

# THE MYTH OF SIGMUND FREUD

Was the father of psychoanalysis  
a closet biologist with a good sense of PR?

by *Russell Schoch*

**T**he 1962 movie *Freud* was shot in black and white and filled with stark contrasts. The opening scene shows Montgomery Clift as Freud standing undaunted before the pompous and powerful senior faculty at the University of Vienna in the late 1880s. Clift-Freud battles to convince these men of the truth of his frightening and novel ideas; he is smothered by their silence, by their ignorance, by their derision. This is but one of the many almost dreamlike images of Sigmund Freud that have spread over the consciousness of our time.

An even more powerful image shows Freud near the turn of the century, on his own, grappling now with his unconscious, doing what no other man has ever done or will ever do: analyzing himself. It was as though he went into a cave, there to confront the demons of the self. As Ernest Jones wrote shortly after Freud's death: "Copernicus and Darwin dared much in facing the unwelcome truth of outer reality, but to face those of inner reality costs something that only the rarest of mortals would unaided be able to give." To withstand the cold stares and icy incomprehension of your elders, as Freud did in Vienna in the 1880s, is one thing; but to leap into the labyrinth of your own past, to plunge into the unconscious and its maze of terrors, is to perform an act much more heroic. And dangerous—as Kurt Eissler suggests in his vivid analogy of Freud's self-analysis: It is comparable "to Benjamin Franklin's flying a kite in a thunderstorm in 1752, in order to investigate the laws of electricity. The next two persons who tried to repeat his experience were killed."

And it is this achievement, Freud's self-analysis, that

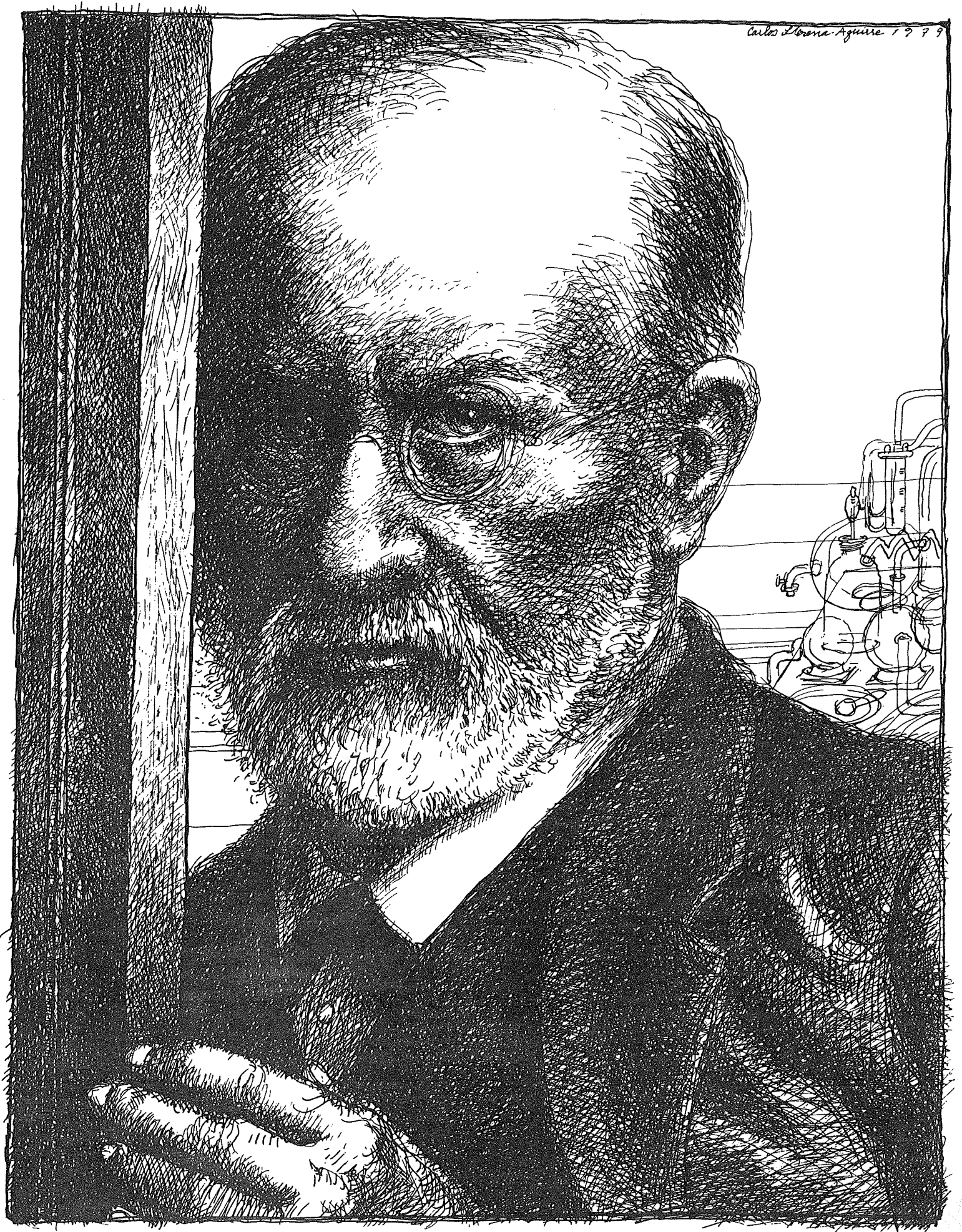
finally turned him from his days as a neurologist to his ways as a psychologist, from his concern with biology and the physical organism to that of psychology and the mysteries of the mind.

