BOOKS

WHAT DOES FREUD STILL HAVE TO TEACH US?

Come for the Oedipus complex. Stay for the later troubled musings on the fate of humanity.

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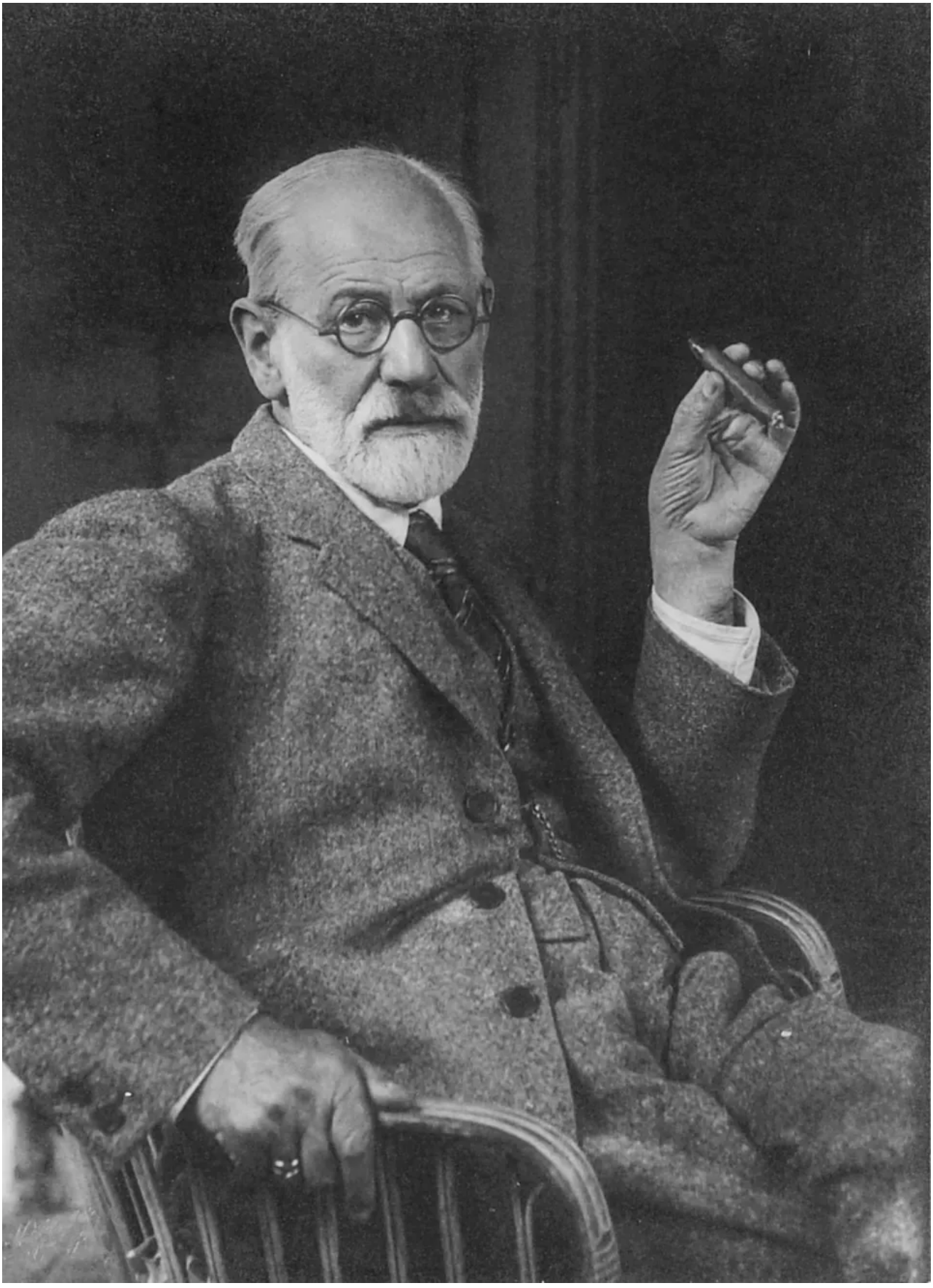

