

G. S. VIERECK – S. FREUD

An Interview with Freud*

SIGMUND FREUD has played an important part in the intellectual life of the world so long that, like Bernard Shaw, he has almost ceased to be a person. He is a cultural force to which we can assign a definite historical place in the evolution of civilization.

"I have been compared to Columbus, Darwin, Kepler, and I have been denounced as a paralytic," Freud himself remarks in a survey of the history of psychoanalysis. There are those, even today, who look upon him as a scientific adventurer. The future will hail him as the Columbus of the Unconscious.

Columbus, seeking merely a new passage to Cathay, discovered a continent. Freud, attempting to find a new method of mental therapeutics, discovered the submerged continent of man's mind.

Freud brings home to us the specific forces within ourselves which bind us to our own infantile past and to the past of the race. In the light of psychoanalysis we can understand for the first time the riddle of human nature.

I have had the privilege of being Freud's guest on several occasions. Each time he revealed to me new glimpses of his fascinating personality. G.S.V.-1927.

"Seventy years have taught me to accept life with cheerful humility."

The speaker was Professor Sigmund Freud, the great Austrian explorer of the nether world of the soul. Like the tragic Greek hero, Oedipus, whose name is so intimately connected with the principal tenets of psychoanalysis, Freud boldly confronted the Sphinx.

Like Oedipus, he solved her riddle. At least no mortal has come nearer to explaining the secret of human conduct than Freud.

Freud is to psychology, what Galileo was to astronomy. He is the Columbus of the subconscious. He opens new vistas, he sounds new depths. He changed the relationship of everything in life to every other thing, by deciphering the hidden meaning of the records inscribed on the tablets of the unconscious.

The scene where our conversation took place was Freud's summer home on the Semmering, a mountain in the Austrian Alps, where fashionable Vienna loves to foregather.

I had last seen the father of psychoanalysis in his unpretentious home in the Austrian capital. The few years intervening between my last visit and the present had multiplied the wrinkles of his forehead. They had intensified his scholastic pallor. His face was drawn, as in pain. His mind was alert, his spirit unbroken, his courtesy impeccable as of old, but a slight impediment in his speech alarmed me.

* Cet entretien a paru dans Th. Reik, C. Staff, B. N. Nelson (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and the Future* (1957). New-York: National Psychological Association For Psychoanalysis, INC.

It seems that a malignant affection of the upper jaw had necessitated an operation. Since that time, Freud wears a mechanical contrivance to facilitate speech. In itself this is no worse than the wearing of glasses. The presence of the metal device embarrasses Freud more than his visitors. It is hardly noticeable after one speaks to him a while. On his good days, it cannot be detected at all. But to Freud himself it is cause of constant annoyance.

"I detest my mechanical jaw, because the struggle with the mechanism consumes so much precious strength. Yet I prefer a mechanical jaw to no jaw at all. I still prefer existence to extinction.

"Perhaps the gods are kind to us," the father of psychoanalysis went on to say, "by making life more disagreeable as we grow older. In the end, death seems less intolerable than the manifold burdens we carry."

Freud refuses to admit that destiny bears him any special malice.

"Why," he quietly said, "should I expect any special favor? Age, with its manifest discomforts, comes to all. It strikes one man here, and one there. Its blow always lands in a vital spot. The final victory always belongs to the Conqueror Worm.

*Out—out are the lights—out all!
And over each quivering form
The curtain, a funereal pall
Comes down, with the rush of a storm
And the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy 'Man,'
And its hero the Conqueror Worm.*

"I do not rebel against the universal order. After all," the master prober of the human brain continued, "I have lived over seventy years. I had enough to eat. I enjoyed many things—the comradeship of my wife, my children, the sunsets. I watched the plants grow in the springtime. Now and then the grasp of a friendly hand was mine. Once or twice I met a human being who almost understood me. What more can I ask?"

"You have had," I said, "fame. Your work affects the literature of every land. Man looks at life and himself with different eyes because of you. And recently on your seventieth birthday the world united to honor you—with the exception of your own university!»

"If the University of Vienna had recognized me, they would have only embarrassed me. There is no reason why they should embrace either me or my doctrine because I am seventy. I attach no unreasonable importance to decimals.

