GEORGE PROCHNIK AND WAYNE KOESTENBAM:

A CONVERSATION

Family History & Its Discontents: Sigmund Freud, Oscar Wilde, Stomach Pains, Death, New England, and the Immortal Porcupine

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters. I'm so happy that you're here today. It's a great pleasure to welcome you to the New York Public Library. I am the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, and my role as the program director here is to create intellectual fervor, stimulate the mind and body, oxygenate the Library, hopefully, and generally speaking, my mandate that I claim for myself is to make the lions roar, and boy oh boy are they roaring tonight. It's a great pleasure to be doing this together with *The Atlantic Monthly*. *The*

Atlantic is celebrating its hundred and fiftieth birthday and so naturally I thought of Freud, since he is celebrating his hundred and fiftieth birthday, I thought of bringing *The Atlantic* together with Freud and celebrate three hundred years of peaceful cohabitation. The evening tonight is divided in two equal parts. Both of them will be about as long as a psychoanalytical session. **(laughter)**

The first will be a conversation between Wayne Koestenbaum and George Prochnik. At the forty-two-minute marker, this is what you will hear. **(first notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony)** That will be a sign that the session is nearly over. **(laughter)** They have three more minutes to wrap up and then there will be another sign, and let us hear it. **(first notes of Fifth Symphony)** Actually, the second one I want a little louder but you'll do that when they are going overtime. And, unlike in your psychoanalytical session, here you will have a great advantage. You will actually be able to ask questions, and perhaps even receive an answer. **(laughter)** And in my experience, questions are usually asked in about fifty-three or four or five seconds. So rather questions than statements.

For the statement part of this evening, we have Slavoj Zizek here, **(laughter)** who will be giving us a wonderful talk about Freud. I say wonderful in advance, because I have no idea how it will turn out, but I am sure it will be wonderful. And he will have fifty-two and a half minutes. We have agreed to give him two and a half minutes more. And after that, what will happen at fifty-two and a half minutes? **(first notes of Fifth Symphony)** And then there will be about ten minutes of Q and A, and then all of you are invited, if you so wish, to join us in the Trustees' Room for a reception. It's a great pleasure to be

hosting Slavoj Zizek, who is also brought to us tonight, co-presented and very generously sponsored by the Austrian Cultural Forum.

I will say very few words about Wayne and George. They are two of the most wonderful people I know in New York City. Wayne I met about two and a quarter minutes after I arrived in America. We were both students at a school in New Jersey, a graduate school in New Jersey, and Wayne subsequently and I maintained contact, and he came out to L.A., where I was blissfully living in Santa Monica—God knows why I'm here now—but anyway, I was living out there, and I invited him out to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where he gave a talk, which was just delicious. It was a talk about—I don't quite remember **(laughter)—**but it's more or less the illicit pleasures one feels when being in hotels. **(laughter)** And it was *fantastic*, and I thought, I am just such a lucky bubbalah, **(laughter)** but in fact I hear now that we will have the pleasure of perhaps reading about those illicit pleasures and maybe if we are so lucky, partaking in them. Wayne is publishing a book called *Hotel Theory*, which will be published by Soft Skull Press in the spring of 2007 and with his permission I'll invite him back again to talk about that. He also wrote an extraordinary book, if you haven't read it, called *The Queen's Throat: The Relationship between Gay Culture and Opera*. It seems an unlikely subject, **(laughter)** but then again it's a wonderfully—I mean I was, in those years I was writing about collecting, and it's a wonderful rumination, actually also on collecting. I can't recommend it enough as a Christmas gift for your mother, perhaps. **(laughter)** But no, it's a really, it's a really, really great book. And we are actually selling the books at the end of the event, so I recommend that you go and at least get that one, if not many others.

He also wrote a book with a quite enticing title, *Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films*, **(laughter)** I'm not sure what exactly it is, but it's a wonderful collection of poetry.

