

Frederick Crews: An Ode to Joy

When Frederick Crews died in 2023, more than one obituary saw fit to quote a hostile review of his magnum opus, *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*. Written by George Prochnik, the review appeared in the New York Times in 2017, and, in illustration of the hall-of-mirrors effect, a bon mot in its text re-appeared in the Times' own obituary some years later. Portraying Crews as a zealot possessed by an implacable animus against Freud, it ran as follows:

This Freud doesn't really develop, he just builds a rap sheet.

In full, the original passage reads:

Here we have Freud the liar, cheat, incestuous child molester, woman hater, money-worshiper, chronic plagiarizer and all-around nasty nut job. This Freud doesn't really develop, he just builds a rap sheet.

The ravings of a biographer bent on destroying his subject at great length ought to be about as pleasant to read as listening to a chain-saw, and yet even one or two of Crews' critics

appear to recognize that there is something wonderful about *The Making of an Illusion*.

What that something is I try to work out here.

Facts Matter

In arguing that the Freud of *The Making of an Illusion* accumulates a rap sheet instead of developing, the reviewer implies that something is very wrong with the biographer, as if Freud could not possibly have been such a miscreant. The charges against Freud are dismissed without being refuted. The fact is that Freud might or might not have been a miscreant, and the only way to determine which it was is to sift the evidence. If the evidence shows that he lied habitually, for example, then a biographer would be remiss not to report it. The evidence shows just that. In particular, Freud lied about whether or not he helped patients, claiming that he did (thereby planting the notion that his clinical practice confirmed his theories) while knowing he didn't. To censure the biographer for documenting Freud's deceptions on a matter of such importance seems like blaming the messenger for the bad news.

We needn't go through the charges on the rap sheet one by one, although the outlier on the list, incestuous child molestation, bears comment. While the balance of the evidence suggests to Crews that Freud as a boy did abuse one or more of his sisters, he offers the following measured conclusion:

We can only speculate about what the youthful Freud did, and with whom, and how frequently. . . . We can say with some assurance that he was gloomily self-preoccupied [in 1896-99], fearful that he had damaged at least one sister through sexual improprieties, and bent not on atonement but on uncovering prior malefactors on whom his guilt might be shunted.

The last phrase refers to Freud's indictment of his father for molesting his children, notwithstanding a complete absence of evidence outside of his (that is, Sigmund Freud's) musings. The defamation of a father no longer present to defend himself is an act of astonishing indecency in its own right; and it is a measure of the expansive liberties Freud granted himself that you cannot investigate one without stumbling on another.¹

In his review of *The Making of an Illusion*, Prochnik does not deign to weigh the evidence underlying its probabilistic finding that Freud did something or other with one or more of his little sisters. As if he had come under the influence of Freud's indifference to factuality, he does not concern himself with the evidence authorizing *any* of the charges on the rap sheet. He simply implies that a biography portraying Freud as a scoundrel is the product of a warped mind.

¹ As provocative as the issue of Freud's molestation or non-molestation of a little sister or sisters may be, *The Making of an Illusion* is less concerned with it than with tracing the windings of Freud's molestation theory, as Crews calls it—that is, the theory that all neurotic symptoms derive from memories of sexual abuse in childhood. That theory attracts Crews' concern for two reasons: first, it was advanced with a sweeping disregard of the norms of evidence; second, it preceded Freud's most renowned and ambitious construct, the Oedipal complex.

Confronted with evidence of Freud's unsavory character, his defenders suggest that it is all beside the point because in his writings he rose above his flaws and left us an inheritance that greatly deepened our understanding of ourselves. Yet if Freud infamously characterized himself as a conquistador, he did not cease being one in his writings; on the contrary, his writings were the means by which he conquered the world. Consider a case-study widely admired as a tour de force, that of Ida Bauer ("Dora"). From the age of thirteen, Ida was trapped in a cat's cradle of ties between two families, hers and the Zellenkas, with her father consorting with Giuseppina Zellenka; Hans Zellenka pursuing and propositioning her (Ida); and her father allowing Zellenka these liberties in exchange for his enjoyment of Zellenka's wife. Philipp Bauer, the panderer of his unwilling daughter, asked Freud to straighten her out as if she were the problem, and Freud set to work to do so. Ida is revealed not only as a problem but a bundle of problems to be unraveled only with great acuity. A man portrayed by Crews as a liar and a cheat acts on behalf of a liar and a cheat against his child, the only party in this treacherous business who behaves with any decency. Finding that Freud's treatment of Ida Bauer "did permanent harm," a historian concludes that "Freud compounded her father's betrayal by his unconscious exploitation of her. His primary interest in her predicament lay in using psychoanalysis to support his theories and his reputation; his interest in curing her, though real, was secondary."²