"Fame comes to us only after we are dead, and, frankly, what comes afterwards does not concern me. I have no aspiration to posthumous glory. My modesty is no virtue."

"Does it not mean something to you that your name will live?"

"Nothing whatsoever, even if it should live, which is by no means certain. I am far more interested in the fate of my children. I hope that their life will not be so hard. I cannot make their life much easier. The war practically wiped out my modest fortune, the savings of a lifetime. However, fortunately, age is not too heavy a burden. I can carry on! My work still gives me pleasure."

We were walking up and down a little pathway in the steep garden of the house. Freud tenderly caressed a blossoming bush with his sensitive hands.

"I am far more interested in this blossom," he said, "than in anything that may happen to me after I am dead."

"Then you are, after all, a profound pessimist?"

"I am not. I permit no philosophic reflection to spoil my enjoyment of the simple things of life."

"Do you believe in the persistence of personality after death in any form whatsoever?"

"I give no thought to the matter. Everything that lives perishes. Why should I survive?"

"Would you like to come back in some form, to be reintegrated from the dust? Have you,

in other words, no wish for immortality?"

"Frankly, no. If one recognizes the selfish motives which underlie all human conduct, one has not the slightest desire to return. Life, moving in a circle, would still be the same.

"Moreover, even if the eternal recurrence of things, to use Nietzsche's phrase, were to reinvest us with our fleshly habiliments, of what avail would this be without memory? There would be no link between past and future.

"So far as I am concerned, I am perfectly content to know that the eternal nuisance of living will be finally done with. Our life is necessarily a series of compromises, a never-ending struggle between the ego and his environment. The wish to prolong life unduly, strikes me as absurd."

"Do you disapprove of the attempts of your colleague Steinach to lengthen the cycle of human existence?"

"Steinach makes no attempt to lengthen life. He merely combats old age. By tapping the reservoir of strength within our own bodies, he helps the tissue to resist disease. The Steinach operation sometimes arrests untoward biological accidents, like cancer, in their early stages. It makes life more livable. It does not make it worth living.

"There is no reason why we should wish to live longer. But there is every reason why we should wish to live with the smallest amount of discomfort possible.

"I am tolerably happy, because I am grateful for the absence of pain, and for life's little pleasures, for my children and for my flowers!"

"Bernard Shaw claims that our years are too few. He thinks that man can lengthen the span of human life, if he so desires, by bringing his will-power to play upon the forces of evolution. Mankind, he thinks, can recover the longevity of the patriarchs."

"It is possible," Freud replied, "that death itself may not be a biological necessity. Perhaps we die because we want to die.

"Even as hate and love for the same person dwell in our bosom at the same time, so all life combines with the desire to maintain itself, an ambivalent desire for its own annihilation.

"Just as a stretched rubber band has the tendency to assume its original shape, so all living matter, consciously or unconsciously, craves to regain the complete and absolute inertia of inorganic existence. The death-wish and life-wish dwell side by side, within us.

"Death is the mate of Love. Together they rule the world. This is the message of my book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

"In the beginning, psychoanalysis assumed that Love was all important. Today we know that Death is equally important.

"Biologically, every living being, no matter how intensely life burns within him, longs for Nirvana, longs for the cessation of 'the fever called living,' longs for Abraham's bosom. The desire may be disguised by various circumlocutions. Nevertheless, the ultimate object of life is its own extinction!"

"This," I exclaimed, "is the philosophy of self-destruction. It justifies self-slaughter. It should lead logically to the world suicide envisaged by Eduard von Hartmann."

"Mankind does not choose suicide, because the law of its being abhors the direct route to its goal. Life must complete its cycle of existence. In every normal being, the life-wish is strong enough to counterbalance the death-wish, albeit in the end the death-wish proves stronger.

"We may entertain the fanciful suggestion that Death comes to us by our own volition. It is possible that we could vanquish Death, except for his ally in our bosom.

"In that sense," Freud added with a smile, "we may be justified in saying that all Death is suicide in disguise."

It grew chilly in the garden.

We continued our conversation in the study.

I saw a pile of manuscripts on the desk in Freud's own neat handwriting.

"What are you working on?" I asked.

"I am writing a defense of lay-analysis, psychoanalysis as practiced by laymen. The doctors want to make analysis except by licensed physicians illegal. History, the old plagiarizer, repeats herself after every discovery. The doctors fight every new truth in the beginning. Afterwards they try to monopolize it."

