

On the Archival Couch: Freud and the Freud Archives

by RICK KLUMPENHOWER

The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory. JEFFREY M. MASSON. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985. xxxi, 316 p. illus. ISBN 0-14-00-76581. \$8.95 pa.

In the Freud Archives. JANET MALCOLM. New York: Vintage Books, 1985. 165 p. ISBN 0-394-72922-6. \$7.95 pa.

Canadian archivists do not need to be convinced that theirs is a profession suffering from an identity crisis. The symptoms accompanying such a condition are evident enough in recent (and, one hopes, final) contributions to the so-called "history and archives" debate featured in *Archivaria*. While this is understandable given the relative adolescence of the archival profession in Canada, one would not expect such a state of affairs to obtain for the well-established, if now somewhat *outré*, discipline of psychoanalysis. In comparison with the spectacular spread of psychoanalytic theory and practice in this century in institutions of learning, medical practice, and scientific research and the vast amounts of funding which have been made available to facilitate such growth, the gains made by archivists and their institutions seem pitifully insignificant. Yet, it is ironic to find that, not only are the very theoretical foundations of psychoanalysis and, indirectly, psychology being seriously threatened by a recent controversy, it also appears that evidence from archival sources is being used as the main battering ram. These two books, which together relate the substance and the context of the controversy, are also of interest to archivists in that they reveal how a profession such as the psychoanalytic administers, uses, and ultimately values its archives.

The eye of the swirling storm centres on Jeffrey M. Masson, the former Projects Director of the Sigmund Freud Archives. Masson, using previously inaccessible documentation contained in the Freud Archives, offers a radical reinterpretation of the early history of psychoanalysis in his ominously titled work *The Assault on Truth*. His thesis is that the source of Sigmund Freud's revolutionary concepts of personality and the subconscious was not valid scientific evidence, but his desire for personal gain and professional cowardice. By the mid-1890s, Freud had come to the conclusion, through his medical studies in Paris and his sessions with various patients in Vienna, that the roots of hysteria lay in the sexual abuse its victims had suffered as children at the hands of adults, most often their parents or guardians. Freud presented what was later called the "seduction theory" in a paper given to the Society of Psychiatry and Neurology in Vienna in 1896. (This paper is reproduced as an appendix to Masson's book.) The reaction of his

colleagues to these ideas ranged from open scepticism to outright scorn, but Freud, basing his view on the consistency and intensity with which his patients recounted such scenes of sexual abuse, held to the theory.

According to Masson, what actually turned Freud away from the seduction theory was an incident involving one of Freud's patients, Emma Eckstein, and a surgeon named Wilhelm Fliess, with whom Freud had nurtured an intense personal and professional friendship. Fliess held to the bizarre notion that the sexual organs were somehow physiologically linked with the nose and sinuses and that psychological hysteria, as displayed in what were then considered to be sexual abnormalities (such as masturbation and coitus interruptus), could be cured through nasal surgery. For some reason, Freud appears to have given this theory some credence, for he allowed Fliess to diagnose Eckstein's symptoms and then to perform surgery on her nose in order to remove the turbinate bone. As it turned out, Fliess bungled the operation by leaving a large piece of surgical gauze in the woman's nasal cavity. The hemorrhaging which ensued when the gauze was discovered and removed by another doctor nearly caused Eckstein's death.