² Hannah Decker, *Freud, Dora, and Vienna 1900* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 199. On the Dora case see my "Sherlockismus: Freud and the Romance of Detection," in Garry Hagberg, ed., *Fictional Worlds and Philosophical Reflection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

While Ida recognized that her father was pandering her to Zellenka, Freud threw cold water on the notion because there was no “formal agreement” between the males. Seeking to convince her that Zellenka was honorable and that she actually loved him, he endorsed the solution of the case that would have been ideal to the party who paid him: marriage to her would-be seducer. (After all, Freud regarded marriage as the appointed cure of hysteria, and Ida as an hysteric.) How to put into words the moral lunacy of this sort of psychoanalytic matchmaking? Opting for satiric levity, Crews remarks that Freud drew the fantasy of marriage between Zellenka and Ida from “his romance novelist’s hoard,” with a play on the Old English “word-hoard.” By showing that Freud’s self-projected image as a man of principle and uncanny insight conflicts radically with reality (as in this instance), Crews exposes Freud’s mythmaking for what it is, vindicates the standards of common sense and common decency, and defends the concept of evidence against one who aggrandized himself at its expense.

“So What?”

At times Prochnik and others seem to be saying, “Everyone knows Freud was no saint. So what?” Frederick Crews belabors the obvious, it seems; buries his subject under a mountain of overkill. To some it is of no consequence that Freud lied or even that he harmed an adolescent trafficked by her own father in order to expedite his infidelity; Freud’s ideas transcend his faulty self, and the world has distilled something of great value from them, an inheritance we dare not cast aside. It is implied that this bequest informs

our culture to such an extent that we couldn't reject it, even if we wanted to, without tearing down our own house. In essence, Freud is a corporation too big to fail. As Adam Kirsch puts it in an adverse review of *The Making of an Illusion*, "psychoanalysis is so culturally embedded in our self-understanding that it may be impossible to think our way entirely free of it."

In yet another hostile commentary on *The Making of an Illusion*—this one a particularly unkind cut, appearing as it did in the New York Review of Books, for which Crews wrote for decades—Lisa Appignanesi observes that Freud enables us to appreciate "how much we share with those whom we casually label with the many diagnoses in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*." Those who object with good reason to the proliferation of diagnoses under DSM-III and its successors need to ask themselves whether a checklist diagnostic system would have looked quite so good to the profession that adopted it if not for the counterexample of Freudian practice, with its interminable analyses, capricious judgments, questionable therapeutic value, and indifference to diagnostic specificity. It was because the framers of DSM-III had enough of the tendentious speculation authorized by Freud and his disciples that they made DSM-III "atheoretical with regard to etiology," in the words of its Introduction. The architect of DSM-III, Robert Spitzer, trained as a psychoanalyst but in the end abandoned the Freudians and their weird project of retrodicting the past.

The expulsion of Freud from DSM certainly did not drive him out of our culture, nor is his continuing influence so enriching that we challenge it at our peril. Some Freudian survivals cry out to be challenged, notable among them the fantastic concept of repressed

memories. Without the Freudian precedent of deducing the past from the present, it might be impossible to interpret common symptoms as evidence of traumas past, and without something very like the Freudian theory of repression, it might be impossible to argue that people can and do suffer traumas, even extended traumas, of which they have no memory whatsoever until one is unearthed by a therapist alert to the signs of hidden trouble.³ Even though survivors of Auschwitz might have been only too glad to lose the memory of their ordeal, the idea that people regularly endure trauma without remembering anything about it has become intuitive, as has the equally outlandish theory that the existence of an underlying trauma can be inferred from telltale signs by the knowing therapist. If only we could put an end to the theory of recovered memories as the APA wrote etiological theorizing out of DSM.

Frederick Crews deemed the doctrine of repressed memory a dangerous abuse of reason, and on that account waged a strenuous campaign even into his 90's on behalf of the Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky, perhaps the most detested individual in the United States upon his conviction in 2012 for the molestation of children. Facts matter, and the fact is that there is not an iota of evidence, independent of the memories excavated by a credulous therapist, that Sandusky committed any of the atrocities alleged against him. Not one of those he was charged with abusing accused Sandusky of anything until someone who believed doctrinally in recovered memories went to work on them. The prosecution of Sandusky on the strength of such evidence was an outrageous sham, but no

³ In the Dora case Freud theorized that she repressed the memory of a phantom pregnancy.

more of a sham than Freud's conclusion that his father must have molested his siblings because of their symptoms.