"Have you had much support from the laity?"

"Some of my best pupils are laymen."

"Do you practice much yourself?"

"Certainly. At this very moment, I am working on a difficult case, disentangling the psychic conflicts of an interesting new patient.

"My daughter, too, is a psychoanalyst, as you see. . . ."

At this juncture, Miss Anna Freud appeared followed by her patient, a lad of eleven, unmistakably Anglo-Saxon in feature. The child seemed perfectly happy, completely oblivious of a conflict or tangle in his personality.

"Do you ever," I asked Professor Freud, "analyze yourself?"

"Certainly. The psychoanalyst must constantly analyze himself. By analyzing ourselves, we are better able to analyze others.

"The psychoanalyst is like the scapegoat of the Hebrews. Others load their sins upon him. He must exercise his art to the utmost to extricate himself from the burden cast upon him."

"It always seems to me," I remarked, "that psychoanalysis necessarily induces in all those who practice it, the spirit of Christian charity. There is nothing in human life that psychoanalysis cannot make us understand. *'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.'*—'To understand all, is to forgive all.' "

"On the contrary," thundered Freud, his features assuming the fierce severity of a Hebrew prophet. "To understand all, is not to forgive all. Psychoanalysis teaches us not only what we may endure, it also teaches us what we must avoid. It tells us what must be exterminated. Tolerance of evil is by no means a corollary of knowledge."

I suddenly understood why Freud had quarreled so bitterly with those of his followers who had deserted him, why he cannot forgive their departure from the straight path of orthodox psychoanalysis. His sense of righteousness is the heritage of his ancestors. It is a heritage of which he is proud, as he is proud of his race.

"My language," he explained to me, "is German. My culture, my attainments are German. I considered myself a German intellectually, until I noticed the growth of anti-Semitic prejudice in Germany and in German Austria. Since that time, I consider myself no longer a German. I prefer to call myself a Jew."

I was somewhat disappointed by this remark.

It seemed to me that Freud's spirit should dwell on heights, beyond any prejudice of race, that he should be untouched by any personal rancor. Yet his very indignation, his honest wrath, made him more endearingly human.

Achilles would be intolerable, if it were not for his heel!

"I am glad," I remarked, "Herr Professor, that you, too, have your complexes, that you, too, betray your mortality."

"Our complexes," Freud replied, "are the source of our weakness; they are also often the source of our strength."

"I wonder," I remarked, "what my complexes are!"

"A serious analysis," Freud replied, "takes at least a year. It may even take two or three years. You are devoting many years of your life to lion-hunting. You have sought, year after year, the outstanding figures of your generation, invariably men older than yourself. There was Roosevelt, the Kaiser, Hindenburg, Briand, Foch, Joffre, George Brandes, Gerhart Hauptmann, and George Bernard Shaw. . . ."

"It is part of my work."

"But it is also your preference. The great man is a symbol. Your search is the search of your heart. You are seeking the great man to take the place of the father. It is part of your father complex."

I vehemently denied Freud's assertion. Nevertheless, on reflection, it seems to me that there may be a truth, unsuspected by myself, in his casual suggestion. It may be the same impulse that took me to him,

"In your Wandering Jew," he added, "you extend this search into the past. You are always the Seeker of Men."

"I wish," I remarked after a while, "I could stay here long enough to glimpse my own

heart through your eyes. Perhaps, like the Medusa, I would die from fright if I saw my own image! However, I fear I am too well versed in psychoanalysis. I would constantly anticipate, or try to anticipate, your intentions."

"Intelligence in a patient," Freud replied, "is no handicap. On the contrary, it sometimes facilitates one's task."

In that respect the master of psychoanalysis differs with many of his adherents, who resent any self-assertion of the patient under their probe.

Most psychoanalysts employ Freud's method of "free association." They encourage the patient to say everything that comes into his mind, no matter how stupid, how obscene, how inopportune, or irrelevant it may seem. Following clues seemingly unimportant, they can trace the psychic dragons that haunt him to their lair. They dislike the desire of the patient for active cooperation, for they fear that once the direction of their inquiry becomes clear to him, his wishes and resistances, unconsciously striving to preserve their secrets, may throw the psychic huntsman off the trail. Freud, too, recognizes this danger.

