CONTENTS

Preface by Andrew Blauner ix
Acknowledgments xi

INTERPRETATIONS

It’s Complicated 3
Sarah Boxer

Penis Envy 22
Jennifer Finney Boylan

On “Mourning and Melancholia” 38
Rick Moody

Dreams of the Dead—IV 51
Alex Pheby

Freud as a Fiction Writer 61
Sheila Kohler

Sigmund Freud, Private Investigator 72
David Gordon

Freud and the Writers 83
Colm Tóibín

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
The Open-Armed, Beckoning Embrace 98
  Thomas Lynch

**THE TALKING CURE**

The Freuds 111
  Casey Schwartz

My Oedipus Complex 120
  David Michaelis

From Freud’s Ordinary Unhappiness to Winnicott’s Good Enough 146
  Susie Orbach

Growing Up Freudian 158
  Peter D. Kramer

Psychoanalysis in the Cold War American Race Movie 172
  Gerald Early

Once a Neurologist 188
  Richard Panek

Tangling with Freud in a Post-Freudian World 198
  Sherry Turkle

**PERSONAL HISTORY**

Freud’s First Scientific Publication 211
  Mark Solms

Searching for Martha Freud 215
  Daphne Merkin
Freud is family, my family. Not literally, but dreamily. I first awakened to Sigmund Freud’s presence in my crib. When I was a year old or so, just lying there, my father approached me. I saw him walk toward me from the hallway. He stuck his pointer finger through the bars and said, “Bite!” And I, toothless, did bite. Nothing weird, right? In retrospect, though, this innocent scene seems kind of kinky. Thank you, Sigmund Freud, for warping my very first memory.

On the other hand, thank you, Sigmund Freud, for putting me in a class with Leonardo da Vinci. As I learned much later, Leonardo had a similar remembrance, which he recounted in the Codex Atlanticus: “it comes to my mind as a very early memory, when I was still in the cradle, a vulture came down to me, he opened my mouth with his tail and struck me a few times with his tail against my lips.” Freud loved this vulture “memory” so much that he wrote a book about it, Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of His Childhood, in which he said, Leonardo’s “phantasy conceals nothing more or less than a reminiscence of nursing—or being nursed—at the mother’s breast,” and when Leonardo grew up, his infant vision became “a passive homosexual phantasy.”

In the house where I grew up, everything had meaning—unconscious meaning, double meaning, hidden meaning, manifest
meaning, latent meaning. Thanks to Freud, nothing was what it seemed. The finger might well be a phallus or a bird; the mouth, toothless, might be a threatening abyss. Hakuna Matata? Never. Vagina Dentata? Could be.

My dad had a shelf of Freud’s writings, which he applied liberally to our daily lives. He labeled his wife’s and his daughters’ emotional outbursts “hysterical.” (They weren’t.) We were trained to be on the lookout for unconscious motives. (Always there.) We were schooled in sussing out the latent criticism behind remarks, jokes, even compliments. (We’re not paranoid; we’re realists!) When I took up rock climbing I was diagnosed with a “death wish.” No dream went unanalyzed, no gift horse’s mouth went unlooked-in. My childhood was a world of fizz and buzz, toil and trouble. Anyone who didn’t see all the stuff churning under the surface of everyday life was a damn fool.

By age sixteen, I began to grapple with Freud’s writings. Looking for a topic for an English paper, I ran my finger along my father’s Freud shelf as if shopping for clothes on a discount rack. I grazed the paperbacks—Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Interpretation of Dreams, Moses and Monotheism, The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents—finally landing on one, untouched and thin, that pleased my eye and my ear: The Ego and the Id. It wasn’t really the best choice. I liked the exotic title, but the insides were a scientistic mess. At the kitchen table I pored over Freud’s incomprehensible diagram of EGO, ID, Repressed, acoust., Pcpt.-Cs., and Pcs., staring at the menagerie of terms, some abbreviated, some in italics, some in ALL CAPS (only crazy people use ALL CAPS!), all linked together by an oval representing a brain.

Then something on the next page caught my eye: Freud noted that the EGO sported a little “cap of hearing,” an acoustic helmet, and wore it “awry.” How jaunty! At this point Freud plunged into one of his best metaphors: The ego “in its relation to the id . . . is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse. . . . Often a rider, if he is not to be parted
from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id’s will into action as if it were its own.”

I was hooked. Freud’s jockey metaphor won me over. I wrote my English paper on The Ego and the Id, or, as Bruno Bettelheim later renamed it, The I and the It. I had no idea what I was talking about. I got an A because the teacher couldn’t understand what I was talking about either.

By the time I went to college, Freud was largely passé, at least at Harvard. The only Freud book I read there, Three Theories on Sexuality, was for a course on intellectual history. Meanwhile, the Harvard department of psychology and social relations was, as far as I could tell, populated by sadists. Lurking somewhere in that department was the behaviorist B. F. Skinner, the king of controlled environments, so-called Skinner boxes, where pigeons, rats, and even people were coaxed, by positive and negative reinforcements, to do whatever they were conditioned to do.

I never took a psychology course. It all seemed god-awful. Nonetheless, I came pretty close to being part of that world when I interviewed for a summer job in the Harvard lab of Torsten Wiesel and David Hubel, who were already famous (and soon to be Nobel famous) for their work on the visual processing systems of kittens. Now they were moving on to monkeys. The job I interviewed for was taking care of the monkeys. But when I found out that the new experiment entailed forcing monkeys, heads immobilized, to stare at a visual stimulus for hours on end every day for the rest of their lives, lives that would end with a beheading and an analysis of what all that torture had done to their brains, I bailed. As I left the lab, Wiesel told me that although the monkeys’ lives would not be pleasant and would inevitably end with a decapitation, “at least their lives will be a little better if you care for them.” Was he guilt-tripping me?
I fled psychology, psychiatry, and every associated field. But not forever. I moved to New York and found work as a science journalist. I had roommates. I had boyfriends. I had problems. I needed therapy. So once I finally managed to earn a living wage, with benefits, I went looking for a therapist. I tried many. I rejected many. Finally, one stuck.

He was a Freudian. He told me I’d have to kill a dozen shrinks before finding the right one. I think he was number six or so. He was older than my dad. He walked crookedly, like he was about to fall over. He had a sense of humor, but I worried that he was a crackpot. Once a week I went into his darkened room and lay on a couch and talked. He often steered the conversation to rage. When I looked into his background many years later, I learned that he had a horribly tragic history (captured in the 1984 movie Bay Boy). His parents were murdered in their home in 1941 by an anti-Semitic policeman who lived in the building they owned. No wonder my therapist was examining my rage! I’d be examining my rage too if I were him. Which didn’t mean that I didn’t have any.

Anyway, psychoanalysis was not dead, at least not to me. I resumed my Freud reading (The Interpretation of Dreams) and kept a dream journal. Then, in the late 1980s, while enjoying a brief period of unemployment and some severance pay from Time, Inc., I moved to Berkeley and started doodling. I daydreamed and I drew. Maybe I could start a comic strip. I’d always drawn a bunny and he always looked troubled to me. I tried to get him to talk and move. He wouldn’t. I placed him in a bar and got him drunk to see whether he’d talk. No. Then, suddenly, a lightbulb! This bunny was totally neurotic. Why not send him to a psychoanalyst? He desperately needed help.

Thus Bunnyman, my neurotic superhero, was born. And he quickly found a quack analyst, a bird, Dr. Sigbird Floyd. In the
mold of Dr. Freud, Dr. Floyd, the bird analyst, was only interested in Bunnyman's psychic life. Although Bunnyman came running to Dr. Floyd because he was being chased by a wolf, Dr. Floyd assured Bunnyman that the wolf was just a fantasy. But then, at the end of the very first episode, just as Bunnyman left the safe haven of Dr. Floyd’s office, a wolf walked in the door for his own analysis with Dr. Floyd. It was Mr. Wolfman! This was how my first comic, *In the Floyd Archives: A Psycho-Bestiary*, began.

To research my comic, I dove deep into Freud’s case histories. I studied the Wolf Man and Daniel Paul Schreber (who would merge to form some of the details of my bipolar, cross-dressing Wolfman); the Rat Man (who would become my obsessive-compulsive hoarder, Ratma’am); Dora (who would become Lambskin, the fleece that was sometimes worn by the cross-dressing Wolfman); and Little Hans (who would become my Oedipal star, Bunnyman).

By the time my comic really took shape, in the 1990s, I had a new job as an editor at the *New York Times Book Review*. There I was in charge of all books about science, nature, psychology, and psychoanalysis. Dumpster-size containers full of books came in every week. I got to decide which ones would get reviewed and who should review them and then I would edit the reviews. For a few books (*On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* by the child analyst Adam Phillips being one), I did the reviewing myself.

