. Sigmund Freud never "cured" anybody. His three former apostles—Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, and Otto Rank—came closer to helping patients than Freud ever did, and mostly because they weren't mulishly wedded to the analytical point of view.

At only one point does Phillips see fit to mention "the potential pitfalls of psychoanalysis . . . its potential for misogyny, dogmatism, and proselytizing: the analyst's temptation to speak on the patient's behalf, and to know what's best for the patient: the cultism of the analyst and patient as a couple." *Misogyny, dogmatism, proselytizing, cultism*: let's please agree that those are much more pernicious than mere "pitfalls." Phillips is normally careful to wear the mask of non-partiality, of cool objectivity, but if you really want to know how he feels about Freud's assassins, you can glimpse his face in this bit: "Psychoanalysis—though this has been easy to forget amid the clamor of Freud's perennial discrediting—was originally about people being freed to speak for themselves." The clamor? Would it not be more precise to say that the clamor is no such thing, no noisy disruption by a resentful mob, but rather a careful and sustained dismantling of entrenched pieties, undertaken by a phalanx of mostly commonsensical and qualified intellectuals?

What's more, the sophistry of Phillips's contention is given away by that crucial term "originally": Many a treacherous or phony revolution was "originally" about something benevolent and worthy. If it's true that Freud's incipient intention had been to liberate people "to speak for themselves," that's certainly not what happened in practice. One need only cite Freud's infamous "Wolf Man" and "Dora" cases to demonstrate that not only did Freud not liberate patients to speak for themselves, he quite knowingly began speaking for them, and in the most fictional, farcical, fabulist ways—ways that revealed much more about Freud and his own wackiness than it ever did about the poor Wolf Man and Dora. Phillips admits as much when he speedily refers to "Freud's abiding fascination with the making and consuming of fictions."

Entire swaths of Freud are dicta that morph into doctrine and before long start sounding

a lot like dogma and then like doggerel. Take his two most ubiquitous fictions, the Oedipus complex and his "dream-work." Phillips quotes Freud writing to the batty physician Wilhelm Fliess that he had discovered in himself "the phenomena of being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood," which is a rather willful confusion of the state of his own stomach with the digestive health of humankind, and one of the comical flaws that his critics love to spotlight: the grand extrapolating and generalizing. Does any half-serious person really believe that little boys unconsciously yearn to destroy their fathers and copulate with their mothers? It might hold some appeal as psycho-erotic literary criticism if you were considering, say, the work of Sade, but it has zero application to actual human lives. Even if it did, how would you determine or begin to address that application?

About Freud's "dream-work": I'm sorry, but there's nothing more tedious and downright uninteresting than someone else's dreams. If you want to bore your date to eye rolling, begin by telling her about your dream from last night, that non-narrative smorgasbord of images that can mean anything you want and so necessarily means nothing at all. Not incidentally, the use of dreams in a novel or short story to disclose some vital component of a character is an absolutely fatal calculation, and one that is also an unfailing sign of a neophyte. According to Freud, our dreams are puzzles that are supposed to be replete with essential data about our true selves, but do you really know any thinking, employable, unsentimental person who takes his dreams very seriously at all? "Dream-work" for Freud was just one more way he skirted the obvious for the arcane. He preferred puzzles, not people. He didn't care much about actual suffering lives, but only for excavating the clandestine—or, let's be honest, the mostly *imaginary*—trauma of those lives.

So it's negligent at best and duplicitous at worst, even in a brief study such as Phillips's, to carry on as if for the past forty years seismic upheavals have not been occurring inside the legacy of Freud and his brainchild—to carry on as if the wholesale validity of psychoanalysis has not been subjected to devastating full-frontal assaults by scholars not easily duped. Phillips might respond that this introduction to Freud—based on a series of lectures he delivered at Trinity College, which might account for this book's epic punctuation problems and slapdash confection, so unlike his other work—is not the proper locus for a promulgating or rehashing of the Freud Wars. And he might be right about that, except that as the most visible, respected, and sober apologist for psychoanalysis he should shoulder the responsibility of a semi-even presentation.

