

*A Dream of Undying Fame: How Freud Betrayed His Mentor and Invented Psychoanalysis*  
by Louis Breger  
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## BOOKS

This small biography is a gem, a brilliantly polished examination of a vital aspect of Sigmund Freud's life and work: his creation of the theory of psychoanalysis and, in the service of this accomplishment, his remarkable perfidy to his teacher, Josef Breuer, the physician who had mentored Freud and, notably, had introduced him to the "talking cure." Louis Breger, a psychoanalytic scholar, clinician, and Caltech professor of psychology emeritus, has published two previous biographies, *Freud: Darkness in the Midst of Vision*, which was a deep exploration of Freud's life and work, and *Dostoevsky: The Author as Psychoanalyst*.

As he did in his earlier Freud biography, Breger provides a nuanced, balanced, and ultimately respectful examination of the history of Freud's initial forays into psychotherapeutic treatment under the guidance of Breuer and the nascent psychoanalytic ideas they developed in collaboration. Breger's criticism of Freud's ideas is tempered by compassion for Freud's evident long-standing personal torment. Breger describes Freud's lifelong obsession with becoming famous and, to that end, his betrayal of Breuer, with whom he broke professionally and socially and whom he eventually failed to credit for their critically important early collaboration.

Breger's description of Freud's early history increases our understanding of Freud's development of some later, unsubstantiated theoretical views. For instance, Breger characterizes the conflict between Freud and his fiancée's mother and older brother:

"These fights were unconscious remnants of his reactions to all those

sisters who took his mother from him as a child. . . ."

Confirmatory bias occurs throughout Freud's writings, and Breger brings it compassionately to life. He makes it clear that Freud's mind, brilliant as it could be in generating ideas, was simply not open to the possibility of disconfirmation of these same ideas. Although he initially framed his formulations as hypotheses, with the passage of time—but with no supporting evidence—he came to express these formulations as fact. He had to be right, and he required unwavering loyalty from his colleagues. This was a central tragedy limiting his greatness and his humanity.

Freud and Breuer claimed that cathartic recall of traumatic memories "immediately and permanently" relieved hysterical symptoms. However, as Breger notes, "it was much more difficult to achieve cures in practice than this statement implies." Contemporary evidence suggests that traumatic symptoms are less likely to be relieved by such clinical approaches than by methods intended to produce competing, benign memories. If Freud and Breuer were correct, one would expect, for instance, that the vivid, cathartic flashbacks of soldiers would be self-limiting, if not altogether curative, which they are not.

Since Freud is otherwise so vulnerable to confirmatory bias and other logical errors in the service of promoting his assertion that, for example, sexual factors underlie all forms of neurosis, one wonders how reliable Freud's claims might be of any of the details unearthed from patients' reports. Breger does not raise this specific concern, but, in the absence of

confirmatory evidence, we can never know the accuracy of assertions such as Freud's claim that a young girl had been "sexually molested each night by her governess."

In fact, one might interpret the following to be a reflection of Freud's awareness of a fictional element to his case studies:

"It still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science."

Freud's thinking was highly metaphorical—a fact that enlivened his writings but that also limited their basis in science. More, this dissociated his ideas from reality. He was, apparently, sometimes aware of this. Breger quotes a letter to Fliess, in which Freud confesses, "I no longer believe in my neurotica," adding that "there are no indications of reality in the unconscious." A contemporary critic of Freudian theory would be hard-pressed to express it more concisely.

Although Breger observes that it is this "fictional" quality to Freud's narrative style that enriches his writing and renders it so compelling, the question of its factual accuracy remains open. One glimpses the apparent ease with which a thought Freud may have had about his own psychology becomes a "fact" about everyone's. "A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, the phenomena of being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and *I now consider it a universal event in early childhood (italics mine).*"

Thus, Freud admits that he takes an experience of childhood feelings of his own (taken by him as real, though

we cannot know why) and then, as if by magic, he *considers* the experience to be a universal one. One can make the case that Freud's theories—his assertions about others' psychology—were essentially projections of his own sense of self. The fact that there is a kernel of truth to some of them reflects that his own psychology was not so different than that of most humans.


Breger's clinical acumen is beautifully rendered in his analysis of Oedipal theory. "Freud's substitution of his universal Oedipal theory for one based on real traumas was a mixture of truth and speculation. It revealed his wish for his mother's love and her loss to a rival, though he made the need for mother-infant attachment 'sexual' and substituted his father for the many babies who took his place. At the same time, it made him into a warrior, a young Oedipus, in combat with a king. It also did away with real traumas, sexual or any other kind, and gave primary emphasis to instincts and fantasies. In this new theory, it was not what actually happened that was the source of fear, depression, and symptoms—"the worries that robbed me of my youth"—but rather the young child's drive for pleasure, Oedipal fantasies, and sexual wishes that conflicted with moral standards. In addition, the theory itself—immediately promoted to 'universal' status—

became Freud's bid for 'eternal fame'; it would make him a great scientist."

Breger's depiction of Freud's personality, especially his desperate quest for fame, shows us a pitiable man. For all of Freud's substantial talent at observation and, more, for his distinct and articulate expression, his personal torment was a profoundly limiting quality. With the benefit of contemporary psychological knowledge, one can readily see that many of Freud's ideas were based primarily upon his rich imagination. His talent for fantasy was surely as capacious as that of his hysterical patients. This commonality likely contributed to his extensive range of ideas, but not to their critical examination.

Breger suggests that Freud's *Studies in Hysteria* "began a revolution in our understanding of human personality and psychological disturbance." He adds that Freud "pushed the field in a number of fruitful directions." Freud's emphasis on both the existence and the ubiquity of unconscious motivation and on the potential meaningfulness of dreams continue to be powerful cultural influences. However, when Freud chose to not test his theoretical formulations with empirical research, he also led the field astray. Moreover, one might argue, he contributed significantly to the delay in the growth of the science of psychology, and especially to the de-

lay in our understanding of personality and psychopathology. His overwhelming need for fame—and his corollary need, to be always correct—were, perhaps, satisfied. But his distortion of psychoanalysis from testable theory to a "cause" cast it into the category of dubious beliefs. "How different things would have been if, instead of a cult-like 'cause,' psychoanalysis had really been the science that it claimed to be. . . ." If only, Breger suggests, Freud could have continued to collaborate with Breuer.

This book is a remarkably successful depiction of a central aspect of Freud's life. Breger has written it as a scholar, yet it reads like a mystery, the solution to which is both compelling and tragic. —JB 

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