

WEEKEND

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At the age of 17, Sigmund Freud wrote to a friend: "Until now [you] have probably remained unaware that you have been exchanging letters with a German stylist. And now I advise you as a friend, not as an interested party, to preserve them – have them bound – take good care of them – one never knows."

The young Freud was prescient. His devotion to letter-writing was extraordinary, even in a period that cultivated personal correspondence as an art. He's estimated to have written 30,000 letters during the 83 years of his life. His estate contains wild and very humorous writing from his youth, passionate and revealing love letters to his fiancée, and the formative – and no less passionate – correspondence with his Berlin-based friend Wilhelm Fliess. Alongside these is correspondence documenting the "self-analysis" chapter of his life, whose peak is the discovery of the Oedipus complex and the solution to the riddle of the dream. By the time he was 30, it was clear that for Freud letter-writing occupied a place not only in his interpersonal relations but also in his discoveries, in the emergence of psychoanalysis as a world scientific movement and in sustaining his unflagging creativity.

Freud's correspondents could take note of the tension between his positivist aspirations as a scholar and a physician, and the poetic and lyrical elements of his personality; become acquainted with the interplay of revolutionism and conservatism in his thought; and be regaled with his thoughts about femininity, sexuality, parenthood, money, smoking, cancer, ecology, archaeology and "an inhuman law devoid of empathy, which imposes the pursuit of a pregnancy even on a mother who does not want it."

These correspondents, unlike the readers of his books and his scientific papers, learned how he felt about his public status, about politics, the war of 1914-1918, metaphysics and culture. They were convinced of both his adamancy and his openness in regard to the innovations they suggested, and got to know his changing thoughts about psychoanalytic technique, the interpretation of dreams, the place of early sexual trauma in the life of the psyche and about homosexuality. With some people, he shared his thoughts in the wake of his meeting with Albert Einstein and about the odd fantasy he cultivated in his younger days to analyze the Russian czar and thereby avert a second world war.

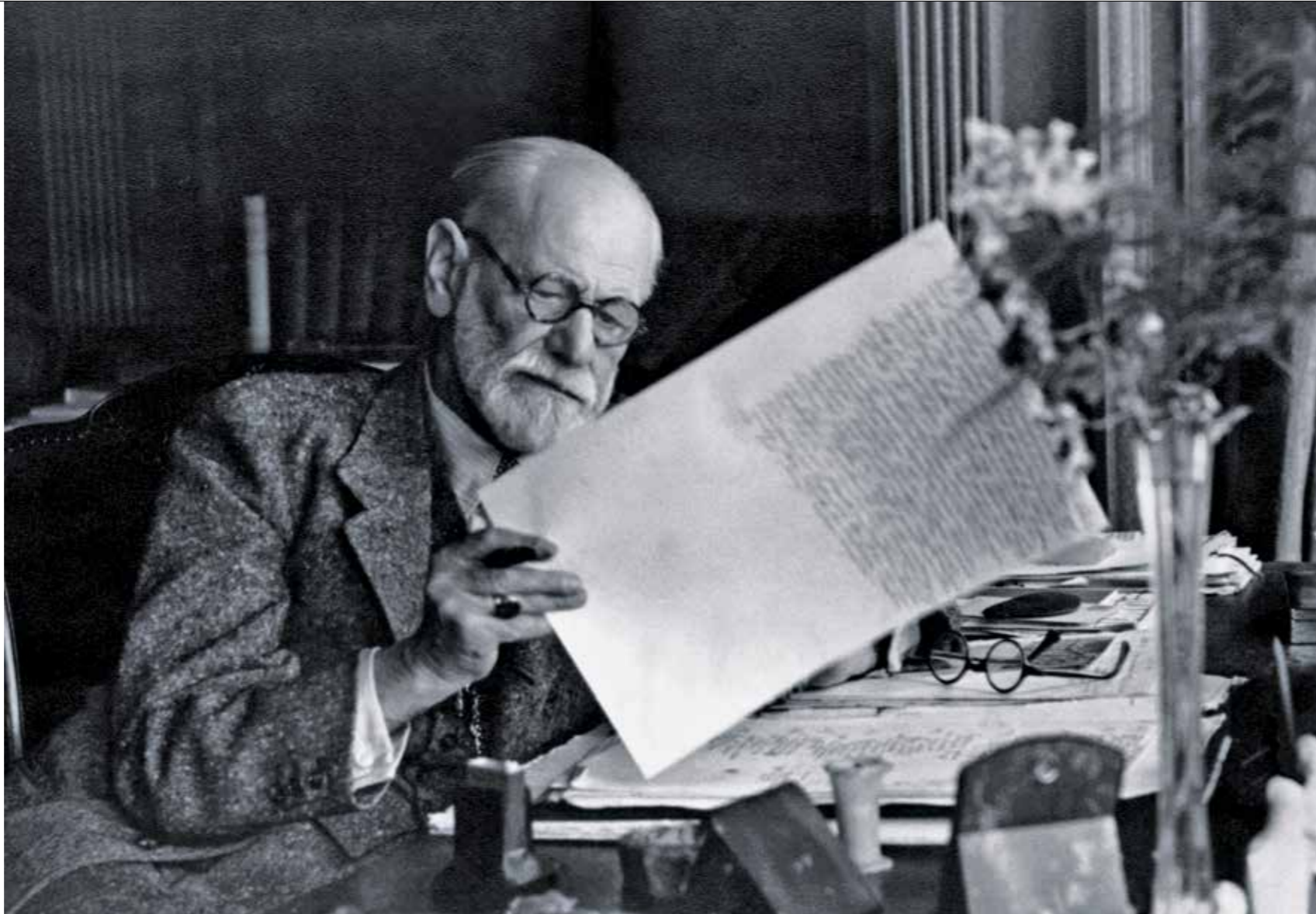
Freud enjoyed surprising recipients of his letters with sensational reports and various items of personal news: about his decision to stop smoking (which lasted exactly until he finished writing the letter in which he described that decision) or about a jolting encounter with Austrian anti-Semitism, which he experienced as a resident in a hospital, as he recounted it to his fiancée, Martha Bernays:

"On Sunday Koller was on duty at the Journal, the man who made cocaine so famous and with whom I have recently become more intimate. He had a difference of opinion about some minor technical matter with the man who acts as surgeon for Billroth's clinic, and the latter suddenly called Koller a 'Jewish swine.' Now you must try to imagine the kind of atmosphere we live in here, the general bitterness – in short, we would all have reacted just as Koller did: by hitting the man in the face. The man rushed off, denounced Koller to the director who, however, called him down thoroughly and categorically took Koller's side. This was a great relief to us all. But since they are both reserve officers, he is obliged to challenge Koller to a duel and at this very moment they are fighting with sabers under rather severe conditions. Lustgarten and Bettelheim (the regimental surgeon) are Koller's seconds."

"I am too upset to write any more now, but I won't send this letter off till I can tell you the result of the duel. [...] All is well, my little woman. Our friend is quite unharmed and his opponent got two deep gashes. We are all delighted, a proud day for us. We are going to give Koller a present as a lasting reminder of his victory."

Similarly, Freud's enigmatic Jewishness, which has deeply preoccupied his biographers, cannot be understood without reading his letters. The same holds for his attitude toward socialism, his response to the Nazis' rise to power, his take on the Zionist movement, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the incipient acceptance of psychoanalysis in Hebrew culture, and his thoughts on death, telepathy and archaeology, music and dogs. Above all, without his letters it is impossible to understand his attitude toward the truth – that is, his daily relationship with truth and the depth of his commitment to it, a topic that runs like a thread through Freud's epistolary writing. In a letter from 1882, he wrote to Bernays:

"For my beloved Marty,
"I am beginning these notes without waiting for your answer, my girl, in order to tell you more about myself



Freud, in his Vienna office, in 1930 His epistolary writing can be seen as a continuation of the self-analysis of one who was already convinced that the unconscious needs another in order to tell the subject's story.

