Book Reviews

An Unwilling Subject for the Biographer

The Psychoanalytic Revolution. Sigmund Freud's Life and Achievement. MARTHE ROBERT. Translated from the French edition (Paris, 1964) by Kenneth Morgan. Harcourt, Brace, and World, New York, 1966. 396 pp. $6.95.

In 1956 Ernest Kris, a famous pupil of Sigmund Freud, wrote a paper called "The Personal Myth," which describes the unconscious and conscious attempts of certain patients to develop and embellish biographies of themselves which fit not the facts, but the way they wish people to think of them. Sigmund Freud, from early in his life, carefully created a personal myth with the express purpose of frustrating future biographers. As is now well known, Freud had an intense sense of his place in history. The famous anecdote that illustrates this prescience tells of his being presented on his 50th birthday with a portrait medallion circumscribed by the line from Sophocles: "Who divined the famed riddle [of the Sphinx] and was a man most mighty." Freud turned pale, and revealed that, as a young student at the University of Vienna, while wandering in the court among the busts of famous professors he had had a fantasy in which he saw his own bust there with the identical words inscribed on it. There is a curious paradox in the records Freud left of himself which I suspect makes a really satisfactory biography of him impossible. Because of the nature of his work, he drew upon himself and his own psychoanalysis again and again to illustrate various theoretical points. These illustrations in one way revealed him to a depth that had never before been exposed in any man; but his awareness of this fact, combined with his anticipation of the historical record, led him invariably to limit the exposure to the point he wanted to make and to go no further. He had, after all, invented the game he was playing, so he was extraordinarily successful at maintaining those limits—a most frustrating situation for biographers. He often destroyed letters and manuscripts, and in many other ways went to great lengths to preserve his personal myth.

Despite Freud's efforts to suppress them, his letters to Wilhelm Fliess came to light; and because the material concerning his inner life is titillating and yet so circumscribed, biographers, certainly including Marthe Robert, have tended to make much of these letters to Fliess, a strange man with whom Freud maintained a very close friendship for almost ten years. It is the same sort of mistake psychoanalysts make (and are harshly and correctly criticized for) when they attempt to do a psychoanalysis solely from letters, papers, published work—which are, for this purpose, secondary sources. The Fliess letters supply a rich and fascinating view of the development of Freud's ideas and certainly illuminate one facet of Freud's complex character and relationships; but equally certainly, they do not supply the key to all that Freud strove to conceal.

In fact, my leading criticism of Robert's book relates to her efforts to tie up Freud's work with his underlying conscious or unconscious personal concerns and preoccupations. Before elaborating that complaint, let me say that *The Psychoanalytic Revolution* is an excellent book and supplies a much-needed alternative to Ernest Jones's biography. The one-volume condensation of Jones's three-volume study sacrifices the fascinating details that make the latter historically important without gaining the clarity that Robert's shorter and more readable book affords. Robert's obvious sympathy for Freud and his work does not prevent her from presenting events objectively and without sentimentality, and her explanations of many confusing aspects of psychoanalytic theory are clear and concise.

My reaction to her book, however, reminded me of that old joke about Hungarians: if you have one as friend, you don't need an enemy. When someone ventures what purports to be a friendly restatement of our beliefs, some ambivalence in our nature makes us want to leap to defend ourselves against it. The feeling that something basic has not been quite grasped or done justice to demands rebuttal and correction more definitively than does an attack. An attack is clear-cut, and one can go about exposing the enemy for what he is, but a friend who in the very act of solidarity diminishes the outcome and the totality of our labors creates a conflict for us. In other words, it is hard to discuss the difficulties this book presents for psychoanalysts without either seeming an apologist for psychoanalytic orthodoxy or minimizing Robert's considerable achievement.

Again and again she points out how the course of Freud's work represents a direct response to his feelings about external events—as in his essays written during and after the war—or a return to and a reworking of his own past (elucidated by the Fliess letters)—as in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and other of the more speculative essays. No man's work is unaffected by momentous contemporary events or by the deep inner feelings that help to shape his personality. But the essential point made in Freud's later works on ego psychology was that the ego, unlike the instincts, reacts slowly. The ego part of the personality responds to the demands of the id and of external reality not directly or swiftly, but ponderously while considering the greatest good of the whole individual. This means that a man's work may have a consistent direction, that it is not necessarily shunted about either by quick-changing external events or by the bombardment of urgent feelings stemming from inner vicissitudes. Somehow the view that Freud's work is motivated so directly by external stimuli or early concerns minimizes the strongest virtue of psychoanalysis, which is to afford objectivity and perspective.

