The case for progress
by Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D.

Becoming Freud does not address the avalanche of criticism recently directed at the man and his work. Instead, in trying to write "that impossible thing, a Freudian life of the young Freud," Phillips celebrates Freud, about whom the most dogmatic thing he can find is his skepticism. And his ambivalence. He includes Freud's work as part of "great modernist literature," in which "coherent narratives of and about the past were put into question," but also deems psychoanalysis to be, in no small measure, evidence of Freud's resistance to modern culture. Coming of age between two worlds, he argues, Freud endorsed Enlightenment values against the "superstition" of religion, and made some room for freedom, rationality, and choice, while exposing the irrationality of everything that is human, including the rationality of the Enlightenment.

He also indicates that psychoanalysis, the invention of a self-proclaimed "godless Jew," was, among other things, about acculturation. No one, Freud insisted, could ever be fully assimilated or would wholly identify with or invest in his culture; however enabling, civilization was inevitably experienced, starting from infancy, as, in varying degrees, oppressive.

Re-Righting Freud's Biography
This book demonstrates that psychoanalysis is a distinctive form of biography. Published on May 12, 2014 by Glenn C. Altschuler, Ph.D. in This Is America

Although he wrote speculative accounts about the lives of Moses, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Leonardo da Vinci, Sigmund Freud had an intense aversion to biography. "To be a biographer," he wrote in 1936, "you must tie yourself up in lies, concealments, hypocrisies, false colorings, and even in hiding a lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had, and if it were to be had we could not use it…"

And yet, psychoanalysis, the treatment Freud invented, Adam Phillips points out, was predicated on reconstructions of the past. And on using childhood memories, recouped as knowledge, as resources in the making of an unknowable future. In Becoming Freud, Phillips, the former Principal Child Psychotherapist at Charing Cross Hospital in London and the general editor of the Penguin Modern Classics translations of Freud's work, uses the story (or, he would no doubt acknowledge, "a story) of Freud's early years to make a fascinating (and compelling) case that psychoanalysis in actually a distinctive form of biography, without a known beginning, middle, and end, in which a useful, personal, and private truth may be discerned through a conversation in which patients, often for the first time, speak about and for themselves, answer back, recover, revise, and re-right foundational life experiences.

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transgressive, the iconoclast, the saboteur in a world of (adult) law and order.

At their best, Phillips claims, these insights help individuals see their lives “as both ineluctably determined and utterly indeterminate; as driven by repetitions but wholly unpredictable; as inspired by unconscious desire and only intermittently intelligible, and then only in retrospect.”

The whole history of psychoanalysis, Phillips asserts, came out of a simple observation: infants survive because someone looked after them and “something was driving them to be looked after.” Interested in how instinctual desire made itself known, Freud gave analysts a parental role, in which they listened carefully to the child. The psychoanalytic story, Phillips emphasizes, is about a couple, mother and child, soon joined by a father to “make the essential triangle.” In the sessions, which take place again with a couple – “though the world outside the consulting room is an always pressing third party” – the viability of appetite is at stake, as shaped by “news from the past for the future.”

In time, of course, psychoanalysis developed its own assumptions, expressed in professional jargon, with words like id, ego, superego, and repression entering into common discourse. In *Interpreting Dreams*, Freud predicted that the psychoanalytical approach “would perform the same useful purposes for adult psychology that the investigation of the structure or development of the lower animals has performed for research into the structure of the higher classes of animals.”

It has not exactly worked out that way. Nonetheless, although Freud did not invent a “psychological science,” he deserves the title Phillips bestows on him: a “visionary pragmatist.” His therapeutic method – “not quite a technique and not simply a talent; and not, it turned out, quite as effective as he wished” – gets people talking about their lives, their resistance to, fears about, and sabotaging of, pleasure. It induces patients to understand pleasure seeking and its relationship to their suffering and their survival.

If Freud had died in 1906, Phillips points, there would have been no structural theory of the mind, no metapsychology, no speculation about anything beyond the pleasure principle. There would only have been a theory of dreams, sexuality, and the rudiments of the practices of psychoanalysis. The subsequent history of the field, he reminds us, can be divided into those who wish Freud had departed this mortal coil in 1906, and “those who did not.”