Such images, taken together, combine to form in part what might be called the legend of Sigmund Freud. But now, in an astonishing intellectual debut, a young and hitherto unknown scholar, Frank Sulloway, 32, has dismantled the mythic aura surrounding Freud.

The origin of this new species of Freud arose in Sulloway's interest in Charles Darwin. This began in 1968, when Sulloway, a junior at Harvard, was looking for a topic for his senior thesis. He sought the advice of his teacher in a course on evolutionary biology, Edward O. Wilson, who has since become a leading spokesman for sociobiology. "Go to the Galápagos," said Wilson. "You'll find all of evolution there in microcosm." Sulloway responded by organizing and raising funds for a documentary film expedition to South America to retrace parts of Darwin's famous voyage aboard H.M.S. *Beagle*. The trip produced six films and provided Sulloway with rich material for a senior thesis on Darwin.

Following his graduation from Harvard, Sulloway used a traveling fellowship to spend six months in England studying Darwin's manuscripts and *Beagle* specimens, and four months back in the Galápagos doing further research and photography. Gradually a puzzle formed in his mind: "the myth of the Voyage Conversion." Why had historians, for a hundred years, gone along with the myth that Darwin discovered evolution while on board the *Beagle*? And why, once he had returned to England and examined his specimens, was

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Darwin convinced of the theory of evolution when the experts he consulted not only criticized him for the errors he made in classifying those specimens, but also refused to buy his thesis of evolution? There were psychological questions here, some relating to scientific creativity on Darwin's part, others to historians who perpetrate myths despite evidence to the contrary.

When Sulloway returned to graduate school, he decided to read up on Freud and the theory of psychoanalysis. “I wanted to read Freud in order to answer some of those questions about Darwin and Darwin scholarship,” he recalls. But what started as a swerve into Freud ended in a seven-year detour from Darwin, resulting not only in a Harvard dissertation on the history of science, but with the publication of *Freud,*



An 1890 photo of Freud and Berlin physicist, Wilhelm Fliess.

*Biologist of the Mind*, as well. The book is packed with new information, new insights, new connections, and important implications. Perhaps the best way to unpack it is to follow Frank Sulloway's own steps—beginning seven years ago, when he decided to “read up” on Sigmund Freud.

He turned first to Ernest Jones' monumental three-volume biography of the master. “It was marvelous,” he remembers, “but it didn't explain psychoanalysis; it assumed you already knew that.” Also, something bothered Sulloway about the emphasis Jones gave to Freud's self-analysis, which occurred in the fall of 1897.

The fruit of that heroic labor, according to traditional accounts, includes the following discoveries: infantile sexuality, the Oedipus complex, the theory of dreams, the free association technique, and the concepts of transference and resistance. As one scholar has noted, “Psychoanalysis proper is essentially a product of Freud's self-analysis.”

“That didn't make sense to me,” says Sulloway. “I had an intuition similar to Freud scholar Robert Holt's: Freud was 41 in 1897, and 44 in 1900, the year *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published. He simply was too old to invent a whole new theory without its bearing the imprint of his previous scientific training in biology.” There had to be some connection, thought Sulloway, that would help to illuminate the assumptions of the new theory of psychoanalysis in a way that Jones' and others' typical accounts did not. “As an outsider,” says Sulloway, “trained in the history of science, and not a devotee of psychoanalysis, I wanted something else.”

He found it by turning next to the correspondence between Freud and Wilhelm Fliess, the Berlin physician and close friend and intellectual companion of Freud during the crucial years 1887 to 1902. Although it was only in the 1950s that the Freud-Fliess letters were published—and then only with Freud's letters incomplete and Fliess' letters not present at all—this volume already has given historians a fascinating glimpse of Freud as he struggled with, to use the English title of the letters, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*.