The matter of ego psychology is crucial and applies to Jones's biography as well, of which the third volume, dealing with Freud's late years, is by far the weakest. Freud, as well as his biographers, felt that the great breakthrough was made in his early works —*The Interpretation of Dreams, Three Essays on Sexuality*, and others. Here he was the discoverer and the creator of a whole new field of human endeavor. To unlock the depths and secrets of the human mind, to show the relations of the past to the present, of hidden motive to later event, changed the way every man alive must look at

himself and profoundly affected all the social sciences and the humanities. As Freud grew older, however, and understood better the problems and vagaries of human relations and interactions, he turned his attention more and more from the unconscious depths of the mind to the conscious surface, from the id to the ego. In fact, it was this very turning to the problem of integration of the entire personality that moved Freud to describe the mind as three interlocking structures, the id, the ego, and the superego. The early discoveries charted the id; his later work, which laid the foundation for all modern psychoanalysis, charted the ego. The later work was far less dramatic and was the result of painstaking concern, not just with what pushes a man, but with how the pushes, the pulls, the should's, and the sensible reasons are connected. Here Freud was foremost among many workers, not a giant alone. Robert gives only one page (337–38) to ego psychology and never even mentions *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937), which many consider one of Freud's most important papers and which was a crucial influence on several important followers, Erik Erikson among them.

This neglect of the ego not only minimizes the totality of Freud's achievement but also indicates a certain lack of understanding about what makes Freud's work both so important and so difficult. Robert points out clearly and correctly that Freud's thought fundamentally resisted straight-line interpretation; in his insistence on various dualisms he presented psychoanalytic theory in terms of the balance of many forces. She does not perceive the natural evolution of this complexity into the concept of mental structures where the ego maintains discharge thresholds, perceptual capacities, thought, affect, and internalized rules of evidence simultaneously in contact with impulse, drives, and their culturally determined opposites. Freud's constant insistence upon human ambivalence and its complicated resolution makes it hard for him to be accepted by scientists who think of research as a straight-line pursuit of an answer. Freud's work makes the search for a specific, certain end point difficult if not impossible. Robert, like many others, tries to explain this inherent complexity by ascribing some aspects of Freud's work to a conflict between Freud as a scientist and Freud as a literary man, even a poet. The fact that the first great prize Freud received was the Goethe award in literature has been used again and again to indicate not just that he was a fine writer who cared about style and language, but that his work should be ranked as an artistic rather than a scientific achievement. Freud, while greatly pleased by the recognition afforded by the Goethe prize, always felt himself to be a scientist. Robert points out how much he suffered from the comparatively low scientific standards of many of his early pupils. But she quotes writers like Schnitzler to argue that their recognition of the importance to them of Freud's work proves it to be more imaginative than scientific.

It is true that much of Freud's work was highly speculative and entered realms not generally considered to be in the purview of science. But in his own view he was an experimenter, applying a rational, analytic method—kept as free as possible of moralistic, theological, and other unscientific influences—to a new science where, unfortunately, no experiments could be exactly repeated. It is a mistake, I think, to place a low estimate on Freud's own view of the matter; or perhaps the mistake lies in minimizing the power of the imagination to further the scientific study of the mind.

Robert takes us through the great suffering of Freud's later life and describes how this stern and, above all, rational man relinquished none of his convictions as he drew close to death. She brings out more directly than Jones the influence of poverty on Freud throughout his life and also its effect upon the psychoanalytic movement. By this attention to his fortitude and courage, both moral (in the early days of psychoanalysis) and physical (during his many operations and hospitalizations), she draws a human, if restricted, portrait. She knows little about his actual family life and relationships, just as he had planned that she should not, but she manages to make this lack seem not to be a serious handicap. Her lively discussion of the famous dissents and dissenters differs slightly from Jones's and presents a somewhat different picture of Jones himself in the controversies. In spite of her attempts to explain Freud's work as the outcome of his inner conflicts, she manages to show that he admitted mistakes and learned from them, that he was never satisfied and never felt that he had reached an unmodifiable conclusion.

In only one respect would I accuse her of personal bias, and that comes from her pleasure, as a Frenchwoman, in Freud's anti-Americanism. She contrasts European psychoanalysis with American to the discredit of the latter, even though she makes much of the existence in Europe of an analytic orthodoxy far more rigid than Freud well before the time of the great controversies with Adler, Jung, and Rank. Admittedly, Freud doubted that America would understand him any better than he understood America. But Robert goes further and says that in America psychoanalysis "concerned itself less with making an individual an integrated person than making him conform to social standards, thereby bringing him down to the common level."

If Robert meant only to call attention to the American capacity for preoccupation with fads, she has a valid point. But that was not Freud's fear. Freud mistrusted the self-conscious materialism of America, and he expressed his bitterness towards both sides of the Atlantic by saying, "I learned that the Old World is ruled by authority as the new is ruled by the dollar." There was no evidence that he felt, or needed to, that in America psychoanalysis per se would abandon what Heinz Hartmann calls its fundamental task, "the study of social deception and its motivations," and would become an instrument for social engineering for no matter what goal.

Erikson says of Freud, "Psychoanalysis had, to all appearances, sprung from his head like Athena from Zeus'." It is the quality of fierce originality and creativity that eludes Marthe Robert, as I think it will all of Freud's biographers.

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A Great Synthesizer

James Hutton—The Founder of Modern Geology. EDWARD BATTERSBY BAILEY. Elsevier, New York, 1967. 173 pp. $9.

This little book provides a useful condensation of the very voluminous and obscure writings of the most important geologist of all time, James Hutton (1726–1797). A much-needed similar service was provided in 1802 by Hutton's friend John Playfair, in *Illustrations of Huttonian Theory.* Bailey's contribution constitutes a 20th-century counterpart now much needed to help