Oedipus at Versailles

New evidence of Freud’s part in a study of Woodrow Wilson

One of the more curious byways in the career of Sigmund Freud was his collaboration with William C. Bullitt, during 1930-32, in writing a psychological study of Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States from 1913 to 1921 -crucially, the period of the First World War and the uneasy peace that followed.

(Their book was eventually published in the United States in 1967 as Thomas Woodrow Wilson.) The nature of Freud’s participation in the project has long been a source of controversy in the psychoanalytic community, but the recent discovery of an unpublished Freud manuscript, along with letters, early drafts and fragments in Freud’s handwriting puts that participation beyond dispute. It also contradicts those who have argued, from the evidence of what was actually published, that the part played by Freud was of little
significance.

Since ancient Greece, thinkers have been pursuing the possible interconnections between politics and the psychology of those who seek political power. Freud himself had often made connections between psychoanalysis and social thought.

As he noted in 1935, at the age of seventy-nine, in a postscript that he added then to his Autobiographical Study:

In 1912 . . . I had already attempted in Totem and Taboo to make use of the newly discovered findings of analysis in order to investigate the origins of religion and morality. I now carried this work a stage further in two later essays, The Future of an Illusion (1927) and Civilization and Its Discontents (1930). I perceived ever more clearly that the events of human history, the interactions between human nature, cultural development and the precipitates of primaeval experiences (the most prominent of which is religion)
are no more than a reflection of the dynamic conflicts between the ego, the id, and the superego, which psychoanalysis studies in the individual - are the very same processes repeated upon a wider stage.

Freud had been proposing a concept called “applied psychoanalysis”, which implied that the so-called discoveries of psychoanalysis could become axiomatic in the social sciences. But his collaboration with Bullitt was a unique instance of his attempting a sustained study of a man of power.

Bullitt (1891-1967) was a maverick aristocrat from Philadelphia, the author of a bestselling novel, It’s Not Done (1926), and a formidable, colourful presence. The New Yorker’s Janet Flanner memorably described him in a profile in 1938:

He is eclectic, enthusiastic, adrenal - in conversation turns scarlet with displeasure or delight - is hospitable, sociable, hot-tempered, and overpunctual.

He has an uproarious sense of humor and loves to
laugh out loud at his or other people’s jokes. He is an inveterate reader and a lively raconteur. Headstrong, spoiled, spectacular, something of a nabob, and a good showman, he has complicated ambitions . . . .

At the time she was writing, Bullitt was the American ambassador to France.

During the First World War he had been a journalist who was asked by Wilson and the Department of State for his views on Central European matters, and he participated in the Versailles peace conference. He was sent on a mission to establish peace terms with Lenin’s Bolshevik Government, but neither Wilson nor Lloyd-George would entertain the proposals he brought back. When the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were finalized, Bullitt publicly resigned, and later testified against the ratification of the League of Nations before Senator Henry Cabot Lodge’s committee. Bullitt was the first US envoy to the Soviet Union once President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to recognize that country in 1933. He went to Russia along with three cars he had
shipped there, at his own expense: a seven-passenger Cadillac V-12 limousine, as well as two Pontiacs.

His lavish entertaining in Moscow provided the model for parts of Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel The Master and Margarita. There were numerous women in his life, including Roosevelt’s favourite private secretary, “Missy” Le Hand, and Wallis Simpson; he was married to Louise Bryant, the widow of John Reed and lover of Eugene O’Neill, though they were divorced six years before her death in 1936.

Barbara Tuchman described him as “a picaresque adventurer in politics, a Tom Jones of diplomacy”.

Bullitt was psychoanalysed by Freud in Vienna in the 1920s. Although in the one biography of him that exists, So Close to Greatness, by Will Brownell and Richard N. Billings (1987), he is said to have denied that he ever received psychoanalytic treatment, contemporaries of his in Vienna at the time insisted he did, and correspondence confirms that Bullitt was not only Freud’s patient but also his collaborator. The earliest known letter from Freud to Bullitt, written in
English, is dated April 17, 1927:

I enjoy your good news, except when you tell me of the trouble in your wife’s health. I trust it will prove a passing one, as it is not in her nature to miss happiness by falling sick.

