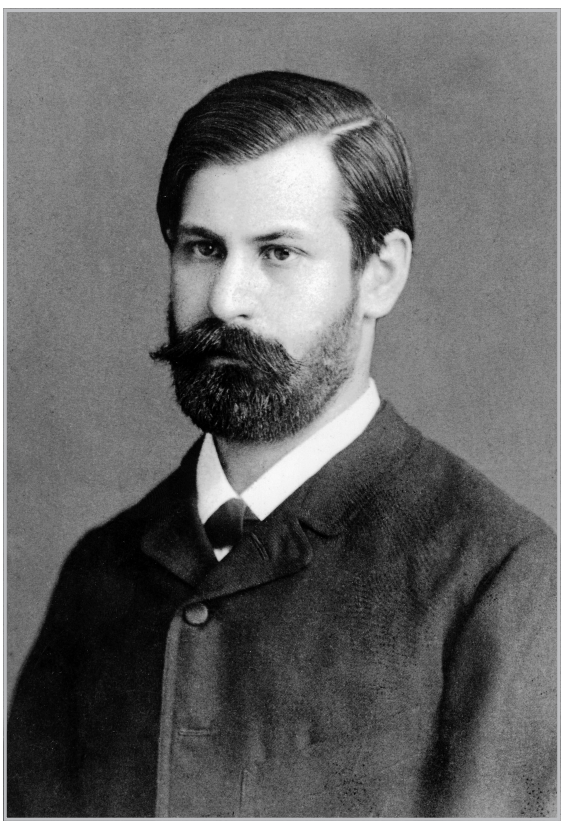
FREUD



Sigmund Freud, about 1890

FREUD

The Making of an Illusion

Frederick Crews

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However far human beings may reach with their knowledge, however objective they may seem to themselves to be: in the end they carry away nothing but their own biography.

—Friedrich Nietzsche*

It's not a lie if *you* believe it.

—George Costanza, in *Seinfeld*

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* *Human, All Too Human*, #513 (1878).

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A NOTE ON SOURCES

For an understanding of Freud's pre-psychoanalytic development and his character in general, the most revealing documents are his and Martha Bernays's *Brautbriefe*, or engagement letters, exchanged between 1882 and 1886. Upon the death of Anna Freud in 1982, the letters were donated to the Freud Archives in the US Library of Congress, where, at her stipulation, they were hidden from view until 2000. That was not an exceptional measure. The first director of the archives, Kurt Eissler, saw to it that other papers would remain unavailable for many more decades, extending as far forward as the year 2113.

Nevertheless, some *Brautbriefe* have long been familiar, at least in part, to the reading public. Ernst Freud published 97 of them in his 1960 edition of his father's selected letters, and Ernest Jones quoted or cited more than 200 in his authorized biography. That may sound like a lot, but 1,539 engagement letters of Freud's and Martha's have survived; and not surprisingly, those that fail to tally with his legend have until recently remained either unpublished or redacted.

Recently, however, German transcripts of all of the *Brautbriefe* have been made available on the Library of Congress's website. Moreover, the full *Brautbriefe* have begun to be published, in five volumes, by a team of scrupulous German editors. Freud scholarship will be revolutionized

when this slow-motion event has concluded. As of this writing, three volumes have appeared, taking the correspondence through September 1884. I have gratefully consulted those texts and the comprehensive notes that accompany them. And, with assistance, I have translated those letters not already published in English.

Because the Library of Congress transcripts contain errors, prudence might dictate that any new study of the early Freud be postponed until all five volumes of the definitive edition have appeared. For me at age eighty-four, however, another prudential consideration takes precedence. I must tell what I know about Freud, hoping that some inevitable mistakes and omissions won't be so grave as to invalidate my inferences.

In quoting published materials that were translated from German, such as James Strachey's *Standard Edition* of Freud's complete psychological writings, I have occasionally preferred a more literal translation, especially where it makes a substantive difference of meaning. Every such change is indicated in the citation. Paragraph breaks have been inserted into a few lengthy passages.

Finally, readers may wonder why, in the chapters that follow, generic physicians are always *he* and generic patients are always *she*. This blunt solution to the always vexing pronoun problem recognizes, but isn't meant to endorse, a historical reality: in Freud's early career nearly all providers of psychotherapy and hypnotism were men, and most of their clients were women.