One of my first—and scariest—editing assignments was handling the review of *Final Analysis: The Making and Unmaking of a Freudian Analyst* (1990) by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, who was infamous for his battles with psychoanalysis. In the 1970s, Masson, a charming and dogged Sanskrit scholar who was also a psychoanalyst in training, befriended the founder of the Freud Archives, Kurt Eissler, as well as Freud’s daughter Anna Freud, keeper of her father’s flame. Shockingly, the two of them handed Masson the keys to the psychoanalytic kingdom in 1980: Masson was named the project director of the Freud Archives and thereby gained access to all of Freud’s letters and interviews. Eissler came to regret it, bitterly. When Eissler died in 1999, I wrote
his obituary and quoted what Gwen Davis had written about him in the *Nation*: Eissler was like “old Geppetto, who had carved himself a son, only to discover, to his profound chagrin, that Pinocchio was a naughty boy.”

Once Masson had access, beginning in the early 1980s, to Freud’s letters, he zoomed in on what he considered the most scandalous and amoral turn in Freud’s life—his abandonment of the so-called seduction hypothesis. In 1895, Freud wrote a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess stating his belief that *all* neurosis was caused by child abuse. Then, less than a year later, Freud scaled back his hypothesis, arguing that *some* neuroses might be caused by the *fantasy* that one had been abused. In a 1983 *New Yorker* essay titled “Trouble in the Archives,” the journalist Janet Malcolm described the revision: Freud “never doubted that seductions and rapes and beating of children sometimes do take place,” she wrote, but he “came to believe that many or most of the seductions reported by his patients were ‘wishful fantasies.’”

To orthodox Freudians, this shift away from historical reality toward so-called psychic reality was the very key to psychoanalysis. To Masson it was a horrible abandonment of abused children and a disaster for psychoanalysis. In her *New Yorker* piece, Malcolm quoted Masson’s 1981 address to the Western New England Psychoanalytic Society, in which he damned Freud’s revision: “By shifting the emphasis from a real world of sadness, misery and cruelty to an internal stage on which actors performed invented dramas for an invisible audience of their own creation, Freud began a trend away from the real world that, it seems to me, has come to a dead halt in the present-day sterility of psychoanalysis throughout the world.”

Masson was promptly removed from his throne at the Freud Archives. And then he had a royal tantrum that lasted years. By the time I handled the review of his 1990 book *Final Analysis*, in which he chronicled his own terrible psychoanalysis and his ejection from the Freud Archives, his antitherapy rampage was famous. He had already written two other books against psychoanalysis, *The
Assault on Truth (1984), detailing his case against Freud, and Against Therapy (1988), arguing that “abuse of one form or another is built into the very fabric of psychotherapy.” Most ominously (to me), he had sued the New Yorker in 1984 for Janet Malcolm’s reportage about him, which had become, in 1983, a book, In the Freud Archives. His case went all the way to the Supreme Court, where he ultimately lost.

Even after I left the New York Times Book Review to become an arts and ideas reporter at the Times, psychoanalysis remained one of my regular beats. In 1997 I wrote a piece titled “How Oedipus Is Losing his Complex,” and an article on the history of hysteria. In 1998 I wrote about pupaphobia, the fear of puppets, and also covered the heated debate among psychoanalysts about Freud’s abandonment of his seduction hypothesis. By the late 1990s, when the so-called Freud Wars had reached a fever pitch, I was embedded more or less with the Freudian troops. I understood their lingo and seemed to care more than anyone I knew on the Times staff about the past and future of psychoanalysis. I felt it was my duty to report honestly about the Freud Wars from the front.

Nonetheless, I had plenty of doubts about Freud and his methods. The comic I was drawing made hay of Freud’s mania for fantasy over reality. I had also modeled the most sinister character in my book, Dr. Fleece, who threatens Lambskin with a fleecing, on Freud’s quackiest friend, Wilhelm Fliess. But, despite my skepticism, I felt no kinship with the anti-Freudians. They struck me as humorless, petty, and mean.

On December 17, 1995, for instance, I reviewed Paul Roazen’s book How Freud Worked: First-Hand Accounts of Patients. His main point was that Freud had no boundaries with his patients, which sure seemed true. Among Freud’s analysands were his own daughter, his daughter’s friend, his translator, and his caregiver. As I noted in my review, “He was personable to the point of being
meddlesome and indiscreet, he was more than willing to ask favors of his patients and give them advice, and he vacationed, played cards and spoke unguardedly with his favorites.” But when I, after agreeing with Roazen’s main argument, took issue with his tendentious quotation marks and his questionable logic, finding his book a “minefield of shattered quotes and non sequiturs,” he sent me hate mail. And when a new Italian translation of the book came out he sent me jaunter hate mail.

By the end of the twentieth century, Freud’s attackers seemed to have gained the upper hand in the Freud Wars. At the New York Review of Books the critic Frederick Crews often published long essays on Freud’s faults (which he then collected in a 1995 book titled The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute). And when, in 1995, the Library of Congress first announced plans for an exhibition on Freud’s legacy, the anti-Freudians, so the rumor went, managed to get the show postponed until a more critical take on Freud could be found.

Three years later, in 1998, when Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture finally did open, the Freud bashers seemed to have won some concessions. As I wrote in a 1998 essay for the Times, “When Verbal Resists Visual: Freud’s Defense Against Art,” the exhibition’s greatest claim for Freud was merely an irrefutable and obvious point: “Freud, like it or not, has had an extraordinary influence on our culture, from Thurber to Popeye.” Still, a lot of Freud’s bashers were unhappy; they seethed that such a man got to be honored with such a show in such a venue. As the British historian and philosopher John Forrester put it in his 1998 book Dispatches from the Freud Wars, Freud’s harshest critics had a “heartfelt wish that Freud might never have been born or, failing to achieve that end, that all his works and influence be made as nothing.”

Were the bashers going to get their way? Was the ship of Freud sinking? Were there any lifeboats? Could psychoanalysis be saved?
The Freudians seemed to be on their heels. I wanted to know what would happen. So I gathered all the Freud-bashing books I could find and reviewed them in an essay for the *New York Times Book Review*, “Flogging Freud” (August 10, 1997). My tone was fairly breezy, as if Team Psychoanalysis would sail on no matter what, with a cigar-smoking Freud on its prow: “Freud has proved to be a great whipping boy for our time. He has been blamed for turning children against their parents (Frederick Crews) and for excusing parents who seduce their children (Jeffrey Masson), for being a crypto-biologist (Frank Sulloway) and a crypto-priest (Richard Webster), for believing patients too little (Jeffrey Masson) and too much (Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen), for hiding his faults (Henri Ellenberger) and flaunting them (John Farrell).” But deep down I was worried. Freud wasn’t exactly my personal hero, but he was, after all, family.

At the height of the Freud Wars, I was putting the finishing touches on my spoof of Freud’s case histories, *In the Floyd Archives: A Psycho-Beastiary* (2001). By this time my main characters were so closely tied to Freud’s famous patients, the Wolf Man, the Rat Man, Dora, Schreber, and Little Hans, that I felt compelled to add some seventy-five endnotes to my comic. And I decided to name my book after *In the Freud Archives*, Malcolm’s book about Masson’s undermining of the Freud Archives. My comic was neither tribute nor hatchet job. It was . . . Freudian. I turned Freud’s ideas on themselves, sometimes making fun of them. In one review, titled “An Analytic Casebook Full of Animal Instincts” (*New York Times*, September 6, 2001), the playwright Jenny Lyn Bader wrote, “If Freud had a bad dream, it would probably be Floyd.” Fair enough.

Freud’s case histories, his most vivid and dramatic material, captivated me, but I knew they were treacherous territory. In the Wolf Man case, Freud totally overreached in claiming to know with certainty what his patient really had seen as an infant and how it affected him. Was the Wolf Man’s dream of wolves silently sitting in a tree really proof that as an infant he saw his parents having sex doggy style? And the infamous Dora case was Freud at his worst.
HELP ME, DR. FLOYD!

I DON'T NEED THE COUCH. I'M JUST HIDING.

AREN'T WE ALL?

THIS WAY TO THE COUCH, MR. BUNNY-MAN.

NO, I REALLY AM HIDING. SEE?

WHAT ARE YOU HIDING FROM? COME OUT AND TELL ME.

I'M BEING CHASED BY A WOLF.
So, you think you're being "chased"?

Yes, I am afraid of the wolf.

And I suppose this "wolf" wants to eat you up.

That's right! How did you know?

Persecution fantasies are common for bunnies.

But I saw him!

That's what they all say.

We're out of time, but I'll hold this spot for you.

You saved my life!