When Freud wrote an autobiography, the result was militantly impersonal. Photograph from Heritage Images / Getty

There are more than thirty full-length biographies of Sigmund Freud in circulation today. Why keep writing them? Generally, there are two justifications for a new biography: an obscure archive may come to light, changing what is known about the subject, or it can become clear that earlier biographers have misunderstood—or even abused—existing sources. In the absence of a discovery or a scandal, what hangs in the balance for the second or third or thirtieth biographer must be a significant reinterpretation of the subject's ideas—where they came from, what they mean, and how they have been transmitted to us from increasingly alien times and places.

With Freud, the possibilities for interpreting his life are limitless, as he well knew. In an 1885 letter to his wife, Martha, written when he was twenty-eight, he boasted that he had burned all his letters, notes, and manuscripts, "which one group of people, as yet unborn and fated to misfortune, will feel acutely. Since you can't guess whom I mean I will tell you: they are my biographers." He added, "Let each one of them believe he is right in his 'Conception of the Development of the Hero': even now I enjoy the thought of how they will all go astray." Freud's wish for the birth of his "unborn" biographers was also a curse laid upon them. Under his ferocious hubris ran an equally ferocious insecurity. He had yet to publish anything of significance, and the ideas that made him famous—repression, infantile sexuality, the libido, and the death drive—were still far in the future.

Nearly all Freud's biographers have brandished this letter as proof of their daring in accepting his challenge. Like children, some have done so respectfully, others with contempt. His official biographer, the Welsh psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, met Freud in 1908, at the inaugural International Psychoanalytic Congress, in Salzburg, and never strayed far from his side. In the mid-fifties, Jones published

a three-volume behemoth, "The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud," which proceeded with the tender, painstaking, and sometimes misleading attention of an eldest child cataloguing his deceased father's belongings. The historian Peter Gay's "Freud: A Life for Our Time," which appeared thirty years later, reads like the work of a clear-eyed younger son. Anchoring Freud's origins in the unstable project of nineteenth-century Austrian liberalism and the vexed insider-outsider status of the Jewish bourgeoisie, Gay systematically linked each of Freud's major writings to its historical epoch. Despite their differences, Jones, the disciple, and Gay, the scholar, were both completists. No one has improved on their essential and extraordinarily vivid books. Efforts to do so—for instance, Élisabeth Roudinesco's "Freud: In His Time and Ours" (2014)—read like the imitative, if perfectly serviceable, remembrances of latecomers to a funeral.

After those two monumental works, the next wave of Freud biographies seemed to respond to a strong reciprocal impulse; after all, he had written the most influential biography of us—of man, a creature of pleasure who had been civilized into unhappiness, and of mankind, its members instinctively bound by Eros and aggression. Reciprocity, however, can take the form of gratitude or vengeance. Frederick Crews's "Freud: The Making of an Illusion" (2017) is a work of propaganda so savage that one cannot help but imagine its author as a disowned son. His Freud is lazy, insecure, abusive, and deluded, and the practitioners who have followed him are saps and chumps. In contrast, the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips's devoted and meandering "Becoming Freud: The Making of a Psychoanalyst" (2016) offers no new details about its subject's life but meditates at length on the sibling rivalry between biography and psychoanalysis. He takes Freud's allergy to biography so deeply to heart that he more or less talks himself out of writing one. Crews and Phillips occupy opposite ends of the love-hate spectrum of biography, but the result is the same. The biographer's psychodrama prevails over the subject's life.

Periodically, though, the call to biography is occasioned by an urge to construct a Freud "for our time," a time that resembles Freud's own in its apprehension and instability. This was an urge whose repetition was foreseen by W. H. Auden, in

his 1940 poem “In Memory of Sigmund Freud”:

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
when grief has been made so public, and exposed
to the critique of a whole epoch
the frailty of our conscience and anguish, of whom shall we speak?

