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*Freud's Impossible Life:  
An Introduction*

What right does my present have to speak of my  
past? Has my present some advantage over my past?

—*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*

THE STORY OF FREUD'S LIFE is easily told. He was born in 1856 in Freiberg in Moravia, a town now called Příbor in the Czech Republic, but then part of the Hapsburg Empire. One hundred and fifty miles north of Vienna, it was a small market town, almost entirely Catholic but with a tiny Jewish community. Freud's father was a merchant, trading mostly in wool, and Sigmund Freud was the first of seven children—five daughters and two sons—of his father's second (and possibly third) marriage to a woman twenty years younger than himself. Jacob Freud had two sons from a previous marriage. His business collapsed when Freud was three and a half, and the family moved

first to Leipzig in Germany for a year and then on to Vienna, where Freud lived until 1938. Freud went to the Sperl Gymnasium, a school in Vienna in 1865, and after briefly considering a career in law Freud studied medicine at the University of Vienna between 1873 and 1882, specializing in his third year in Comparative Anatomy. After research in physiology but with no obvious professional prospects—he went in 1885 to study for several months in Paris with the great neurologist Charcot, returning in 1886 to set up his own private practice as “Docent in Neuropathology.” In the same year, after a four year engagement, he married Martha Bernays, a woman five years younger than himself and the granddaughter of a distinguished German-Jewish family (her grandfather had been the Chief Rabbi of Hamburg). The couple had six children, three daughters and three sons, in fairly quick succession. In 1896 Freud’s father died at the age of eighty-one.

Through extensive clinical work, at first using the method of hypnotism on so-called hysterical patients; and through a series of passionate relationships with men—most notably the physician Josef Breuer (b. 1842), whom he met in the late 1870s, and Wilhelm Fliess (b. 1858), an ear, nose, and throat specialist from Berlin whom he met in 1887; and then, after the turn of the century with younger men, most notably Carl Jung (b. 1875), Alfred Adler (b. 1870), Karl Abraham (b. 1877), Otto Rank (b. 1884), and Sandor Ferenczi (b. 1873)—Freud invented the clinical practice of psychoanalysis (he first used the term in 1896). Psychoanalysis was, as one early patient called it, a “talking cure,” the doctor and the patient doing nothing but talk together. The patient lay on a couch, with the analyst sitting behind him, and was instructed to “free-associate” i.e., say whatever came into his head, including his dreams, undistracted by the analyst’s responses, with the doctor clarifying and interpreting and reconstructing the patient’s childhood experiences; but

not using drugs or physical contact as part of the treatment. The aim was the modification of symptoms and the alleviation of suffering through redescription.

A prolific writer, from 1886 to his death in 1939, Freud published what in the Standard Edition—the official translation of nearly all his work into English—became twenty-three volumes of theoretical and clinical writing, and he wrote thousands of letters. It was through *Studies On Hysteria* (written with Breuer, 1895), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1905), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1929) that Freud made his name.

As Freud’s work became known beyond the confines of Vienna through his writing and his personal influence, the Psychoanalytic Movement, as it was soon called, grew out of the informal Wednesday Evening Meetings started by Freud in 1902 for curious and interested fellow professionals. The first International Psycho-Analytical Congress was held in Salzburg in 1908, and in 1910 the International Psycho-Analytical Association was founded. In 1909 Freud made his first and only trip to America to lecture at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts.

In 1917, during the First World War, in which his sons saw active service, Freud discovered a growth on his palate which was finally diagnosed in 1923 as cancer which, despite operations, he suffered from intermittently for the rest of his life, though he continued to work to the very end. In 1919 his favorite daughter Sophie died of influenza at age twenty-six, and in 1930 his mother died at the age of ninety-five. In 1938, after living and working in Vienna for nearly sixty years, Freud fled to London from the Nazis with his daughter Anna, also a psychoanalyst, where he died in 1939.

The facts of a life—and indeed the facts of life—were among the many things that Freud's work has changed our way of thinking about. Freud's work shows us not merely that nothing in our lives is self-evident, that not even the facts of our lives speak for themselves; but that facts themselves look different from a psychoanalytic point of view. "The facts in psychoanalysis," Freud wrote, "have a habit of being rather more complicated than we like. If they were as simple as all that, perhaps, it might not have needed psychoanalysis to bring them to light."<sup>1</sup> Because we want to like our facts we are always tempted to simplify them. Psychoanalysis reveals complications that we would rather not see; before psychoanalysis, Freud suggests, the facts seemed simple, but now they seem complicated. "Bringing to light" might mean recovering something buried, or seeing something in a new light. Freud is not saying here that psychoanalysis has revealed new facts, but that it has revealed new aspects of the facts. The facts were always there, but now we can see them differently. What complicates the facts, in Freud's view, is what he will come to call unconscious desire (so, for example, the fact that Freud invented psychoanalysis mostly out of conversations with men but through the treatment mostly of women—that psychoanalysis was a homosexual artifact—can tell us something about Freud's homosexual and heterosexual desire, what he wanted men and women for; our desires inform our facts and our fact-finding). He will show us how and why we bury the facts of our lives, and how, through the language of psychoanalysis, we can both retrieve these facts and describe them in a different way. Though his writing is dominated, for reasons which will become clear, by archaeological analogies—by the archaeologist as hero—the practice of psychoanalysis was, Freud increasingly discovered, difficult to find analogies for. What Freud was in no doubt about, though, was the value of heroism, and of the discovery of psychoanalysis as somehow a heroic project. His writing is studded with ref-