I'm glad you had the sense to seek help.

Come in, Mr. Wolfman.
This was ground zero for “No means yes.” When Dora, a teenager, told Freud that his old friend “Herr K” had tried to seduce her, Freud demurred, saying that her report merely showed her wish to be seduced by Herr K, and by Freud too. Talk about unexamined projection! In dealing with this infuriating and almost absurdly awful material (and, by the way, Herr K later confessed to Dora), I still was awed by Freud’s ability to be both maddeningly literal minded and beautifully metaphorical in almost the same breath, his talent with puns and slips, and his great ease with unconscious life. Sometimes he used his gifts atrociously. But what gifts they were!

—

I won’t say that the _Floyd Archives_ ended the Freud Wars, but I will say that the Freud Wars ended abruptly and dramatically on the day of what was supposed to be my first New York book party for _Floyd_, originally scheduled for September 11, 2001. (Needless to say, the party was canceled.) On that day, the Freud Wars came to a screeching halt. Freud was worse than dead; he was totally beside the point. Who cared about psychological reality when actual reality—airliners used as weapons, collapsing towers, three thousand dead, a smoke-filled city, the threat of future terrorism—was so clearly present?

However, not everyone got the memo. To some people, or at least those who attended my book talks, Freud still mattered. At one of my talks for _In the Floyd Archives_, a few audience members voiced outrage that I was using Freud’s ideas at all. Someone asked: If Freud has been discredited, why would you spend so much time on him? Another asked: If Freud hated women so much, why would you, a woman, pay him any mind? I was on the defensive. I imagine I said something unwitty about Freud’s wit.

Closer to home, I faced opposite challenges. From Freudians and psychoanalytically inclined persons, including some from my family, came questions about the critical tone of _In the Floyd Archives_. Why do you mock Freud? At a meeting of the Ameri-
can Psychoanalytic Association, I had a little friendly back-and-forth with Harold Blum, who had become the executive director of the Freud Archives in 1986, after Masson was fired from that post. In a conversation called “Dr. Freud and Dr. Floyd” Blum and I compared what was in the Freud Archives with what was in the Floyd Archives. Apparently I was still welcome among the psychoanalysts, but I could tell that my audience, battered and bruised by the Freud Wars and September 11, was in no mood for Freudian fun and games. Everyone with a psychoanalytic bent wanted to know what my real attitude toward Freud was. Once again, I was on the defensive. If I recall correctly, my answers boiled down to one rhetorical question: Wasn’t I honoring Freud by engaging him, playing with him, fighting him on the very playground that he himself built? I’m not sure anyone bought it.

Several years later, I wrote and drew a sequel to the Floyd Archives, titled Mother May I? A Post-Floydian Folly. There I played with some of the wild ideas that Freud formulated at the end of his life—the father-fearing, father-killing, father-worshipping foundations of civilization as he outlined them in Totem and Taboo and Moses and Monotheism—as well as some of the mother-centric ideas of the post-Freudians, namely the breast-obsessed object relations theory of Melanie Klein and the play therapy of Donald Winnicott. My new comic turned out to be a much broader comedy than the Floyd Archives. So when International Psychoanalytic Books wanted to publish Mother May I? (along with a new edition of Floyd) I was both pleased and surprised.

In Mother May I? I was as tough on late Freud and the post-Freudians as I had been on early Freud in my first book. By turning Melanie Klein, the great analyst of rage and envy, into an intrusive and bossy little sheep named Melanin Klein (which means “Little Black”), I literally belittled her. And if that weren’t
WHY, YES, I, MELANIN KLEIN, DO HAVE KIDS.

I THINK I'VE GOT ONE IN MY POCKET HERE.

...LET ME JUST FEEL AROUND FOR HER.

HERE SHE IS—ME LITTLE KLEIN!

A KITTEN?

YOU CAN CALL HER 'ME LITTLE LITTLE.'

WHAT'S WRONG WITH HER? ...IS SHE DEAD?

IS SHE BROKEN? ...

NO... JUST A BIT DOWN...

WHY?

GRRRRRRRR.
Because she loves me...

She loves me not.

She hates me...

...She hates me not.

She wants to rip me limb from limb...

...She wants to crawl back inside me.

She wants to eat me alive...

...She never wants to stop sucking on me!

Plus, she's not nearly as smart as her mummy.

Grrr... I hate my mummy...

I call it the depressive position...

And it's as good as it gets.
UH... AHEM... MRS. KLEIN?

YES, ME LITTLE BUNNY-MAN?

HAVE YOU GOT ANY OTHER KIDS?

PROBABLY... PROBABLY...
I, MELANIN KLEIN, WILL NOW CHECK MY OTHER POCKET...

WILL YOU LOOKIE HERE?

IT'S ME LITTLE HANS... OR IS IT ME LITTLE PETER?

THIS ONE IS FULLY ANALYZED... HOUSE-TRAINED TOO!

THAT'S YOUR SON?!

BUT HE LOOKS JUST LIKE ME...
EXCEPT SMALL AND BLACK.

I AM LITTLE HANS, A.K.A. HANS KLEIN.
WHAT DO I DO WITH MY LITTLE HANS?

TREAT HIM LIKE HE'S YOUR LITTLE BROTHER.

LIKE HE'S YOUR LITTLE BROTHER.

BUT ISN'T HE YOUR SON?

AND THAT WOULD MAKE ME... UH...

...MAKE YOU WHAT?

FURIOUS? ENVIOUS? VENGEFUL? MURDEROUS?

STOP IT, MUMMIE! YOU'RE EMBARRASSING ME!

ISN'T HE CUTE?

I WAS GOING TO SAY...

...THAT WOULD MAKE ME YOUR SON, TOO.

I KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO SAY THAT.
enough, I gave Klein, the prime theorist of the infant-mother bond, three disturbed animal children: Melittle Klein, a kitten who hates her mother with a passion (true to life); Little Hans (aka Hans Klein), a happy but violent little bunny named for one of Freud’s sweetest cases; and Squiggle Piggle, an indignant pig who speaks only when someone pulls his tail. (I modeled him after the so-called Squiggle Game that the child analyst Winnicott used to play with his patients.)

In 2019 I gave a slide talk at 192 Books in New York titled “How to Psychoanalyze a Bunny.” (The title of my talk was a nod to a short documentary about the artist Ray Johnson, How to Draw a Bunny.) There I presented the brief and sometimes tragic true life stories behind each of the characters I drew in Mother May I? After my talk one die-hard Freudian I knew asked: “Why are you so hard on Freud?” And I responded: “Why are you so easy on him?” He never spoke to me again.

I do not hate Freud. I grew up with him. Sure, he had deep faults, which are especially evident in his case histories, the works I drew on most. But there is so much brilliance in his leaping logic. When Freud, whose study was cluttered with antiquities, was once struggling to get his favorite patient, the obsessive-compulsive Rat Man, to open up, to unearth his real thoughts, he told the Rat Man that if he kept all his disturbing unconscious thoughts to himself, buried, he would actually be preserving them, keeping them alive and powerful, just as antiquities are protected from air, hands, accidents, and soot as long as they are left buried underground. It is a beautiful, deep, and complicated metaphor that I think of often. Without Freud, it would not exist.

Without Freud: No Freudian slips. No Oedipus complex. No latent content. No repression. No wish fulfillment. No death drive. No unconscious life. No ego. No id. As I think now on my long engagement with Freud, back to the crib, I keep returning to Freud’s words and metaphors. It is magical stuff. The world would be worse without it. I do not hate Freud. Nor do I worship him. I am conflicted, which is a feeling from Freud, who defined the psyche as a
field of conflicts. My ambivalence is Freudian. Which is not to say, as Freud might, that my resistance to Freud is a defense against my attraction to him. My “no” is not a “yes.” Nor is my “yes” a “no.” Rather I would say that after all the love and war, Freud is still the air we breathe, the language we speak, and the finger we bite.
INDEX

