



Liliane Weissberg in the style of
Viennese painter Gustav Klimt

ANALYZING FREUD

A PROFESSOR OF GERMAN AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE TURNS THE TABLES ON THE FATHER OF MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

BY PRIYA RATNESHWAR

PHOTO BY LISA GODFREY

If Sigmund Freud were alive today, he would likely have mixed emotions about the attention being lavished on him by Liliane Weissberg, the Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor in Arts and Sciences. On the one hand, he might be thrilled at Weissberg's efforts to teach and study him as a cultural and historical keystone even as his clinical relevance is fading. After all, this was a man so determined to establish psychoanalysis as the scientific discovery of the 20th century that he copyrighted his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, with the year 1900, even though it was published in 1899. On the other hand, Weissberg's current research project, a book exploring issues that Freud may subconsciously be revealing in his writings, might strike the father of modern psychology as a little too close to home.

While Freud taught the world about the unconscious, he was meticulously conscious of his own public persona. An atheist himself, he came from a Jewish family, and many of his disciples were Jews. He believed that the survival of psychoanalysis in the anti-Semitic climate of early 20th-century Vienna, where he spent most of his life, would not be possible if it were associated with Jewish tradition.

"There was a real effort on Freud's part," Weissberg says, "to describe himself as an assimilated, middle class, bourgeois doctor in Vienna. He changed his first name [from Sigismund] to adjust, and he made sure that his children would not receive the religious education that

his family traditionally received. He wanted to establish not just his own autobiography but also the story of psychoanalysis as something that would be able to exist without references to his personal background."

In a quest to more profoundly understand Freud's significance as a paradigm-shifting thinker, Weissberg is looking at instances in his writings where references to the classical Western traditions that he explicitly espoused merge with underlying, perhaps subconscious, references to his own social, religious and cultural heritage. Her innovative methodology combines textual analysis of metaphors and imagery that Freud uses with an historical investigation into the people, places and events of his life.

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“These metaphors could just represent a common use of language,” Weissberg admits, “but if you notice that they are used particularly often, and then you wonder why, you find out they have a very concrete significance. So Freud says, ‘I’m not going to say anything about where I’m coming from,’ but in many ways, he’s saying it all the time.”



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Weissberg has noticed, for example, an abundance of imagery in Freud’s writing that refers to cloth-making. These metaphors of weaving, spinning and unraveling could simply be part of the repertory of someone educated in classical mythology. But in delving into Freud’s family history, Weissberg finds a host of relatives who worked in the textile industry, occupations that, at the time, drew many Jewish traders. Freud’s great-grandfather and father were both wool dealers, and his two older half-brothers moved to Manchester, England, to become established in the vibrant textile industry there.

“I found that Freud’s choice to become a doctor was not just a choice for medicine but also a choice against going into the father’s business,” Weissberg says. “And in some ways, if you want to apply Freud to Freud, the father’s business is still there, and he is deciding against it. But he can’t get rid of the threads and the wools and the fabric.”

Weissberg is conducting a similar exploration of Freud’s use of the term “catharsis” to describe the dramatic and healing outpouring of emotion he believed would occur when a trauma was resurrected through psychotherapy. The word was first used by Aristotle to discuss tragic poetry and drama, but Weissberg found that Freud was inspired to use the term by his wife’s uncle, Jacob Bernays. Bernays, a Greek scholar, believed that “catharsis” was intended to have strictly medical—and not moral or religious—connotations. This claim led to debate among Bernays’ students about whether or not it was unchristian to conceptualize catharsis in this way. “So, Freud uses a Greek concept of Aristotle,” Weissberg explains, “but at the point when it was under the discussion of being particularly Jewish to use it in medicine.”

