Freud the Man: An Intellectual Biography

by Lydia Flem. Susan Fairfield, trans. Other Press, New York, N.Y., 2003 trans., 223 pages, $28.00.

Another book about the life and work of Sigmund Freud? Hardly the subject to engage the average psychiatrist, or even a practicing psychoanalyst like myself. Lydia Flem wrote an earlier (1986) book on daily life in Vienna. She introduces the current volume with the intriguing goal of "sketching out . . . the way Freud invents psychoanalytic theory on the basis of his intimate metaphors" (p. x). "What will be found here," she promises, "is the novel of the unconscious told 'live' by its author, Freud: the way his writings give birth to an interior discovery called psychoanalysis" (p. xi). We will be her companions as she immerses herself in the intimacy of Freud's creative process, attempting to "follow Freud's trail, to accompany him in his voyages to the land of nowhere, to read over his shoulder the strange and fabulous tale he brought back with him" (p. xi). She continues, "I have tried to get to know the man together with the work, the underlying passions inextricably linked with his theoretical fiction" (p. xi). Her own creation is surprisingly fresh, insightful, compact, and, to my knowledge, unique. Profoundly knowledgeable about Freud's life and writings, Flem quotes relatively little from Freud's professionally published psychoanalytic writings, but instead draws deeply from his letters and carefully selects a wide range of literary quotations, thereby allowing the reader to sample the very authors whom Freud read and from whom he drew so much inspiration.

Almost immediately it becomes apparent that the author is an ardent admirer of Freud, the man who, "through the threefold path of the personal, the pathological, and the cultural," tried to "interpret the unknown of the human soul" (p. 3). By the book's end, I had come to the somewhat surprising understanding that she had also become his "friend." The development of this "friendship" is especially noteworthy, given that Freud placed the highest value on friendship, utilized dialogues with his friends in the process of creating, and, over his lifetime, in addition to 150 papers and books, wrote 150,000 letters, a level of correspondence that astounded even his own family. Flem becomes Freud's "friend" by situating herself, in a very personal, intimate way, inside Freud's imagined state of mind as he immersed himself in his many fields of interest outside of psychoanalysis, exploring how each provided a unique conceptual framework for understanding an aspect of the mind and its dynamics. Ten chapters address distinct perspectives into the workings of Freud's creative and conceptualizing process: (1) Creation Day by Day, (2) Through the Train Window, (3) The Archeologist, (4) The Conquistador: Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, (5) The Man Without a Country, (6) The Man of the Book, (7) In the Witch's Kitchen, (8) The Shade of the Poet, (9) The Metaphor Man, and (10) The Friend. Their headings suggest the many lenses through which Freud viewed the public world he explored with such fascination and energy and the private world that his patients entrusted him to know.

The journey, the careful unearthing of psychological "civilizations" buried by layers of personal history, the courage required to overcome the anxiety inherent in coming face to face with aspects of oneself not previously known, are metaphors for Freud's personal development of his theory of mind and for the clinical practice of psychoanalysis. "The Man of the Book" introduces us to the importance of Freud's childhood immersion in the Bible, his lifelong struggle with his Jewish identity, and his deeply held identity as an author. Flem is a scholar of Freud the scientist and Freud the creator. In describing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, she notes:

> [T]he originality of its composition has to do with his very personal way of moving constantly from one conceptual space to another, from the pleasure of childhood to the seriousness of the adult. And it has to do with his ability to travel from the visual to the virtual, the everyday to the speculative, to mingle science and autobiography, to occupy, in a fertile back-and-forth two positions that his research training taught him to keep clearly separate: the position of the scientist and the position of the artist. (p. 109)

Perusing this table of contents evokes the breadth of the author's own ability to move between these 2 points of view, her vision of Freud's creative process, and her understanding of the ways in which he drew upon many sources in assembling and revising his models and understandings of the mind.

