

Freud at 150: 21st-Century Essays on a Man of Genius

edited by Joseph P. Merlino, MD, MPA; Marilyn S. Jacobs, PhD; Judy Ann Kaplan, MSW; and K. Lynne Moritz, MD. Jason Aronson Publishers/Rowan & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 2008, 208 pages, \$24.95 (paper), \$50.00 (cloth).

Midway through this collection of short essays that were presented at a symposium celebrating the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sigmund Freud, I found myself thinking repeatedly about the paintings of Georges Seurat (1859–1891). Seurat was a French painter who developed the technique of pointillism, in which dots of color were applied to the canvas in such a fashion that the eye of the viewer mixed the colors to produce intense color effects. In keeping with the focus of the symposium and my own psychoanalytic education, I believed that I could probably learn something from this seemingly random preoccupation. Not much time elapsed before I realized that I was responding to the impact of this collection, *Freud at 150: 21st-Century Essays on a Man of Genius*. Many of the essays are intensely personal; others are more academic but with their own deeply held convictions about the impact of Freud on contemporary society. The essays are frustratingly brief and somewhat unsatisfying, leaving the reader to wish that the authors had been given more space to expand on their ideas. But upon finishing the volume, I found that my mind had mixed the many condensed ideas into a powerful whole, in much the same way that my eye had mixed the colors in the pointillist paintings I have seen.

The symposium, held at the Austrian Embassy in Washington, DC, in September 2006, was entitled “Freud’s Place in Our Minds: A Day of Reflection on Sigmund Freud’s Significance in the 21st Century,” and most papers, while often making reference to *fin de siècle* Vienna and Freud’s own professional journey, anticipate Freud’s contributions to this new century. The preface by Heinz Fischer, the Federal President of the Austrian Republic, begins with a citation from Freud’s 1932 letter to Albert Einstein: “Whatever makes for cultural development is working also against war.” Later in the preface, Fischer quotes Freud’s famous line, “The voice of the intellect is a soft one but it does not rest till it has gained a hearing.” This symposium, presented in the shadows of September 11, 2001, and the genocides in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and Darfur and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is replete with considerations of war and the horrors of man’s inhumanity to man. References to Freud’s correspondence with Einstein and his essay “The Future of an Illusion,” from which the “voice of the intellect” quotation is drawn, are leitmotifs that run throughout, blending hope with pessimism and despair.

The book opens with 9 essays reviewing the personal, historical, and sociocultural aspects of Freud’s life and the development of psychoanalysis. These essays were not presented at the symposium, but for those unfamiliar with Freud’s personal history, the breadth and depth of his interests and knowledge, and the history of field of psychoanalysis, they provide an essential backdrop to the short pieces that follow. Each of the essays presented at the symposium is carefully conceived and provides a brief glimpse into the minds of professionals from clinical and non-clinical disciplines who have been profoundly influenced by Freud’s work. Several essays are especially noteworthy: “Implications of Integrating Psychoanalysis with Neuroscience” (H. Michael Meagher, MD), “The Application of Psychoanalysis in Nonclinical Domains” (Stanley Palumbo, PhD), “Sublimation, Freud’s Movement Outward Toward Nonclinical Domains” (J. David Miller, MD), and “Freud’s Voice” (Nancy McWilliams, PhD). One essay, “Freud in the 21st Century,” by Eli Zaretsky, PhD, is considerably longer than the rest and was the keynote address of the symposium. Zaretsky, a

professor of history, looks at the body of Freud’s work from 3 perspectives: psychoanalysis as a therapy, as a theory of culture, and as an “ethical current in everyday life.” Zaretsky’s synthetic examination of Freud’s impact provides a framework for considering each of the other pieces within this collection.

My sense, after speaking with several of the contributors, is that the symposium was more satisfying and stimulating than the book itself. I can well imagine that the interchange among a group of individuals, each deeply committed to psychoanalytic thought and each expressing a unique perspective on Freud’s place in the 21st century, must have been stimulating and generative. Still, the essays themselves make it clear that the impact of Freudian thought continues in our contemporary life.

David I. Joseph, MD
dijoseph@verizon.net

Author affiliation: Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Washington, DC.

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