Weissberg credits making these unusual connections to her approach to scholarship, which she claims is driven, not by fealty to any discipline, but by “pathological curiosity.” Although she was trained in comparative literature, her varied affiliations across the School of Arts and Sciences—including the Jewish Studies Program, the English Graduate Group, the Art History Graduate Group and the Committee in Women’s Studies—have earned her the moniker of “interdisciplinary.” Weissberg, however, eschews this label. “I do not say that I work in an interdisciplinary way because I’m also questioning disciplines. Then you see that they are very porous, and you are able to ask those questions that may seem marginal but then turn into the center.”

Much of Weissberg’s recent work involves the recovery of a German-Jewish literary and cultural tradition. She has worked extensively on Jewish women writers of the early 19th century, such as Henriette Herz, Dorothea Schlegel, Regina Froberg and Rahel Varnhagen. And she just completed a book on early German-Jewish autobiography, which sheds light on the first Jewish authors to write about themselves in German. Weissberg discovered that in late 18th-century Germany the only publication available to Jews who wanted to record their own stories was the *Journal for the Experiential Science of the Soul*, a prototype of the modern psychological journal. As they described their ailments for this journal, these writers also described their lives.

Weissberg’s studies at the juncture of psychology, case study and Jewish autobiographical history helped

shape her interest in Freud, but she finds she needs to access an even wider array of disciplines and methods to grapple with his complex role in history. “I have been trained in Post-Structuralism and New Historicism, but I don’t know what kind of ‘-ism’ I’m doing now,” she observes. “In fact, I hope it is not an ‘-ism’ in any way. I have found it extremely useful to integrate literary analysis with a knowledge of historical and cultural texts, and these texts do not have to come from the reigning, dominant history of kings and queens. They

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can come, for example, from the history of textile production. So maybe what I’m doing is an analytical reading of literature and culture that addresses gaps, open places and silences.”

Weissberg is grateful to the academic culture at Penn that lets her “run wild.” “There seems to be the feeling here,” she says, “that I can contribute something to the core of a field, whatever that is, even though I’m trying to question the core. It’s as if a little bit of earthquake might be good for everybody.”

Freud, being a revolutionary thinker, would likely come to the conclusion that a little bit of earthquake would be good for his legacy as well. Weissberg acknowledges that many scholars believe there is little new to be said about Freud but because he is a polarizing figure, she feels that much that has been written about him is the work of loyalists or detractors who may have been limited by those perspectives.

In bringing her own approach to Freud, Weissberg is increasingly amazed at how richly he signifies some of the most complex concerns of the past century, such as issues of gender—which have always had an uneasy relationship with psychoanalytic theory—as well as questions about religion and culture. Most importantly, Weissberg says, “Freud established a field that changed a paradigm for all scientific inquiry. This is the conclusion that the invisible—what you don’t see, what is not articulated—may also be important.” ♦



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THE CASE OF UNCLE JOSEF

One of the more surprising threads that Liliane Weissberg has followed in studying Freud is the possible presence of counterfeiters in his family. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud mentions an Uncle Josef, his father’s younger brother, in a famous analysis of one of his dreams. Freud recounts feeling guilt-ridden by the knowledge that Josef had once been fined for carrying false ruble notes. Viennese trial records reveal, however, that Josef had actually been arrested and had dealt in false notes on numerous occasions and in other cities. His son-in-law, Freud’s cousin, was convicted of the crime as well. Josef told the police that he obtained the counterfeit money from his nephews in Manchester.

Weissberg is attempting to establish whether or not Freud’s half-brothers Emmanuel and Phillipp were involved in counterfeiting. She does know that Manchester was a center of the counterfeit industry at the time—paper money consisted of cotton fiber, and Manchester was a center for textile production.

Weissberg ultimately wants to find out how this family history, which deeply troubled Freud, is reflected in his writing. “What started out as a story to think about the textile industry has become a story about counterfeiting,” Weissberg says. “Money was counterfeited in Britain and then particularly Russian money was traded in Jewish circles on the continent. While I am not saying that Jewish counterfeiting bands are a typical part of Jewish history, this discovery fits into my exploration of how Freud signifies the crossroads of the repressed and the obvious, the Jewish and the not-Jewish, the private and the public.”