"I sometimes wonder," I questioned, "if we would not be happier if we knew less of the processes that shape our thoughts and emotions? Psychoanalysis robs life of its last enchantments, when it traces every feeling to its original cluster of complexes. We are not made more joyful by discovering that we all harbor in our hearts the savage, the criminal and the beast."

"What is your objection to the beasts?" Freud replied. "I prefer the society of animals infinitely to human society."

"Why?"

"Because they are so much simpler. They do not suffer from a divided personality, from the disintegration of the ego, that arises from man's attempt to adapt himself to standards of civilization too high for his intellectual and psychic mechanism.

"The savage, like the beast, is cruel, but he lacks the meanness of the civilized man. Meanness is man's revenge upon society for the restraints it imposes. This vengefulness animates the professional reformer and the busybody. The savage may chop off your head, he may eat you, he may torture you, but he will spare you the continuous little pinpricks which make life in a civilized community at times almost intolerable.

"Man's most disagreeable habits and idiosyncrasies, his deceit, his cowardice, his lack of reverence, are engendered by his incomplete adjustment to a complicated civilization. It is the result of the conflict between our instincts and our culture.

"How much more pleasant are the simple, straightforward, intense emotions of a dog, wagging his tail or barking his displeasure! The emotions of the dog," Freud thoughtfully added, "remind one of the heroes of antiquity. Perhaps that is the reason why we unconsciously bestow upon our canines the names of ancient heroes such as Achilles and Hector."

"My own dog," I interjected, "is a Doberman Pinscher called 'Ajax.' "

Freud smiled.

"I am glad," I added, "that he cannot read. It would certainly make him a less desirable member of the household if he could yelp his opinion on psychic traumas and Edipus complexes!

"Even you, Professor, find existence too complex. Yet, it seems to me that you yourself are partly responsible for the complexities of modern civilization. Before you invented psychoanalysis we did not know that our personality is dominated by a belligerent host of highly objectionable complexes. Psychoanalysis has made life a complicated puzzle."

"By no means," Freud replied. "Psychoanalysis simplifies life. We achieve a new synthesis after analysis. Psychoanalysis reassembles the maze of stray impulses, and tries to wind them around the spool to which they belong. Or, to change the metaphor, it supplies the thread that leads a man out of the labyrinth of his own unconscious."

"On the surface, it seems, nevertheless, as if human life was never more complex. And every day some new idea, put forward by you or by your disciples, makes the problem of human conduct more puzzling and more contradictory."

"Psychoanalysis, at least, never shuts the door on a new truth." "Some of your pupils, more orthodox than you, cling to every pronouncement that has ever emanated from you."

"Life changes. Psychoanalysis also changes," Freud observed. "We are only at the beginning of a new science."

"It seems to me that the scientific structure you have erected is very elaborate. Its fixtures—the theory of 'replacement,' of 'infantile sexuality,' and of 'dream symbols,' etc.—seem to be fairly permanent."

"Nevertheless, I repeat, we are only at the beginning. I am only a beginner. I was successful in digging up buried monuments from the substrata of the mind. But where I have discovered a few temples, others may discover a continent."

"You still place most emphasis on sex?"

"I reply with the words of your own poet, Walt Whitman: 'Yet all were lacking, if sex were lacking.' However, I have already explained to you that I place today almost equal emphasis upon that which lies 'beyond' pleasure—death, the negation of life. This desire explains why some men love pain—as a step to annihilation! It explains why all men seek rest, why poets thank—

*Whatever gods there be,
That no life lives forever
That dead men. rise up never
And even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea."*

"Shaw, like you, does not wish to live forever, but," I remarked, "unlike you, he regards sex as uninteresting."

"Shaw," Freud replied smiling, "does not understand sex. He has not the remotest conception of love. There is no real love affair in any of his plays. He makes a jest of Caesar's love affair—perhaps the greatest passion in history. Deliberately, not to say maliciously, he divests Cleopatra of all grandeur, and degrades her into an insignificant flapper.

"The reason for Shaw's strange attitude toward love, and for his denial of the primal mover of all human affairs, which robs his plays of universal appeal in spite of his enormous intellectual equipment, is inherent in his psychology. In one of his prefaces, Shaw himself emphasizes the ascetic strain in his temperament.

