

Faustian, Fantasist, and Fraud

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Freud: The Making of an Illusion

By Frederick Crews

(Holt/Metropolitan Books, 2017)

The distinguished literary critic Frederick Crews has written an extraordinarily brilliant, profound, detailed, and judicious book about the first fifty years of the life of Sigmund Freud (1856 to about 1910) that shows the exact means by which the Freud enterprise, legend, establishment, and influence were created. His conclusions are devastating to what remains of the myth of Freud's integrity as a person, scientist, and thinker. On the very last page, Crews tells us that the "commercial mentality is what set Freud apart from the ethical scientists and physicians of his era," whom he alternately flattered, plagiarized, and defamed. According to Crews, "Members of those groups, loyal not to a business but to the idea of objective inquiry, felt constrained to abandon measures and beliefs that had failed to garner empirical support. But Freud, who cared only about the cause to which his name was attached, found it imperative to inflate his results, to make promissory claims, to meet objections through sophistry, scorn, and ad hoc tinkering, and to pile further theory atop postulates that had never been validated." The documentation of these conclusions fills the more than seven hundred

pages of this magisterial volume. It is surely Crews's magnum opus.

Professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Berkeley, Crews has written and edited important books on topics including Hawthorne, Henry James, and E. M. Forster. Crews was an enthusiastic Freudian in the 1960s, when Freud's influence in the humanities was at its height. But by the middle of the 1970s, Crews's attachment had begun to weaken, a development he credits to his encounter with writings in the philosophy of science by figures such as Ernest Nagel, Sidney Hook, Karl Popper, and Adolf Grünbaum. After his initial shock, Crews set out to educate himself in the history and philosophy of science, and in biology and psychology, as well as studying the biography of Freud and the history of his immensely successful movement. The results of these efforts have augmented a growing mass of critical resistance and provide an antidote to Freud, whose claims Crews has subjected to the most radical scrutiny.

Through a carefully documented chronological narrative of Freud's career, Crews succeeds in showing that from very early on Freud's ambition, egotism, and desire

for money and fame led him to exploit “the ethical scientists and physicians of his era,” whose professional standards of conduct he mimicked as and when necessary. He preyed on their research, sometimes using insights, arguments, and data without attribution or taking credit for research findings or arguments gleaned from others. Freud was also a predator of what he cynically called “goldfish”—the patients whom Crews describes as the “chronically agitated and fabulously wealthy ladies at the apex of Viennese Jewish society.” Freud was a classic case of an upwardly mobile confidence man, perfecting techniques of deception that would continue throughout his life and would also characterize the inner ring of Freudians during the last twenty years of his life and since his death.

One of the main recurrent topics of this volume is Freud’s use of cocaine, both as a private intoxicant and as a treatment for the ailments of his patients. Although he eventually recognized the drug’s dangers, Freud, as Crews shows, was instrumental in causing or enabling the addiction of several colleagues, friends, and patients in an unscrupulous way that almost terminated his own career. Crews plausibly argues that many of Freud’s boldly but covertly immoral actions—including concocting case studies that were actually personal fantasies and fictions—were the results of cocaine abuse. Despite Freud’s ostensible skepticism regarding the occult, Crews compares his relationship to drugs to a satanic pact. “On April 30, 1884—*Walpurgisnacht*, or the folkloric night of supposed witchcraft and trafficking with the Devil,” Crews tells us, Freud “tasted cocaine powder and imbibed his first .05 gram solution of it, marveling at its mood-elevating capacity. And from that night forward he would regard the drug as the most precious and restorative substance on earth.”

Atheistic and contemptuous of his long-suffering wife’s residual respect for her inherited Judaism, Freud descended into

the deep, superstitious subjectivity of pagan German Romanticism. “On *Walpurgisnacht* in Goethe’s *Faust*, Mephistopheles offers the hero a magical elixir that grants him both sexual and intellectual mastery,” Crews points out. “*Faust* was already Freud’s favorite work of serious literature, and it would remain so. The figure of Dr. Faust, risking his soul for freedom from ethical constraints that render the experience of other mortals so impoverished, would become central to his later self-conception as the founder of an anti-Christian science that could penetrate forbidden realms.”

What could professional or moral standards mean to such a man? “Freud’s enthusiasm” for cocaine, Crews tells us, “was boundless.” Obsessed with self-flattering ideas of himself as a Nietzschean Superman, Freud was sure, within a month of first taking the cocaine, “that the ‘magical remedy’ [*Zaubermittel*] would prove to be his ticket to worldly success.” Repeatedly experiencing its “emboldening” effects, “he had begun sending small amounts of it, along with commendations of its benefits, to his fiancée, to his sisters, and to trusted colleagues, who would presumably be encouraged to prescribe it to their patients for the alleviation of various complaints.” Crews’s description of the subsequent effects of cocaine on figures such as Freud’s friend Fleischl are heartrending.