When Crews first mentioned to me that Sandusky was innocent, I didn't know what to make of it but suspected he had gone off the deep end. I should have known better. Upon reading his defense of Sandusky—written with the same robust cogency as *The Making of an Illusion*—I felt like a fool for having passively gone along with a witch-hunt. When no journal would touch his unsparing analysis of the evidence against Sandusky and a TV magazine froze when shown his précis of the case, Crews simply redoubled his efforts on Sandusky's behalf, dedicating himself to this radioactive cause as if Sandusky were a second Dreyfus. Consider a bit of his argumentation.

Having been taken into the home of Jerry and Dottie Sandusky at the age of sixteen, Matt Heichel was adopted by them two years later. When interrogated by prosecutors and questioned before a grand jury, he denied ever being abused by Sandusky. Later, however, after psychotherapy “teased forth fantasies of abuse that were then promoted to memories,” he turned on Sandusky, testified against him at trial, and appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show to discuss his woeful history.

Writes Crews,

Among Jerry's supposed victims, Matt appeared to pose the most extreme example of “massive” or “robust” repression. That is the unsubstantiated notion whereby dozens of traumas, spread over a course of years, are salted away in the unconscious just as soon as they occur, leaving other relations with the perpetrator unaffected.

Not only had Matt continued to welcome Jerry's company for some twenty-five years; he had joined his household, begged to be adopted by him, and, most strikingly, signed a contract with him specifying a reward of Penn State tuition for Matt's future good behavior. Why would either party enter into such an agreement if Jerry had molested Matt?⁴

A dogma sufficient to overrule the evidence of a pattern of behavior extending *twenty-five years* is clearly subversive of reason itself. Hence the derision it receives from Crews. Dozens of traumas are "salted away" in the Freudian cupboard of the unconscious. Fantasies of abuse specified by the therapist are "teased forth" from the patient's head as if the unconscious were being opened by a wand, and the resulting tales are then duly "promoted" to veridical memories, ready to be introduced into the courtroom. Over the course of this elaborate charade, an objectively preposterous case against Sandusky becomes a legal edifice.

Once again concerned with the making of an illusion—in this case, the illusion of iniquity on the basis of which Sandusky was sent to prison—Crews traces the process of spinning something from nothing and accentuates its lunacy with brilliant touches of black humor.

Hilarity and Affirmation

⁴ See Crews' analysis of the Sandusky affair, "Sandusky: The House of Cards," posted on Medium.

Over the years that went into the composition of *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*, Frederick Crews sent me drafts of chapters for comment, one by one, as they rolled off the printer. Though I identified some editorial problems and posed questions and occasional cavils, the truth is that my reaction to each and every chapter, from the first to the last, was one of pure amazement at their virtuosity, boldness and intellectual power. It was as if I were encountering Freud for the first time, now stripped of the privilege that transformed violations of reason into strokes of genius, and the bullying of a patient at the behest of a pandering father into a classic demonstration of analytical mastery. For me the experience of amazement is usually brief, akin to a flash. Here, however, was an amazement sustained unbroken over dozens of intricately argued chapters which I read over the course of years. Passages that flooded me with astonishment when I first laid eyes on them reappear in the print version of *The Making of an Illusion*, a great many inflected with a satiric levity akin to the black humor of Crews' account of the Sandusky affair. Consider a passage from the same chapter in which Crews weighs the likelihood that the young Freud molested one or more of his sisters.

Like a therapist conjuring memories of things past, Freud sought to infer early events that marked him for life from the evidence of dreams. "But none of his dream-informed reconstructions of his early past, each with its outlandish infractions of verisimilitude, can tell us what [his mother's] conduct was really like." The Oedipus complex, too, leaves the mother-figure a mystery:

In conceiving of fathers and sons as rivals for the embraces of a mother whose own motives were left out of consideration, Freud would fill a chasm in his psyche with a myth of masculine striving that turned every boy, beginning with himself, into a little hero at the mercy of a paternal ogre. It suited his mother-excusing myth to represent castration threats as emanating from the sexually possessive father, as if the latter would be seriously concerned about sexual rivalry from a five-year-old. The real menace to Sigismund's organ was more likely to have been voiced by the coarse Amalie [that is, his mother].

“Outlandish infractions of verisimilitude”! A “little hero”! “Sexual rivalry from a five-year-old”! “Sigismund's organ”! Has scholarship ever reached a higher pitch of hilarity?