"I may have made many mistakes, but I am quite sure that I made no mistake when I emphasized the predominance of the sex instinct. Because the sex instinct is so strong, it clashes most frequently with the conventions and safeguards of civilization. Mankind, in self-defense, seeks to deny its supreme importance.

"If you scratch the Russian, the proverb says, the Tartar appears underneath. Analyze any human emotion, no matter how far it may be removed from the sphere of sex, and you are sure to discover somewhere the primal impulse, to which life itself owes its perpetuation."

"You certainly have succeeded in impressing this point of view upon all modern writers. Psychoanalysis has given new intensities to literature."

"It also has received much from literature and philosophy.

Nietzsche was one of the first psychoanalysts. It is amazing to what extent his intuition foreshadows our discoveries. No one has recognized more profoundly the dual motives of human conduct, and the insistence of the pleasure principle upon unending sway. His Zarathustra says:

*Woe
Crieth: Go!
But Pleasure craves eternity
Craves quenchless, deep eternity.*

"Psychoanalysis may be less widely discussed in Austria and Germany than in the United States, but its influence in literature is nevertheless immense.

"Thomas Mann and Hugo von Hofmannsthal owe much to us. Schnitzler parallels, to a

large extent, my own development. He expresses poetically much that I attempt to convey scientifically. But then, Dr. Schnitzler is not only a poet, but also a scientist."

"You," I replied, "are not only a scientist, but also a poet. American literature," I went on to say, "is steeped in psychoanalysis. Rupert Hughes, Harvey O'Higgins, and others make themselves your interpreters. It is hardly possible to open a new novel without finding some reference to psychoanalysis. Among dramatists Eugene O'Neill and Sydney Howard are profoundly indebted to you. The Silver Cord, for instance, is merely a dramatization of the Oedipus complex."

"I know," Freud replied. "I appreciate the compliment, but I am afraid of my own popularity in the United States. American interest in psychoanalysis does not go very deep. Extensive popularization leads to superficial acceptance without serious research. People merely repeat the phrases they learn in the theater, or in the press. They imagine they understand psychoanalysis, because they can parrot its patter! I prefer the more intense study of psychoanalysis in European centers."

"America was the first country to recognize me officially. Clark University conferred an honorary degree upon me, when I was still ostracized in Europe. Nevertheless, America has made few original contributions to the study of psychoanalysis."

"Americans are clever generalizers, they are rarely creative thinkers. Moreover, the medical trust in the United States, as well as in Austria, attempts to preempt the field. To leave psychoanalysis solely in the hands of doctors would be fatal to its development. A medical education is as often a handicap as an advantage to the psychoanalyst. It is a handicap, if certain accepted scientific conventions become too deeply encrusted in the mind of the student."

Freud must tell the truth at all cost! He cannot force himself to flatter America, where he has most admirers. He cannot even at threescore and ten bring himself to make a peace offering to the medical profession, which accepts him only grudgingly even now.

In spite of his uncompromising integrity, Freud is the soul of urbanity. He listens patiently to every suggestion, never attempting to overawe his interviewer. Rare is the guest who leaves his presence without some gift, some token of hospitality!

Darkness had fallen.

It was time for me to take the train back to the city that once housed the imperial splendor of the Hapsburgs.

Freud, accompanied by his wife and his daughter, climbed the steps leading from his mountain retreat to the street, to see me off. He looked gray and sad to me, as he waved his farewell.

"Don't make me appear a pessimist," he remarked, after the final handshake. "I do not despise the world. To express contempt for the world is only another method of wooing it, to gain an audience and applause!"

"No, I am not a pessimist, not while I have my children, my wife, and my flowers!"

"Flowers," he added smilingly, "fortunately have neither character nor complexities. I love my flowers. And I am not unhappy—at least not more unhappy than others."

The whistle of my train shrieked through the night. Swiftly the car bore me away to the station. Slowly the slightly bent figure and the gray head of Sigmund Freud disappeared in the distance.

Like Oedipus, Freud has looked too deep into the eyes of the Sphinx. The monster propounds her riddle to every wayfarer. The wanderer who does not know the answer she cruelly seizes and dashes against the rocks. Yet she may be kinder to those whom she destroys, than to those who guess her secret.