One of Crews’s main arguments is that Freud was only minimally and even reluctantly a “scientist.” Although his reputation rested on his carefully crafted self-portrait as a heroic yet ascetic man of reason, he actually despised the empirical habit of mind and the general canons of rationality that had informed educated people from Aristotle through Aquinas, Descartes, Samuel Johnson, Kant, and modern science. Not careful study but cocaine addiction was a key to Freud’s own secret closet of obsessions, particularly his quasi-mystical self-conception. He seems to have loved irrationalist phrases

such as “magical remedy” and “magical attraction” (*zauberischen Reiz*, which he used of a strong homophile attraction to *Fleischl*). The children of one of his wealthy, emotionally abused, and financially exploited patients saw him as an evil magician; the flattering identification of himself as a “magician” was one he was happy to develop among his own disciples. Crews depicts this group as a set of sorcerer’s apprentices following the magic flute of an allegedly scientific pied piper.

Freud had little interest in people outside his charmed circle. He frequently expressed contempt for poor people who couldn’t afford his expensive and lengthy services, seeing them as a Nietzschean herd or “*massa damnata*.” “A Hippocratic sense that each human being deserves respectful treatment was never part of Freud’s perspective,” Crews writes. “Most people struck him as contemptible.” Crews goes on to quote Freud’s notorious letter to the Swiss Protestant minister-psychiatrist Rev. Oskar Pfister. “I have found little that is ‘good’ about human beings as a whole,” Freud informed Pfister. “In my experience, most of them are trash.”

Freud’s attitude toward women, who provided the overwhelming majority of his cases, was similarly contemptuous and abusive. Crews’s documentation of his behavior makes some of the most painful reading in this book. The allegedly happily married paterfamilias was in reality a domestic tyrant who ignored or abused his frequently pregnant wife (who bore him six children). Later he almost certainly deserted her sexually for her younger, sexier, live-in sister, Minna Bernays, with whom he took most of his holidays and for whom he probably procured a painfully botched abortion of a child they conceived. It is the story of a scoundrel and a megalomaniac, one styling himself, of course, “beyond good and evil.”

Freud’s rejection of inherited ideas of moral obligation extended to his famous case histories, which Crews and others have

shown to be fictions never based on careful observations and biographical accuracy, but rather on Freud’s reveries, hunches, and career needs. The level of scientific dishonesty documented here is breathtaking, and the rationalizing strategies of even recent Freudian defenders such as Peter Gay and Élisabeth Roudinesco augment the impression of dishonor and uncanny evil. The Freudian establishment after Freud’s death, initially a secret coterie led by his daughter Anna Freud, alternately destroyed or “lost” incriminating correspondence and records, denied access to them, or falsified them. Fortunately, detectives like Crews have recovered much of the incriminating evidence.

Freud’s dream interpretations, for example, were clever works of imagination meant to enforce and illustrate previously enunciated dogmas. His “belief that dreams can reveal arcane knowledge aligned him with popular superstition and against the scientific mainstream,” writes Crews. He made these fictional leaps “because, like Faust, he had reached a point of intellectual and emotional frustration that rendered him willing to risk his reputation for . . . visionary truth.” Freud characteristically terminated a letter on the subject with an occult, gnostic, literary reference to Goethe: “Again ye come, ye hovering forms.” Crews argues that this portentous, pretentious literary quality of Freud’s rhetoric is precisely what rendered him appealing to “science-envying humanists,” even while it alienated more earthbound researchers.

Freud’s covert, long-term sexual affair with his sister-in-law Minna, a widow completely dependent on him for financial support and supposedly working as a governess for his several children, who intensely disliked her, should not surprise us either. As Crews points out, already in the mid-1890s Freud “had declared as a medical principle that sexual satisfaction is essential to both physical and mental health.” Unfortunately, his child-bearing wife had lost sexual attractiveness.

“Like his moralizing successor D.H. Lawrence, he believed that no vows or conventions must be allowed to take precedence over such fulfillment,” Crews notes. Thus Freud “became something of an activist against bourgeois sexual morality, a role that would endear him to the flappers and philosophers of the Jazz Age.”

The German writer Arnold Zweig praised Freud in 1930 by telling him that his “science” of psychoanalysis had “reversed all values...conquered Christianity...and liberated the spirit of resurgent life from the ascetic ideal.” But as Philip Rieff and Paul C. Vitz have argued, Freud proved even more hostile to Judaism, attacking Moses and monotheism in a book by that title in 1939, at a time of mounting persecution and danger to people of his own ethno-religious background. His English admirers rescued him from Vienna and brought him to London as the Nazis took over Austria, while the remaining Jews of Austria were not to be so fortunate. It was the final act of an extraordinarily influential, and dishonorable, life.

Crews’s book is the crescendo of his long, dogged, and noble campaign against Freud

and Freudianism. It will certainly do great good. As Swift said of his own satirical writing, it “will make sin and folly bleed.” Freud’s stock in actual psychiatric practice and in academic psychology has apparently been falling for decades, but tenured Freudians in English, French, and comparative literature departments are another story. The *Zaubermittel* of Franco-Nietzschean skepticism and lascivious Freudian reductionism has been a “devil’s brew” that has intoxicated too many Western intellectuals over five generations. The “Oedipus complex” is in ruins, but the sexualized edifice that they have constructed remains. Though much reduced, it is a monument to the selective skepticism, “moral inversion,” and pervasive credulity that helped create the blatant pornotopia in which we all now must live our lives.

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