abstinence, 222
abuse, 8–9, 64–66, 138–41, 143–44, 199
Aciman, André, 277–85, 325
Adams, Laurie Schneider, 131–45
addiction, 47–48, 50, 103, 238
Adler, Irene (character), 78
Adorno, Theodor, 202, 287, 291
“Against Joie de Vivre” (Lopate), 291
Against Therapy (Masson), 11
agency, 156
aggression, 302
Alberini, Cristina, 305
altruistic surrender, 226
The Ambassadors (James), 95
ambivalence: of feeling, 92–93; about
Freud’s work, 20–21, 39, 170–71, 199,
255, 286; about parents, 166
American Psychoanalytic Association, 15, 94
American Psychological Association, 309
“An Analytic Casebook Full of Animal
Instincts” (Bader), 11
Anatomy of Melancholy (Burton), 48–49
Andreas-Salomé, Lou, 223
Anna Freud, 112–19; arrest in Vienna
of, 251; childhood of, 113; and devote-
tion to father, 112–14; dog owned by,
227–30; father’s analysis of, 199;
homes of (see London; Vienna);
Masson’s friendship with, 7; and
relationship with mother, 224; work
of, 114–19, 167, 225, 236–37, 269
Anna Freud: A Biography (Young-Bruehl),
113–14
Anna Freud Centre (Hampstead
Clinic), 113, 115–16, 118, 165, 167
“Anna Freud’s Adult Psychoanalytic
Technique” (Couch), 116–17
Anna O. case (Bertha Pappenheim),
123, 174, 193, 196
Ansermet, François, 305
anthropology, 161–62, 164
anti-Freudians. See criticism of Freud’s
work
anti-Semitism, 177, 183, 218, 247, 300
aphasia, 302
aphorisms about mental health, 263–64
“Apocryphal Freud” (Elms), 263
Appignanesi, Lisa, 216
Aristotle, 212, 214
artwork, children’s, 121–23
Aschenbach, Gustav von (character), 94
The Assault on Truth (Masson), 9
assisted suicide, 104, 232
Auden, W. H., 169, 255, 257, 261
Auerbach, Erich, 63
Augenfeld, Felix, 237
Austria, Freud’s patriotism for, 88–89.
See also Vienna
An Autobiographical Study (Freud), 293,
296–97
Bader, Jenny Lyn, 11
Baldwin, James, 291
Balzac, Honoré de, 237–38
Barthes, Roland, 45, 287

Bataan (film), 177

Bauer, Ida, 69–70. See also Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Freud)
The Bay Boy (film), 6

Bayes, Thomas, 305

The Beast in the Jungle (James), 95

behavior genetics, 307–9, 322n5

Behling, Katja, 217

The Bell Curve (Herrnstein and Murray), 307

Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital, 129–30

Benjamin, Walter, 75, 287

“Beobachtungen über Gestaltung und feineren Bau der als Hoden beschriebenen Lappenorgane des Aals” (Freud), 211–14, 302

Bergmann, Martin, 222

Berlin, Isaiah, 216

Bernays family: Berman, 218; Emmeline, 218, 221; Isaac, 218, 219; Jacob, 218; Martha (Freud), 216–26, 234, 239; Michael, 218; Minna, 219, 223–24

Beth Israel Hospital, 167

Bettelheim, Bruno, 5

Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Freud), 87, 197, 266–70, 272, 275–76

biology: neurology, 188–97, 301–5; reproductive, 211–14

“Biology and the Future of Psychoanalysis” (Kandel), 304–5

biomedical model, 301–9

bipolar disorder, 302

birth, 322n2

birth control, 222

bisexuality, 68, 183

Blackmur, R. P., 292

The Blank Slate, (Pinker), 307–8

Bloom, Harold, 258–59

Blum, Harold, 15

body-mind interaction: in depression, 45–46, 49; Freud’s neurological work on, 193–96; Freud’s theories about, 149, 155, 193–96, 206–7, 303–4; modern theories about, 309–10

Bonaparte, Marie, 112, 223, 228–32, 251

Bone Rosary (Lynch), 103

The Book of American Negro Poetry (Johnson), 315n2

Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel, 11

Borges, Jorge Luis, 39

Bovell, James, 30

Box, George, 308

Boxer, Sarah, 3–21, 325

Boylan, Jennifer Finney, 22–37, 325

Boyt, Susie, 234–43, 325

brain research, 188–97, 301–2, 307

Breuer, Josef, 123, 149, 172, 174, 193–96, 293, 302. See also Studies on Hysteria (Freud and Breuer)

Bridges, Lloyd, 173

Brief Encounter (film), 235

British Museum, 167

British Psychoanalytical Association, 227

Brodie, Steve, 173

The Brothers Karamazov (Dostoevsky), 63

Brown, John, 141–44

Brown University, 38–50

Brücke, Ernst Wilhelm von, 197, 302

Bruner, Jerome, 162

Brydon, Spencer (character), 95

Buchholz, Leon, 249–50

Buchholz, Malke, 250

Buckley, Tim, 107

Buddenbrooks (Mann), 94

Buffon, Comte de, 213

Bullitt, William, 112

Bunnyman (character), 6–7, 12–13, 16–20

Buñuel, Luis, 137

Burns, Ken, 141

Burton, Robert, 48–49

Cabin in the Sky (film), 316n10

Cabrera, Roberto Esquivel, 32

The Call of Cthulhu (Lovecraft), 81

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
INDEX 333

Calvino, Italo, 39
cancer. See oral cancer of Freud
capitalism, 146–47, 157, 204–5, 255
Capra, Frank, 316n10
caricature of Freud, 299–300
Carmen Jones (film), 173
The Carrot Seed (Krauss), 129
Carter, Angela, 39
Carter, Ben, 177
case histories: fictional qualities of, 44, 61–71, 77–78, 295, 302–3; Freud as character in, 72–82; spoofs of, 7–15. See also Studies on Hysteria (Freud and Breuer); specific case
castration anxiety, 164, 167
Cat (Hilda Doolittle), 223, 230
Cervantes, Miguel de, 62–63, 219
Champollion, Jean-François, 282, 285
change, capacity for, 272
Charcot, Jean-Martin, 63, 174, 175, 193–94, 315n4
Charlotta, 133, 138–41, 143–44
Charlotte Stant (character), 96
cheating: ban on, 95–97; extramarital affair, 223–24, 297
Chevalier, Laurent (character), 125
Un Chien Andalou (film), 137
childhood: abuse during, 8–9, 138–41, 143–44; exposure to Freudian concepts during, 3–4, 120–23, 158–61, 286–87; and fort-da game, 266–76; memories from, 3, 261–62; and Oedipus complex, 118, 120–45, 160–65, 199, 298; and parents (see father; mother); penis envy during, 23, 164, 300, 307; psychoanalysis during, 114–18, 160–61; psychoanalytic focus on, 154–57, 164, 168, 182–83, 256; success emphasized during, 147; theories of, 114–18, 147, 162–63, 200
Chow dogs, 116, 227–33, 240
Civilization and Its Discontents (Freud), 37, 45, 82, 162, 259–61, 296
Claus, Carl, 211–13
clues, symptoms as, 74–76, 80
Cobbs, Price M., 172, 180, 317n26
cocaine, 47, 130, 192, 311n1
cognitive behavioral therapy, 169, 204, 207, 309
college. See university education;
specific university
Collins, Joseph, 94
Columbia Science Honors Program, 161
comedy: Freud’s writing as, 77; spoofs of Freud, 6–20, 299–300
The Complete Neuroscientific Works of Sigmund Freud (Solms), 211
The Confessions of Felix Krull (Mann), 95, 96
consumption, culture of, 147
countertransference, 78, 170, 203
Coppola, Francis, 124, 125
Cope, Daniel, 199
Copernicus, Nicolaus, 290
Cotton, Henry, 30
Couch, Arthur, 116–17
countertransference, 78, 170, 203
Coverley, Bernardine, 244
Covid-19 pandemic, 309
Crash Dive (film), 177
Crews, Frederick, 10, 11, 221–22, 255, 301, 308
criticism of Freud’s work: ambivalence about, 20–21, 39, 170–71, 199, 255, 286; biomedical model influencing, 46, 301–2; and dream interpretation, 80, 277–85; Freud’s awareness of, 290; during Freud Wars, 9–11, 14–15, 198–99; Kagan’s arguments and, 162–64; lack of evidence used in, 300; as sexist, 23, 37, 199, 225, 256, 294–95, 300–301, 306
Croy, Kate (character), 96

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
cultural influences: capitalism as, 146–47, 157, 204–5, 255; digital technology as, 201, 204–8; on emotions, 151–57; war as, 81–97, 270–72

Curtis, Tony, 184

Damasio, Antonio, 305
Darwin, Charles, 256, 260, 290
David Copperfield (Dickens), 219
Davis, Gwen, 8
daydreams, 6, 263–64
Deary, Ian, 307
depression (melancholia), 38–50, 106, 273, 301, 309
desire, 147, 161, 270; repressed, 95, 163, 166, 257, 264–65, 298
“Desire and Ambition” (aphorism), 263–64
demolition of Freud, 237, 249
Destiny’s Tot (film), 180
detective, Freud as, 63, 72–82, 289
Deutch, Helene, 223
diagnosis of illness, 41–43, 98, 148
The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III), 301
Dick, Douglas, 173
Dickens, Charles, 161, 163, 219
digital culture, 201, 204–8