“This doctor” was the poem’s answer—“an important Jew who died in exile,” and who spoke to all the “exiles who long for the future that lives in our power.” As Matt Ffytche observes at the beginning of his biography, “Sigmund Freud” (2022), “there has been a Freud for 1920s Bengal and 1930s Tokyo; a Freud for the early days of the Bolshevik revolution and for modernist poets; a Freud for apartheid South Africa.” The past few years have given us a Freud for the pandemic, a Freud for Ukraine and a Freud for Palestine, a Freud for transfemininity, a Freud for the far right, and a Freud for the vipers’ nest that is the twenty-first-century American university.

The latest biography, “Mortal Secrets: Freud, Vienna, and the Making of the Modern Mind” (St. Martin’s), is by Frank Tallis, a British clinical psychologist and a crime novelist. (His popular series, “The Liebermann Papers,” is set in an opulent fin-de-siècle Vienna, and features Dr. Max Liebermann, billed as “literature’s first psychoanalytic detective.”) Tallis is not the first to give us a Freud for Vienna—the intellectual historian Carl Schorske’s “Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture,” from 1980, remains the standard-bearer—but what Tallis lacks in novelty or political verve he makes up for in sheer entertainment, drawing inspiration from the briskly plotted intrigue of his crime fiction. Quotation is jettisoned in favor of dramatic paraphrase. Chapters are anchored by colorful Viennese personalities, including patients from Freud’s case studies—Anna O., Dora, Rat Man, Wolfman—and the melancholy aristocrats and philandering artists of his milieu. Reading “Mortal Secrets” is like waltzing around a crowded ballroom, past quivering gold leaf and sternly curved flowers, while your partner murmurs in your ear very elegant, very precise summaries of primal parricide and the topographical model of the mind.

The experience is not just entertaining. It is refreshingly honest. Tallis, to echo Freud, has no "hobby-horse, no consuming passion." His biography intends to synthesize and clarify, and to dispel any baseless speculation about his subject. He uses his lifetime of professional expertise to adjudicate freely and fairly between the "Freud bashers" and the fanatics who "have treated his works like scripture." Their battles, he points out, have made it difficult to assess the importance of a thinker who, though routinely debunked, indelibly shaped our ideas about the self. "He is obviously important," Tallis writes. "But how important?"

Every biographer of Freud must contend with the gruff, withholding story that he told about his own life in "An Autobiographical Study," which he published in 1925, at the height of his success. From the start, Freud adopts a tone of pure facticity. "I was born on May 6th, 1856, in Freiberg in Moravia, a small town in what is now Czecho-Slovakia," he writes. "My parents were Jews and I have remained a Jew myself." He describes his family's move from Freiberg to Vienna, when he was three, without detail or emotion. His references to his early influences—the Bible, Darwin, Goethe—are glancing. The formative mentorships of Ernest Brücke and Jean-Martin Charcot, and his professional relationship with Josef Breuer, with whom Freud co-authored the 1895 book "Studies on Hysteria," are swept aside after a few paragraphs. Martha makes a single, strange appearance, in a digression about how she persuaded Freud to stop experimenting with cocaine. "It is the fault of my fiancée that I was not already famous," he complains. Their six children and eight grandchildren are largely absent. The faithful disciples are subordinated to the founding institutions of psychoanalysis; the unfaithful Carl Jung is dismissed in an icy parenthetical.