ABBREVIATED TITLES

CP	Sigmund Freud, *Cocaine Papers*. Ed. Robert Byck. New York: Stonehill, 1974.
FF	*The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*. Trans. and ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard U., 1985.
FMB	Sigmund Freud and Martha Bernays, *Die Brautbriefe*. 5 vols. (projected). Eds. Gerhard Fichtner, Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, and Albrecht Hirschmüller. Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2011—.
FS	Sigmund Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud to Eduard Silberstein: 1871–1881*. Ed. Walter Boehlich. Trans. Arnold J. Pomerans. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard U., 1990.
J	Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. 3 vols. New York: Basic, 1953–57.
L	*Letters of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. Ernst L. Freud. Trans. Tania and James Stern. [1960.] New York: Dover, 1992.
SE	*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols. Trans. James Strachey, with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson. London: Hogarth, 1953–1974.
SK	Sigmund Freud, *Schriften über Kokain*. Ed. Albrecht Hirschmüller. Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1996.

Preface

Among historical figures, Sigmund Freud ranks with Shakespeare and Jesus of Nazareth for the amount of attention bestowed upon him by scholars and commentators. Unlike them, he left behind thousands of documents that show what he was doing and thinking from adolescence until his death at age eighty-three. Although many of those records were placed under lengthy restriction by followers who felt both financial and emotional incentives to idealize him, that blackout has at least partly expired by now. More revelations will emerge, but they are unlikely to alter the outlines of Freud's conduct and beliefs as they appear in the most responsible recent studies.

Nor, surely, will much more be learned about Freud's intricate relation to the currents of medical, philosophical, political, and cultural thought that affected him, or about his own effect on later currents.[1] We know that he was the beneficiary of various long-term trends that influenced his own thinking and then accelerated in the twentieth century. They include a backlash against scientific positivism; an Ibsenesque discontent with bourgeois hypocrisy; a current of Nietzschean "dark Romanticism," celebrating the Dionysian element that Christian teaching had equated with sinfulness; the rise of a bohemian avant-garde, devoted to anti-establishment feeling and sexual license; increased urbanization and social mobility, accompanied by rejection of patriarchal authority;

and a waning of theological belief, allowing psychotherapy to inherit some of religion's traditional role in providing guidance and consolation to the unhappy. The disaster of World War I virtually guaranteed that Freud's pessimistic, instinct-centered philosophy would prevail, at least among intellectuals, over sunnier models of the psyche.

If Freud's career and its impact are so well understood, what justification could there be for another lengthy biographical tract? The question appears especially pertinent in view of the fall that Freud's scientific reputation has suffered over the past forty-five years.[2] In 1997, for example, the standard academic work on cognition and emotion referenced 1,314 texts, only one of which was by Freud.[3] And in 1999, a comprehensive citation study in the flagship journal of American psychology reported that "psychoanalytic research has been virtually ignored by mainstream scientific psychology over the past several decades."[4] The situation has not improved in the twenty-first century. As one otherwise sympathetic observer put it in 2010, "the scientific standing of psychoanalysis and of its therapeutic claims has been severely compromised both by a lack of empirical support and [by] its dependence on an outdated biology."[5] It might be merciful, then, just to turn our backs on an increasingly deserted scene.

But Freud, even stripped of his scientific pretensions, is destined to remain among us as the most influential of twentieth-century sages. Without those pretensions, in fact, his cultural sway becomes a more intriguing phenomenon. Although the peers who knew his writings perceived the flaws in his system,[6] intellectuals in later years were spellbound by his self-portrayal as a lone explorer possessing courageous perseverance, deductive brilliance, tragic insight, and healing power. Much can still be learned from that episode of mass infatuation, in which I myself naïvely participated fifty years ago. And the seriocomic history of the psychoanalytic movement itself is instructive as a cautionary demonstration of what can happen when a pseudoscience, lacking any objective means of adjudicating internal differences of judgment, becomes a worldwide enterprise whose outposts inevitably loosen their ties with the founding center and generate new vortices of dogma.[7]

My main concern here, however, is with Freud in person—and, indeed, with only one question about him. How and why did a studious, ambitious, and philosophically reflective young man, trained in rigorous inductivism by distinguished researchers and eager to win their favor, lose perspective on his wild hunches, efface the record of his mistakes, and establish an international cult of personality? The record from his years of obscurity and struggle can show how he was affected by clashing impulses: his sense of duty, his fear of disgrace and of prolonged poverty, his yearning for celebrity, his initial willingness to conform and to ingratiate himself, and his resentment of the institutional authority to which, for a while, he nominally bowed. As we will see, the balance among those factors was tipped by crucial experiences, between 1884 and 1900, whose import for psychoanalysis has been almost entirely overlooked.