The mind and techniques of the writer and the importance of friendship, both of which are explored in detail in chapters 8 to 10, are central to Flem's understanding of Freud's creative process. The first involves the importance of fiction, of poetry, and especially of metaphor in the development of psychoanalytic theory. References to and citations from Cervantes, Goethe, Heine, Mann, Schiller, Shakespeare, Sophocles, and others provide an immediate, enriching experience of the literary world in which Freud immersed himself. Freud acknowledged that, since childhood, his secret hero was Goethe, and believed he had "been able to win my destiny in an indirect way and have attained my dream: to remain a man of letters, though still in appearance a doctor" (p. 104). Without apology, he stated that he was "captivated by the storyteller's art as much as by the perspicacity of the observer" (p. 107). Flem understands and values the subtle but powerful way in which Freud's literary and poetic sensibility infuses and enriches the theory he nurtures and refines. "Scholarship or poetry, science or fiction, psychoanalysis transcends contradiction and carves out a third path, the path" (pp. 122–123) that Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, called a "theoretical fiction." In that volume, Freud explored the similarity between dreams and poetry, but Flem argues, persuasively to my mind, that Freud called on "literature to bridge the gap between the intimacy of the unique and experiences shared by everyone" (p. 144), and the technique of free association will share aspects of poetic creativity.

Flem's deeply personal knowing of Freud, the writer and creator, allows her to celebrate the literary aspects of Freud's writing that she believes are essential to understanding his psychoanalytic theory of the mind. A 1930 study of Freud's writing praised his "'spontaneous tendency to narration, an innate sensual love of the word, a feeling for metaphor, auditory and rhythmic sensitivity, the union of poetry and the daily life of language'" (p. 112).[1] Flem argues that his style of writing and his scientific understanding of the mind are inextricable and mutually reinforcing. In her mind, in order "to breathe into his own writings the enchantment banished by science . . . he turns . . . to the sparkle of literature . . ." (p. 142).

The theme of friendship is central to Flem's understanding of Freud. Freud's extensive correspondence attests to the involvement of friends in his creative process. Flem, however, believes that he required this dialogue to "get underway on the road to creation" (p. 183). As any reader of Freud well knows, Freud often addresses his reader directly, anticipating questions and objections. He is guided by an intrinsic understanding that writing involves a dialogue between author and reader and an awareness that works of literature, including scientific literature, inhabit the space between the reader and writer, a very

contemporary point of view. Given the importance of friendship to Freud and the centrality of correspondence to his creative process, it is ironic that until relatively recently, psychoanalysis was understood as a 1-person psychology. To be sure, Freud also drew upon the metaphors of the surgeon and the observations of a traveler on a railroad journey to suggest an "objective," 1-person psychology. Our current understanding of psychotherapeutic treatment as a 2-person psychology—a dialogue, albeit an odd one, between 2 individuals working together to fashion an understanding of the patient's mind and resolution of his or her unconscious intrapsychic conflicts—is reflected in the ways in which Freud's relationships with friends and colleagues facilitated his processes of creating. Freud's personal struggle to resolve the tension between the scientific and the literary was never, and, to his mind, could never, be successful. His approach to the psychopathology of everyday life places the observer "within the observation itself, affect and objectivity standing side by side to say something new about the human soul" (p. 132).

This compelling volume evokes Freud's creating mind but it also serves to remind us that, regardless of remedicalization, psychiatry remains both science and art. I recommend this scholarly book to anyone interested in Freud the man, but also to those wishing to nourish their connection to the artistic aspects of our field and to use these connections to enrich their scientific understanding of the minds of their patients. Don't read this book in search of an incisive evaluation of Freud's theories of the mind, although the author suggests throughout that she is well aware of their shortcomings. Come to it instead with the desire to become immersed in the process of Freud's creating. Having read *Freud the Man*, you will certainly have a much richer understanding of his mind, but you will also have a window on ways to understand patients that do not sacrifice the poetic richness of the human condition to scientific rigor or dilute the science of psychiatry with the "artistic" aspects of psychiatric medicine.

REFERENCE

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