Militantly impersonal in his style, Freud narrates his life through a series of lucid and economic summaries of the ideas that defined his career: first, repression; then infantile sexuality; and, finally, the grand battle between Eros and the death instinct, within individuals and across civilization. It was the first of these ideas,

he writes, that gave rise to all the others: “It is possible to take repression as a centre and to bring all the elements of psychoanalytic theory into relation with it.” The subject opened one of his earliest papers, “Screen Memories,” from 1899, which recounted a conversation that Freud had had with a patient, a thirty-eight-year-old man whose family had moved when he was three from the small town where he was born to a big city. They had suffered “long years of hardship,” the man confided. “I don’t think there was anything about them worth remembering.” He had thrown himself into his studies, achieving considerable intellectual and financial success. Only once, when he was seventeen, did he return to his home town, for the summer; on the trip, he fell in love with a daughter of a family that he was staying with, a girl who wore a striking yellow dress. His most perplexing childhood memory, he told Freud, was of picking bright-yellow flowers in a meadow with his two cousins, a girl his age and a boy slightly older, while a farmer’s wife and a nursemaid watched them. “The little girl has the nicest bunch, but we two boys, as if by prior agreement, fall upon her and snatch her flowers from her. She runs up the meadow in tears, and the farmer’s wife consoles her by giving her a big slice of black bread.”

…et this patient did not really exist. He was, Tallis writes, “Freud’s invented doppelganger,” an immigrant who had left his home only to learn how solitary, how grim the reality of growing up was in comparison with childhood. He wondered, What if he had never left his home town? What if he had married the girl he had fallen in love with that summer? Freud knew that all people ask questions like these, and that, upon asking them, life suddenly appears in split screen, with one side drenched in color and the other black-and-white, with long interludes in which nothing much seems to happen. Human beings, Freud wrote, “find reality unsatisfying quite generally, and for that reason entertain a life of phantasy in which we like to make up for the insufficiencies of reality.”

These unrealizable fantasies, which were too melancholy to confront, had to be “repressed,” or pushed out of consciousness. Yet “the repressed wishful impulse continues to exist in the unconscious,” he explained. At opportune moments, the

impulse sent "into consciousness a disguised and unrecognizable substitute for what had been repressed." The screen memory, a substitute, emerged "almost like a work of fiction." It was constructed out of superimposed fantasies of sex and satiation—in this case, the deflowering, as it were, of the little girl, whose flowers were the same vivid yellow as the dress of Freud's first love, and also the bread, a source of material comfort. The screen memory, associated with the wish to return home and find love waiting there, represented a "compromise" between knowledge and illusion. It was a bearable sign of an unbearable disappointment.

"Screen Memories" belongs to the earliest period of Freud's writings, along with "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900), "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life" (1901), and "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (1905). All of them concern a repressed wish's substitutive forms—memories, dreams, slips of the tongue, and jokes, which Freud wrote about with great charm. An enthusiastic popularizer of his ideas, he imagined his audience as anyone who had not managed to turn "his wishful phantasies into reality"—not titans of industry or artists but ordinary people who longed for more than what they had. The act of attending to their substitutions—of fantasizing—provided a daily experience of creativity, surprise, humor, and interpretive activity. One needed to have only the "courage and determination," Freud urged, to heed the minor poetry of the unconscious.

"The idea of repression makes Freud's interest in sex logical," Tallis writes. The realization, in "Screen Memories," that the figure of the demanding, sexually aggressive child persisted in the psyche of the self-possessed adult put Freud on the scent of his next major discovery, infantile sexuality. His 1905 book, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," described how the child passed through a predictable series of relations—with his mother, his father, and his own body—that guided his libido. Sometimes, however, the pathway of the libido was disturbed—by an ailing parent, a harassing sibling—thereby releasing a desire that had to be repressed. The substitute was not a gratifying aesthetic

experience, like a screen memory or a joke, but a disruptive symptom, "expressed in disturbances of other, non-sexual, somatic functions." In Freud's patients, symptoms ranged from an aversion to food and drink to migraines, a persistent cough, momentary aphasia, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