erences to great men—Plato, Moses, Hannibal, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Goethe, Shakespeare, among others—most of them artists; and all of them, in Freud's account, men who defined their moment, not men struggling to assimilate to their societies, like many of the Jews of Freud's generation; self-defining men, men pursuing their own truths against the constraints of tradition. In the young Freud's myth of his own heroism, created in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he was a man who would face, in a new way, the facts of his own life (he uses as his epigraph to the book a line—appropriately given his ambitions—from Virgil's *Aeneid*, "If I can't bend those above, I'll stir the lower regions"). Through psychoanalysis the introspective hero born of romanticism went in search of scientific legitimacy. But heroism—not to mention scientific legitimacy—was another cultural ideal that would look different after psychoanalysis. What Freud would realize through his new science—and the devastation of the First World War would confirm this—was that the idea of heroism was an attempted self-cure for our flagrant vulnerability. Freud intimated, through psychoanalysis, that there might be other ways of finding life impressive, other pleasures that might sustain us.

We spend our lives, Freud will tell us in his always lucid prose, not facing the facts, the facts of our history, in all their complication; and above all, the facts of our childhood. Freud sees modern adults as people who cannot recover from their childhoods; as people who have a child's view of what an adult is. He 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. And to face all these improbable facts 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 nothing but the psychosomatic development of the growing child in the family, and the individual in his society; and a story with no religion in it. Instead of God as the organizing idea, there was the body in the family; the family that brings its own largely unknowable transgenerational history to the culture it finds itself in. 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. For Freud the modern individual is ineluctably, compulsively a biographer and an autobiographer. And his sexuality and his symptoms are among the forms his life story takes.

The body treated only with words inevitably linked Freud, as a doctor, with the more literary arts. Indeed he was slightly bemused to discover that his early case histories—in which, as he wrote, there is “an intimate connection between the story of a patient’s sufferings and the symptoms of his illness”—read, as he put it, “like short stories” (or as “novellas,” in the new Penguin Freud translation).<sup>2</sup> In a psychoanalytic treatment patients tell the story of their lives by saying whatever comes into their heads. It is an unusual way of telling a story, and of giving and taking a history. So one of the first casualties of psychoanalysis, once the facts of our lives are seen as complicated in the Freudian way, is the traditional biography. After psychoanalysis all our narratives of the past—indeed, all our coherence and plausibility—are suspect. They hide more than they seek. History begins to sound like fiction, and fiction begins to sound peculiarly wishful.

So the history of the period of Freud’s time and place—the background, as it were, of traditional biography—can also be

read with these new Freudian complications in mind; not that the historical facts are not true, but that the telling of them might be prone to simplification, and particularly when they are at their most devastating. We have to be attentive to the wishfulness at work even in our most painful stories, especially in our most painful stories. Freud lived through, in what is by now a familiar account, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the rise of nationalism; the cataclysm of the First World War and the buildup to the Second World War; the emergence of communism and the rise of fascism; the increasing emancipation of the Jews and the beginnings of their possible extinction. It was an era of fragile democracies and unstable aristocracies, of an inexhaustible capitalism and of economic depression, of the “de-traditionalising” of societies, and of an exorbitant arms race. But Freud’s work—as, among other things, a theory of reading—wants to undo our confidence in familiar formulations, especially familiar formulations about the past. Freud wants us to be wary of our temptation to make catchphrases out of history, of our temptation to be too eagerly convinced by our fictions and formulations. We are always, in Freud’s view, trying to contain the uncontainable. However horrifying the facts, for Freud history is always more horrifying—and so more elusive—than we can let ourselves know; as though he also had an inkling of just how horrifying it was to become (his sisters that remained in Vienna died in concentration camps). Only the censored past can be lived with, Freud was discovering. From a psychoanalytic point of view modern people were as much the survivors of their history as they were the makers of it. We make histories so as not to perish of the truth.

The psychoanalyst is a historian who shows us that our histories are also the way we conceal the past from ourselves; the way we both acknowledge it and disavow it at the same time (to disavow it is, one way or another, to simplify it; to acknowledge it is to allow complication). After “the great Darwin,” as Freud

called him, another of Freud's heroes, we are creatures of an appetite to survive and reproduce; and because we are desiring creatures in an uncomfortable world we are, like all animals, endangered by our desiring and therefore self-protective. But unlike other animals, who because they have no language have no cultural history, we also feel endangered by our histories. There is nothing we want to protect ourselves from more, in Freud's view, than our personal and family histories. For many people the past had become a phobic object, concealed in sentimental nostalgia and myths of race and national history. Through psychoanalysis—which was clearly a response to these increasingly insistent contemporary questions—Freud tried to work out the ways in which we are unduly self-protective; the senses in which modern people suffer from their self-protectiveness.

In Freud's view we are defensive creatures simply because we have so much to defend ourselves against; our fears of the external world are second only to our fears of the internal world of memory and desire, and both are warranted (it was Freud that made the ordinary word "defensive" such an important part of common currency). Psychoanalysis, whatever else it is, is a dictionary of modern fears. The acknowledged past, both personal and transgenerational, always threatens to destroy our belief in the future; or, as Freud intimated, modern people were beginning to feel the burdens of their past in new ways (with the rise of historical research and scientific methods of enquiry they knew more about them than ever before). We can't, now, take in the true horror of our histories; and this became for Freud, implicitly, a reflection about his own history as a Jew, as well as a more general account that he was keen to universalise. Freud's fear that psychoanalysis could be misunderstood to be a Jewish Science went some way to acknowledging that the history of the Jews might also be somewhere bound up in it.

