

**Review: *Freud in his Time and Ours* by Elisabeth Roudinesco, translated by Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, 2016**

*Val Parks*

There seems to be an enduring appetite for biographies and autobiographies, judging from lists of best-selling books. Perhaps this can be ascribed to our curiosity or, to phrase it even more in the vernacular, nosiness. The latter seems an appropriate term in the context of Freud, whose allegiance to Fleiss and his frankly psychotic theories about the nose and its potential as erotic appendage is extensively discussed by Elisabeth Roudinesco, French psychoanalyst and historian, in her new biography of Freud. Apart from these dubious gratifications, and perhaps, in Kleinian terms, our envious pre-occupation with the secret goings-on in the Master's bedroom, can reading a biography of Freud enhance our work as analysts?

Acknowledging the so-called Freud Wars, with their heated debates between detractors and advocates for Freud, vehement on both sides, Roudinesco addresses in the introduction the need to justify another biography. A prominent point here, she argues, is that this is the first French biography of Freud in a field of research formerly dominated by English-speaking figures. And indeed her approach does seem distinctively French, with a touch of the *longue durée* in her situating of Freud's life in the changing patterns of the Jewish diaspora of Middle Europe, with the geographical shift from Freiberg to Vienna matched by a psychosocial one. Where Peter Gay's biography (Gay, 1988) brilliantly situates Freud in the cultural milieu of his time, Roudinesco sets out to widen the lens and takes in rather the enduring social structures encompassed by the Lacanian Symbolic. She writes: "Freud always thought that what he was discovering in the unconscious foreshadowed what was happening to people in reality. I have chosen to reverse this proposition and show that what Freud thought he was discovering was at bottom nothing but the product of a society, a familial environment, and a political situation whose signification he interpreted masterfully so as to ascribe it to the work of the unconscious" (Roudinesco, 2016: 4). Whereas this raises

controversial questions about the nature of the unconscious, Roudinesco does not, in my view, include enough analysis of Freud's texts in her book to prove her own proposition fully convincingly.

There is, however, much else of very great importance and value in her book. She has taken full advantage of the fact that over the last 20 years, much more of the Freud archive has become available, at the London and Vienna Freud Museums and at the Library of Congress. Roudinesco has always published works of meticulous and extensive research, and this book is no exception. Far more material is now accessible, covering case notes particularly. Apparently, these exist for 170 analysands of Freud (256). This relatively small number gave me pause for thought, but of course Freud was consulted on many more cases than that, to say nothing of the mania for the mutual and arguably entirely gratuitous running analysis of one another which went on amongst the early analysts.

Paul Keegan in a review published in the *London Review of Books* compared Roudinesco's book with one by Joel Whitebook. He points out that a biography cannot be an analysis, not even one like Freud's own study of Schreber. The facts in a biography are different from the material in an analysis. The treatment of the life history contained in a biography differs from the same life story conveyed to us by someone on the couch with its frequent repetitions and revisions. Keegan notes that there are things relevant to a biography of Freud but irrelevant to him as the progenitor of psychoanalysis. In particular, matters of enjoyment which would be a lively, vital field for an analysis, are yet not relevant to thinking about Freud the instigator of psychoanalysis. Smoking especially is cited here. Roudinesco writes comprehensively about such matters, illustrative of Freud the man. "Easily accused of digression, Roudinesco nevertheless broaches these matters and her book is a shaken kaleidoscope of things inessential," says Paul Keegan (10). We do not learn more about psychoanalysis from reading about Freud's dogs or his failure to appreciate music, but these facts do somehow appease our curiosity. However, we cannot and should not try to psychoanalyse Freud.

Much of Roudinesco's Freud is very familiar, but some is not. For instance, she calculates that Freud was sexually active for only about nine

years, a piece of reasoning I had not come across before (Roudinesco, 2016: 50). More strikingly, she passes the judgement that he was in truth only a mediocre clinician, without a natural feel for how to deal with the mentally ill. We see this particularly evident in his attitude to the psychoanalytic treatment of psychosis. She opines that, though so much of the early theorising is based on Freud's published case studies, these are of course his reconstructions of the analyses often well after the event, and further, the results were not uniformly successful. As we all do, Freud learned from his mistakes. There exists testimony of later analysands, showing in fact more satisfactory outcomes. She asserts that, probably for a variety of reasons, the majority of his later analysands came away satisfied. Such people, psychoanalysts themselves, or prominent intellectuals or artists, came of their own volition, and manifested a stronger and more durable transference. By then, Freud had prestige and many consulted him to learn of and experience psychoanalysis from its source.

From his lofty status, he felt free to break his own rules, and often went against his own better judgement in taking on cases which he should have been able to see would be unsuccessful. This, I assume, is an aspect of what Roudinesco means by his relative lack of clinical skill. The case of Carl Liebman, one of those newly available for scrutiny, demonstrates this. Coming from a wealthy American family, Liebman was a fetishist and probably a paranoid schizophrenic, a case celebrated in his time but never fully and openly published, as he sought treatment of all the latest kinds. Roudinesco characterises it as a case Freud should never have taken on, being unsuitable for psychoanalysis. Freud analysed him for three years and vainly sought to convince him that his fetish – a jock strap – was the disavowed maternal penis. However, for Roudinesco, Liebman's case epitomises the paradoxes of Freud. In it, "two orders of reality were opposed once again: the critical consciousness of a doctor on the one hand, and the tragic consciousness of a patient on the other – a divide between clinical thinking and madness" (Roudinesco, 2016: 328).

Deeply fascinated by the world of madness and the uncanny, Freud was equally committed to his lifelong project of rational systematisation, vainly hoping thereby to master and subdue it. Here lies the reason for

his dalliance with Fleiss and his life-long pre-occupation with the paranormal. And here too is Roudinesco's shaken kaleidoscope, as referred to by Keegan above. Consciously seeing himself as an Enlightenment hero invoking the rational and the scientific, he continually decentred and unsettled his own theorising, almost against his will. In the end, he could not help himself. As we all do, he had finally to concede victory to the unconscious. Though we cannot learn anything about being an analyst directly from a biography of Freud, perhaps we can at least take comfort in his failure. In this sense, there are no masters in psychoanalysis.

### **References**

- Keegan, P. (2017). From Shtetl to Boulevard. *London Review of Books* 39 (19): 5-12.
- Whitebook, J. (2017). *Freud: an Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge University Press.