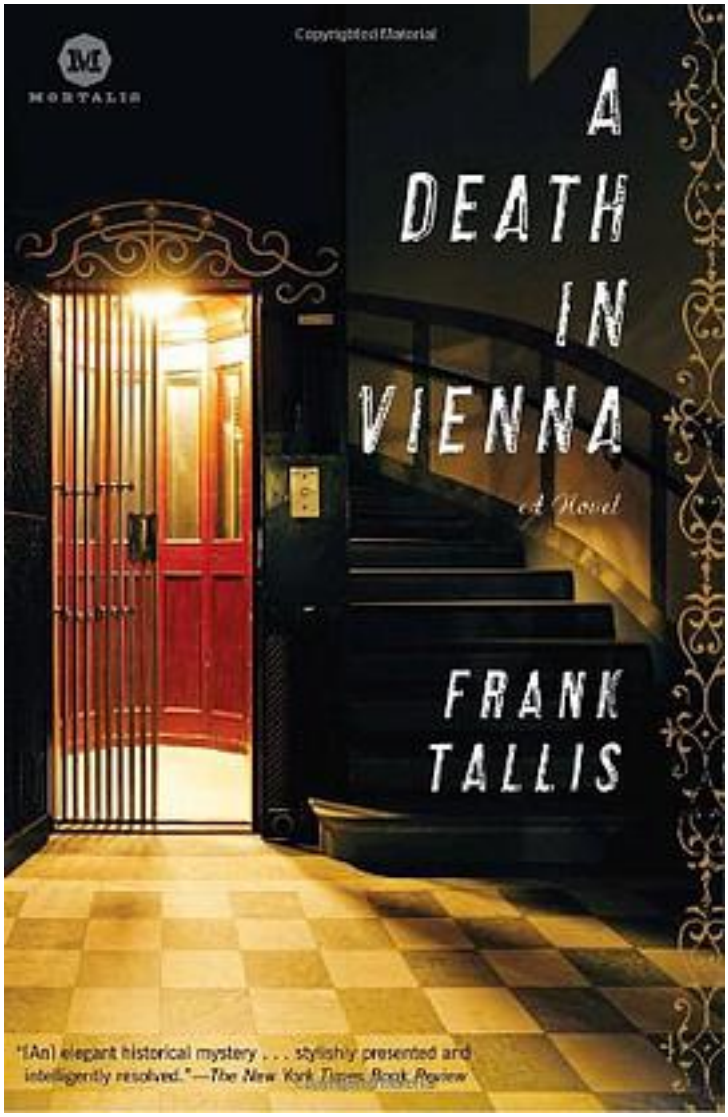
Death in Vienna



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In 1902, elegant Vienna is the city of the new century, the center of discoveries in everything from the writing of music to the workings of the human mind. But now a brutal homicide has stunned its citizens and appears to have bridged the gap between science and the supernatural. Two very different sleuths from opposite ends of the spectrum will need to combine their talents to solve the boggling crime: Detective Oskar Rheinhardt, who is on the cutting edge of modern police work, and his friend Dr. Max Liebermann, a follower of Sigmund Freud and a pioneer on new frontiers of psychology. As a team they must use both hard evidence and intuitive analysis to solve a medium's mysterious murder–one that couldn't have been committed by anyone alive.

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THE MORTALIS DOSSIER- PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS: THE CURIOUS CASE OF PROFESSOR SIGMUND F. AND DETECTIVE FICTION

Summertime–the Austrian Alps: A middle-aged doctor, wishing to forget medicine, turns off the beaten track and begins a strenuous climb. When he reaches the summit, he sits and contemplates the distant prospect. Suddenly he hears a voice.

"Are you a doctor?"

He is not alone. At first, he can't believe that he's being addressed. He turns and sees a sulky-looking eighteen-year-old. He recognizes her (she served him his meal the previous evening). "Yes," he replies.

"I'm a doctor. How did you know that?"

She tells him that her nerves are bad, that she needs help. S ometimes she feels like she can't breathe, and there's a hammering in her head. And sometimes something very disturbing happens. She sees things–including a face that fills her with horror. . . .

Well, do you want to know what happens next? I'd be surprised if you didn't.

We have here all the ingredients of an engaging thriller: an isolated setting, a strange meeting, and a disconcerting confession.

So where does this particular opening scene come from? A littleknown work by one of the queens of crime fiction? A lost reel of an

early Hitchcock film, perhaps? Neither. It is in fact a faithful summary of the first few pages of Katharina by Sigmund Freud, also known as case study number four in his Studies on Hysteria, co-authored with Josef Breuer and published in 1895.

It is generally agreed that the detective thriller is a nineteenthcentury invention, perfected by the holy trinity of Collins, Poe, and (most importantly) Conan Doyle; however, the genre would have been quite different had it not been for the oblique influence of psychoanalysis. The psychological thriller often pays close attention to personal history–childhood experiences, relationships, and significant life events–in fact, the very same things that any self-respecting therapist would want to know about. These days it’s almost impossible to think of the term “thriller” without mentally inserting the prefix “psychological.”