Infantile sexuality lent the child's life a generic shape and a sense of fatedness. In "The Interpretation of Dreams," Freud had noted the prevalence in his neurotic patients of the "Oedipus dream"—having sex with one's mother—which he understood as an intense and agitated expression of natural filial love. "The persons who are concerned with a child's feeding, care, and protection become his earliest sexual objects: that is to say, in the first instance his mother," Freud wrote. The father, a rival for the mother's attention, presented an obstacle. Indulging his libidinal attachment to his mother, a boy behaved in discomfiting ways—watching his mother undress, sleeping in her bed, proposing marriage, and wishing his father were dead. "One may easily see that the little man would like to have the mother all to himself," Freud wrote. This behavior may have seemed mild in comparison with incest and patricide, but Freud held that it was "essentially the same"—a difference of degree rather than of kind.

Crucial to Oedipus' story is that he did not realize that Queen Jocasta was his mother. His was a tragedy of misrecognition, and his eventual self-blinding literalized his blindness to the nature of his desire. A similar blindness afflicted Freud's patients, he observed, and nowhere more powerfully than in their relationships with "persons who can revive in them the picture of the mother and the father"—lovers, teachers, bosses, priests, and, of course, psychoanalysts. The patient would act out the same patterns that had structured his encounters with his parents, often without understanding what he was doing or why. This displacement of emotion, which Freud called "transference," manifested as a "stormy demand for love or in a more moderate form." Some people "understand how to sublimate the transference, how to modify it until it attains a kind of fitness for existence," he wrote. Others, failing to identify the source of their longings, would never solve the riddle of their need and their hostility.

The Oedipus complex, with its touch of mythological grandeur, has obscured more radical claims about infantile sexuality—and, by extension, sexuality in general—that Freud made in his mid-period writings, especially his 1909 lectures at Clark University. Against the fantasy of the innocent, angelic child, Freud insisted on a baby as a rapacious pleasure-seeker, a thumb-sucking, ear-pulling, cheerfully masturbating creature lacking "shame, loathing, and morality." (Tallis summarizes Freud, wonderfully: "A baby is a promiscuous voluptuary with irregular tastes.") The baby was all instinctual need, attending to his own body with profound concentration, deigning to allow his mother to tickle and stroke and nurse him while he mewled with contentment. He would enter a latency period before the onset of puberty, when the behaviors he exhibited as a child would be checked by adults. But his narcissism and his Oedipal grief would remain forever submerged in his unconscious.

Freud's theory of infantile sexuality allowed him to pursue a startling critique of " 'civilized' sexual morality," as he called it, in his 1908 essay of the same name. It was a critique that he prosecuted subtly, at first, with an ironic and counterintuitive definition of the sexual as anything "improper." Impropriety encompassed any sexual activity that had "given up the aim of reproduction" to pursue "the attainment of pleasure"—a child sucking his mother's breast for comfort, oral sex between married people, anal sex between men. Civilization, Freud argued, did not teach people to repress specific sexual activities per se. It taught them to repress the inutile pleasure of sex—and to understand as sexual, or "improper," any experience of pleasure that exceeded the act of reproduction. "All these crazy, eccentric and horrible things really constitute the sexual activity of people," Freud observed. Laying the irony on thick, he suggested that all his readers were in thrall to the uselessness of pleasure; that they had been educated into heterosexual object choice, marriage, and having children; and that this education entailed a lifetime of repressing one's unruly libidinal instincts. People "do not show their sexuality freely," Freud wrote. "To conceal it they wear a heavy overcoat woven of a tissue of lies, as though the weather were bad in the world of sexuality."