We take refuge in plausible stories, Freud tells us in his own partly plausible story called psychoanalysis. We fear the immediacy of experience—the immediacy of instinctual desire and the overwhelming pressures of contemporary reality—and, so we represent it to ourselves as symptoms and knowledge, our forlorn and noble forms of mastery. So fearful are we in living our lives now we seek as much intelligibility as we can get; but our wish to make sense of our lives—or our wish to make our lives sound sensible, or at least intelligible—has become an ironic acknowledgement of just how unknowing and wishful we are; a measure not only of our terror, but of our overinvestment in progress as the acquisition of knowledge, and coherence as the sign of knowledge. And the "we" Freud was referring to was possibly, he thought, not the fin de siècle Viennese middle class that he knew, but the entire human race. Freud, in other words, in the way of the great nineteenth century European intellectuals, was also a great generalizer. Freud, in actuality, met a very small group of people in his life, but universalising a point—one of Freud's most interesting papers, for example, he entitled "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" (1912)—was a way of rhetorically enforcing it. As a young man, by all accounts, Freud, like many young people with intellectual tendencies, was more interested in reading than in sociability; and *Don Quixote* was his favourite book. The psychoanalyst he became was as interested in whether we can experience ourselves as he was in whether we can know ourselves; and above all in how knowledge, especially self-knowledge, can become a refuge from experience. Psychoanalysis was to be, essentially, an elaboration of *Don Quixote*.

But one of the things we will notice in Freud's writing is not the dogmatic narrow-minded knowingsness for which he has become famous, but an absorbing and wide-ranging scepticism. And scepticism, he believed, needed to be justified, to be

accounted for, just as much as, if not more than, conviction and belief. His *Three Essays on Sexuality*, one of the early groundbreaking books of psychoanalysis, ends with what Freud calls the “unsatisfactory conclusion” that “we know far too little . . . to construct from our fragmentary information a theory adequate to the understanding alike of normal and pathological conditions.”<sup>3</sup> Nearly one hundred and fifty pages of extraordinary speculation end with Freud’s virtual undoing of the whole project. And with the reminder that what we call sexuality is itself a constructed theory, not simply a natural fact. What Freud discovers is the impossibility of normalizing sexuality, and that the sexual is what we always want to normalize. And this is because, he writes, “sexuality is the weak spot . . . in cultural development.”<sup>4</sup> So Freud will be inclined to say, as his detractors always claim, that everything is sexual, without his ever quite knowing what the sexual is. Or indeed what it might mean to know about or understand sexuality. Freud, we might say, was interested in sex because it was one of the forms that personal history takes; one of the ways in which knowledge of the past re-presents itself; one of the areas of the individual’s life where the biographer and the autobiographer are struck by something, and falter, never quite knowing what to make of it all.

Freud became preoccupied in his work, in other words, not only with increasing our knowledge of human nature, but with those moments when knowing breaks down, when it doesn’t work, when something other than knowledge becomes an object of desire (what interrupts our concentration as readers may be as telling as the book we are reading; Freud is always making the case for interruption). We make a Freudian slip when we thought we knew what we were saying. We dream beyond the bounds of intelligibility. We unwittingly repeat what we hate about ourselves. Freud, that is to say, charts the development of the unknowing and largely unknowable modern individual in a culture obsessed by knowledge; of the distracted

and disrupted individual whose continuities and traditions are breaking down around him. Where progress was demanded Freud found regression and the allure of the past; where predictability was wanted he found the disarray of desire and self-destructiveness; where laws of human nature or of history were sought he found only, in the title of one of his finest papers, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes.” Childhood, as he described it, informed everything but predicted nothing. Human development was riddled with paralyzing repetitions. Sexuality obsessed us, but what an obsession with sex was an obsession about was unclear. Darwin, in Freud’s view, had oversimplified sex by suggesting it was really about reproduction. Because Freud believed that everything was “overdetermined,” had multiple causes and reasons, nothing could be about one thing. Indeed the history of science showed that new causes and meanings kept occurring to people. Science was as unpredictable as the phenomena it studied; nor could it prove scientifically that it was of value.

So after Freud, if we are to take him on his own terms, our knowledge of his, or of anyone else’s, life—and indeed our wish for knowledge about his life—has to be tempered with a certain irony. Because it was 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. Freud helped us, if that is the right word, to see our lives as both ineluctably determined and utterly indeterminate; as driven by repetitions but wholly unpredictable; as inspired by unconscious desire and only intermittently intelligible, and then only in retrospect. There was the unfolding of the individual’s psychological potential—the so-called life cycle with its developmental stages—and there was something less surely plotted, less explicable, called the life story. Freud wanted to bring these two inextricable things together in the science of psychoanalysis, but with a great deal of uncertainty about what was possible.

And partly because Freud was discovering that we obscure ourselves from ourselves in our life stories; that that is their function. So we will often find that the most dogmatic thing about Freud as a writer is his skepticism. He is always pointing out his ignorance, without ever needing to boast about it. He is always showing us what our knowing keeps coming up against; what our desire to know might be a desire for.