It's clear from Phillips's other work that he's become bored with all the chatter debating whether or not psychoanalysis is a science, and if that's the case, he should stop adding to the chatter by the frivolous employment of the term. Psychoanalysis, Phillips writes in *Becoming Freud*, "is neither a science in the usual sense, nor a religion in the traditional sense." So if it's not a science in the *usual* sense, it must be a science in the *unusual* sense, and there the term "unusual" must do the work for "pseudo" or "fraudulent." It is indeed about time we stop having this discussion: Psychoanalysis is not, nor has it ever been, a science. But like many Freudians, Phillips can't seem to make up his mind about the definition of "science." A scholar of his deep learning is surely not conflicted over the fact that science must adhere to empirical, testable criteria, so why is he not adverse to mobilizing the term in reference to Freud? For instance: "[Freud's] most important principle of scientific explanation was the idea of overdetermination: that nothing psychically ever has only one cause." How, pray tell, does speculation about what might or might not have molested one's psychic health amount to "scientific explanation"? How is such speculation testable? It is not.

Freud's combat to keep psychoanalysis scientifically viable faced certain defeat from moment one, as he seems to have known. Phillips

quotes Freud in *Studies on Hysteria*: "It still strikes me as strange that the case-histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science." The melancholy and pessimism of his later years had an array of causes, and one of them was his realization that the supposedly scientific center of his work would not hold. There would be less wrangling over Freud if his texts remained only a way of *reading* literature and ourselves instead of attempting to be a scientific avenue to *curing* ourselves and others of a humanness that can never be expunged. He was a literary man, but you can't apply literature clinically or use it as a corrective for broken lives. Literature is many beneficent things, but it isn't medicine. It's true, as Phillips writes, that "Freud would become the most literary of psychoanalysts," just as Friedrich Nietzsche would become the most literary of philosophers.

Freud was never completely honest about the degree to which he deliberately annexed the ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but from a young age he understood intuitively that literature and philosophy contained the clues, the intimations of the truth he wanted to explore in the caves of the human psyche. "Psychoanalysis," writes Phillips, "whatever else it is, is a dictionary of modern fears," and it's hard to disagree with that, especially since psychoanalysis helped to forge those modern fears. This is what the incomparable Karl Kraus meant when he famously quipped that "psychoanalysis is the disease of which it claims to be the cure."

But let's forget about diseases and cures for a moment. In one of the truest observations in *Becoming Freud*, Phillips contends that "Freud is not showing us merely that we are unacceptable to ourselves, but that we are more complicated than we want to be. And more wishful. And more frustrated. And more or less divided against ourselves than we may need to be." As well-adjusted as you may be, those statements apply to you as much as they apply to all those blitzed by psychological unrest.

Saul Bellow's narrator in *More Die of Heartbreak* has a punchy take on this issue: "I trust psychology less and less. I see it as one of the lower by-products of the restlessness or oscillation of modern consciousness, a terrible agitation which we prize as 'insight.'" Agitation is not insight, no, but Freud would have told Bellow that such restlessness and oscillation must be reckoned with, must be parsed if we are to have any hope of knowing ourselves. Ten years ago, in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Harold Bloom wrote this: "We live more than ever in the Age of Freud, despite the relative decline that psychoanalysis has begun to suffer as a public institution and as a medical specialty. Freud's universal and comprehensive theory of the mind probably will outlive the psychoanalytical therapy, and seems already to have placed him with Plato and Montaigne and Shakespeare rather than with the scientists he overtly aspired to emulate." Freud might feel a ping of vindication to see the April 2014 cover story of *Discover* magazine, the title of which is "The Second Coming of Freud," about the ways neuroscientists are merging their research of the brain with Freud's theories of the mind. The improbable name of this new species of scientific insight? Neuropsychoanalysis.

Listen carefully. Can you hear that? It's Sigmund Freud, cackling from his Greek urn. ◘