All of the events described above were known to historians before Masson came along. Their importance for the development of Freud's ideas at this crucial, formative stage, however, has been largely ignored. By carefully comparing Freud's letters to Fliess concerning the Eckstein case with simultaneous correspondence relating Freud's doubts about the seduction theory, Masson links the two developments in a unique and controversial way. As the danger to his and Fliess's reputations grew, Freud began to diagnose Eckstein's persistent hemorrhaging as "psychosomatic," as part of an attempt by Eckstein to fulfill a desire to be loved and not as a result of the disastrous operation. It was precisely at the point when Freud began to doubt the physiological reality of the causes of Eckstein's bleeding, Masson contends, that Freud also began to question the reality of the scenes of sexual abuse during childhood which Eckstein and other patients had related to him during therapy. Furthermore, by turning the accounts of sexual seduction into fantasies, Freud was free to abandon the entire theory of seduction, which depends on the reality of sexual abuse for its scientific validity. With this "discovery" of a self-contained world of adolescent sexual fantasy, Freud was able to develop his theory of the Oedipus complex and, in turn, the theoretical foundation upon which modern psychoanalysis is built. Masson's conclusion is that, by diagnosing Eckstein's bleeding as hysterical, or as wish fulfilment, and by simultaneously denying the reality of childhood sexual abuse, Freud absolved both himself and Fliess of continuing responsibility for a disastrous and almost fatal operation. Freud subsequently regained his status within the psychoanalytic community in Vienna and went on to become the unquestioned leader of an expanding new movement based on his theories of adolescent sexual fantasy.

It is not my task here to assess the validity of Masson's argument. My understanding of psychoanalytic principles and theories and the early history of psychoanalysis are far too limited for such an undertaking. Our main interest is Masson's treatment of archival documentation, the circumstances under which such documentation was and is being obtained and used within the Freud Archives, and the response of the psychoanalytic profession to research based on such documentation.

As to the first point, Masson's reverence for his sources is undeniable and probably derives from his work as a Sanskrit scholar, involving as it does a great deal of palaeography and diplomatics. This is manifest, first of all, in the precision with which he establishes the exact German translation of Freud's letters and, more importantly, in his

consistent effort to understand the meaning of the information contained in any one item in relation to previous correspondence. This respect for the organic nature of the archival material does not appear to be the rule among other scholars in the profession; the only other major primary source previously made available for research is the collection of letters in *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*, a volume which omits all letters within the Freud-Fliess collection, including those relating to the Eckstein case, which the editors deemed “irrelevant.” By studying the Freud-Fliess letters in context, Masson is able to make convincing interpretations of seemingly cryptic passages in the published edition. The letter of 21 September 1897, in which Freud supposedly denounced the seduction theory for the first time, is a case in point. Moreover, Masson consistently refers to the same archival *fonds* as he forges the crucial link in his argument — the connection between the Eckstein case and Freud’s rejection of the seduction theory. This strengthens an otherwise tenuous assertion, for nowhere does Freud himself make such a connection. Masson, therefore, must resort to a bit of guesswork about Freud’s intention to carry his argument through. However, the juxtaposition of Freud’s references to each issue within the correspondence and the fact that he was addressing the same person, a person who was himself intimately involved in both events, make Masson’s reconstructions not only legitimate but appropriate.

While *The Assault on Truth* presents a brilliant and detailed outline of the results of Masson’s research, Janet Malcolm’s *In the Freud Archives* provides a perspective on the process of and response to that research. Malcolm chronicles the developing constellation of events, personalities, and opinions surrounding the rise and fall of Masson as Projects Director of the Sigmund Freud Archives. As a matter of fact, since the results of Malcolm’s research first appeared (in a series of articles in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1983) he was given the unique opportunity to criticize her account in the preface to *The Assault on Truth*. Masson accuses Malcolm of using composite interviews to create a distorted portrait of him (Masson) as a kind of beguiling, deranged intellectual predator. This portrait, Masson claims, has served to fix all subsequent debate about his findings on personality rather than on ideas. Be that as it may, Malcolm’s insights into the psychoanalytic profession, the theoretical context of the controversy, and the conditions under which archival research must be undertaken, make her book much more than sophisticated gossip.