It is sexuality and a death-dealing aggression—the subjects to which Freud's work is always returning—that render us incoherent, that expose the limits of our language, and of our self-knowledge. There is what he later calls “the silence” of a Death Instinct working inside us, and an insatiable sexual hunger, “incapable of obtaining complete satisfaction,” that resists our sense-making.<sup>5</sup> And our histories, at their most fundamental, are stories of need in Freud's account; of sexuality and violence and scarcity; of irresolvable conflict and unavoidable ambivalence. Where we love we always hate, and vice versa. We are wanting more life for ourselves but we are also wanting, in one of Freud's memorable phrases, “to die in our own way.” We are full of vitality but, he tells us in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), we crave inertia, insentience. We want to get better but we love our suffering. What Freud increasingly found most difficult to cure in his patients was their (mostly unconscious) wish not to be cured. In his search for cures, Freud found just how incurable we are; that is, he found how much pleasure we can get from our suffering through the psychic alchemy of what he would call masochism. Indeed, Freud developed psychoanalysis, in his later years, by describing how it didn't work; clinically, his failures were often more revealing to him than his successes. By showing us what psychoanalysis couldn't do he showed us what it was (and what it was up against). It was part of Freud's considerable ambition—what is a theory of wishing if not a theory of exorbitant ambition?—to reveal in no uncertain terms the limits of psychoanalytic ambition. And to reveal that the

causes and reasons of ambition could be found in the catastrophes of childhood. And that we are children for a very long time.

And yet in what Freud saw as our instinct-driven lives there seemed to be a margin of freedom, a place for rationality and choice. He agreed, implicitly, with Swift, that you can't reason a person out of something; they weren't reasoned into, but he did discover that he could sometimes psychoanalyze people out of, or through, their most anguished predicaments. There was an Enlightenment Freud who believed we might be more sensible and law-abiding; that knowledge, and particularly the knowledge generated by the methods of science, could dispel superstition, and free us from the old-fashioned tyrannies. A Freud who went on believing in the giving of reasons and the testing of hypotheses, in the beneficial uses of explanation and understanding, in the value of putting words to things; who believed that the conversation he had invented called psychoanalysis could improve our lives, even if it could only, in another memorable phrase, “transform hysterical misery into ordinary human unhappiness”; who hoped that knowledge and desire may not be at odds with each other. And there was an anti-Enlightenment Freud who, as time went on, found it harder and harder to believe in most of these things, and yet without ever losing his belief in the value, and the values of psychoanalysis. Indeed how Freud kept faith with psychoanalysis as it evolved—that is, how what he calls the unconscious never lost its grip on him—is the central drama of Freud's life. It was this relationship between desiring and knowing, between the unconscious and what he called the ego, between ourselves as creatures of (initially uncultured) appetite and creatures of (cultured) knowledge that fascinated Freud. Psychoanalysis became an enquiry into what, if anything, knowing had to do with desiring; and, indeed, about what telling one's life story had to do with desiring. Freud's initial hope was that life stories were sustainers of appetite. His confidence in this, though, was to diminish.

But it was, as Freud was to remark on several occasions—and it is a remark we must take to heart in any consideration of Freud's life—the pursuit of knowledge that inspired him as a younger man (and indeed as an older man). He felt, he wrote in his *Autobiographical Study* (1925), “no particular partiality for the position—and activity of a physician in those early years, nor, by the way, later. Rather, I was moved by a sort of greed for knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> Not religion, not politics, not medicine, not sexuality, not healing and helping, but knowledge. And the pursuit of knowledge would be another casualty of the psychoanalytic enterprise, as Freud began to describe it as simply another form of our ingenious and ubiquitous sexuality could take. Psychoanalysis became the language in which Freud could wonder what a greed for knowledge might be a greed for. Curiosity, Freud came to believe, was initially and fundamentally about sex. There was nothing else to be interested in but people's relations with each other, what they did together (everything being a pretext for doing something together). The satisfactions of knowing were derivatives—sublimations, to use his rather obscure terminology of the more immediate, the more sensuous pleasures of childhood. Not that the person intent on knowledge was a failed sensualist, but rather a troubled one; in thrall, as we all are, not simply to his desires, but to the conflict around and about his desires. Pleasure was not addictive, anaesthetizing it was.

What (some) modern people couldn't help but notice after Freud, through their symptoms, their dreams, their slips of the tongue and their bungled ambitions—especially modern people who were no longer religious believers—was how unconscious they were, how removed from a clear sense of their own intentions, how determinedly ignorant they were about their pleasure. And, in Freud's language, this meant how conflicted they were about their appetites, and so how fundamentally divided they were against themselves. As if people no longer knew what was in their best interests, or what their interests were; or in-

deed whether they had best interests. Modern people could live as if they couldn't care less about themselves. They would, for example, risk everything or nothing at all for money or for love, for safety or for excitement. It was confounding, after Darwin, to discover that Man, as he was then called, was the animal that deliberately estranged himself from his own nature, that suffered above all, from his capacity for adaptation. In Freud's account it had become all too human to discard survival and reproduction as the aims of life; all too human to adapt (i.e., to assimilate and conform) at the cost of vitality. From a psychoanalytic point of view even the Darwinian facts seemed too simple. Psychoanalysis was to be a therapy in which modern people could work out for themselves what, if anything, mattered most to them: and despite the strictures of science.