It may seem odd that this part of the story has never been told in full detail. But lack of attention hasn't been the problem. Rather, biographical Freud studies have been dominated by partisans of psychoanalysis with a vested interest in preserving the legend of epochal discovery. Nearly all of Freud's apologists, heeding a tacit plea on his part to be exempted from dispassionate evaluation of his claims, have engaged in protective discourse: ascribing special acuteness to the master, always granting him the benefit of the doubt, and, when there appears to be no dodging the evidence of his illogicalities and ethical lapses, blaming them on the autonomous operations of his unconscious mind.

By exaggerating Freud's competence in various respects, this Freudolatry has obscured the central drama of his career. His temperament and self-conception demanded that he achieve fame at any cost. His apologists tell us, as Freud himself did, that the cost was irrational opposition from a prudish world. As we will see, however, the cost was much steeper: it was nothing less than his integrity as both a scientist and a physician.

Although many readers expect a sensible book about Freud to manifest its objectivity by weighing certain hard-won contributions against certain errors or excesses, such predetermined evenhandedness renders

him more puzzling than he actually was. We have been told, for example, that he disregarded every element of scientific prudence *and* that he achieved fundamental breakthroughs in psychological knowledge.[8] How, then, did he do it? No one can say; the attempted explanations vaporize into the useless notion of "genius." It is better, I suggest, simply to ask what the biographical evidence tells us at every juncture. If, as a result, we lose a former hero, we may at last gain a consistent picture of the man.

On one point, though, nearly all readers will want to insist upon a concession that won't be made below. Believing that Freud, whatever his failings, initiated our tradition of empathetic psychotherapy, they will judge this book to have unjustly withheld credit for his most benign and enduring achievement. Still worse, they may judge the author to be a disbeliever in psychotherapy itself. I will show, however, not only that Freud had predecessors and rivals in one-on-one mental treatment but also that he failed to match their standard of responsiveness to each patient's unique situation. As for my estimation of psychotherapy, I regard it as potentially helpful to the extent that it dispenses with a reductive style of explanation.

Nevertheless, analysts who believe that their discipline has now "gone beyond Freud" will find no comfort in my chapters. Whatever its recent improvements, psychoanalysis remains what Frank Cioffi sarcastically dubbed a testimonial science.[9] That is, the evidence offered in support of its propositions consists almost entirely of assurances that Freud and others have found them to be true. A vast first-person literature, recounting what individual analysts have purportedly learned from their patients, can be selectively taken to prove one or another tenet. But regarded as a whole, the same literature cancels out to zero, because the anecdotes favoring one proposition are no better grounded than the opposing ones.

Of course, hard-core partisans can be counted upon to dismiss this book as an extended exercise in *Freud bashing*—a notion that gets invoked whenever the psychoanalytic legend of lonely and heroic discovery is challenged. To call someone a Freud basher is at once to shield Freud's theory from skeptical examination and to shift the focus, as Freud himself so often did, from objective issues to the supposedly

twisted mind of the critic. Like other aspects of Freudolatry, the charge of Freud bashing deserves to be retired at last. The best way to accomplish that end, however, is just to display the actual record of Freud's doings and to weigh that record by an appeal to consensual standards of judgment.

PART ONE

SIGMUND THE UNREADY

A man with unbridled ambition is bound at some time to break away and, to the loss of science and his own development, become a crank.

—Freud, letter to Georg Groddeck*

* 6/5/1917; L, p. 317.