Through her interviews and a number of references to published material, Malcolm allows us a rare glimpse into the shrouded world of the Sigmund Freud Archives, an institution which lives, moves, and has its being under the jealous guardianship of K.R. Eissler, Secretary of the Archives, and a small coterie of Freudians. In the early 1950s, Eissler and others began to acquire letters, papers, manuscripts, and taped interviews which they considered to be important as documents of Freud’s life and work and arranged to have them deposited in the Library of Congress under terms dictated by the archives. A large and valuable collection of manuscripts, including the Freud-Fliess correspondence, remained locked in a large black cupboard at the Freud house in Marsfield Gardens, Hampstead, England. Until her death in 1981, after which time custody of the Marsfield Gardens house and its contents was transferred to the archives, Freud’s daughter Anna maintained complete personal control over access to these manuscripts.

Eissler and the archives’ board of directors have set numerous access restrictions on the material housed in the Library of Congress. Some documents, for example, will not be opened to researchers until the year 2102 — an incredible span of over 150 years from the

time of acquisition to the time of availability. Much of this material relates to patients who had undergone psychoanalytic analysis and, for reasons of privacy at least, such a strict access policy may be justified. Eissler also points out, however, that easing restrictions might cause prospective donors to hesitate before depositing their personal papers in the archives. For Eissler, the access restrictions serve mainly as a kind of token of assurance for contributors “that the Archives was not motivated by any self-seeking aims but merely by the desire to have the source material collected and preserved for future biographers and scholars” (Malcolm, p. 7).

One might object to the implication here that periods of restricted access seem to be set, not according to the date of a document’s creation, following a legitimate desire to protect the privacy of the individuals and their families, but from the date of acquisition, regardless of a collection’s age, in order to protect the archives’ acquisition potential. The traditional dilemma posed by the trade-off between privacy and access considerations, which most public archives must face, seems in this case to have been transcended in favour of a more paternalistic approach. Other statements by Eissler clearly indicate that as a staunch defender of the Freud legacy he is deeply suspicious of the intentions of researchers using the archives. The archives’ access policy is, to a great extent, based on this attitude towards researchers. When Malcolm repeated to Eissler the claim of Peter Swales, an independent Freud scholar, that, by restricting access to its material for such long periods, the archives was unjustly discriminating against contemporary writers, Eissler’s responses were vague, defensive, and, at points, bizarre:

I would tell him of far greater injustices — the unequal distribution of wealth, the killing of innocent people, Eissler retorted, with bland irrelevance.

Do you feel that people living in the next century will be in a better position to write about Freud?

They will have more distance. They will be more objective. I hope they will be free of Swales’s prejudices. Injustice! I think it is a far greater injustice that Swales may publish what he wants about Freud, and that Freud cannot defend himself and prove he is being maligned (Malcolm, p. 116).

Obviously, Eissler places little confidence in Freud’s ability to defend himself through his own records.

With this kind of paternalistic attitude towards researchers, it is not surprising that an informal system of privileged access has evolved at the Freud Archives. It is clear that scholarly credentials are not sufficient to attain such a privileged status; Eissler must be convinced that the researcher is “one of us.” What is more, judging by the events described by Malcolm, this privilege seems to depend a great deal upon personal compatibility with Eissler and Anna Freud. That such an outspoken iconoclast as Masson could have stormed this holy of holies in itself illustrates the rather arbitrary personal dynamics involved in gaining favoured access to the Freud Archives. Indeed, the unlikely relationship between the charming, ambitious Masson and the detached, lonely Eissler provides most of the psychological drama which sustains Malcolm’s account. Both Eissler and Anna Freud secretly revelled in Masson’s passionate denunciations of modern psychoanalytic scholarship and, in return, showered him with scholarly favours. Eissler was willing, ultimately, to offer the greatest treasure in his possession — the secretaryship

of the archives. When Masson rather naively published documentary findings taken from the archives which seriously questioned the foundations of the Freud legacy, it is not surprising that the archival guardians of that legacy regarded it as an expression of intense personal betrayal. By playing the role of "intellectual gigolo," Masson was able to attain the privileged status necessary for him to view previously inaccessible documents; this did not, however, give him the right, in the eyes of the Freud archivists, to assume the role of an independent researcher.