Now Prochnik, George Prochnik has written an extraordinary book, which Wayne and George will talk about very shortly, if I stop this very long introduction. George's book, which is also on sale, and which the Other Press has brought out, is called *Putnam's Camp: Sigmund Freud, James Jackson Putnam, and the Purpose of American Psychology*. Basically, an extraordinary study of many, many things but in part also Freud's trip in 1909—thank you, George, I was sure it was nine—1909 to the United States of America. So without further ado, and for forty-two minutes, I present to you Wayne Koestenbaum and George Prochnik.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Are we being amplified already? We are, good. But we were not being amplified when we were in the front row, whispering, I hope, or backstage. Okay, George and I know each other very, very well, and we've known each other for a long time, so the first awkwardness, I think, that I have to get over, is realizing that we're not just drinking wine in Brooklyn together, but that we're on the stage. It's a deep sadness, but, you know, before I read this extraordinary book and we were having conversations together about writing, we bonded about the work of Walter Benjamin and Sebald and other kinds of crazy, obsessive collectors of cultural detritus and idiosyncratic wanderers and questers. So that's the George Prochnik, I think, who wrote this book. Do you want to corroborate, or deny?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Well, that's unbelievably generous. I mean, certainly because so much of this book is a book that was born out of different kinds of discoveries of letters, there was a collecting aspect, and there was also that kind of obsessive thing that happens, where, having collected a certain number, I wanted to collect all of them. And for me it was really about collecting voices, ultimately, because one thing that bothers me in a great deal of biography or history is that sense that people are behind this proscenium theater in a very flat, either condescending or fetishizing position, vis-à-vis their subject, and *voice* seems to me both what enlivens and destabilizes history and therefore makes it worth reading, for me.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: There is really incredible voice in the book, long periodic sentences written with a kind of mania, almost. I mean they're *huge*, and—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: They've been shortened considerably by a number of people. **(laughter)**

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: But I love it. It's the sense, it's a gripping narrative. And the main voice in it is your great-grandfather, correct? James Jackson Putnam, who, if you will forgive me for saying, is not a household name, at least in my household, but I think one of the aims of this book is to get him to become more of a household name. Who is he?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: You know, I was thinking about you asking that. And it's actually very hard to answer. I mean, he was my great-grandfather and he was a Boston neurologist, psychologist, and part of a medical elite and an intellectual elite that included—William James was a close friend, Emerson's youngest son Edward was his roommate in medical school—so he was an extremely ensconced person within an extremely specific Boston, which for that very reason, also, the longer I spent with him made me realize how much he was in deep solitude. Because to be enmeshed in that particular Boston was one that *demanded* a constant turning back on the self, and I think a sense of, sort of at times bathetic loneliness, but something very poignant and present in everything he wrote.

So he had a very successful career. It was in large measure handed to him, but he was also active in all sorts of rights movements, and fought for things like the removal of arsenic from wallpaper and lead from plumbing. He was very socially engaged, as many of his generation of Bostonians were. And then had a highly successful career as a neurologist and psychologist. Met Freud when Freud came over to speak in 1909, and he'd only gone at the last minute. He was actually thinking of not even attending Freud's lectures, which were delivered in Worcester. And he was just blown away by what he heard, and even though he was sixty-three years old at the time, he became so enthused that he really began something like a religious conversion to the ideas of Freud, while also holding on to a great deal of his New England past, which would become more and more of a bone of contention between them and the subject of an argument, which was really what engaged me, I think, in many ways in writing the book.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: First, I want to acknowledge your royalty in that way. That you are virtually, even though I didn't know who Putnam was, that circle that you are—and you must have known all your life that you are—really connected to an American intellectual gentry, which sits oddly—no, I have respect for certain kinds of pedigree.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: It gave me a fantasy life within an American suburb that was without any pedigree. **(laughter)**

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Yes, but still, I think that's quite—and you actually, you found a trove of family letters that your mother staunchly hid in the closet.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I mean, this is a story that the more I thought about it, it's like a dream that you have on purpose for your analyst or therapist, it was so strange. **(laughter)** But about a third of the way through writing this book, there are letters that are collected at Harvard University and in various places, and there were a few lying around in Fairfax, Virginia, where my parents now live, and where I grew up, but I had heard about this mythic vast trove that had been sold off by a relative, or perhaps simply lost by a relative, or perhaps in some way *defiled* by a relative, and was it was something that bothered me, and I kept hearing about it, and I would grumpily go down to Fairfax and sort of re-raise this issue of these letters, and "Isn't it awful what happened?" And then one day I was sitting on my mother's bed, in my mother's bedroom, with her.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: A frequent occurrence?