Among Freud's biographers, there is much prurient speculation about his own sexuality. How erotic was his early relationship with the otolaryngologist Wilhelm Fliess, who propounded an intimate connection between the nose and the genitals? Did Freud have an affair with his sister-in-law Minna, who was prettier and more attentive to his research than Martha? On such points, Tallis is levelheaded where others have been foolishly excitable, like naughty boys peeking through keyholes. "The truth of the matter is that we can never know what really happened," he writes. Instead, he stresses what Freud repeatedly stressed: that psychoanalysis, in its encounters with so-called perversions, "has no concern whatever with such judgments of value." Freud made this point with increasing vehemence in his later work: "The demand for a uniform sexual life for all . . . disregards all the disparities, innate and acquired, in the sexual constitution of human beings, thereby depriving fairly large numbers of sexual enjoyment and becoming a source of grave injustice." Psychoanalysis erased the difference between "perverts" of all stripes—gays, lesbians, sadists, masochists, fetishists, exhibitionists—and faithfully married heterosexuals. For all of them, Freud held, the aim was the same: "Transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness."

The scandal of infantile sexuality and the Oedipal plot have distracted many of Freud's biographers from the final phase of his career, when he broadened his fierce and unsettling gaze from the history of the individual to the history of humankind. His postwar writings—"Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), "Reflections on War and Death" (1918), "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), "Civilization and Its Discontents" (1930), and "Moses and Monotheism" (1939)—attempted to comprehend a world besieged by war and illness. Man was ensnared in a "battle of the giants": Eros versus Thanatos, the libido against what Freud named the death drive. The libido drew people together. The death drive tore them apart, repeatedly, across every epoch, and with a bleak determinacy that led Freud to conclude that "the aim of all life is death."

A strong pessimism had marked Freud's work from the beginning, but it had

been tempered by his quiet appreciation of the poetry of the unconscious. Yet the consolations of fantasy could not withstand the First World War, which sent his sons to the front and bankrupted his practice, leaving his family in Vienna starving. In 1915, he drafted a short and hopelessly poignant essay, "Transience," on why people mourn. "Mourning over the loss of something that we have loved or admired seems so natural to the layman that he takes it quite for granted," he wrote. "But for the psychologist, mourning is a great mystery." The libido bound itself to objects—a lover, a homeland, a profession—that it absorbed into the ego, incorporating them into one's sense of self. The loss of these objects freed the libido to seek substitutes. Yet it also provoked a wrenching displeasure, which, Freud marvelled, "we have at present no hypothesis to explain." Mourning, he observed, compelled people to create more ferocious attachments to whatever objects were still present to them. His primary example was the war, which "made our fatherland small again, and made the rest of the world remote." In the face of war's losses "the love of the fatherland, the affection for our neighbors and pride in what we have in common have been suddenly reinforced."

The preoccupation with death in his writings of the twenties and thirties was hardly surprising. The streets of Vienna teemed with veterans suffering "war neuroses" and civilians suffering "the traumatic neuroses of peace," he observed in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." While he was writing that book, his daughter Sophie, his best-beloved child, died of the Spanish flu, at the age of twenty-six. A terrible pathos hangs over "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," which is concerned with absences that can and cannot be mastered. At its center is a diptych of loss. On one side of it, Freud tells the story of Sophie's older son, Ernst, who delighted in playing a repetitive and apparently pointless game. He would take a wooden spool attached to a piece of string and throw it into his crib, out of sight. Then he would pull it back, cooing "O-o-o-o," and shout "Da!" when it reappeared. Freud speculates that the game, "*fort-da*" ("gone-there"), is evidence of the child learning to renounce his instinctual need for his mother. He "compensated himself" by "staging the disappearance and return of

the objects within his reach," learning to win pleasure from his mastery of loss. On the other side of the diptych are situations in which people repeated painful relations passively and unconsciously, such as "the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friends" or "the lover each of whose love affairs with a woman passes through the same phases." They presented no thrill of novelty, no compensating pleasures. Instead, they modelled the "compulsion to repeat," leading Freud to conjecture that the death drive is "a need to restore an earlier state of things"—an annihilatory instinct that exceeded sex drives and ego drives.