Like all writers, Freud writes out of a specific historical moment; but what he often seems to be writing about is just how difficult it is to know what is specific about any historical moment (what the facts are), or what any individual is going to make of her own times (what the facts are for her). Partly because the past so insistently informs the present—our seeing the present in the terms of the past is what he will call “*transference*”—but also because our reconstructions of the past are inspired by our desires for, and fears about, the future. And partly because of the individual's idiosyncratic *psychic metabolism* that Freud was unusually attentive to (in Freud's work the individual is always making something of her history, whether or not she is making her own history). The way we digest and metabolize our experience Freud would call “*dream-work*” in *Interpreting Dreams* (1900). Freud saw the modern individual as excessively overstimulated (both by his environment and his desires), and struggling all the time to become insulated without becoming too isolated or estranged from herself or other people (symptoms were a way of regulating exchange). In what were soon to be called “*mass-societies*” it was the individual



voice, in all its singularity, that Freud was interested in. His emblem for this was his belief that a person's dream could be understood only through the dreamer's own associations to her dream; she had to be enabled through collaboration to be more self-interpreting, less defined from outside (there couldn't be a Freudian dictionary of dream symbols). For Freud we are desiring creatures, creatures who look forward with certain satisfactions in mind; but each with, or through, a different history. All history, for Freud, is the rewriting of history because the past is something we rewrite to make a future for ourselves. And in this sense our pasts are inherently unstable. As early as 1896 Freud referred in a letter to what he would eventually call "deferred action." "I am working on the assumption," he wrote to Wilhelm Fliess on December 6, "that our psychological mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a re-arrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances—to re-transcription." The individual keeps re-writing his history even though his biographer cannot (we may want another biography of someone but we don't want another biography by the same biographer). It is, as Freud both intimates and enacts in his writing—in his return to and reworking of the same preoccupations—the inability to rewrite the past that the individual suffers from. And that makes the biographer such an unreliable witness. A biography, like a symptom, fixes a person in a story about themselves.

Freud draws our attention to this work of re-presenting the personal and cultural past in words; when his patients started giving an account of themselves in psychoanalysis it was this work, of distortion and disguise and censorship—work that all too easily becomes inhibited, but work potentially of great vision and imagination—that Freud found himself hearing. He discovered, through his invention of the psychoanalytic situation, that in the speaking (and writing) of history, memory and

desire were inextricable, indeed memory was of desire; that our histories, whatever else they are, are coded stories about what we wanted in the past, and about what was missing in that past; and about what we want in the future, and about what we fear in that future. Words, Freud assumed, are the tools of need and desire; and since there can be no history without language, it is the individual's history of needing and desiring that must be reconstructed, as far as is possible, in psychoanalytic treatment. Psychoanalysis enables patients to recover their desire, by re-presenting their history to a new kind of attentive listener. At a time when it was increasingly up for grabs what people could use—race, religion, nationality, class, talent—to identify themselves with (and as), Freud would want modern people to identify themselves as primarily desiring creatures. But with one essential qualification—to desire for human beings was to remember, to remember their earlier forms of desiring. For Freud our (shared) biological fate was always being culturally fashioned through description and recollection.

Freud wants us to remember that need is where we begin and language is what we acquire. Language, as at once a deferred pleasure and a formative adaptation (and estrangement), was at the center of Freud's work; on virtually every page of Freud's writing, as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan remarks, there is a reference to language. Freud's account of the talking cure, unsurprisingly, has within it theories and assumptions about language and how it works, but not theories informed by the modern science of linguistics, which was not then available to him. The individual's always ongoing acquisition of language—his relationship to the language he inherits and the language he speaks—was one of Freud's primary concerns. When he is describing the unconscious and how it works it often sounds as though he is describing the workings of a language; the treatment of psychoanalysis itself was conducted only in words. And Freud was as much, if not more of, a writer

than a doctor. He became a writer who, as he would put it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), wanted to “throw [himself] into a line of thought and to follow it wherever it leads.”<sup>7</sup> And he would encourage his patients when speaking, to do something similar. Following a line of thought to wherever it leads—to wherever it leads by association—was to be the psychoanalytic way. Until, that is, the need to restore order kicked in.

So Freud’s work, we also need to remember, is of a piece with much of the great modernist literature, all of which was written in his lifetime; a literature in which—we can take the names of Proust, Musil, and Joyce as emblematic—the coherent narratives of and about the past were put into question; and, of course, in all the other arts and the sciences; and in the overlap between them in psychiatry, philosophy, and sociology this was a period of extraordinary energy and invention and improvisation. Indeed psychoanalysis makes sense only as part of the larger cultural conversation in the arts that became known as modernism. Vienna, where Freud lived for virtually his entire life, was the eye of the storm of this modernism; and was the birthplace of the linguistic philosophy that came to dominate the twentieth century. Psychoanalysis, as we shall see, was to be at once Freud’s resistance and his assimilation to this newly emerging modern culture in which he found himself growing up. And in getting a sense of Freud’s life, a version of it, we will need to notice both where he protests and where he complies; what, in his contemporary culture, he found compelling—the collecting of antiquities, for example, and the smoking of cigars; and what he was indifferent to—he had, for example, little interest in contemporary art, and was dismissive of Surrealism, which owed so much to him; he had no interest whatsoever in opera or music, something of a feat in the Vienna of his time. We will need to notice what Freud used the language of psychoanalysis to talk about (childhood, sexuality, aggression, humour, the unconscious, memory, biography, religion, science),

and to mostly avoid talking about (politics, philosophy, economics, class, fashion, mysticism, old age). We will have to see, in other words, which of the cultural conversations of the time Freud wanted to join, and which he avoided; what Freud needed psychoanalysis to liberate himself from, and what kind of imprisonment it liberated him for.