(laughter)

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I mean, only in my dreams. I mean, and she suddenly—I raised the letters again, and she suddenly said, "Oh, well, those letters have been here all the time," **(laughter)** and she proceeded to open a little door in the wall across from her bed, and she's not a large woman, and she began drawing out these garbage bags, one after the next, **(laughter)** filled with letters, and they I mean they were hundreds and hundreds of letters tied in silk ribbons and filled with wonderful line drawings and watercolors and some of them are written on birch bark from the Adirondacks.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: These were your family—these were not letters *from* Freud to your great-grandfather.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Those are collected—at least the ones that I know of—I mean, many were lost, or a sizeable number.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: You claim, the big argument of the book, as I see it, is that you claim that even though Freud won in this kind of argument that Freud and Putnam engaged in even after Freud returned to Europe and never returned to America. They continued a dialogue about the place of ethics and kind of transcendental higher purposes

as a goal of psychoanalysis. Even though Freud won, Putnam secretly won, and in fact in Freud's later religiously questing work he was answering some of Putnam's arguments about the necessity of religion or faith or—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Answering or at least fighting with. I think, I mean, I view Putnam more as to the extent that he won or at least remains important, it's more about what we as Americans, I think, look for in mental treatment, and one thing that Freud had a difficult time, I think, *getting* when he came here, and he was weirdly unprepared, even though he saw America as the future of analysis, something about which he was very ambivalent, but what he didn't realize was the degree to which Americans look for, I think, often, *salvation* in their mental-health treatment, some grand kind of reform of self, which far exceeds the parameters of what Freud claimed to provide with all of Freud's ambitiousness. This kind of line in American desire, which I think informs much of the therapeutic process, for something more than—something more. I mean it exists in certainly all popular culture, I mean, it was banished from the analytic world, but this may have been one of the ways that the analytical world also effaced itself until it became so fragile that it, you know, threatens—has cracked in many places.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: So, you're not—but you also, maybe you don't say it so explicitly, but something like *The Future of an Illusion*, or *Moses and Monotheism*, were—that those are arguments with your great-grandfather.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Well, he, Freud says in certain letters to Putnam, he actually says, you know, "You've gotten me interested in the idea of battling with religion," and then he gives answers that upset Putnam terribly because they position religion within these works, I mean, within *Instincts and Vicissitudes*, and within certain of Freud's essays, he seems to say that religion is a fantasy, a particular kind of fantasy that fits into a family construct, but I think that the one thing I would say is that, you know, Jung—I think that Putnam, because Putnam was much more, first of all, deferential to Freud than Jung was, and secondly because Putnam was more open-minded than Jung, that there ways in which Jung's mysticism—Freud couldn't even come close to it, he shied away from it, and he got in these many arguments with Jung where he said that, you know, the occult lies, this black mud of the occult lies beneath so much of our psyche, and it's *sex*. And he kept sticking that tail on the donkey, but with Putnam there was a bit more of an ability, I think, for Freud to engage. He was less threatening.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Okay, there's like four loose threads that I want to gather. The paranormal will be one and the occult, but we're going to save that. Your father and the Jews, because, there's these two great fathers, Freud and Putnam, but there's somebody else in this picture who makes you who you are that is part of the journey of this book, and I think the third would be kindergarten. I'm thinking as you're talking. Putnam was nicer than Freud, partly because he had this girlfriend, Susan Blow, who invented kindergarten. **(laughter)** Isn't that basically it?

(laughter)

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That's so well put that I hesitate to even respond in any way.

(laughter)

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: I mean, Martha Bernays didn't invent kindergarten, but you're saying in a way, Anna Freud followed the trail of your great-grandfather's girlfriend. I'm serious. This is what your book is saying.

(laughter)

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yeah, well. I'm glad, I think, that that's what I'm saying, because that allows another book to be written explaining why I'm saying that. **(laughter)** But—you know, Putnam had this patient with this wonderful name, Susan Blow, who in fact was a very distinguished early American educator—theorist in early childhood education. She did found the first kindergarten in America in St. Louis.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: That's big.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I think it's very big, and she's someone who really needs a biography, so I hope someone here will do it, because she was also a brilliant lecturer on Dante and on Shakespeare, and had this vast reading in Hegel, and in fact her intellectual

roots lie in this bizarre, fascinating philosophical movement in St. Louis called the St. Louis Hegelians, which—I've met very few people who've heard of, but—

(laughter)