• 1 •

Between Identities

1. PROSPECTS AND BURDENS

When Sigmund—*né* Schlomo Sigismund—Freud enrolled in the University of Vienna in 1873 at age seventeen, he bore with him the high expectations of a family that desperately needed him to become a salary earner. His father, Kallamon Jacob, formerly a wholesale wool merchant in Freiberg, Moravia, had gone bankrupt, and a year's further search for business in Leipzig, Germany, had proved fruitless.

Relocated in Vienna since 1860, Jacob had long since given up actively looking for work. The Freuds were surviving mainly on charity from local and distant relatives, including the two sons from Jacob's first marriage, who had emigrated to England and become modestly successful shopkeepers in Manchester.

If Sigismund had been the only child of Jacob and Amalie Freud, their future would have looked brighter, but the marriage was distressingly prolific in offspring. Although Jacob was already forty, with one or possibly two marriages already behind him, when he married the twenty-year-old Amalie, Sigismund's birth proved to be the first of eight. And five of his siblings were sisters, unlikely to find middle-class employment or to make advantageous matches. Jacob was of no more financial help to his brood than Dickens's Mr. Micawber, to whom his son would later compare him.

Freud's childhood was marked by incidents whose traumatic effects he subsequently judged to have been severe. His Czech nanny in Freiberg, who functioned as a surrogate mother when Amalie went from one pregnancy to the next, had been abruptly fired and jailed for stealing. Years later, Sigismund was haunted by the awful thought that his ill wishes toward his first immediate sibling, Julius—born when Sigismund was just seventeen months old, and dead six months later—had somehow killed the baby. And his relocation from Freiberg to Leipzig and thence to a lower-class Jewish enclave within the Viennese district of Leopoldstadt, where he would grow up in the midst of overcrowding, illness, and penury, was evidently a protracted trial.

One incident in particular stands out as a source of continuing mortification. In 1865 Sigismund's uncle Josef was sentenced to ten years in prison for having counterfeited rubles; a well-founded suspicion persisted that Sigismund's half-brothers in Manchester had been involved in the scam. (The phony bills, after all, had been made in England.) Sigismund was nine when the Viennese newspapers were trumpeting the sting operation that had caught the Jewish forger Josef Freud. The boy and later the man may never have fully recovered from that shame.

The easygoing Jacob was proud of Sigismund and assumed loving charge of his early education, including his acquaintance with Judaism. Jacob looked forward each year to reading aloud the Passover Haggadah, and he twice presented his son with a Hebrew-German "Samuelson Bible"—the same volume both times, rebound for the adult and backsliding Sigmund and inscribed with a traditional cluster of sacred passages.[1] But Jacob had little use for theology. He had embraced the movement known as *Haskalah*, which sought to bring European Jews out of their cultural isolation and, at the same time, to promote scriptural study in a nonliteral, nonmystical, ethical spirit.[2] The editorial content of his son's Bible, which moralized the epic tales of Moses and David, was itself an expression of *Haskalah* humanism.

This undogmatic idea of what it means to be a Jew was amplified by the teenage Sigismund's religious studies, which were required by his college-preparatory school, the Sperl (Leopoldstadter Communal) Gymnasium. In extracurricular sessions with Samuel Hammerschlag, who

would remain his friend in later years, he learned to regard the ethical aspect of Jewish thought as consonant with enlightened social values. From Hammerschlag, too, he came to value the heroic strain in another ancient tradition, that of the Greek and Roman classics.

In boyhood, Sigismund had idolized his father and associated him with the noblest Hebrews of the Bible. As his own dream of greatness took hold, however, disillusionment set in. Having grasped that parents can exercise a measure of choice regarding the size of their families, and finding himself required, vexatiously, to look after five young sisters and a final brother, the boy grew impatient with a father who had gone on engendering children while failing to provide for them.

Moreover, Sigismund was shocked when Jacob, seeking to let him know how bad things had formerly been for Jews in Freiberg, confided that he hadn't fought back against gentile bullying. After learning of such "unheroic" conduct, Sigismund compensated by fantasizing himself as Hannibal, the Semitic Carthaginian general whose father had made him swear to "take vengeance on the Romans"—metaphorically, on the established Roman Catholics of Austria.[3] Such daydreaming became chronic as Sigismund, with dawning consciousness of his family's humble state, identified not just with Hannibal but also with the world-shaking Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, among others.