Diski, Jenny, 217, 219

Dispatches from the Freud Wars (Forrester), 10
dissemination, 261, 264, 270
The Doctor Looks at Biography (Collins), 94
dogs, 116, 227–33, 240
Don Quixote (Cervantes), 62–63, 219
Doolittle, Hilda, 223, 230
Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Freud), 45; and Dora as Freud’s femme fatale, 78, 80; fictional qualities of, 61–71, 78, 295; spoof of, 7, 11, 14
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 63
“double portrait,” 295
doubt, 292–94

Dreaming for Freud (Kohler), 69–70
dream interpretation: arguments against, 80, 277–85; in case histories, 62, 66, 80; and daydreams, 6, 263–64; fiction informed by, 38–39, 51–60; and Freud’s self-interpretations, 80, 232–33, 236, 278; psychoanalytic use of, 62, 169, 267, 272, 274; symbols in, 278–80, 285. See also Interpretation of Dreams, The (Freud)
Dr. Fernweh (character), 28–30, 36–37
Dr. Fleece (character), 9
“Dr. Freud and Dr. Floyd” (conversation), 15
Dr. Sigbird Floyd (character), 6–9
Dr. Watson (character), 63
DSM III (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), 301

Early, Gerald, 172–78, 325
early memories, 3, 261–62
East West Street (Sands), 244
Ebony (magazine), 181
Edwards, James, 173
eel testicles, Freud’s paper on, 211–14, 302
ego, 4–5, 255, 273, 283
The Ego and the Id (Freud), 4–5
ego psychology, 167
Egyptian hieroglyphs, 282, 285
Einstein, Albert, 158, 300
Eissler, Kurt, 7–8, 117
Eitingon, Max, 240
Ellenberger, Henri, 11
Ellison, Ralph, 172, 176, 179
Elms, Alan, 263
emotions: cultural influences on, 151–57;
   and relationship with intelligence, 84, 92, 162, 202–3; role of, 150–51
empathy, 169, 201–8, 314n9
epigrammatism, 295–96
Erikson, Erik, 162, 200–202, 208, 263
Eros (life instinct), 82, 95, 100, 104, 298
   See also specific work
estrangement, 107
ethnography, 203
ethnotherapy, 317n26
etiology of melancholia, 41–43, 45–49
eugenics, 305–7, 309
evil, 271
evolutionary psychology, 307, 323n31
Ewen Montagu (character), 285
existential psychotherapy, 168–69
extramarital affair, 223–24, 297

Falk, Peter, 186
false self, 155–56
Family Matters (exhibition), 251–52
Fanon, Frantz, 291
fantasy, 7, 8, 9, 111, 164, 207
farce, 77
Farrell, John, 11
father: death of, 272; Oedipal love for, 199; role of, 134–44, 160–61
The Feeling of What Happens (Damasio), 305
feelings. See emotions
“Felix Krull” (Mann), 96
femme fatale, 78
Ferenczi, Sándor, 113, 217
Fern, Fanny, 289
Fernweh, Dr. (character), 28–30, 36–37
Fichtl, Paula, 225, 234
fiction: characters in (see literary
   characters; specific character);
dream-informed, 38–39, 51–60;
Freud’s writing as, 44, 61–71, 77–78, 295, 302–3; as outlet for unconscious,
   94–97
The Fifty-Minute Hour (Lindner), 180, 183
films, portrayal of race in, 172–87.
   See also specific film
Final Analysis: The Making and
   Unmaking of a Freudian Analyst
   (Masson), 7, 8
final reveal, 68–69, 79
Finch (character), 173–74, 177–78
First World War. See World War I
Fleece, Dr. (character), 9
Fliess, Wilhelm, 8, 9, 68, 120, 195–96,
   222, 303
“Flogging Freud” (Boxer), 11
Floyd, Dr. Sigbird (character), 6–9
Forrester, John, 10, 216
fort-da game, 266–76
“Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of
   Hysteria” (Freud). See Dora: An
   Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Freud)
France: Freud’s education in, 193–94;
   May 1958 events, 202–3
Frankfurt School, 202
Frau K (character), 70, 78
Frau Professor (Martha Freud), 216–26,
   234, 239
free association, 149, 169, 258, 278–79, 298
Freeman, Lucy, 159
French psychoanalysis, 199
Freud: A Life for Our Time (Gay), 83
Freud: The Making of an Illusion
   (Crews), 221–22, 301
Freud, Anna. See Anna Freud
Freud, Martha. See Martha Freud
Freud, Race, and Gender (Gilman), 300
Freud, Sigmund. See Sigmund Freud
“Freud and Dora” (Marcus), 65
Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis (Marcus), 65
Freud Archives, 7–9, 11, 15, 117
Freud family: Adolphe (Dolfi), 241; Anna (see Anna Freud); Ernst L., 68, 240, 247–48; Esther, 244–52, 326; Heinerle, 228, 269, 273–74; Lucian, 238, 244–49; Lucie, 238–39, 245, 247, 248; Marie (Mitzi), 241, 250; Martha, 215–26, 234, 239; Martin, 217, 220; Mathilde, 237; Pauline (Pauli), 241, 250; Regina (Rosa), 241, 250; Sigmund (see Sigmund Freud); silence about, 244–52; Sophie, 113, 269–70, 273–74; Stephen, 246; Walter, 249; Wolfgang Ernst Halberstadt, 267–70
Freud Museum: in London, 118–19, 234–43, 251–52; in Vienna, 244–52
“Freud Project” (Kramer), 314n5
The Freud Reader (Gay), 224
Freud's Women (Appignanesi and Forrester), 216
See also criticism of Freud's work
Friston, Karl, 305, 309
Galchen, Rivka, 227–33, 326
Galileo Galilei, 189
Galton, Francis, 305, 307
game (fort-da), 260–76
García Marquez, Gabriel, 39
Gay, Peter, 83, 224
gender. See men; women
General Hospital of Vienna, 192
genetics, 302, 307–9, 322n5
Gerlach, Joseph von, 190, 197
German character, 84, 86–87, 90–91, 141, 158, 245
German Enigma code, 277–85
Gestalt Therapy Verbatim (Perls), 38
Gilbert Osmond (character), 96
Gilman, Sander L., 300
“La Gioconda” (painting), 261–62
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 296
Goethe Prize, 69, 294
Goldblatt, Max, 165, 168
The Gold Cell (Olds), 26
The Golden Bowl (James), 95
Golders Green Crematorium, 104
Golgi, Camillo, 190–91, 197
Gombrich, Ernst, 261
Gombrowicz, Witold, 291
good enough, 146–57
Gopnik, Adam, 255–65, 326
Gordon, David, 72–82, 326
Gottfredson, Linda, 307
grandiosity, reining in, 153
Green, Walter, 120–21
grief (mourning), 106, 200, 228, 270, 272–75
Guinness World Records, 32
Halberstadt, Max, 223
Halberstadt, Wolfgang Ernst, 267–70
Hallelujah (film), 173
Hamlet (Shakespeare), 100–101
Hampstead Clinic (Anna Freud Centre), 113, 115–16, 118, 165, 167
Hampstead War Nurseries, 114–15
Hanno (character), 94
Hans Klein (character), 18–20
happiness, 37, 146–57, 162, 260, 296
Hardenbour, Felix von, 69
“Harlem Is Nowhere” (Ellison), 172, 179
Harpers Ferry (West Virginia), 141–44
Harvard University, 162–68, 200
Hauptmann, Gerhard, 87
Hayward, Shepherd, 143
Hazlitt, William, 291
H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), 223, 230
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 300
Heine, Heinrich, 218
Heinerle (grandson), 228, 273–74
Helmholtz, Hermann von, 304, 305
hermetic theory, 68
Herr K (character), 14, 64–66, 68, 69, 78
Herrnstein, Richard J., 307
INDEX 337