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Is that why you went to St. Louis recently?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That's why I went to St. Louis to read in a library to two schizophrenics. But that's another story.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: That was the St. Louis Hegelian Society secretary and vice-president.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: She moved from being a patient in a way that I think now this trajectory many therapists, analysts are more uncomfortable with, into being Putnam's mentor, and he realized that she was better-read than him, actually smarter than him, probably, and gave him much of the outline of the philosophy that he would then use in his arguments with Freud to say, because, I think, just as a quick side note, part of what he was saying to Freud and part of what he wouldn't give up on was the idea that you couldn't stop therapy at the point of ridding people of their demons. That if you abandoned them there, as he said in different papers at different times, it would be as though Dante had abandoned Virgil on the slopes of Purgatory, and he was worried that this would lead to a narcissistic psychology. He said you *had* to give patients a *goal* and

after having them look inward as deeply as possible, they were to turn outward again, and ideally this would be to a series of concentrically expanding relationships—family, community, nation—and essentially he wanted patients to become social workers. Which, the more I stayed with it, although Freud intellectually dwarfs Putnam in many ways, I think that the engagement that Putnam called for, if we look at the subsequent fate of much of therapy, it wasn't entirely misplaced.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: I'm a more lurid guy than you are, George, in my imagination, and I in some way, though you are eloquent in your—everything you say about Putnam, I remain a Neo-Freudian, and I remain most excited by that system, so I want to ask you. We announced in our prospectus for this conversation that we would talk about a certain porcupine, but first that we would talk about Freud's stomach. And that there is something so exciting in Freud that the deepest thinking can take place around a stomachache, or, as we were talking about in the green room, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a boil right below his scrotum, which appears at the kind of the dead center of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and that that grounds serious thinking, so can we go back to 1907, Putnam Camp, Freud's stomach?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yes.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Is that fair?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yes, yes, I think that Freud was remarkable at externalizing symptoms throughout his life, and this also gets into Freud fainting before Jung twice—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Tell us about that.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Well, maybe I'll quickly say that, because before he goes to America, Freud has lunch in Bremen, on the eve of his departure to America, with Jung and Ferenczi, and they have this wonderful meal of salmon and some nice wine, and at a certain point, Jung begins talking about some mummified corpses that they've found nearby, and Freud becomes more and more upset, and finally he's saying, you can hear Jung like an early Hitchcock film, where the sound on the word "murder" amplifies more and more, it's like "Mordleichen, mordleichen," and Freud finally says, "What is it with you and the corpses?" And then he passes out. **(laughter)** and he does this again a few years later in a similar situation, and this time, waking in Jung's arms—that time, I should say, that he wakes right next to Jung, who quips at the moment when Freud awakes, "From this point onward, we'll pay for Papa." Implying that the lunch had been on Freud's bill and that this had made him pass out. But he passes out again, and I think part of what was so remarkable reading the lives of these people, and trying to cut through a lot of the ideological armature that's been shoved or scooped in more like in layers over these people was just how much they were able to express physically. I mean, can you imagine having a close friendship with another man, an obsession with another man, which makes you actually faint in public more than once? He has this terrible urination incident on the—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Tell about that.

(laughter)

GEORGE PROCHNIK: On the Palisades. He goes on a walk with Jung, this same trip.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: This is at the Putnam Camp?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Before he gets to Putnam Camp, right, this is just ten miles upriver. And he, you know, wets himself and again is put in this position where he—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: And there's no prelude, he doesn't say, "Is there a bathroom around here?" **(laughter)** It's just "whoosh."

(laughter)

GEORGE PROCHNIK: As Jung reports it, yeah. So, but I—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: It's not just as you said, though, just family histories, it's that—that's not at the forefront of people's minds when they think about Freud. And I think that Freud-bashers would be less inclined to bash Freud if they understood, not just