Though we may think of skepticism as a kind of intellectual negativity, Crews' is different. This skepticism is affirmative in character, not only reveling in the exposure of pretense and absurdity but rejoicing in meeting the burden of proof. The author rejoices that there is such a thing as a burden of proof at all—that is, that questions are to be decided by evidence, not authority, incantation, or whatnot. What strikes critics like George Prochnik as overkill is actually the abundance of evidence necessary to establish an argument of great historical and philosophical import beyond all reasonable doubt. The undercurrent of gaiety in Crews' discussions even of dark and difficult matters reflects a spirit that not only accepts but embraces the duty of argument at every point. The risk of reading *The Making of an Illusion* is not that it will seduce you into being a Freud-basher but that it will abolish your tolerance of the incompetence of academic prose.

The overwhelming evidence of Freud's charlatanism was the last impression Frederick Crews' study left with me when I read it in draft. As I wrote the author upon reviewing a text of what is now the final chapter of *The Making of an Illusion*:

Except that it ends abruptly on what is for me a definitely wrong note (for the last word can't be that this tyrannical impostor was a "victim" of his own cocaine habit), the last chapter brings all to a magnificent crescendo. Freud stands revealed as a self-alleged genius who actually lacked the most elementary insight into human beings and "couldn't apprehend other people except as personages in his own turbulent drama." If Angelika Bijur/Frink never met an analyst who was "not an obvious neurotic, lost in their theory and unable to deal with life," Freud was the worst of the lot. Like an alchemist, though, he managed to transmute his inability into a reputation for genius and, indeed, into gold. This is a study of successful imposture and deluded grandeur.

If only the world had the sense of Freud's patient who, "after each session, having retired to a café, . . . would amuse her girlfriend with uproarious accounts of her therapist's credulity." Damning is the image of Freud sleeping through analytical sessions, or telling tales on patients to their relatives, or deploring patients one and all, or wheedling gifts out of them, or lying in print about his therapeutic prowess even while he was going through the motions of psychoanalysis "without concern about the outcome," even drawing out the ordeal for years on end, reducing patients

to abject dependence, to make heaps of money. [Some of the quoted phrases appear in the final text of *The Making of an Illusion* and some don't.]

An undertone of hilarity runs through the argumentation of *The Making of an Illusion* because the notion that the malpractitioner in its pages was a transcendent genius is, in fact, risible.

Joy and Freedom

Prochnik's review of *The Making of an Illusion* begins as follows: "Frederick Crews, the eminent literary critic and perennial Freud censor, opens his new study with an important question." Frederick Crews a *censor*?

Not Crews but the keepers of the Freudian flame engage in censorship—sealing papers in the Freud archives, for example. Crews decries such practices and documents all manner of editorial dishonesties on the part of the guardians of the Freud legend, as in this passage from Ch. 23 of *The Making of an Illusion*:

One of the tasks for Freud's editors, then, was simply to put the most damning evidence under the rug. . . . Out of 284 letters from Freud to Fliess, only 168 were represented [in *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis*], and all but 29 of them underwent diplomatic and often silent alteration.

What Prochnik had in mind in branding Frederick Crews, of all people, a censor I could not possibly say. If he had consulted the dedication page of the book he held in his hands, he would have seen an inscription to “Han Israëls, who defied the censors.” Moreover, a censor is a kill-joy, and *The Making of an Illusion* breathes joy throughout. What is its source?

After reading an early version of the chapter that became Ch. 23, I wrote to the author:

How freeing your work is! To read it is to witness a censorship being lifted, a system of lies exposed, as if the files of the Stasi were thrown open to the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall. . . . Simon Leys, the China scholar, points out that Mao’s own writings had to be carefully censored by the managers of his cult. The analogy to the Freud cult is obvious. Maybe the deeper truth is that Freudianism too is or was a system of domination; founded on Freud’s practice of using “coercive means of reaching foregone conclusions,” what else could it be? . . . The fall of domination brings joy, and your work is an ode to joy. Thanks so much for sending it.

The joy perceptible even to some of the critics of *The Making of an Illusion* is that of a man who delights in the burden of proof, well knowing that he is able to meet it, and knowing above all that questions are better decided by evidence than fiat. The adjudication of questions on their evidentiary merits is not something to be taken for granted. Under a totalitarian regime no independent appeal to evidence is possible; all

issues are closed in advance. Under the regime of postmodernism, for its part, the concept of objectivity crumbles like some sort of atavistic fallacy, and with it goes any procedure as lucid as the evaluation of evidence. Emphatically a modernist and not a postmodernist, Frederick Crews celebrates a world in which reasoned inquiry remains possible despite the heavy damage done by its many adversaries. Hence the joy at work or at play in *The Making of an Illusion*. Reading this volume is like filling your lungs with the air of freedom.

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