Who was Wilhelm Fliess? Traditional Freudians agree that Fliess was a pseudo-scientist; a mystic, perhaps a buffoon; a man who spent years pondering “the relations between the nose and the female sexual organs,” who played number mumbo jumbo with a bizarre theory of human “periodicity.” Fliess, the standard version goes, was merely a handy friend in need, vastly inferior intellectually, during Freud's dark, lonely days.

“That's what I assumed too, having read the usual interpretations of Fliess and his relation with Freud,” says Sulloway. “But something started bothering me again. In his letters to Fliess, Freud discusses what sounds like infantile sexuality as early as December 6, 1896. Freud's self-analysis occurred in the fall of 1897. So how could Freud be discussing something he wasn't supposed to discover for another nine months? That seemed odd.”

As an historian of science, Sulloway assumed that there was a context in which Freud was thinking and working—a context that would be shared by Wilhelm Fliess, even though Fliess' replies to Freud are no longer available. “There's someone on the other end of

the telephone," as Sulloway puts it. "If Fliess understood what Freud was saying to him nine months before the self-analysis, he must be part of the explanation for Freud's intellectual development—maybe Fliess was even contributing to it.

"Then I said, 'Oh, my God! Fliess *had* to believe in infantile sexuality because it was implicit in the whole nature of his own theories!'"

So Sulloway dragged out the German text of Fliess' 1897 monograph, *Die Beziehungen zwischen Nase und weiblichen Geschlechtsorganen* ("On the Relations between the Nose and the Female Sexual Organs"). "Lo and behold!" says Sulloway. "There it was: Fliess had many discussions of infantile sexuality."

Once Sulloway realized this, and realized that the emergence of the entire theory of psychosexual development was associated with Fliess' biological work, a lot of pieces began to fall into place. As he says: "All hell broke loose. The armor of the myth had been pierced. And once you've made a dent, you see other things."

To his credit the tenacious Sulloway not only versed himself in Freud's standard works, but the less familiar works on aphasia and cerebral palsy, and all of Freud's earliest papers in research biology. Sulloway also immersed himself in the scientific literature of the 19th century, some 1,200 sources in all. In sum, he read, what Sigmund Freud and his fellow workers in the broad fields of biology, psychology and neurophysiology were reading at the time. His goal: "to understand the assumptions upon which Freud built."

Sulloway recognized that he had not merely the makings of the article he had thought of writing while reconstructing the Fliess connection, but a book, a significant one. He has kept quiet the last six years—no lectures on his findings, no articles that would give the book away in bits and pieces.

The more he explored and rearranged the context of the birth of psychoanalysis, the more Sulloway came to believe that Freud's whole theory, from beginning to end, was what he calls "crypto-biology," that the legend of Freud heroically undergoing self-analysis to find a completely new, and pure, psychology was a myth.

Briefly, what Sulloway has discovered and argued in his massive intellectual biography is that there was indeed, as has been assumed, a change in Freud's mind and theories between 1895 and 1900. But it was not, he says, the change from a mechanistic physiology to a pure psychology that has been typically asserted. If anything, says Sulloway, Freud's theories became *more* biological, not less so, after the crucial years 1895 to 1900. Sulloway reads the entire Freudian corpus in this light, with convincing brilliance, right up through the



*Freud's defrocked, author Frank J. Sulloway.*

late and "speculative" works which, Sulloway counterasserts, also have a "beautiful, biological logic."

This new and lasting biological substratum in Freud's theories is composed of many things. First, there is the general influence of Darwin's evolutionary biology. Says Sulloway: "Perhaps nowhere was the impact of Darwin, direct and indirect, more exemplary or fruitful outside of biology proper than within Freudian psychoanalysis." But the evolutionary biology of Freud's day included a good many other theories, that today are little known and scientifically outmoded. Two such notions, both central to Freud's thinking, are the neo-Lamarckian theory of evolution and Ernst Haeckel's theory of recapitulation. It is Sulloway's reading of Freud in the light of such theories that allows Freud a "biological logic" never before appreciated; but such theories also give Freud's formulations a twisted base.

Haeckel's recapitulation theory, known as the biogenetic law, states that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny"—that in man the development from fetus to adulthood (ontogeny) provides a brief recapitulation of the history of the race (phylogeny). Vastly influential in the late 19th century, this theory disappeared as a scientific force by 1930, along with the Lamarckian notion that acquired characteristics are inherited.

Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, in his 1977 book *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* writes that psychoanalytic theories "cannot be properly assessed or even understood without recognizing their links to the biogenetic law. Yet these links have rarely been mentioned because so few psychologists and historians have any inkling of



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Haeckel's doctrine and its impact. Millions of lives have been influenced," Gould concludes, "by theories shaped in the light of a basic tool for any 'enlightened' late 19th-century thinker—recapitulation."

What Sulloway has done is to fill the intellectual gap outlined by Gould. In the process he has created an historical tool that should allow us more properly to assess the theory of psychoanalysis. The notion of infantile sexuality is probably the idea in the Freudian literature that is most widely known. Sulloway's discussion of Fliess' influence has dimmed any claim that



*Freud in 1919 with his future biographer, Ernest Jones.*

Freud discovered this phenomenon by himself, in or out of self-analysis. (Sulloway's chapter on "Freud and the Sexologists" adds further enlightenment.) Once Freud moved from his more strictly physiological conception of sex and neurosis, he was supported by his assumption of the biogenetic law to see sex and its causal link to neurosis everywhere—even where, in a particular case, it did not occur. For, Freud believed, the Oedipus complex, the castration complex, the various sexual phases (oral, anal, genital) all *had* occurred

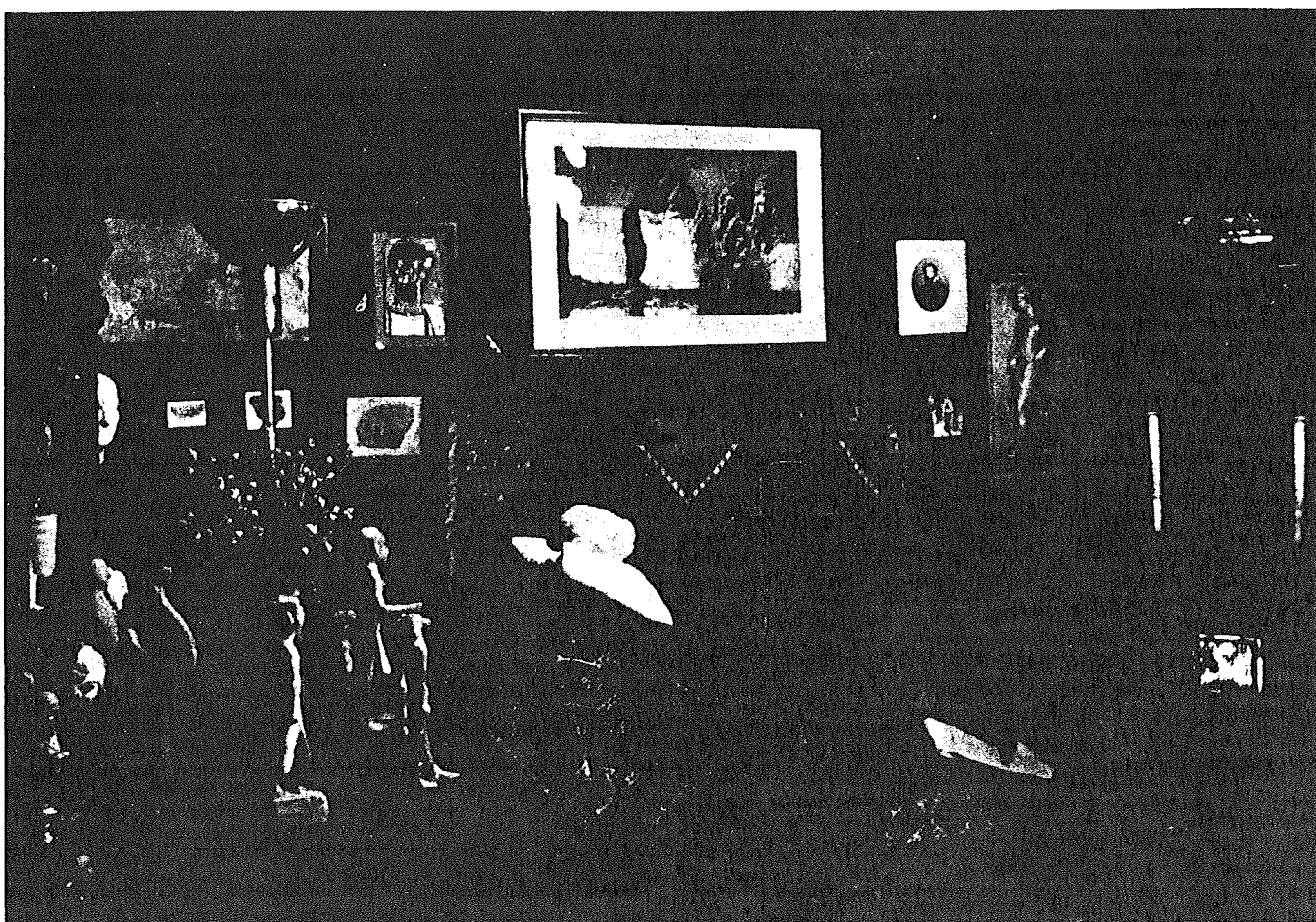
somewhere and sometime in the vast biological continuum—had actually been repeatedly felt and experienced by our ancestors, however remote—even if Johnny didn't happen to remember any urge to slay the father and bed the mother.