My interest in the Red Indians was not great hitherto, it is getting enhanced by reading the very interesting volumes you sent me.

No need to say I am looking eagerly forward to your play on Wilson, I am sure you still appreciate him more than I do.

(The last sentence will surely be of great interest to those who have argued that it was Bullitt who somehow persuaded Freud to pursue an anti-Wilson course in their book.) By 1930 their collaboration seems to have been well under way.

In a document dated October 27 that year, Bullitt wrote:
We discussed how we should go to work, and decided tentatively that I should continue to completion the statement of facts in regard to Wilson’s career, that if possible I should have it finished by the end of this week, that then we should go to work together on the analysis.

In November, Freud wrote (also in English) about a draft of Bullitt’s: “It is glorious. I am sure you are a great writer, but you are bound to develop into more. There is only one passage where you dive into deep analysis which I would like to see omitted”. By September 1931, Freud was writing to Bullitt in his Gothic script:

I have finished my task sooner than expected. While I have changed some things in the general part, and written down the whole thing in German, I found there was little that needed my interference, particularly when you turn to W. himself, and nothing at all from p.142 onwards. In fact, it is excellently done, and reading it gives the strong impression that it is also correct in its essence . . . . When you come to Vienna we will engage a translator, whose work I control,
while you help him understand some American peculiarities.

When Bullitt wrote to Freud, he addressed him as “Dear Freud”, which was practically unheard of at the time, when Freud was known reverentially in his circle as “Professor”. The literature about Freud, for example in connection with his relationship with Jung, emphasizes mainly his need for discipleship, provided it was loyal, rather than his delight in autonomy. Why was an exception made in Bullitt’s case? My hunch is that Freud appreciated how well Bullitt could stand up to him. On December 13, 1932, after he and Bullitt had once again worked on their text, Freud wrote (in English) that he felt “eager to learn about you and our book’s prospects”. Then almost exactly a year later, on December 7, 1933, Freud wrote to Marie Bonaparte, “From Bullitt no direct news. Our book will never see the light of day”. Something had made it impossible for Bullitt to go ahead with publication, or at the very least expedient not to.

The central thesis of Freud and Bullitt’s work was that Wilson suffered from a passive relationship to his
Presbyterian minister father, and struggled throughout his life to deal with this form of Oedipal conflict. Partly this could explain why Wilson relied on younger assistants, as he identified with his father at the same time as he needed adoptive sons of his own. At Versailles Wilson had denied what the Allies were calling for -the humiliation of a defeated Germany -so that he could continue to believe he had fulfilled the high moral ideals for which the United States had entered the war. Wilson’s Fourteen Points were the basis for the Imperial German Government’s acceptance of the Armistice. He had gone to Versailles with the aim of trying to create a new world society, one governed by the ideals of democracy and “the self-determination of peoples”, only to see these ideals grandly violated by the Treaty itself. He succeeded in securing agreement to the establishment of the League of Nations, but at the price of compromising most of his other principles.

Bullitt and Freud refer to Wilson’s “moral collapse” at Versailles. He had “met the leaders of the Allies not with the weapons of masculinity but with the weapons of femininity: appeals, supplications, concessions,
submissions”. His agreement to the transformation of the Fourteen Points into the Treaty was, they claimed, a “flight from reality”. And “because of the reaction-formation against his passivity to his father it was impossible for him, by compromising with Lodge (who led opposition to the Treaty and the League), to obtain the ratification of the treaty which his passivity to his father demanded”.

Furthermore, although Wilson had known about the existence of secret treaties revealing the Allies’ imperialistic war aims in 1917, before they were published by the Bolshevik Government, he had repressed this knowledge, a “repression . . . no doubt strengthened by his unconscious wish to believe himself the victim of a conspiracy -Jesus Christ betrayed”.

Thomas Woodrow Wilson did not appear until 1967, and when it did it was to a hostile reception. A. J. P. Taylor in a review called it a “disgrace”, and asked, in his concluding sentence, “how did anyone ever manage to take Freud seriously?”.
The reviewer in the TLS cited the Wilson authority Arthur Link’s “masterly destruction” of the book, and pointed out “a practical unanimity of condemnation that has had few parallels in recent historical controversy”.