In 1859, three years after Freud was born, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*; in 1939, the year Freud died, Joyce published *Finnegans Wake*. This is one way of imagining the timeline of Freud’s life, the disrupted narratives of time and of the times that he lived through and contributed to so dramatically. Like so many of the people of Freud’s generation, the world Freud grew up in was unrecognizable to the world he died in; it could only be remembered—or rather, to use a psychoanalytic term, reconstructed—because so much had been lost (Eric Hobsbawm entitled his history of the twentieth century *The Age of Extremes*, and Niall Ferguson subtitled his history of the century *History’s Age of Horror* because a seismic disturbance was being registered). In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century—in Freud’s lifetime—Europe was radically transformed. And in ways in which we may only just be beginning to understand, or even to get glimpses of. It was not a world turned upside down, but a world less coherent, less able to be pictured than that. Freud’s life, and psychoanalysis itself, are glimpses of those times, at once a product of those times, and Freud’s protest against them through the choices he made. The new stories and new ways of telling stories—even the ways of not telling stories, or of finding alternatives to narrative coherence, or the philosophical investigations into language that Wittgenstein pursued—were, like psychoanalysis, signs of the times; both symptomatic and diagnostic. They were part of the process of people making sense of, and coping with, their (modern) lives; ways of working out both what kind of sense was now possible,

and whether it was sense that now needed to be made. And psychoanalysis—the project of Freud's life—needs to be seen as part of the history of storytelling, as much as of the history of medicine. Certain symptoms, Freud realized, were stories in abeyance, stories waiting to be told but felt to be unreliable. There were symptoms where there couldn't be words; where words were forbidden, or unavailable. Talking about symptoms, Freud began to find, was one of the ways in which people could make sense, could talk about what mattered most to them, about what made their lives worth living (or not). Freud read pathology as though it were an uncompleted conversation, a modern way of talking, a language. Psychoanalysis became a story about why people couldn't speak, and about what it was they could not speak about. And Freud himself could speak by speaking (and writing) about these things.

Genius, Sartre once wrote, is the word we use for people who get themselves out of impossible situations. Whether or not Freud was a genius—and genius was one of the many words Freud changed our sense of—psychoanalysis was the conversation Freud invented to get himself and other people through the impossible situations of their lives, the impossible situations that their lives had become in a modern world. A world in which people had to adapt to things—to economic and political conditions—that *may be impossible to adapt to*. And this involved, as I say, giving a different kind of account of what a life story, or indeed of what a history was; both what a person might be doing, wittingly and unwittingly, in telling something of her life—or, indeed, in telling something of someone else's life, which a life story always involves; and what a person might be wanting not to do in the telling of her life. There were things in a life that seemed to resist articulation, and there were things it was forbidden to say.

So a biography of the young Freud—a biography after Freud, in other words—has to begin, has to briefly set the scene,

so to speak, with Freud's own misgivings about biography, and about biography as an impossibility. With, in short, the idea of the impossible life. The idea that is at the heart of psychoanalysis; that there is something impossible about the living and the telling of our modern lives. Impossible in the sense that we cannot see possibilities—for leading good lives, for political justice, for living without religious consolation, for sexual satisfaction and relations between the sexes—or that there are none. That childhood is inherently catastrophic, and unrecoverable from; that the mismatch now between childhood and adulthood, men and women, the young and the old, has become intractable (Freud would always be interested in things that didn't work). When he famously said that psychoanalysis was the impossible profession—"In truth," Freud wrote to Binswanger, "there is nothing for which man's disposition befits him less than occupying himself with psychoanalysis"—he was giving us an important clue about the life he had invented for himself.<sup>8</sup> A life, it turns out, that the young Sigmund Freud wanted no one to know about.

Psychoanalysis would one day be Freud's proof that biography is the worst kind of fiction; that biography is what we suffer from; that we need to cure ourselves of the wish for biography, and our belief in it. We should not be substituting the truths of our desire with trumped-up life stories, stories that we publicize. It is, in other words, about biography that the young (and the old) Freud protests too much. As though biography was, as Karl Krauss the Viennese satirist famously remarked of psychoanalysis, the symptom that was purporting to be the cure. When psychoanalysis works, Freud will suggest, it cures people of their need to be their own biographers. But biography, of course, unlike psychoanalysis—though Freud seems to be forgetting this—may be aiming at truth but it is not trying to cure anybody of anything. So Freud's fussing about biography is also his way of thinking about what kinds of truth about a life

are available, and what those truths are for. And whether the truth, if it exists, is curative. Why, Freud seems to be wondering when he writes about biography, do we want what we call truths about ourselves, a question he cannot ask directly about psychoanalysis itself? So it is, as they say, of interest that for Freud at the very beginning of his professional life, biographers were the enemy. We need to note that before the invention of psychoanalysis, Freud believed that a life, his life, was not the kind of thing that could, or should, be known about. Or, at least, that life stories were not for public consumption. That life stories were an attempt to mislead. That only certain kinds of intimacy made truthfulness possible. Psychoanalysis became a way of working out what the preconditions were for truthfulness between people. And what that truthfulness could do for them.