because it makes him a sweet guy because he was so vulnerable, but that it shows how real his investigations were, how embodied, I think.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I think that's really well put. And the stomach stuff. I mean, he—Putnam was so excited by hearing him speak at Clark that he asked Freud to visit his—to visit Putnam's Adirondack retreat, which was Putnam Camp, which was twenty miles from—which is, to this day, twenty miles from Lake Placid, which took him five and a half hours, just those twenty miles, to travel. And Freud went, and he immediately started undergoing these terrible stomach pains when he was in the context of this very WASPy Adirondack retreat and from that point onward he complained of his "American colitis," **(laughter)** and he, he blames it—even his disciple Ernest Jones, who bought everything Freud said, said Freud was complaining about his stomach years before he went to the United States. But something happened. And I think there were, I mean, I argue that were issues of his own digestibility within this goyish society that he's confronted with in this very intimate way. I mean, he's running around a camp with people playing tetherball, and playing charades, and having all sorts of bizarre dinner rituals, which I go into, and I think that this was absolutely unlike anything, and he says, he writes home to his wife from there, that "of all the things that I've experienced in America, this is by far the most amazing, Putnam Camp." And I think the shock to the system was severe.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: So America—just to unpack—America couldn't digest Freud, particularly his, you know, otherness, Jewishness, his focus on sexuality, which was already connected to stereotypes about Jews.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And reciprocally.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Yeah. So that then my question is, following this, if it is his American colitis and if Freud is, if the money/anality thing is pretty interestingly fixed, and helpfully so for future thought, in Freud's work, how do America and anality get folded together? I mean, do you think that in some way that if his stomach issues became his, you know, souvenir from America, did this have anything to do with his attitude toward the popularity of psychoanalysis in America, American capitalism and commerce, publicity? There seems to be some connection in your book about America, and whether you call it anality or the whole issue of the alimentary and the indigestible?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I think that's a great, it—**(GP has technical difficulties)**. This is my microphone-ality. Okay, so, well, yeah, I mean, one thing I'll say just to the top of your question is that in the very first letter that Freud writes to Putnam—Putnam, after the encounter with Freud, goes home and starts reading in a very good-schoolboy sort of way, a very dutiful American fashion, Freud's work, and he asks some questions about, you know, the anal erotic and Freud's immediate response in the first letter is, "I am sure that in America anal eroticism has undergone some very interesting transformations." And he says this specifically because of America's relationship to money. And this was

something that concerned Freud tremendously from the beginning of his relationship with America, because he saw it on the one hand as the future of his work. He knew that that was inevitable, that it wasn't going to happen in Europe in the way that was going to happen here, and he worried and knew that it was going to be distorted in all sorts of ways that had to do with commerce. And to Freud's credit, after the First World War, his entire fortune had been wiped out, it was in Austrian savings bonds, there was nothing left, and he had enough of a name by this point that he had a couple of offers from the States, including something from Samuel Goldwyn Mayer to do kind of help, consult, or doctor scripts on the greatest love stories of all time, and he had some offer from, I think—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: *Cosmopolitan?*

GEORGE PROCHNIK: —*Cosmopolitan*, also to write some articles, which he had ideas about, but then was basically told he would end up writing a tip sheet on advice. And both times, Freud, even in this situation of real destitution, where his neighbors were eating pets and he wasn't so far from this, he was being paid sometimes in root vegetables by patients, he resisted this part of the siren call. So he was very suspicious of the ways that we commercialize our intellectual endeavors, and the fact that Putnam and his world was all so weirdly, I think, alien to that project in New York is so much all about—it wasn't something he was clear on as a national, you know, as a regional distinction.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Can we talk about the porcupine? I'm gesturing like this because it's shaped like this, right, and it has these quills. What is this porcupine that's sort of the talisman of your family's connection to Freud?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Can I—I mean, I'll come back, slightly, also to the side. There are really two direct reasons that Freud gave for coming to America, and one of them occurred when he was onboard the ship that took him here, the *George Washington,* as they're coming into the New York Harbor. He's riding with Jung and Ferenzi. They've undergone onboard the world's first group therapy session. **(laughter)** As I imagine it, as he sees the Statue of Liberty coming into sight in the New York skyline, which probably—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Can I say, why didn't their wives come? Just because that wasn't done? Do we know?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: You know, they weren't bringing their wives anywhere, these guys. Unlike Putnam, who when he went to Europe to be with Freud, took his entire family. There's these spectacular pictures of them roped together in evening dress on an—near the Matterhorn. **(laughter)** He's coming into New York, and he turns to them, and he says, "Don't they know we're bringing them the plague?" Which is a very provocative statement, and something that actually, I think, is more puzzling the more we think about it, and I try to wrestle with it a bit in the book. But the other thing that he says immediately before going to Europe, to his followers, is he says, "I'm going to America