Vladimir Nabokov joined in the anti-Freudian fun by writing in a letter to Encounter (where parts of the book had been serialized): “I welcome Freud’s Woodrow Wilson not only because of its comic appeal, which is great, but because that surely must be the last rusty nail in the Viennese Quack’s coffin”.

Though, as Barbara Tuchman observed in 1967, the anguished psychoanalysts “greeted this posthumous work of the Master as if it were something between a forged First Folio and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, the view that had the most lasting influence was expressed by the otherwise remarkably original thinker Erik H.

Erikson. Writing in the New York Review of Books (a review later reprinted in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis, the most prestigious publication in the
profession), Erikson referred to Freud’s “alleged senior authorship” of the book and thought that “for me and for others it is easy to see only that Freud could have ‘written’ almost nothing of what is now presented in print”.

He argued that “There are good reasons to conclude that with the exception of the Introduction, all of Freud’s original contributions . . . have been lost”; deplored the idea that Freud could “knowingly collaborate in psychoanalytic belittling of any person, great or small”; and concluded that “the text now printed must be ascribed to Bullitt, because he either transcribed or wrote, translated or caused to be translated, every word of it”.

(Bullitt himself, who had been diagnosed with leukaemia in 1946, was too ill to be told about the book’s reception; he died at almost the same time as Erikson’s denunciation appeared.) The reaction of the Freud family was further to distance their illustrious forebear from involvement in writing the book.

When Ernest Jones, Freud’s official biographer, first
read the manuscript in

1956, he proposed that the whole text might appear in James Strachey’s Standard Edition (1953-73) of Freud’s works. It never appeared there, and Volume Twenty-Four of the Standard Edition still restricts Freud’s contribution: “In 1966 (sic) Bullitt published (in English) a study of Wilson, acknowledging Freud as co-author. The book, however, although quite clearly influenced by Freud’s ideas, does not appear to contain any contribution written by Freud, with the exception of an Introduction of which the German original is extant”.

Melvin Lasky in Encounter quoted Freud’s daughter Anna as saying that she found the whole “‘tragic conception’ of the work both moving and convincing”.

(She had told me something similar in 1965, after the Freuds had first received the manuscript from Bullitt, and when I first heard of its forthcoming appearance.) But Anna was disappointed to find that Bullitt, in poor
health, was determined to proceed to publication without the textual improvements she suggested.

(Bullitt justifiably thought, as he told me as well, that if Freud had wanted her to read and alter the manuscript he would have asked her to do so in 1930-32, when the first draft was completed, or in 1938-9, when it was retyped.) Thomas Woodrow Wilson has continued to appear in various translations. Freud said about the book, in his printed introduction, “for the analytic part we are both equally responsible; it has been written by us working together”. Bullitt, writing to Ernest Jones in 1955, said that he and Freud were both “extremely pig headed; somewhat convinced that each of us was God. In consequence each chapter, indeed each sentence . . . was the subject of an intense debate”. Freud’s son Ernst wrote to Bullitt in 1965, asking for a photograph of Bullitt for a pictorial biography, “if possible from the years when you worked with him -as you share with Josef Breuer the rare distinction of having written a book with my father”. Despite all this, and the fact that a complete manuscript in English, signed by both men at the end of every chapter, was seen by editors at Houghton Mifflin as well as by relatives of Bullitt’s
(the whereabouts of this manuscript are now unknown), the mythology has persisted in diminishing Freud’s contribution. To me it seemed even in 1965 that it might be consigned to the kind of vacuum that had almost then swallowed Freud’s Moses and Monotheism. Wilson was just the kind of liberal idealist that Freud could use, like the ancient figure of Moses, for the sake of autobiographical self-exploration.

Long after Bullitt’s death his papers remained in the possession of his daughter in Ireland, but early in 2004 they were transferred to Yale, Bullitt’s alma mater.

