

Freud the Man: An Intellectual Biography By Lydia Flem. Translated by Susan Fairfield. New York: Other Press, 2003. 224 pp.

“If often he was wrong  
at times absurd  
to us he is no more a person  
now but a whole climate of opinion”

W.W. Auden

I decided to review *Freud the Man*, an intellectual biography by Lydia Flem after I read and reviewed the Peter Kramer biography of Freud. It seemed to me that Kramer and Flem were not writing about the same Freud. Kramer’s Freud is profoundly flawed, grandiose, opportunistic, vindictive, mercenary, apodictic in his thinking and wanting in clinical judgment and understanding of his patients. Freud demanded absolute loyalty from his followers, wanted to deceive his future biographers, did not credit his sources and the forebearers of his ideas, and invented a method of treatment which has limited applicability or just doesn’t work at all. Flem’s Freud is a “conqueror, an archaeologist, a detective of the human soul,” he is constantly revising his oeuvre, he is “always open, self analysis and theory begat each other,” he “moves forward along oblique pathways without trying to side step doubt or vagueness.” She continues:

“His intellectual procedure is a two fold movement: opening individual singularity out of the universal though cultural references and revealing the subjectivity of cultural figures.”

Where Kramer sees Freud as dogmatic, Flem finds him open. Flem reads Freud as human, concerned about his children and she shows us how his ideas are relevant to his daily life, to his clinical experiences to his self analysis, and to his interest in his collection of antiquities. Both Kramer and Flem agree that Freud’s wish was to “disturb the sleep of the world” but Kramer sees that as pathology related to his special treatment as a child by his family

whereas Flem connects his childhood experience with his capacity for bold speculation which she views positively.

Flem is a practicing psychoanalyst, Kramer is not. Does this account for their different views of Freud? Is Flem more positive because she uses Freud's insights everyday in her consulting room? Or should we discount her views because her professional life requires her to think well of Freud? Is Kramer's view more negative because he has not enough experience with the illuminations of Freud's psychoanalysis or does his psychiatric and pharmacologic and less psychoanalytic identity make him a more objective assessor of Freud in his work and his life?

The leit motif of Flem's volume is metaphor. Her penultimate chapter is titled "The Metaphor Man." She writes, "Optical, textual, geographical or archaeological, Freud's metaphors are attached to the body: The gaze of the hand, the foot, and always the genital. Traces on the soil, in the earth or water, or paper, wax, stone. Fleeting traces in search of an inscription of eternity, ephemeral sensations for an indelible memory. Paths blazed, body on the march. Metaphorical writing, surveys, digs, penetrates, goes astral and abandons itself to the rigorous play of creative fantasy." For me Flem's comments are a homage to Freud worthy of Auden.

In the book Flem has takes us on a journey through Freud's intellectual life. The chapters which precede The Metaphor Man are: Freud the Archeologist; The Conquistador, Athens, Rome, Jerusalem; The man Without a Country; The Man of the Book; In the Witches's Kitchen; The Shade of the Poet. Flem's evocative titles do justice to her prose. She presents a triumvirate to convey Freud's genius: artistic imagination, literary knowledge, and introspective

intuitions and shows us how they that served Freud well for a life time. But at the same time she writes about the tension Freud experiences as the “son of a humiliated Jew” (the hat in the gutter story) and the father of a new Western discipline.

Flem pays more attention fo Freud’s Jewishness than does Kramer. She focuses in particular on his relationship to Theodore Herzl and the parallels in their lives. They were from the same neighborhood in Vienna. Freud went to Paris to study with Charcot, Herzl went to Paris to cover the Dreyfus trial for the *Neue Freie Presse*. They had both belonged to a national group of German students but moved away from that pan German identity because of the evident intractable anti-Semitism. And both Herzl and Freud, Flem writes, “each in his own way, imagined an answer to this crisis of Jewish identity.”

For Herzl it was the dream of a Jewish state in another place and for Freud the other place was “the fertile soil of his unconscious,” the goal of an internal journey. And although Freud is ambivalent about Zionism, his identifications are Jewish: Joseph the dream interpreter, Moses who does not get to the promised land, and perhaps his namesake Solomon, a king of Israel and the author of one of the most “beautiful erotic poems ever written,” the Song of Songs. At the end of his life, when he has to leave Vienna for London, his Gestapo forced exile in London, he refers to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai, who after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem by Titus established an academy in Yavneh. .

Flem looks at Freud’s Jewish roots and influences from his childhood on. There was the illustrated Phillipson Bible that he first studied with his father at age seven and later with his Hebrew tutor Samuel Haimershlage during his gymnasium school years. Flem calls our attention to the influence of that important Jewish enlightenment figure Ludwig Bourn (Loeb

Baruch) whose short text “The Art of Becoming an Original Writer,” Freud read when he was thirteen years old, an instruction in free association. Flem presents exegesis many of Freud’s important works, “Studies in Hysteria, “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,” “The Interpretation of Dreams,” “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” “Civilization and its Discontents,” “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxieties. “ and finally “Moses and Monotheism”

Flem and Kramer agree that Freud was a great writer, a great stylist, the winner of the 1930 Goethe prize for writing, but Flem also sees Freud as a great psychologist who discovered profound truths about human development and motivations. Kramer does not. Kramer ends his book begrudgingly acknowledging that he had become in Auden’s words a “climate of opinion.” Flem’s book celebrates that fact and shows Freud’s intellectual development made that happen

Flem ends the book with the chapter “Freud the Friend.” She writes about Freud’s ambivalent relationship to Jung and Fliess and less ambivalent relationships with women: Lou Andrea Salome, Marie Bonaparte, Martha and his sister in law Minna. Flem does not address Gunter Perdigao has called the dark side of Freud’s legacy, which is what Kramer’s book mostly about. His lack of tolerance for dissidence and disagreement and his need for absolute loyalty, (“the ring bearers”) and the authoritarian, restrictive structures of organized psychoanalysis which he spawned. If one accepts Kramer’s argument about the limited value of Freud’s psychoanalysis the authoritarian organizational structures this need not concern us. However, if Freud’s psychoanalysis is indeed a major discovery as Flem asserts, then those who benefit from it have an obligation to assure that it develops and is transmitted in an open and democratic way. Flem’s book her own homage to Freud presents a view of Freud which we can on balance be proud of and can serve as the foundation for our efforts to advance his discoveries and our discipline.

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