Freud's fundamental psychoanalytic hypotheses—psychosexual stages and their influence on later personality; wish-fulfillment in dreams; the theory of instincts; even his conception of "penis envy" in women—all stem from his erroneous biogenetic logic. "If the biogenetic law had been true," Sulloway says in conversation, "Freud would have been an almost unassailable genius." It wasn't true, and serious implications for Freudian theory are upon us. "I think I can say," Sulloway accurately claims, "that my book introduces a certain rationality, an historical rationality, in the whole debate about Freud's theories."

Once Sulloway has revealed the context of Freud's thought and has portrayed him as a crypto-biologist, he moves, in Part Three of his book, to the "epistemological politics" of myth-making within the psychoanalytic tradition. Here too it's a matter of resupplying an historical context, because what is necessary for the construction of a myth, according to Sulloway, is "historical decontextualization." Myths must deny history in order to substitute something ahistorical in its place. Freud twice "denied history" by burning his personal papers (in 1885 and 1907). And Freud and his followers worked to the same effect by perpetuating the interlocking myths of Freud the Hero and Freud the Pure Psychologist.

Why? For the good of the Cause. If Freud's theories are not tied to the biological theories of their day, but come instead from a more universal source (the unconscious) and through a more heroic action (Freud's own self-analysis), then the psychoanalytic movement gains a mythical strength and independence. It also finds a ready answer to its critics: "Your resistances are showing—perhaps you should consider psychoanalysis."

Freud's followers and psychoanalytic biographers, the first "psychohistorians," completely missed the mark when working in their own backyard, writes Sulloway. They sought in the historical record of Freud's life a confirmation of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. It makes sense that they would attempt to do this. If the way to find the truth of an individual's life is to psychoanalyze him, then the way to write the true account of Freud's life is to write it psychoanalytically. Hence in classical, Freudian jargon, Fliess becomes a "transference figure," and Fliess' own works, which shed enormous light on the context of Freud's develop-



*Numerous Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities filled Freud's study displaying his fascination with the past.*

ing thought, go unread.

To assume that psychoanalysis sprang full-blown from Freud's head—"like Athena from the head of Zeus," as Erik Erikson has described it—is to have an extremely impoverished notion of history, one that ignores and denies the context in which Freud worked. Ernest Jones' biography is thus a mythical version of Freud's life, which denies the rich, historical context. Frank Sulloway's new study announces, in effect: Where myth was, there shall history be. His reconstruction of the Fliess missing from *The Origins of Psychoanalysis* is but one example of many detective-like discoveries he makes along the way.

It is fitting that Sulloway be permitted one long quotation, from a paragraph that forms part of his conclusion and gives a general sense of what Sigmund Freud looks like at the end of this revolutionizing book:

The sequence of intellectual development that I have documented in Freud's work mirrored changes that were occurring in medical psychology in general throughout the last two decades of the 19th century. And therein lies the great interest that Freud's intellectual transformation holds for the historian of ideas. For 30 years, the intellectual influence of Darwin and evolutionary theory laid the groundwork for a sophisticated new paradigm of human behavior. . . . But few thinkers took the

step from a physiological to an evolutionary theory of mind more ardently than did Sigmund Freud. . . . Perhaps no one synthesized the biological assumptions of his scientific generation more boldly than did Freud.

Where, finally, is Freud placed once this powerful and cumulative argument has come to an end? *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* is a delicate mixture of criticism, revelation, and respect. It leaves Freud displaced, but not re-placed. Sulloway says that he fought long and hard against being judgmental in his book. "I didn't want to use my historical advantage against Freud. I wanted instead to do the historian's job—to place Freud in the context of his time."

Sulloway has carried a torch to the back of the cave of Freudian scholarship, and he has not only cast brilliant new light on that construction, he has come close to burning it down. Harvard historian Donald Fleming, one of the first readers of this book, says "The whole of the existing literature on Freud has been rendered obsolete." But *Freud, Biologist of the Mind* is by no means an ending. It is a beginning, an opening. It cuts Freud loose from the mythical but gripping figure we had come to know—and love or hate. □

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