Among them is a manuscript to which Anna Freud referred when, within a few weeks of Freud’s death in 1939, she wrote to Bullitt:

After my father’s death I discovered among his papers two or three essays which are going to be published now as an addition to his Collected papers. I remembered then that there is one more unpublished paper of his that he wrote as an addition to a MS of yours. The manuscript is not here; I seem to remember
that my father sent it to you with some special messenger from Vienna when times there were not very safe . . . . Anyway, if the MS or a copy of it is in your possession, would there be an objection against including it in my father’s posthumous articles?

When Freud was first threatened by the Anschluss in 1938, Bullitt had thought it “dangerous” for Freud to keep documents pertaining to their work (the Nazis had started publicly burning Freud’s works when they came to power in 1933). A satchel or small suitcase of manuscripts had gone from the Freud apartment to the American legation in Vienna, and from there by diplomatic pouch to Bullitt’s embassy in Paris. Bullitt, who had gone off years earlier with the volume he and Freud had worked on together, declined to cooperate with Anna Freud, and kept the manuscript she asked for.

(She had not been included in Freud and Bullitt’s collaboration, or their discussions.) That manuscript, the “addition” Freud sent from Vienna, consists of some twenty-four large sheets in Freud’s Gothic script. It was evidently intended to be the first chapter of
Freud and Bullitt’s book, though it was radically condensed and revised before its eventual appearance (as Chapter One and part of Chapter Two) in the published text.

(Is it perhaps “the general part” Freud referred to in his letter of 1931? -“I have changed some things . . . and written down the whole thing in German . . .”.) The essay is mainly an exposition of libido theory, but also touches on narcissism, repression and sublimation, and contains a discussion of castration anxiety as well as a highly unusual interpretation of Christianity, in which Jesus is described as “the perfect reconciliation between masculinity and femininity”. This whole line of thought, as expounded in the following passages, was suppressed before publication of the Wilson book.

A man whose passivity toward his father could not find a direct outlet will often have recourse to a double identification. He will identify with his father and also seek out a younger man whom he identifies with himself and on whom he bestows the same love that he wished for from his father but that remained unsatisfied because of his passivity toward the father. In this way
he may become an active homosexual. In many cases a man whose passive attitude toward the father has not found direct expression will find that expression by identifying with Jesus Christ. This identification is a regular occurrence, so to speak, in the psyche of a Christian; according to the testimony of psychoanalysis it can be demonstrated to exist in completely normal people. That should not surprise us, for this identification accomplishes the feat of miraculously reconciling two extremely powerful and absolutely contradictory wishes by fulfilling both at the same time.

These two wishes are to be completely passive and subservient toward the father, to be completely feminine, and on the other hand to be completely masculine, powerful and authoritative like the father. Christ was able to fulfill both these wishes: by humbly submitting to the will of God the Father, he was able to become God himself; in other words, by surrendering to total femininity he was able to attain the ultimate goal of masculinity. Thus, it is understandable that identification with Christ is so frequently used to deal with the more important of the two Oedipal problems.
the relationship with the father.

It is perhaps no accident that with the worldwide spread of Christendom during the first centuries after the birth of Christ, an extraordinary decline in the direct expression of homosexuality coincided with its official suppression. Its direct expression had simply become unnecessary. Identifying with Christ gave expression to homosexuality in a way that not only found social approval but also must have been acceptable to the superego, which always strives to resemble God. Christ is, after all, the perfect reconciliation between masculinity and femininity. Belief in his divinity includes the belief that one can realize the most daring dreams of activity by means of the utmost passivity; in submitting unreservedly to the father, one triumphs over him and becomes God oneself. This mechanism of reconciling opposing impulses of masculinity in the constitutionally bisexual human being by identifying with Christ is something so satisfying that it assures the Christian religion a long existence. People will not readily be inclined to give up something that rescues them from the most difficult conflict they have to struggle with. They will continue to identify with
Christ for a long time to come.

Here, perhaps, is the reason why the project ground to a halt some time after September 1931. Freud proposed to include these passages among his “changes”; Bullitt in 1932 was preparing to re-enter political life, and could not have allowed such explosive material to be published in his name.