Freud, in fact, had a lifelong aversion to biography and to biographers. He was not averse to biographical speculation himself—in his writing there are speculative biographical accounts of Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci, among others—but his misgivings about biography were a way of saying something important about psychoanalysis. Of defining psychoanalysis by saying what it is not. Or what he hopes it is not. When the writer Arnold Zweig offered to write Freud's biography in 1936, Freud replied with excessive—that is, unusually self-revealing—rancor. "To be a biographer," he wrote to Zweig,

you must tie yourself up in lies, concealments, hypocrisies, false colourings, and even in hiding a lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had, and if it were to be had we could not use it . . . truth is not feasible, mankind doesn't deserve it, and anyway isn't our Prince Hamlet right when he says that if we all had our deserts, which of us would "escape whipping"?<sup>9</sup>

To have a sense of what someone was like after reading their biography is to have been willingly duped. The biographer deceives himself and others, his subject is exposed as culpable, and the reader is not worthy of biographical truths even if they could be told, which they can't. In biography the truth is neither available, useful, nor feasible. But in psychoanalysis, Freud intimates, which deals with similar material, it may be: the analyst doesn't have to give a misleading account of the patient because he can check it against the patient's account; and he doesn't have to position himself as judge, or indeed as in any way punitive. The private thoughts that are episodes in peoples' lives can never be episodes in their biographies; psychoanalysis would encourage the voicing of private thoughts. Unlike a biography, and indeed unlike Hamlet, psychoanalysis is a conversation, and not a piece of writing (it doesn't have a known beginning, middle, and end). The patient has the opportunity to speak for himself, to answer back, to go on with the conversation; a different way of being truthful is available to both the analyst and the patient. The unconscious has no biography. Biographical truth is not to be had, but personal truth may be; and it may be useful, feasible, and something to which we may be entitled.

And then, of course, there is the possibility that Freud is being so defensive here because he also feels that the analyst and the biographer may be more similar than he would wish—psychoanalysis does, after all, trade in biographical truth—and that something immoral, something suspect about the analyst, is exposed by the art of biography. That the analyst, like the biographer, can never be beyond suspicion (the analyst is no more immune than anyone else from psychoanalytic interpretation; everyone is equally, that is, immeasurably, unconscious). Perhaps the role of psychoanalyst, as many of its critics would say, ties the analyst up in lies, concealments, hypocrisies, false

colorings, and even in hiding a lack of understanding; and perhaps what psychoanalysis can only ever reveal is how disreputable the patient always really is. At its most minimal Freud reveals here what the lifelong practice of psychoanalysis had left him feeling about so-called human nature (and we may wonder what the effect of this was on the way he, and his followers, practiced psychoanalysis). Did a life of psychoanalysis leave him feeling like the biographer he described? And were the motives of the psychoanalyst comparable to the biographers who, Freud claimed in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, “sacrifice truth to an illusion, and for the sake of their infantile phantasies abandon the opportunity of penetrating the most fascinating secrets of human nature”?<sup>10</sup> It was the more intimate and strange conversations of psychoanalysis that was the real opportunity for such “penetrating” enquiries, Freud believed; and yet he couldn’t help but wonder how the psychoanalyst’s infantile fantasies—the psychoanalyst’s buried past—affected the treatment. Nor, indeed, what it was that the analyst wanted from the patient (other, that is, than his money). One way or another Freud—and the new professional he had invented, the psychoanalyst—was shadowed by the biographer. By Freud’s misgivings about what the biographer might be up to. All Freud’s work as a psychoanalyst was to be about what the experience of knowing someone—including oneself—was like. Describing why and how biography was misleading clearly helped Freud define what he took to be the new truthfulness of psychoanalysis.

At a time when the boundaries between the public and the private life were shifting, Freud, as it turns out, was to become the great defender of the privacy of the self. Psychoanalysis, unlike biography—and unlike the gossip and the journalism that was rife in Viennese society—was also a refuge from the public exposure of everyday life; a setting in which the self—or whatever a modern person was deemed to be—could be talked of and considered in confidence. If the public project was all

too often about dismantling (and simplifying) the aura of the powerful—and Freud, of course, was himself to be the victim of this—the project of psychoanalysis was the provision of secluded time and space to discuss the individual’s failing powers. And to discover, by the same token, what curiosity about another person—and the other person that was oneself—was good for.

So we must begin the biography of the young Freud with one scene in mind, a scene he described in a letter of 1885 to his fiancée, Martha Bernays. “One intention, as a matter of fact, I have almost finished carrying out,” he writes,

an intention which a number of as yet unborn and unfortunate people will one day resent. Since you won’t guess what kind of people I am referring to, I will tell you at once: they are my biographers. I have destroyed all my notes of the past fourteen years, as well as letters, scientific excerpts and the manuscripts of my papers. As for letters only those from the family have been spared. Yours, my darling, were never in danger. In doing so all old friendships and relationships presented themselves once again and then silently received the coup de grace (my imagination is still living in Russian history); all my thoughts and feelings about the world in general and about myself in particular have been found unworthy of further existence. They will now have to be thought all over again. . . . But that stuff settles round me like sand-drifts round the Sphinx; soon nothing but my nostrils would have been visible above the paper; I couldn’t have matured or died without worrying about who would get hold of those old papers. Everything, moreover, that lies beyond the great turning point in my life, beyond our love and my choice of profession, died long ago and must not be deprived of a worthy funeral. As for the biographers, let them worry, we have no desire to make it too easy for them. Each one of them will be right in his opinion of “The Development of the Hero,” and I am already looking forward to seeing them go astray.<sup>11</sup>

At nearly thirty, with no distinctive professional achievements, Freud thinks of himself as a hero, a man who will be worthy not of one biography but of many. And it is essential to the identity of this hero that he has to make a clean break with the past (it is not, we should note, family letters that are destroyed). And this attempt to eradicate not the past, but evidence of the past—not to mention this sense of being buried, of being suffocated by the past—will be what he discovers in his future psychoanalytic patients (one of the shibboleths of psychoanalysis is that there is no such thing as a fresh start). There is the overriding commitment to love and work—the defining values of the psychoanalytic ethos—and there is the reference to the Sphinx, alluding to the myth of Oedipus that will be at the center of Freud's work. But the people he wants to outwit (and provoke), the “unfortunate people,” are the biographers; all of whom will have their versions, but all of whom will get it wrong. Freud wants to fascinate and sabotage his biographers. As we shall see, he was to devote his life to the undoing of the biographer's work.