to catch sight of a wild porcupine and to give some lectures." On the face of it, not an entirely clear remark, since not everyone knows of Freud's, I think, or knew of Freud's deep love of porcupines at this point. But he explained to his followers that whenever you have some great object in mind, that you should also have some secondary object that you position as the main object as a way of basically easing your nerves. Like, I came here to eat grapes in the green room and to sit up here and—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Do this little thing.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: However, even though it sounds, it's kind of a nice anecdote and his disciple Jones said this became a regular saying in our circle, you know, I began thinking that there was more to it than this, and, in fact, there are many ways in which Freud's relationship to America was porcupine-like. And he was aware of this, because in an essay he had written, he quotes an anecdote that Schopenhauer tells about two cold porcupines and this dilemma they face, where the more they try to get close to warm up, the more that they prick each other, of course, zoologists have subsequently told me this is entirely, you know, madness, because porcupines' quills go down and it's not a problem. **(laughter)** But it's a nice story and Freud certainly had this, I mean, love/hate isn't right, because I think it was really *hate*, but he also wanted to get close to it, and anyway, he comes to Putnam Camp, and he lets this story out that he came to America to see a porcupine, and, in typical vigorous Adirondack camp fashion, a couple of eighteen-year-old cousins of Putnam's say that they want to show him a porcupine. And Freud was very grumpy by this point, because he actually hated walking around in the Adirondacks,

he found it unbelievably exhausting, it wasn't at all what he'd been expecting, he was horrified by what the Americans took on as a morning stroll in these mountains. **(laughter)** He wrote home this very funny letter when he talks about how, "We ran up slopes to which even my horns and hoofs were not equal." **(laughter)**

And so he was—in fact, would have been very happy I think not going on the great porcupine hunt, but he went and then there's this very strange experience where these giggly girls, who drove him crazy, who were flirting with Jung at the same time, they were dressed in bloomers and sailors' outfits, take him on this walk, and it goes on and on and on, and gradually the air begins to stink more and more, and finally they get to the place where the porcupine has its roost or nest or whatever it is, and there's just this bloated porcupine corpse swarming with flies. Which I think was a very disturbing allegory for Freud **(laughter)** of a lot of what, you know, he had feared and he kind of walked up to it with his cane and poked it and then turns around to the others and says, "It's dead," **(laughter)** and then proceeds, on the way down, to try to engage in a high-minded taxonomic conversation with Jung and Ferenczi about porcupines.

However, there's one coda to that, which is that actually, as they're leaving, which was, I think, about twenty-four hours after this event, as they're actually leaving the Adirondacks, Putnam presents Freud with a metal porcupine, which is to me a wonderful mystery of how he acquired this. There were no little souvenir shops in Lake Placid at the time. **(laughter)** And you know—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: And you touched it. You went to London.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And then went on to put it on his desk with all his antiquities, where it still is.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: How did you get them to let you touch it?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I said it was mine. **(laughter) "**It's mine. It's my porcupine."

(laughter)

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Did you want to steal it?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I really wanted to steal it, and I used it as an opportunity as well to sit on Freud's couch, to lie on it, to realize how much softer that couch is than all the black leather New York standard model, and this completely gave me a different impression of what it was to lie on the couch, because it was really like lying on a waterbed. Perhaps the springs were broken, but in any case, it's there, and it's this ferocious, remarkable object, and one that I think he kept on his desk in part as the question of America because it's got these wild sprays of bristling quills and its snout is dilated and it's—as a child, hearing about it, I thought it was—I was expecting some cozy little porcupine toy, like we might give our children today, but this was a genuinely scary animal. And yet, when you stroke the quills, as Anna Freud, I think, may have first

realized, it makes music kind of like an Africa thumb harp, it's this beautiful sound, so it's imbricated, it's layered, in all these interesting ways.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: I love your aside that Anna Freud was probably the first to do it—one wonders at what age? Alone? I mean, just the things that Anna went through, really, including that analysis. **(laughter)** I mean, at the hands of her father. I wonder if you could say something about your great-aunt Molly? Or I can say what interests me is your great-aunt Molly Putnam formed a Boston marriage with Helene Deutsch, a well-known American, early American Freudian, right? Very much parallel to the Boston marriage that Anna Freud formed with—blank.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Dorothy Burlingham.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: So what's—I think that there's some kind of story about libido, women, keepers of the flame, farming. **(laughter)** I mean, there's some major questions of what happens to the father's land, and what seems to happen both in England and in Boston is that these heirs are kind of—they've been analyzed or lusted after by their psychoanalyst fathers—this is not a moral tale I'm telling, or—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Or an immoral tale.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Or an immoral tale, but—their response is in some sense to return to this kind of utopian—is it Brook Farm, that the American—that there's some