Herzog, Wilhelm, 84
heterosexuality, 95–96, 256
*The Hidden Spring* (Solms), 150–51
hieroglyphs, 282, 285
*High Noon* (film), 316n9
Hirsch, Samson Raphael, 218
“History, Family, Silence” (Freud and Sands), 244–52
 Hodder, Edwin, 30
Hoffer, Willie, 248
Hoffman, E.T.A., 314n6
Holmes, Sherlock (character), 63, 72–82, 289, 311n1
*Home of the Brave* (film), 173–87
*Home of the Brave* (play), 176–77
homo- sex- uality, 85, 87, 256, 258, 261
Horney, Karen, 300
How Freud Worked (Roazen), 9–10
“How Oedipus Is Losing His Complex” (Boxer), 9
Hubel, David, 5–6
humor: in Freud’s writing, 77; spoofs of Freud, 6–20, 299–300
Hustvedt, Siri, 299–310, 326
Huygens, Christiaan, 189
Hyman, Stanley Edgar, 294
hypervigilance, 206
hysteric paralysis, 173–80, 193
hysteric paralysis, 173–80, 193
hysteria: Dora case (see *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (Freud)); Freud’s book on (see *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud and Breuer)); Freud’s experience of, 61; history of, 9; therapy for, 154–55, 274
Hysteria (Johnson), 240
hypnosis, 174, 183, 193, 298
hypnosis, 174, 183, 193, 298
impotence, 222
“The In-Between” festival, 25–27
incest taboo, 295
individual-state relation, 89–92, 95–97, 271
Ingram, Rex, 177
injunctions (*mitzvot*), 215
innovator, Freud as, 159
In Search of Lost Time (Proust), 76
Institut Catholique de Paris, 61
integration, 176–79, 186
intelligence: and relationship with emotion, 84, 92, 162, 202–3; theory of, 307
International Psychoanalytic Books, 15
*The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud), 6, 38–39, 62, 68, 232–33, 272, 277, 297. See also dream interpretation
*In the Floyd Archives: A Psycho-Bestiary* (Boxer), 7–15
*In the Freud Archives* (Malcolm), 9, 11, 117
Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis (Freud), 74, 79, 287–94
*Invisible Cities* (Calvino), 39
Jackson, Ricky, 26
James, Henry, 66, 83–97
James, William, 287
jaw cancer. See oral cancer of Freud
Jed (case study), 208
jockey metaphor, 4–5
Jof (dog), 230–32
John Brown Wax Museum, 141–44
John Marcher (character), 95
Johnson, Celia, 235
Johnson, James Weldon, 315n2
Johnson, Samuel, 260
Johnson, Terry, 240
The Jolly Corner (James), 95
Jones, Ernest, 66, 88, 196, 213, 225, 227, 229–31, 255, 297
Joyce, James, 42
Jung, Carl, 223, 306
Kagan, Jerome, 162–64
Kaiser, Hellmuth, 315n12
Kandel, Eric, 304–5
Karnac (bookstore), 111
Kate Croy (character), 96
Kazin, Alfred, 124
Kennedy, A. L., 104–5
Kircher, Athanasius, 282, 284, 285
Klein, Hans (character), 18–20
Klein, Melanie, 15–20, 117–18, 167
Klein, Melanin (character), 15–20
Klein, Melittle (character), 16–20
Kohler, Sheila, 61–71, 326
Konrath, Sara, 207–8
Kraepelin, Emil, 301
Kramer, Peter D., 158–71, 326
Kramer, Stanley, 173–87
Krauss, Ruth, 129
Kurzke, Hermann, 84

Labyrinths (Borges), 39
Lacan, Jacques, 79, 198, 199
Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, 179
Lamb, Charles, 289, 291
Lambskin (character), 7, 9
Lampl-de Groot, Jeanne, 228
Larkin, Philip, 234
La Rochefoucauld, François de, 258, 283–84
Laurents, Arthur, 176–77
Leeuwenhoek, Antonius van, 189
Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of His Childhood (Freud), 3, 259
Letters of Sigmund Freud (Freud), 68
libido, economics of, 260–62
“Libra” (Lynch), 102–3
Library of Congress, Freud exhibitions, 10, 314n5

Licht-benching (Sabbath candles), 215, 226
The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud (Jones), 66
life instinct (Eros), 82, 95, 100, 104, 298
“The Limits of Empathy” (Lopate), 291
Lincoln, Abraham, 141–44
Lindner, Robert, 180–86
listening, value of, 310, 315n11
Listening to Prozac (Kramer), 315n11
See also specific character
See also specific feature
the little death (la petite mort), 104
Little Hans case, 45, 114; spoof of, 7, 11, 12–13, 16–20
Lolita (Nabokov), 63
London Review of Books, 217, 219
Lopate, Phillip, 286–98, 326
loss and return game (fort-da), 266–76
lost object, 105–7
Lothane, Henry Zvi, 303
“Love and Work” (aphorism), 263–64
Lovecraft, H. P., 81
Lovejoy, Frank, 173–74
A Lover’s Discourse (Barthes), 45
love stories, in Freud’s writing, 77–78
Lün (dog), 231
Lün Yug (dog), 229
“Lust and Competition” (aphorism), 263–64
lying, ban on, 95–97
Lynch, Thomas, 98–108, 327
Macintyre, Ben, 281, 285
Madame Merle (character), 96
“Madonna and St. Anne” (painting), 262

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
Magistretti, Pierre, 305
Major (character), 173
Malcolm, Janet, 8, 9, 11, 117
Malle, Louis, 125
Mann, Thomas, 83–97, 294
Mantegazza, Paolo, 64
The Man Who Never Was (film), 281
Marcher, John (character), 95
Marcus, Steven, 65
Marcuse, Herbert, 162
Maresfield Gardens (Hampstead), 111–13, 118–19, 215, 223, 234–43
Martha Freud, 215–26, 234, 239
Mayer, Hans, 87
medications, 46, 164–65, 169, 207, 301
medulla oblongata, 192, 302
melancholia (depression), 38–50, 106, 273, 301, 309
Melanin Klein (character), 15–20
Melittle Klein (character), 16–20
memory: concept of, 75; early (childhood), 3, 261–62; elicitation of (see psychoanalysis); neurobiological evidence for, 305; of trauma, 174–75, 266–76
“Memory Reconsolidation, Trace Reassociation and the Freudian Unconscious” (Alberini, Ansermet, and Magistretti), 305
The Memory Wars (Crews), 10
men: and castration anxiety, 164, 167; as fathers (see father); and Oedipus complex, 118, 120–45, 160–65, 199, 298; and penis envy, 25; and sexual abuse, 8–9, 64–66, 138–41, 143–44, 199
mental health, aphorisms about, 263–64
mental illness: biomedical model of, 301–9; diagnosis of, 41–43, 98, 148; etiology of, 41–43, 45–49; genetics of, 302, 307–9, 322n5; symptoms of, 74–76, 80, 106; treatment of (see treatment of mental illness).
See also specific disease
Merkin, Daphne, 215–26, 327
Merle, Madame (character), 96
metaphors: death wish, 100; dream interpretation and, 277–85; ego-id, 4–5; Freud’s use of, 256–57, 264; penis, 24, 164; repression, 258, 264–65
Met Breuer museum, 25–27
Meyer, Nicholas, 311n1
Meynert, Theodor, 175
Midgley, Nick, 115
Mildred, Stanley, 5
Mill, John Stuart, 219
Millet, Kate, 300
Millican, Jeannie, 241–42
Milton, John, 40–42
Mimesis (Auerbach), 63
mind: body’s relationship with (see body-mind interaction); concept of, 45, 196, 306, 309; subconscious (see unconscious mind)
Mingo (character), 173–74, 178
Minnelli, Vincente, 316n10
Mitzvot (injunctions), 215
“Mona Lisa” (painting), 261–62
Mondini, Carlo, 212–13
Montagu, Ewen (character), 285
Montaigne, Michel de, 258–59, 264, 289, 292
Moody, Rick, 38–50, 327
Moses and Monotheism (Freud), 15
Moss, Peter (character), 173–78, 185
“The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life” (Freud), 295–96
mother: departure and return of, 268, 274–75; favorite child of, 126; Oedipal love for, 118, 120–45, 160–65, 199, 298; role of, 150, 261

Mother May I?: A Post-Floydian Folly (Boxer), 15–20

mourning (grief), 106, 200, 228, 270, 272–75

“Mourning and Melancholia” (Freud), 38–50, 101, 105–7, 272–73

Mrs. Freud (Rosen), 225

Mr. Wolfman (character), 7, 12–13

Murmur of the Heart (film), 125

Murray, Charles, 307

My American Life (Cobbs), 172, 180

mystery, in Freud’s writing, 62–69, 77, 79, 289

Nabokov, Vladimir, 63

Nagorski, Andrew, 112

narcissism, 48, 50, 147

narcosynthesis, 174

narrator, in case histories, 66–70

Nation (magazine), 8

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 302

Nature (journal), 309

nature-nurture debate, 307–8

Nazi death camps, 239–41, 250, 306

The Negro Soldier (film), 316

neurology, 188–97, 301–5

neuropsychoanalysis, 305

neurotic paralysis, 173–80

New Project for a Scientific Psychology (Solms), 305

Newton, Isaac, 192, 194, 197

New Yorker (magazine), 8–9

New York Review of Books (magazine), 10

New York Times (newspaper), 11, 259, 322, 323

Book Review of, 7, 9, 11, 301, 308

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 81, 287, 291, 296–97

“Nietzsche, Freud, and William James” (seminar), 287

Nobel Prize, 294, 305

non serviam, 41–42, 45

Nuremburg trials, 250

object-catheaxis, 50, 124

object-choice, 124

object-crisis, 45

object permanence, 274–75

“Observations on the Configuration and Finer Structure of the Lobulated Organs of the Eel described as Testicles” (Freud), 211–14, 302

obsession, 238

Oedipus complex, 118, 120–45, 160–65, 199, 298

Oedipus Rex, 74

Olds, Sharon, 25–27

On Bullfighting (Kennedy), 104–5

100 Years of Solitude (García Marquez), 39

O’Neill, Eugene, 297

On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored (Phillips), 7

online therapy, 205–7

Operation Mincemeat (book/film), 281, 285

Oppian, 212

oral cancer of Freud: death caused by, 112, 226, 228; smoking as cause of, 47–48, 103; and suffering, 232, 240, 251; treatment for, 114, 228, 230, 239