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Epistolary epiphanies

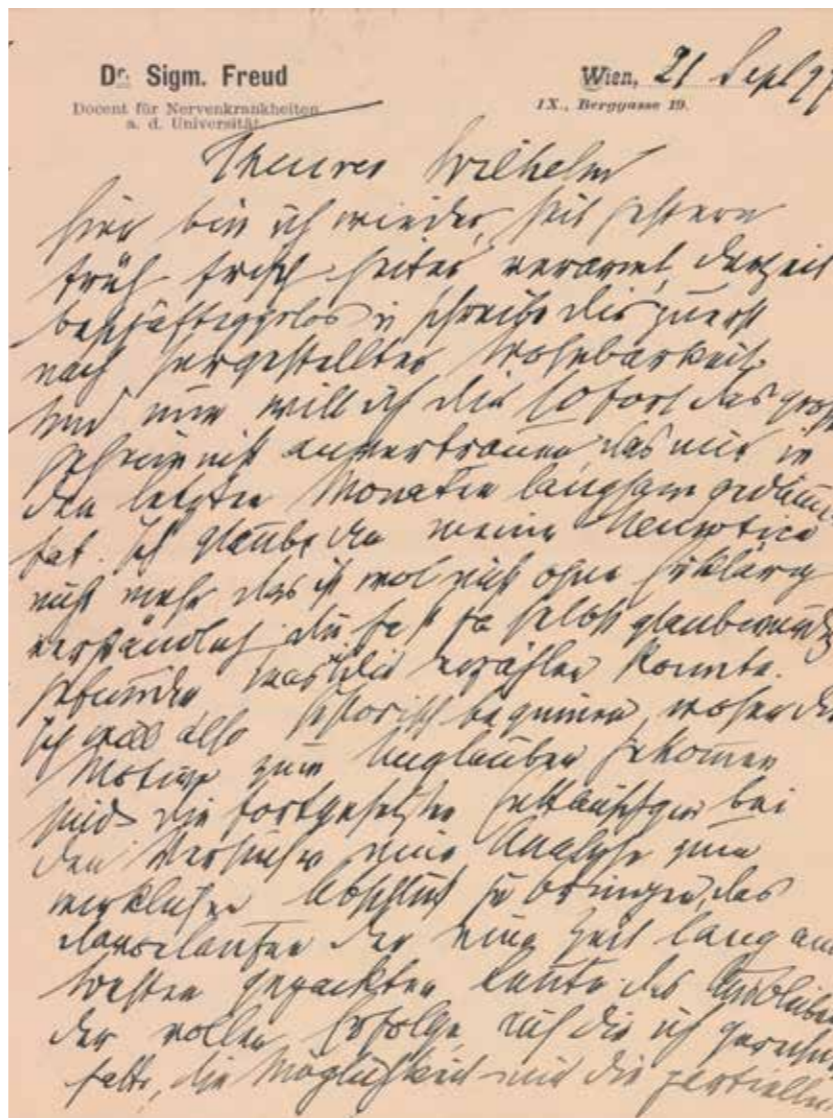
Romance, anti-Semitism, homosexuality, friendship – the vast trove of Sigmund Freud's letters sheds light not only on the subjects that occupied the father of psychoanalysis, but also on the role the very act of writing them played in his life

and my activities than our personal contact would allow. I am going to be very frank and confidential with you, as is right for two people who have joined hands for life in love and friendship. But as I don't want to keep on writing without receiving an answer I will stop as soon as you fail to respond. Continuous inner monologues about a beloved person that are not corrected or refreshed by that person lead to false opinions about the mutual relationship, and even to estrangement when one meets again and finds things to be different from what one had thought. Nor shall I always be very affectionate, sometimes I will be serious and outspoken, as is only right between friends and as friendship demands. But in so doing I hope you will not feel deprived of anything and will find it easy to choose between the one who values you according to your worth and merit, and the many who try to spoil you by treating you as a charming toy."

Public interest in Freud's letters began with a bundle of his letters that found their way to Paris and in 1937 came into the possession of the French psychoanalyst Princess Marie Bonaparte. When she informed Freud that she had purchased his letters to Fliess from a German bookseller, he wrote back that he would like her to do with them what a Jew does when cooking a peacock: He cooks it, buries it for a week and then retrieves it from the ground and throws it into the garbage. Bonaparte insisted on keeping the letters, and during the Nazi occupation transferred them to London. "Just imagine," she wrote to Freud, "that we didn't have Goethe's conversations with Eckermann, or the dialogues with Plato."