Meanwhile, his more practical ambitions were swelled by his irreligious mother, Amalie, who openly favored her firstborn at the expense of his siblings. Relying on the forecast of a fortune teller and on old-wives' superstition, she insisted he was destined for a brilliant career. Sigismund appears to have taken the prophecy in earnest and to have accepted his special privileges in the household as nothing more than his due. But by giving birth to seven more children, and by withdrawing into mourning over baby Julius when Sigismund was not yet two years old, Amalie left him with a permanent sense of abandonment.

In different ways, both of Freud's parents would strike the eventual theorist of the "family romance" as unworthy of his innate nobility and as an impediment to his social ascent. Along with thousands of other beneficiaries of the emperor Franz Josef's lifting of anti-Jewish restrictions, they had both emigrated from Galicia, a region that now includes

parts of Poland and Ukraine; Amalie had also passed some of her childhood still farther east, in Odessa. Strong-willed, boisterous, and histrionic, with "little grace and no manners," this emotional "tornado" of a mother remained closer to her eastern roots than her upwardly mobile son would have liked.[4] Jacob was more subdued, but too much so; his resignation to defeat gave Sigismund a constant reminder of how far he could fall if he were to lose his foothold on the ladder of professional success.

Jacob and Amalie Freud, whose personalities were even farther apart than their ages, agreed on one important point: the best hope for a turnaround in the family's circumstances lay with Sigismund's academic achievements. The parents were heartened when he proved to be a precocious reader, a deft student of Greek, Latin, and history, and, after home schooling until age nine, the academic star nearly every year in his class at Leopoldstadt's multiethnic gymnasium. If Sigismund were to continue on the same prize-winning path, he would presumably earn the support of influential university professors. And in the distance lay respectable and remunerative career opportunities in a number of fields, from law and medicine to business, banking, higher education, and civil service.

Freud's parents were not mistaken about his mental agility. Before founding and leading an international movement, he would become a skilled anatomist, the holder of a prestigious postgraduate fellowship, a pediatric neurologist, a family doctor, and a scientific author. None of those achievements and honors, however, would slake his appetite for greatness or earn him more than temporary peace of mind. Already disposed to regard himself as disadvantaged by his humble origins and poverty, he would gradually acquire a sense of isolation, a mistrust of others' motives, and a panicked conviction that only some extraordinary breakthrough or windfall could allow him to realize his dreams.

2. ROOM TO BE TOLERATED

The most important contributor to that feeling of narrowed access to recognition was the psychological weight of anti-Semitism. Freud himself, in his autobiographical remarks, recalled that burden and empha-

sized the adjustment of attitude he had needed to make in order to press ahead with his career. Interestingly, though, he said nothing about a topic that will concern us much later: the effect of prejudice on the shaping of psychoanalysis.

Freud's eventual doctrine would constitute a turning of the tables on the anti-Semites—a "transvaluation of values" that delegitimized the Christian dichotomy between spirit and sexual passion. But Freud couldn't acknowledge that impetus without exposing the "science" of psychoanalysis as an ideological production. Consequently, anti-Semitism figured in his retrospect only as an obstacle to be negotiated in his path to discovery of universal psychological laws. From Freud's account we could never suspect either that he retained a lifetime grudge against gentiles or that—as we will find—one strain of anti-Semitism affected his own apprehension of fellow Jews.

Looking backward in his *Autobiographical Study* of 1925, Freud maintained that his struggle with prejudice had already been fully engaged in his adolescence. "Anti-Semitic feelings among the other boys," he wrote of his concluding school years, "warned me that I must take up a definite position. . . . And the increasing importance of the effects of the anti-Semitic movement upon our emotional life helped to fix the thoughts and feelings of those early days."[5] But a look at the record will show that until he was about nineteen and beginning medical school, he hadn't expected to be handicapped by his ethnicity.

We cannot doubt that Freud did experience some of the slights described in the *Autobiographical Study*. Even though, by the time of his graduation, Jews made up a full 73 percent of the Sperl Gymnasium's pupils, that majority constituted no insurance against snubbing. The rapid increase in Jewish enrollment, from 68 to 300, during the years of Freud's attendance was well suited to producing hostility from gentile teenagers who perceived "their school" as having fallen into alien hands.[6] Nevertheless, the adolescent Freud didn't regard prejudice as a credible threat to his advancement. A favorable sociopolitical climate encouraged him to believe that his opportunities would be almost limitless if he properly "Germanized" himself. This is not to say that his early fondness for Goethe, Schiller, and Heine was feigned. Rather, he saw

no conflict between retaining his identity as a Jew and becoming culturally German.