As the psychoanalyst Ilse Gubrich-Simitis discovered, Freud inserted the death drive into "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" after Sophie's death; the concept is the impersonal marker of a profoundly personal loss. More losses followed. In 1923, Sophie's younger son, Heinz, died of tuberculosis; the same year, doctors found cancer in Freud's mouth. No wonder, then, that his next book, "Civilization and Its Discontents," stands as his most anxious and disordered work. It can be difficult to determine its central theme, so frantically does Freud shift his topic and tone. He begins by expressing his skepticism about religion, but he also avows interest in a sense of "oneness with the universe"—an "oceanic feeling" corresponding to a "more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it." Some individuals pursue this bond through prayer. Others seek it in love, which Freud seems to have hardened his heart against. "We never have so little protection against suffering as when we are in love," he warns. The greatest testament to the human sense of "oneness" is civilization itself, man's "mastery over space and time" in the form of shared aesthetic and political projects—beauty, order, religion, nationhood.

Yet civilization had not "increased the amount of pleasure" that men could "expect from life." The telephone that allowed one to hear the voice of a child thousands of miles away would not be needed had the railways not allowed the child to move far away. The ideas that united people in shared projects would not be necessary if civilization had not sacrificed both desire and aggression on the false altar of human perfectibility. Civilization contained within its structures

the urge to destroy them. Whoever recalls "the people known as the Mongols under Genghiz Kahn and Tamerlane, the conquest of Jerusalem by the pious Crusaders, or indeed the horrors of the Great War, will be obliged to acknowledge this as a fact," Freud wrote. Existence was the struggle between "the life drive and the drive for destruction." It was impossible to know which would win.

In a letter to Albert Einstein, written in 1932, the year before the Nazis came to power, Freud expressed his hope that "everything that promotes the development of civilization also works against war." Yet he feared that he belonged to a minority. "How long must we wait before the others become pacifists as well?" he wondered. Shortly after the Anschluss, in 1938, the Gestapo detained and interrogated Freud's youngest child, Anna, then raided the Freuds' home. The family fled to London, where Freud died a year later, delirious, inarticulate, and in agony from the cancer that had eaten away at his jaw. The end of his story makes it difficult to disagree with his dejected assessment of civilization. "The life imposed on us is too hard to bear," he wrote. "It brings too much pain, too many disappointments, too many insoluble problems."

But it would be wrong to end on such unremitting pessimism. No matter his private grief, Freud always allowed the analytic pendulum to swing in the opposite direction. The smallest but brightest entry among the Freud biographies is "Writing on the Wall," a 1944 tribute by the modernist poet H.D., who was treated by Freud in the thirties. Dedicated to "Sigmund Freud, blameless physician," its chapters flit between H.D.'s memories of her sessions with "the Professor" and memories of her father and mother, her stillborn child, and her flight to Greece under a gathering mist of madness. The poetic spirit that animates psychoanalysis—the subterranean glow of fiction, of fantasy, of useless pleasure—finds its apotheosis in H.D.'s free-associative style. She had evidently watched Freud listening just as carefully as he had listened to her speaking. He was "like a curator in a museum, surrounded by his priceless

collection of Greek, Egyptian, and Chinese treasures," she wrote. She found him withdrawn, "quiet, a little wistful." When he grew annoyed with her, he beat his hand on the headpiece of his famous couch. Re-creating Freud as a mixture of myth and reality, H.D. offered the reader a singularly intimate account of the method of a man who claimed intimacy with everyone but seemed to offer it to no one.

"Writing on the Wall" was published several decades after it was written, in a volume called "A Tribute to Freud," along with excerpts from H.D.'s diaries and the letters that Freud wrote to her during and after her analysis. Her side of the correspondence is not included, but in May, 1936, she seems to have sent him an especially affectionate letter, for his eightieth birthday. His response was brief but tender. "I had imagined I had become insensitive to praise and blame," he wrote. "Life at my age is not easy, but spring is beautiful and so is love." This idea would stay with H.D., and later became a form of psychic protection when air-raid sirens screamed across the London sky: "The Professor himself proclaimed the Herculean power of Eros and we know that it was written from the beginning that Love is stronger than Death." ♦

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