Like wolves intent on devouring prey, historians of psychoanalysis cast their gaze on the huge wooden closet that stood next to Anna Freud's bedroom in London, where she had stored her father's letters.

It was Kurt Eissler, a New York psychoanalyst who founded the Freud Archive in the 1950s and started systematically collecting Freud's letters from around the world, and who was finally permitted to open the closet and read the letters to Fliess, which are considered the cradle of psychoanalysis. He felt that he held the fate of an entire science in his hands. Hidden within the letters, is there also testimony about sexual exploitation of patients by their parents, which Freud knew about and repressed? Does the Freudian revolution rest on an original sin capable of refuting psychoanalysis and all its thinking from Freud until our day? Those questions will continue to occupy Freud scholars for decades to come. But the interest in his letters to Fliess sparked a desire to become acquainted with the totality of Freud's epistolary writing. Its contours were gradually revealed as an immense continent made up entirely of letters. And they, in their turn, validated the assertion of Thomas Mann, another of Freud's correspondents,



An 1897 letter from Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, with the first mention of the Oedipus complex, identified more closely than any other concept with Freud's thought.

U.S. Library of Congress

It's not the 'limitations of writing' or the connection between 'truth and creating' that occupy Freud; it's the limitations of self-knowledge and self-awareness.

that Freud's contribution to German literature is as great as his contribution to science.

Obligatory self-observation

"A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealousy of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood, even if not so early as in children who have been made hysterical [...] If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the objections that reason raises against the presupposition of fate; and we can understand why the later 'drama of fate' was bound to fail so miserably. The Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in

the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one."

That 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess contains the first mention of the Oedipus complex, which is identified more closely than any other concept with Freud's thought. But a perusal of his letters (preserved in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., which is the custodian of the Sigmund Freud Archives, they are addressed to 600 different recipients) shows that the obligation of self-observation – an ideal that drove millions of educated Europeans beginning in the 18th century to keep diaries in which they documented themselves before retiring for the night – reached new heights in Freud's epistolary writing. The writing of a letter – and in this,

the epistolary genre, which by definition involves communication with another individual, surpasses the boundaries of the "ideal self" addressed in a tiresome diary – entails a certain risk. Writing to another person will almost always overwhelm the writing self and bring to light something the author had not intended to reveal to his interlocutor or to himself. I tend to see Freud's epistolary writing as the continuation of the self-analysis of one who was already convinced that the unconscious needs another in order to tell the subject's story. Here's what Freud sounded like in a letter to his fiancée while he was studying under Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris in 1886:

"I consider it a great misfortune that nature has not granted me that indefinite something which attracts people. I believe it is this lack more than any other which has deprived me of a rosy existence. It has taken me so long to win my friends, I have had to struggle so long for my precious girl, and every time I meet someone I realize that an impulse, which defies analysis, leads that person to underestimate me. This may be a question of expression or temperament, or some other secret of nature, but whatever it may be it affects one deeply. What compensates me for all this is the devotion shown to me by all those who have become my friends – but what am I talking about?"

"But what am I talking about?" asks the person who, within a short time, would burst the bounds of the religious confession and the literary confession and teach his patients the advantages of a new form of psychological confession – namely, the basic rule of psychoanalysis: From now on, say everything that enters your mind. When a patient in analysis asks, "But what am I talking about?" it is a sign that the analysis is working and that the patient is in the midst of a new monologue with himself.

Apparently at an extremely early stage, Freud felt that free writing of the sort that appears on stationery (with the addition of a moderate use of cocaine) was for him a condition for original scientific thinking; that he must harness the artist in himself for the benefit of the scientist he so ardently wished to be. And let us not forget that in his letters, far more than in his theoretical writing, Freud shared with his correspondents his process of creation. "I was depressed the whole time and anesthetized myself with writing, writing, writing," he wrote to the Hungarian analyst Sandor Ferenczi. To the pacifist author Romain Rolland, who wished to interest him in the treasures of Indian culture, he would write, "In our perception, even thinking is a regressive process" (that is, in the psychological sense).