That Freud aimed at Germanization from the outset is most clearly indicated by his early decision to alter his given name. In either 1869 or 1870, no later than age fourteen, he began registering for his school courses not as Schlomo Sigismund but as Sigmund, and his early letters also show him experimenting with the new version before definitively adopting it in his signature.[7] Quite a bit of baggage was then left behind. "Schlomo," honoring Freud's paternal grandfather, means "Solomon." "Sigismund" was his parents' tribute to a sixteenth-century Polish monarch who had protected Jews against pogroms. But quite recently the name had come to stand, like the later "Hymie," for the generic Jew in anti-Semitic jokes.[8] In contrast, "Sigmund" would have evoked the Norse hero Siegmund in the *Niebelungenlied*, a work that was then serving as a rallying point for pan-Germanic sentiment; Wagner's *Die Walküre* (1870) strongly advanced that connection.

Although Freud wasn't trying to pass for a gentile, as a refashioned Sigmund he was announcing his eagerness to become as *kulturdeutsch* as anyone else. And he had an imposing model to follow. His first close friend—a fellow Jew and on-and-off classmate in the Leopoldstadt gymnasium—was Heinrich Braun, who would go on to attain prominence in Social Democratic politics and journalism; he even served briefly in the German parliament. The debonair, charismatic Braun, a bold rebel, encouraged Freud to supplement his school curriculum with implicitly subversive books by the progressive British historians W. E. H. Lecky and Henry Thomas Buckle and by the gentile German skeptics Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss.[9]

Braun confided to Freud his plan of acquiring a law degree and then becoming a radical politician. Smitten by his panache, Freud thereupon decided he would follow that very course himself. Although he soon thought better of the idea and opted for a medical career, it was a telling sign of the times that two young Jews could plausibly imagine themselves becoming socialist leaders, operating freely within the broader society to accomplish reforms that would be applauded by Jews and gentiles alike.

An even more impressive crossing of ethnic lines was effected by

Braun's eventual brother-in-law, Victor Adler, whom Freud came to know (and envy, and dislike) at the University of Vienna. A physician in private life, Adler believed that his political organizing and parliamentary initiatives extended naturally from his concern for patients who were experiencing class oppression. As the founder of the first Social Democratic party in Austria, Adler would manage to legislate universal manhood suffrage in a land where the nobility's illusions were still being humored. In 1907, thanks to Adler, the workers could vote at last, and they made his party the strongest in Austria. When the whole empire imploded at the end of World War I, it was the dying Adler who "led the orderly and peaceful revolution which removed the last formalities of Habsburg rule."[10]

Neither Adler nor Braun, then, felt significantly limited by anti-Semitism. Nor, apparently, did Freud himself feel persecuted in his schoolboy years, as can be inferred from two fragmentary sets of extant correspondence: a handful of letters to his Freiberg companion Emil Fluss, with whom he had reconnected in a visit to his birthplace at age sixteen, and a more extensive collection, composed mostly in errant self-taught Spanish between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, that he sent to his closest teenage friend and "private academy" confidant, Eduard Silberstein. Both Fluss and Silberstein were Jews, and Silberstein, one year behind in the gymnasium, had been exposed to the same local atmosphere as Freud. While each set of Freud's letters occasionally mentions Jewish ethnicity, neither of them contains so much as a hint of ill treatment.

We meet in these archly ironizing documents a bookish, ponderously playful, sententious adolescent who exudes optimism about his studies and his plans for a sterling career. His literary and philosophical orientation is already German. He often sounds as if he is parroting judgments that were pronounced in class by his teachers. But there are signs, as well, of youthful cynicism about an older generation's pomposities. Jewish, Christian, and imperial Austro-Hungarian customs alike are treated satirically, with an implication that forward-looking youths in this modern age can no longer be bothered with religious or patriotic nonsense.

According to Freud's *Autobiographical Study*, a wall of anti-Semitism,