Orbach, Susie, 146–57, 327

ordinary unhappiness, 146–57, 162

Orwell, George, 291

Osmond, Gilbert (character), 96

An Outline of Psycho-Analysis (Freud), 197

“Outside the Operating Room of the Sex-Change Doctor” (Olds), 26

Owl Babies (Waddell), 261

The Painter and His Family (exhibition), 251–52

Panek, Richard, 188–97, 327

panic attacks, 140, 164

Orbach, Susie, 146–57, 327

ordinary unhappiness, 146–57, 162

Orwell, George, 291

Osmond, Gilbert (character), 96

An Outline of Psycho-Analysis (Freud), 197

“Outside the Operating Room of the Sex-Change Doctor” (Olds), 26

Owl Babies (Waddell), 261

The Painter and His Family (exhibition), 251–52

Panek, Richard, 188–97, 327

panic attacks, 140, 164
Pappenheim, Bertha (Anna O. case), 123, 174, 193, 196
Paradise Lost (Milton), 40–42
paranoia, 164
parapraxes (slips), 158, 232, 288–89
parents. See father; mother
The Passions of the Mind (Stone), 175
patient-therapist relationship, 10, 78–80, 147–49, 155, 199
patriotism, 87–91
Pearson, Karl, 306
La Peau de Chagrin (Balzac), 237–38
penis envy, 22–37, 164, 300, 307
Peretz, Martin, 201
Perls, Fritz, 38
Perry, Lilla Cabot, 84–86
personality traits, 307
persuasive writing, 62, 69, 262, 287–88, 290
Peter Moss (character), 173–78, 185
la petite mort (the little death), 104
Pfister, Oskar, 273
phallic symbols, 121–23
Pheby, Alex, 51–60, 327
Phillips, Adam, 7, 270, 298
phylacteries (tefillin), 215
physics envy, 304, 307
Physiology of Love (Mantegazza), 64
Pinker, Steven, 307
pleasure principle, 37, 260, 267, 296, 298
Pliny the Elder, 312
plot turns, 62, 65, 67, 69, 79
Poe, Edgar Allan, 100, 104, 127
point of view, 69, 257
Poitier, Sidney, 181–87
polymorphous perversity, 29
Popper, Karl, 255
Porgy and Bess (film), 173
The Portrait of a Lady (James), 95
post-Freudians, 15, 132–33, 198–208
post-traumatic stress disorder, 174–75, 266–76
Prater, Donald, 87
pregnancy, 322n2
prejudice, 172–87
Pressure Point (film), 180–87
Pribram, Karl, 304
primitive impulse, 95–97, 271
Principia (Newton), 192
private investigator, Freud as, 63, 72–82, 289
Prochnik, George, 301, 308
Project for a Scientific Psychology (Freud), 303–5
projection, 203
Proust, Marcel, 75–78
pseudoscience, 287, 300, 306, 308
psychic reality, 8–9
psychoanalysis: arguments against (see criticism of Freud’s work); case histories as reports of, 69 (see also case histories); case study of, 151–57; childhood as focus of, 154–57, 164, 168, 182–83, 256; of children, 114–18, 160–61; defined, 146, 153–54; dreams in (see dream interpretation); failure of, 106, 144, 168–70, 183–84, 281–84; Freud as founder of, 146, 159, 164, 188; online, 205–7; outcome of, 150, 164, 170; personal descriptions of, 6, 28–30, 36–37, 50, 78–80, 94, 129–45, 160–61, 165–66, 241–43; process of, 78–80, 94–97, 123, 128–29, 147–49, 154–57, 288, 306, 310; racism and, 172–87, 300, 306, 309, 317n26; as science, 159, 164, 300, 303, 308; sex as central to, 160, 163–64, 257–58, 272–73, 290, 295–96, 298; social theory and, 201–2, 309–10; training in, 111, 116–18, 165, 167, 198; unconscious as focus of (see unconscious mind); uniqueness of, 147–48; writing compared with, 119
psychoanalyst: as listener, 310, 315n11; patient’s relationship with, 10, 78–80, 147–49, 155, 199; role in case histories of, 69
psychoanalytic culture, argument for, 198–208
psychodynamic therapies, 308–9
Psychology Today (magazine), 38
The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (Freud), 103, 297
psychopaths, 183–84
psychopharmacology, 46, 164–65, 169, 207, 301
psychotics, 183–84
pupaphobia, 9
puppets, 9, 23, 27
Putnam, James Jackson, 94
quantum thinking, 283, 285
Rajzman, Samuel, 250
Ralph Touchett (character), 95
Rami (case study), 151–57
Ramón y Cajal, Santiago, 191, 197
Rathke, Martin, 213
Ratma’am (character), 7, 11
Rat Man case, 77; spoof of, 7, 11, 20
Reading Anna Freud (Midgley), 115
reality principle, 8–9, 264, 298
Rebel without a Cause (Lindner), 180
Reflections; Or Sentences and Moral Maxims (La Rochefoucauld), 283–84
Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man (Mann), 84, 87, 89–90
Reflections on War and Death (Freud), 84, 87–89
reflective solitude, 205
regression, 84, 92
Reik, Theodor, 315n11
reiteration, 65, 67
relational talk, 204–8
religion, 260. See also Jewishness
reminiscences, 175
remote therapy, 205–7
repetition, therapeutic role of, 268–75
repetition compulsion, 47–48
repression, 95, 155, 163, 166, 175, 257, 264–65, 274, 298
reproduction. See sexuality
resistance, 67, 160, 165, 166, 168, 298
“Resistance to the Holocaust” (Lopate), 291
the reveal, 68–69, 79
reversals, 62, 65, 67, 69, 79
Rilke, Rainer Maria, 87
Roazen, Paul, 9–10
Robinson, Paul, 201–3
romance, in Freud’s writing, 77–78
Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare), 101
Rossellini, Isabella, 26
Roth, Michael S., 266–76, 328
Rowling, J. K., 32–33
Sabbath candles (Licht-benching), 215, 226
Sachs, Bernard, 175–76
sadism, 48
Sahara (film), 177
Salpêtrière clinic (Paris), 63, 193–94
Sammelwohnung (“collective” apartment), 251
Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass (Schulz), 39
Sands, Philippe, 244, 249–50
Satan (character), 40–42
Saving Freud (Nagorski), 112
schizophrenia, 98–108, 302
Schneider, Daniel E., 129–31
Schopenhauer, Arthur, 270, 296–97
Schreber, Daniel Paul, 7, 11
Schultze, Max, 213
Schulz, Bruno, 39
Schur, Max, 103, 232
Schwartz, Casey, 111–19, 328
science: and biomedical model, 301–9; neurological, 188–97, 301–5; psychoanalysis as, 159, 164, 300, 303, 308
Scientific American, 307
scientific papers by Freud, 211–14, 302
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The Sea House (Esther Freud), 249
The Second Sex (de Beauvoir), 300
Second World War. See World War II
seduction hypothesis, 8–9
segregation, 176–79, 186
self-love, 283–84
self-portraits, 94–95
self-promotion, 68
“Semiotics 12: The Foundation of the Theory of Signs” (seminar), 44–45
sense making, therapy as, 147–48
September 11 (2001), 14
The Seven-Per-Cent Solution (Meyer), 311n1
sexism, 23, 37, 199, 225, 256, 294–95, 300–301, 306
sexual abuse, 8–9, 64–66, 138–41, 143–44, 199
sexuality: bisexuality, 68, 183; of Freud, 222–24; heterosexuality, 95–96, 256; homosexuality, 85, 87, 256, 258, 261; and incest taboo, 295; and Oedipus complex, 118, 120–45, 160–65, 199, 298; psychoanalytic focus on, 160, 163–64, 257–58, 272–73, 290, 295–96, 298; repression of, 95, 163, 166, 257, 264–65, 298; and reproductive biology, 211–14; as theme, 101–3
Sexual Politics (Millett), 300
Shabbat Ha’Malkah, 215
Shadow and Act (Ellison), 172, 179
Shakespeare, Olivia, 101
Shakespeare, William, 100–101, 104, 161
Sheitel (wig), 218
Sherlock Holmes (character), 63, 72–82
Siebold, Philipp Franz von, 213
Sigmund Freud: addictions of, 47–48, 103; cancer in (see oral cancer of Freud); criticism of (see criticism of Freud’s work); death of, 103–4, 112, 114, 215, 226, 228, 240; dogs owned by, 116, 227–33, 240; education of, 62–63, 188–97, 211–14, 302; extramarital affair, 223–24, 297; family of, 88, 92, 112, 216–17, 222 (see also Freud family); father’s death, 272; homes of (see London; Vienna); Jewishness of, 158, 215–18, 286, 298; legacy of, 299–310; marriage of, 215–26; neurological work of, 188–97, 302–5; psychoanalysis founded by, 146, 159, 164, 188 (see also psychoanalysis); self-doubt of, 293–94; sexuality of, 222–24; skepticism of, 255–65, 292–93; statue of, 111; writings of (see writing by Freud)
Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture (exhibition), 10
Silberstein, Eduard, 213
silence about family and history, 244–52
Sirk, Douglas, 45
Sitzungsberichte der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 211
skeptic, Freud as, 255–65, 292–93
Skinner, B. F., 5
slips (parapraxis), 158, 232, 288–89
smoking, 47–48, 103
social media, 147, 151, 201, 204–5
social psychology, 200–203, 309–10
solitude, 205
Solms, Mark, 150–51, 211–14, 305, 328
“Song to the Siren” (Buckley), 107
The Sorrows of Young Werther (Goethe), 45
Spencer, Kenneth, 177
Spencer Brydon (character), 95
splitting, 155
spontaneous generation hypothesis, 212, 214
spoofs of Freud, 6–20, 299–300
Squiggle Game, 20
Squiggle Piggle (character), 20
St. Albans School for Boys, 120–21
The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Strachey), 66, 167, 302
Stant, Charlotte (character), 96