So how did this happen? How did Freud’s work come to influence the development of an entire literary genre? The answer is quite simple. He had some help–and that help came from the American film industry.

Now it has to be said that Freud didn’t like America. After visiting America, he wrote: “I am very glad I am away from it, and even more that I don’t have to live there.” He believed that American food had given him a gastrointestinal illness, and that his short stay in America had caused his handwriting to deteriorate. His anti-American sentiments finally culminated with his famous remark that he considered America to be “a gigantic mistake.”

Be that as it may, although Freud didn’t like America, America liked Freud. In fact, America loved him. And nowhere in America was

Freud more loved than in Hollywood.

The special relationship between the film industry and psychoanalysis began in the 1930s, when many émigré analysts–fleeing from the Nazis–settled on the West Coast. Entering analysis became very fashionable among the studio elite, and Hollywood soon acquired the sobriquet "couch canyon." Dr. Ralph Greenson, for example–a well-known Hollywood analyst–had a patient list that included the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Tony Curtis, and Vivien Leigh. And among the many Hollywood directors who succumbed to Freud's influence was Alfred Hitchcock, whose thrillers were much more psychological than any that had been filmed before. In one of his films Freud actually makes an appearance–well, more or less. I am thinking here of Spellbound, released in 1945, and based on Francis Beedings' s crime novel The House of Dr. Edwardes.

T he producer of Spellbound, David O. Selznick, was himself in psychoanalysis–as were most of his family–and so enthusiastic was he about Freud's ideas that he recruited his own analyst to help him vet the script. Hitchcock's film has everything we expect from a psychological thriller: a clinical setting, a murder, a man who has lost his memory, a dream sequence, and a sinewy plot that twists and turns toward a dramatic climax. That this film owes a large debt to psychoanalysis is made absolutely clear when a character appears who is–in all but name–Sigmund Freud: a wise old doctor with a beard, glasses, and a fantastically hammy Viennese accent.

Since Hitchcock's time, authors and screenwriters have had much fun playing with the resonances that exist between psychoanalysis and detection. This kind of writing reached its apotheosis in 1975 with the

publication of Nicholas Meyer's The Seven-Per-Cent Solution, a novel in which Freud and Sherlock Holmes are brought together to solve the same case.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and detection was not lost on Freud. In his Introductory Lectures, for example, there is a passage in which he stresses how both the detective and the psychoanalyst depend on accumulating piecemeal evidence that usually arrives in the form of small and apparently inconsequential clues.

> If you were a detective engaged in tracing a murder, would you expect to find that the murderer had left his photograph behind at the place of the crime, with his address attached? Or would you not necessarily have to be satisfied with comparatively slight and obscure traces of the person you were in search of? So do not let us underestimate small indications; by their help we may succeed in getting on the track of something bigger.

Later in the same series of lectures, Freud blurs the boundary between psychoanalysis and detection even further. He goes beyond pointing out that psychoanalysis and detection are similar enterprises and suggests that psychoanalytic techniques might actually be used to aid detection. Freud describes the case of a real murderer who acquired highly dangerous pathogenic organisms from scientific institutes by pretending to be a bacteriologist. The murderer then used these stolen cultures to fatally infect his victims. On one occasion, he audaciously wrote a letter to the director of one of these scientific institutes, complaining that the cultures he had been given were ineffective. But the letter contained a Freudian slip–an unconsciously performed blunder. Instead of writing in my experiments on mice or guinea pigs, the murderer wrote in my experiments on men. Freud notes that the institute director–not being conversant with psychoanalysis–was happy to overlook such a telling error.

In a little-known paper called Psychoanalysis and the Ascertaining of Truth in Courts of Law, Freud is even more confident that psychoanalytic techniques might be used in the service of detection. He writes:

In both [psychoanalysis and law] we are concerned with a secret, with something hidden. . . . In the case of the criminal it is a secret which he knows he hides from you, but in the case of the hysteric it is a secret hidden from himself. . . . The task of the therapeutist is, however, the same as the task of the judge; he must discover the hidden psychic material. To do this we have invented various methods of detection, some of which lawyers are now going to imitate.

It is interesting that criminology and forensic science emerged at exactly the same time as psychoanalysis. In 1893, Professor Hans Gross (also Viennese) published the first handbook of criminal investigation, a manual for detectives. It was the same year that Freud published (with Josef Breuer) his first work on psychoanalysis: a "Preliminary Communication," On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena.

Freud, largely via Hollywood, wielded an extraordinary influence on detective fiction. But to what extent is the reverse true?

We know that Freud was very widely read–and that he had and Vivien Leigh. And among the many Hollywood directors who succumbed to Freud's influence was Alfred Hitchcock, whose thrillers were much more psychological than any that had been filmed before.

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