The young Freud was an industrious scientist (400 eels fell prey to his research on the reproductive organs of the wretched creatures). His early articles attest to his also having been a gifted clinician. But it's doubtful

that he would have discovered the healing potential that free association can have – when it encounters a listener who is in a state of free-floating attention and surrenders to the flow of his unconscious thoughts – if he had made do with dissecting eels, scurrying between patients or publishing case histories of hysterical women, without spending long hours alone in his room writing letters. Accordingly, the birth of psychoanalysis should be attributed to a successful fusion between ambition, inquisitiveness and persistence, and the creative imagination and extraordinary verbal abilities with which Freud was endowed. In other words, one can draw a connection between his scientific discoveries and his response to the urge to write, to keep a record, to capture himself in the word and to share with others everything that entered his mind.

"I know that in writing I have to blind myself artificially in order to focus all the light on one dark spot, renouncing cohesion, harmony, rhetoric and everything which you call symbolic, frightened as I am by the experience that any such claim or expectation involves the danger of distorting the matter under investigation, even though it may embellish it. Then you come along and add what is missing, build upon it, putting what has been isolated back into its proper context. I cannot always follow you, for my eyes, adapted as they are to the dark, probably can't stand strong light or an extensive range of vision. But I haven't become so much of a mole as to be incapable of enjoying the idea of a brighter light and more spacious horizon, or even to deny their existence." (Letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, May 25, 1916)

Freud's letters are not only texts of "candor," in the tradition of the confessions of Augustine, Goethe or Rousseau. They are concise documents that possess the power to arouse questions such as "What is thought?" or "What is sincerity?" Freud does not wallow in the impossibility of communication through letters – a motif that has engaged wordsmiths, men and women alike, from time immemorial in their correspondence with their lovers. It's not the "limitations of writing" or the connection between "truth and creating" that occupy him; it's the limitations of self-knowledge and self-awareness. Patently he would dispute Franz Kafka's pronouncement (in one of his letters to Milena) that writing letters is "an intercourse... with one's own ghost." Readers of Kafka's autoerotic love letters are able, in my opinion, to understand why Kafka attributed the calamity of his life to the possibility of writing letters, and why he accused his own letters of "always betraying him."

Not so for Freud. He takes pleasure in writing, and the words cascade from him generously and assuredly, but as a person of emotional and intellectual partnership, even letters to a beloved one or to an intimate friend are no substitute for the desire to rub up against the lives of others. Accordingly, the recipient of a letter from Freud didn't feel that the great man had "done him a favor" by replying to him. Freud did not hide from his correspondent his feeling that he, Freud, needed the epistolary presence in his life and acknowledged his dependence on an "intelligent reader" like him. So it's easy to imagine the surprise of Yohanan Levinson, a dentist from Kibutz Givat Brenner, when he received a detailed letter from Freud in 1936, who was then at the height of his fame. Forthrightness and love of the truth also characterized his replies to many authors who solicited his opinion of their writing.

'Excess libido'

"What I have to say about your argument will not surprise you, as you seem to be familiar with my attitude to philosophy (metaphysics). Other defects in my nature have certainly distressed me and made me feel humble; with metaphysics it is different – I not only have no talent for it but no respect for it, either. In secret – one cannot say such things aloud – I believe that one day metaphysics will be condemned as a nuisance, as an abuse of thinking, as a survival from the period of the religious Weltanschauung. I know well to what extent this way of thinking estranges me from German cultural life. Thus you will easily understand that most things I read in your essay have remained unappreciated by me, although I several times felt that the essay contained quite 'brilliant' thoughts." (Letter to Werner Achelis)

When correspondence with a student or a friend loses its flavor, the significance is that the entire relationship is in doubt. Freud did not hide that truth from correspondents. "You will undoubtedly suppose that I am writing to you from practical motives and not from an inner urge after such a long break. And that is so," he wrote to Fliess in one of the letters concluding long years of intensive relations. When relations with Carl Jung foundered, Freud observed them from an epistolary perspective,

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