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state-individual relation, 89–92, 95–97, 271
statue of Freud, 111
Stein, Lorenz von, 219
Stephen Dedalus (character), 41
Stone, Andrew L., 316n10
Stone, Irving, 175
Stookey, Paul, 104
Stormy Weather (film), 316n10
The Story of Psychoanalysis (Freeman), 159
Strachey, James, 66, 259
Stranger in a Strange Land (Heinlein), 38
structure of writing, 65–69
Strümpell, Adolf, 293
Studies on Hysteria (Freud and Breuer), 82, 113, 155, 172, 175, 196, 293, 302–3. See also case histories
subconscious. See unconscious mind
subjectivity, 147
sublimation, 259, 264
success, emphasis on, 146–47, 157, 165, 204–5
suicide, 43–45, 49, 98–108, 232, 302
Sullivan, Harry Stack, 160
Sulloway, Frank, 11
Summer at Gaglow (Freud), 247–49
superego, 255
Swales, Peter, 223
symbols, in dreams, 278–80, 285
symptoms of illness, 74–76, 80, 106
Syński, Szymon de, 212–14
tafelspitz, 217
talk: therapy based on (see psychoanalysis); value of, 204–8, 310
The Tangled Bank (Hyman), 294
Tavistock Institute, 117–18
tefillin (phylacteries), 215
telescopy, 189
“Terror of Mentors” (Lopate), 291
Thanatos (death drive), 82, 95, 100, 104, 266, 269, 271–72, 275, 298
therapist. See psychoanalyst
therapies. See psychoanalysis

Theresienstadt, 241, 250
third (therapist’s) ear, 315n11
Thomas, D. M., 66
Thomas, Emily (case study), 317n26
“Thoughts in Wartime” (Mann), 83, 87, 90
Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex (Freud), 94
Three Theories on Sexuality (Freud), 5
Titanic (ship), 258, 264–65
T. J. (character), 173–74, 178
Töibin, Colm, 83–97, 328
toilet training, 164
Tolkien, J.R.R., 256
tone (voice), 62, 66–69, 257, 259, 287
Topsy (Bonaparte), 228, 231–32
Totem and Taboo (Freud), 45
Touchett, Ralph (character), 95
Toy Story (film), 23
training institutes, 111, 116–18, 165, 167, 198. See also specific institute
transactional talk, 204–8
transference, 78, 123, 136, 166, 170, 199, 203, 298, 306
transgender people, 22–37
trauma, memory of, 174–75, 266–76
treatment of mental illness: biological focus of, 301–8; cognitive behavioral therapy, 169, 204, 207, 309; ethnotherapy, 317n26; hypnosis, 174, 183, 193, 298; narcosynthesis, 174; online (remote), 205–7; pharmacological, 46, 164–65, 169, 207, 301; psychodynamic therapies, 308–9; rejection of, 98, 106, 183–84, 283–84; talk therapy (see psychoanalysis)
Treblinka, 241, 250
Trieste Zoological Station, 211–14
Trilling, Lionel, 163
“Trouble in the Archives” (Malcolm), 8
A Troublesome Inheritance (Wade), 322n5
true self, 155–56
Turing, Alan, 277
Turkheimer, Eric, 308
Turkle, Sherry, 198–208, 328
Tynan, Kenneth, 124

Ulysses (Joyce), 42
uncanny, 73, 143, 314n6
unconditional love, 235
unconditional positive regard, 50
unconscious mind: dream interpretation and, 277–85; fiction as outlet for, 94–97; psychoanalytic focus on, 78–80, 123, 154, 158–59, 165–66, 267, 290, 292, 306; in psychodynamic therapies, 309–10; repression and, 274 (see also repression)
unhappiness, 146–57, 162
university education: exposure to Freudian concepts during, 5, 38–50, 61, 162–69, 200–202, 287, 300; of Freud, 188–97, 211–14, 302. See also specific university
University of Delaware, 307
University of Vienna, 188–93, 197, 211
unreliable narrator, 66–68

Vallisneri, Antonio, 212
Vent Haven museum, 23, 27
ventriloquist’s dummies, 23, 27
Vidor, King, 173

Vienna: departure of Freuds from, 103, 112, 230, 232, 234, 236, 239, 245, 251, 306; education of Freud in, 188–93, 197, 211–14, 302; employment of Freud in, 194; Freud Museum in, 244–52; Freuds’ home in, 223, 227–29, 247, 251
Vienna General Hospital, 302
Vienna Medical Society, 194
Vienna Psychiatric Society, 192
“Virgin and Child with St. Anne” (painting), 262
voice (tone), 62, 66–69, 257, 259, 287
von Rönne, Alexis Freiherr, 285

vulnerability, 205
vulture memory (Leonardo da Vinci), 3, 261–63

Wade, Nicholas, 322n5
Waldeyer, Wilhelm, 191–93
Walpole, Hugh, 85
war: post-traumatic stress disorder from, 174–75, 266–76; theories about, 83–97, 270–72. See also World War I; World War II
Watson, Dr. (character), 63
Webster, Richard, 11
Wharton, Edith, 84–86
“When Verbal Resists Visual: Freud’s Defense Against Art” (Boxer), 10
White, E. B., 289
Whitehead, Alfred North, 309
The White Hotel (Thomas), 66
Wiesel, Torsten, 5–6
wig (sheitel), 218
The Wings of the Dove (James), 95
Winnicott, Donald W., 15, 20, 62, 146–57
wish fulfillment, 267
Wolf (dog), 227–30
Wolfe, Tom, 129
The Wolf Man (Freud), 74, 76; spoof of, 7, 11, 12–13
Wollheim, Richard, 167
women: and Freud’s sexism, 23, 37, 199, 225, 256, 294–95, 300–301, 306; as mothers (see mother); and Oedipus complex, 199; and penis envy, 22–37, 164, 300, 307; and sexual abuse, 8–9, 64–66, 199
World Record Academy, 32
World War I: mental illness caused by, 266–67; theories about, 83–97, 270–71, 274–76
writing by Freud: brilliance of, 20–21, 50, 73, 117, 258, 262–63, 287, 294; cases (see case histories); early reading of, 4–5, 38–50, 104, 111, 161–69, 266; as essayistic, 256–65, 286–98; as fiction, 44, 61–71, 77–78, 295, 302–3; and Freud as private investigator, 63, 72–82, 289; humor in, 77; literary features of, 44, 62–69, 79, 256–57, 287–88, 295 (see also specific feature); scientific papers, 211–14, 302; spoofs of, 6–20. See also specific work

Yeats, W. B., 101, 104
Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth, 113–14
Zelenka, Frau, 70
Zelig (film), 25
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (Pirsig), 38