Also among Bullitt’s papers at Yale is a shorter draft of the chapter, in English, with initialled corrections by both men (perhaps the basis for Freud’s German MS version); and, pertaining to Freud’s quite separate introduction to the book, typed drafts in both German and English, again with handwritten corrections by both; a short draft of a Freud paper on Wilson’s illnesses (a few sentences from which do appear in the published book); and various handwritten notes indicating Freud’s corrections to the whole text, some of which were included in the published book, but not all. Two contracts for the Wilson study were signed by both Freud and Bullitt in 1932. Because Bullitt could not in 1932 agree to releasing the book, due perhaps to that late addition and perhaps also to a possible change
in Freud’s introduction, he paid Freud the sum of $2,500 in lieu of royalties. In London during 1938-9 Freud and Bullitt came to a resolution of their differences, and the decision when (and whether) to publish was left in Bullitt’s hands.

This documentation can represent only a fraction of the material that the project engendered. Both Freud and Bullitt were known to have destroyed many of their papers; the fact that, like that of other major figures in intellectual history, Freud’s work forces us to rethink the most basic of our premisses, perhaps helps explain why Bullitt did not destroy at least some of the Freud manuscripts in his possession. Although he might originally have feared that the quality of Freud’s writing would outshine his own, in the long run it could be that instead of their collaboration detracting from Freud’s reputation, the parts by Freud that were suppressed, and his daring to work with Bullitt at all, could help add to his stature. Given the sanitized state of the published Chapter One, a sentence from Bullitt’s own foreword now takes on new meaning: “To bury Freud on Wilson in a chapter of my book” -which was the original proposal Freud had made: to contribute to
Bullitt’s projected volume about the leaders at Versailles “would be to produce an impossible monstrosity; the part would be greater than the whole”.

Presidents ought not be treated as totems, and Wilson - like any other political figure - is not exempt from criticism. At this time especially it is worth remembering that the involvement of the United States in the First World War – which followed the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915, with the drowning of 128 Americans, and the resumption of unrestricted German submarine warfare in 1917 – was fiercely opposed by some willing to go to prison for their beliefs. The war led to over a quarter of a million American casualties. Calvinism in American foreign policy is by no means a dead letter, and Freud with Bullitt may have been on the right track in challenging Wilson’s championing of high-sounding moralism in politics. Bullitt lived long enough to see his prophecies about the consequences of the Versailles Treaty amply fulfilled, and Freud endured the first effects of the rise of the Nazis.

Freud became convinced that the war should have ended in a stalemate, and that neither side should have
won; he thought that America would have done better by staying out. Gore Vidal suggested, in connection with the Wilson book, that Freud could not forgive Wilson for the part he played in the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and all that followed.

Bullitt, however, maintained that Germany had forced Wilson’s hand. In 1914 Wilson had himself hoped for a deadlock in Europe. Freud’s political beliefs may look now like an unusual position, but they were an essential part of the context in which his collaboration with Bullitt needs to be assessed. James Strachey told me that he had, during his own analysis with Freud following the First World War, loaned him a copy of his friend John Maynard Keynes’s The Economic Consequences of the Peace.

I regret now that when I first published on Freud and Bullitt in 1968, in Freud: Political and social thought, although I was correct in seeing Freud’s authorial hand in their book, I did not then look at Wilson through the eyes of those in the interwar period. From Versailles to Pearl Harbor, American revisionist historians were convinced that the US intervention in the First World
War had been mistaken.

Only after America entered the arena for the second time in 1941 was there a major increase in popular American respect for Wilson’s memory. When I initially wrote about Freud and Bullitt, I was thinking of Wilson as an internationalist predecessor for FDR. Who can say now whether, if Imperial Germany had been merely checked rather than humiliated, that might have been enough to ensure that Hitler had never come to power, or whether, if America had stayed out, the Germans might not have transported Lenin back to Moscow?

“Woodrow Wilson is the most violently controversial American president of the twentieth century” were the words with which Johann Hari began his reconsideration of the Wilsonian legacy in the TLS (March 28, 2003). Those still trying to understand that legacy, or to make as dispassionate an assessment as possible of the current exercise of American power, cannot fail to find much that is fascinating and illuminating in Freud and Bullitt’s study. It goes without saying that we can still disapprove of the
continuing temptation to impose pseudo-diagnostic labels on what we politically do not like.

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