The case of the Sigmund Freud Archives as revealed in Malcolm's book may conjure up disturbing images for archivists. In many ways, it reinforces the prevalent view that archives are closed institutions administered according to the arbitrary whim of their custodians. Disturbing, too, is the idea that archival policies should be formulated so as to allow only those interpretations of the record which conform to the archivists' own opinions. But, behind the question of access lies a larger question relating to the role and value of archives within the discipline which ultimately produced them. The nature of the psychoanalytic profession has determined its response to Masson's claims and its attitudes toward archival research.

Masson has made it clear that his reinterpretation of the historical events surrounding the development of Freud's early theories is not merely an exercise in historical revisionism. He has used his findings to launch a comprehensive attack on the legitimacy of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic profession. Modern psychoanalysts, according to Masson, have been trained, following Freud's basic methodological approach, to deny the reality of the violent events which lie at the root of their patients' psychological illnesses. In using this technique to analyse a patient, the therapist, Masson contends, "is in covert collusion with what made her ill in the first place.... The silence demanded of the child by the person who violated her (him) is perpetuated and enforced by the very person to whom she had come for help" (Masson, pp. 191-92). In the popular media, Masson's statements about the implications of his ideas for psychoanalysis have been less thoughtful, but potentially more damaging. "They would have to recall every patient since 1901," Masson told a writer for *The New York Times* in 1981. "It would be like the Pinto" (Malcolm, p. 19).

This kind of challenge is especially serious for a discipline that has always been insecure about its methodology and ultimate benefit to humanity. As Malcolm observes, psychoanalysis is riddled with paradoxes: it is regarded as a science, yet it must deal with the so-called "irrational" and the essentially intangible reality of the subconscious. It must also rely upon the cryptic, elusive evidence of dreams, accidental statements, and contrary actions to analyse and interpret that reality. It is no wonder, then, that the psychoanalytic profession has, from the beginning, regarded itself as a kind of "secret society" practising a science which only believers can understand fully. Its theorists, practitioners, and historians must first of all accept this scientific paradigm based on Freud's concepts if they expect their ideas to be taken seriously by the psychoanalytic community. This approach to research and scholarship may explain the tendency of Freudians and psychoanalysts to focus their responses to Masson's claims on his personality and subconscious motives rather than on his ideas. This may explain, in turn, the doubts the Freud archivists have about the ability of researchers to interpret meaningfully the material under their care: if one does not accept the subconscious drives behind human actions and statements in general, how can one expect to understand fully the documentary information produced by historical persons who did?

In the end, the most serious criticism of Masson's claim and its implications for the profession are based on the same theoretical approach which Masson has identified as being faulty. When *The Atlantic Monthly* published an excerpt from Masson's book in the February 1984 issue, many of the psychoanalysts and psychologists who took exception to Masson's views in their letters to the editor simply either denied the scientific validity of an argument based on the analysis of historical documentation or rejected the relevance of historical events for present problems in psychoanalysis. Hans H. Strupp, in the May issue, criticized Masson's contention that, in order for psychotherapy to be successful, the reality of past sexual abuses must be acknowledged. According to Strupp, analysts must deal with problems today which often have very little to do with the historical origins of those problems (p. 5). Douglas Muder, in the same issue, reflected the same attitude towards the analysis of past events in questioning the entire relevance of Masson's study. Muder could not see the point of "being subjected to an excruciatingly detailed analysis of Freud's letters to Fliess" since it did not scientifically prove or disprove psychoanalytic theory as it is now being practised; it merely described certain historical events in the life of Freud. For Muder, then, the historical origins of psychoanalysis, and the archival evidence which document those origins, are of questionable value to what he sees as a "scientific," ahistorical discipline (p. 4). Interestingly, the psychoanalytic profession seems to have rejected the reality, or at least validity, of past events in its own history in the same way that Freud rejected the reality of his patients' testimonies concerning past events in their lives.

These two books allow archivists to gain insights into the symbiotic relationship between the administration and use of archives, and the profession, institution, or community which maintain such archives as essential components of their identities.