Freud, as a young man, needed to tell his fiancée that he didn't want to be used to gratify the desires of his biographers, their will to know him, to explain him, to sum him up. He doesn't want to be entrapped by suppositions and conjectures and assumptions. Unlike his future psychoanalytic patients he will not be able to contest their accounts. He will go on to invent a version of truth-telling in which no one has to submit to other people's descriptions, in which all descriptions are taken to be provisional and circumstantial; and in which no one is entitled to speak on someone else's behalf (as the biographer can't help but do). The psychoanalysis he will invent will be about how and why people jump to conclusions about each other, and about themselves. As we shall see, Freud had to become his own biographer—albeit a slightly new version of a biographer, but no less informed by prior conventions of the genre—to discover psychoanalysis (if Freud's question was al-

ways, what is biography a way of discovering?, his own personal answer would be, the desire of the biographer). After Freud, in other words, we have to ask, what does the biographer want his subject for? What does he want from him? What does he need him to be and not to be? What does he use his subject as a way of talking about, and what does he use his subject to avoid talking about? This makes, in the psychoanalytic way, the omissions and speculations in a biography as telling as the inclusions and the facts. And it makes a biography a double life.

There is, for example, very little on record about Freud's mother, a person, we imagine—and he encourages us to imagine—of some importance in his life; she exists in Freud biographies as a tiny catalogue of personal impressions that tend towards cliché and prejudice (“a typical Polish Jewess with all the shortcomings that implies,” and so on).<sup>12</sup> And, as Peter Gay remarks, “there is no evidence that Freud's systematic self-scrutiny touched on this weightiest of attachments, or that he ever explored, and tried to exorcise, his mother's power over him.”<sup>13</sup> It is a strange word with unfortunate connotations; not the kind of thing that Freud, or any other psychoanalyst, would have thought possible, or would have recommended. But Freud's mother, in her intractable invisibility, has been, and will always be, an unexcusable presence for Freud's biographers. More recent biographers of Freud have speculated about whether Freud had an affair with his wife's sister Minna. But whether he did, and what the consequences might have been if he did, can only be more or less interesting speculation. Freud showed us that people's sexual lives are also always a secret they keep from themselves, and why this is so. When it comes to childhood, parenting, and sexuality, the biographer, in Freud's view, is unavoidably at a loss; and in Freud's view these are the very things that constitute a life.

Freud wants us to bear in mind what the biographer might be wanting in his speculations; what the story is that the biog-

ographer wants to tell, and why he might be telling it (and why in this way, now?). From a psychoanalytic point of view what is made of the evidence is always more important (more revealing) than the evidence itself; and what is selected out as evidence, and how it is interpreted—what it is used to do—is a function of unconscious desire. Science, Freud soon realized, was sex by other means; what he would call a sublimation. So after Freud, the subject of biography becomes, among many other things, an object of desire for his biographer, at once an opportunity and a temptation. And psychoanalysis, for Freud, becomes a story about what desiring is like for any given person.

There are, then, the deceptions of biography and the supposed truths of psychoanalysis. And the truths of psychoanalysis, Freud would find, are often revealed by the repetitions in people's lives, in the things that keep happening to them, and the things they keep doing despite themselves, and that therefore insist on being thought about (Freud, for example, would keep reiterating his interest in repetition). Perhaps all a biographer can do—at least from a psychoanalytic point of view—is to keep repeating himself by describing the recurring preoccupations that make a life. And allow, and allow for, a measure of incoherence. Freud, as he begins to invent psychoanalysis, is poised between the traditions and conventions of biography and autobiography, and the revisions of psychoanalysis; which would itself become a tradition with its own conventions and rules, however contested. But the Freud who wanted to baffle his biographers, and indeed discredit biography, was also the Freud who would never be psychoanalysed, except by himself. Freud, that is to say, was someone who desired his own descriptions of himself and his life. It is perhaps not surprising that a Jew of Freud's generation would be interested in the possibilities of uncompromised self-definition, and would invent a science that would reveal its impossibility.

## 2

*Freud from the Beginning*

I have lost the thread of my discourse.

It does not matter if we find it.

—Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation*

BIOGRAPHERS, FREUD KNEW even as a young man, spoke on other people's behalf—like parents, doctors, rabbis, and politicians. Psychoanalysis was to be a medical treatment which enabled people to speak on their own behalf. This would be Freud's interest: what people could say and do, think and feel, if they could speak, as far as was possible, on their own behalf. People's capacity to speak, Freud was to find, depended on their childhood experience (people grow into their past, Freud realized, more than they grow out of it). And the collaborative treatment of psychoanalysis succeeded, in Freud's view, where the biographer would always, crucially, fail: in the reconstruction of people's childhoods. Constructions of and about the patients'