sort of American project—or in Anna Freud's case, it's not American. But you know what I'm saying, about these Boston marriages and the fate of Freud's and Putnam's experiment.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: The offspring. I mean, I think one thing—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Can I just say one thing? There's a picture of George as a baby being held by Molly Putnam in the book, which is a kind of statement about where you got, in this whole Putnam constellation, the nourishment.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: She was a wonderful woman who had a large—a great deal to do with my learning to read. So I have very fond memories of her. And one of the memories I have of her is—and she did not have children herself, like Anna—but she was just wonderfully warm, and there was a jolliness to her spirit that communicated to all children, and she in fact ended up being one of the first pediatric analysts in this country, which is an odd idea, I think, when we think of it in the abstract, because we think of conversation, and often she was dealing with children who were too young, even, to talk. But I'm sure that she did good things, and one of the nice parts of the story, with all of the darkness that surrounds both Anna and Molly, is I really believe that they gave to children in a wonderful way, and in ways that their fathers had intermittent, at best, success at. In that sense, yeah.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: But that thing that you're—I mean, just the facts. Two facts in the book, is one is that first Freud analyzed his daughter, which is great, but weird. It's just really weird and way off today's map for better or worse. The second thing is that Putnam wrote a case history about his lust for his daughter Molly, in which his fantasy, isn't it basically stabbing her, or am I making this up?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Not at all. Unfortunately, that's correct.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: He sent this to Freud, and Freud said, if I may make reference to your book, Freud said, when he heard that one of Putnam's daughters had died, he said, "Well, at least it's not your beloved Griselda." Referring to the girl in the case history that he had these incestuous feelings about and wanted to stab.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: This whole incident was not—it was one of the moments where Freud was *hard* to read, because he also, from that point on, whenever he and Jones come upon a case of incest they refer to it as a "JJP complex," shorthand for—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: So the American colitis and the JJP complex—wow, yeah.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yeah, in a sense, this case history, though, I have to say. It's something one doesn't quite know what to say. It's a shocking case history in the sense that, you know, he's talking about gratification from torture of the person he's most, most dearly in love with. On the other hand, I do think that in life, he managed to enact some

kind of profound tenderness that was cordoned off from this. Now, you know, who knows? And Molly doesn't live—doesn't seem to have found a fulfilled mono-track love in her life, but it's very, very painful to read, and it's sort of an extraordinary case history also because Putnam describes how, in the course of this, he would secretly go downstairs and also read books of Chinese torture, I mean, which, imagining in a Boston brownstone, a townhouse—where did he get this book?

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Marlborough Street?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I mean, some branch of Borders, an early branch. Perhaps a Taschen book, I'm sure the early. . . **(laughter)** But I mean, it's so, again, it's such a dilated fantasy life that they lived. And I think that in this way, all of these characters were so vivid to me, reading, because they seemed to take things farther than we generally do today.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: And they also seem to enjoy, these men, writing to each other, confessing about their marriages and their daughters, and Freud writes to Fleiss about his wife's periods because they were collecting that kind of information, the two of them. And the way that the Griselda story gets passed to Freud from Putnam has a kind of sanctity as a ritual of the brotherhood.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yes, I think that's right.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: I don't know what our time is, I know we're going to get the Fifth Symphony, but I want to have a little more control than that. So I think we have five minutes before the alarm.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I have to ask. I want you to speak a little bit about dreams, which of course is so germane to all this. And I know, I mean, you take dreams more seriously than anyone I know. And I want you to say something about how the language, what you take from the language of dreams, what you take from it, and whether or not it accords with the Freudian project and why they're so important to you.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Well, I thank you for asking that, and I was looking again at *The Interpretation of Dreams* today, and remembering what I found so exciting about it, and I think it's that, apart from what the dreams are supposed to express, and this isn't news, I think, to anyone who's read Freud, but that the sense of the way connections are made in the dream—the sense of dream logic is a system of poetry as rich as anything that the Oulipians did, or, I mean, it's an entire poetic system that has extreme dignity and legs, as they say. You know, so that, I guess that for me—and I remember my dreams very well. Which I was even thinking that I would come here to say to you that I have been self-analyzed. I have not gone as far as Freud has, but that I would say I have in my life undergone a form of self-analysis by remembering my dreams almost nightly and working with them in my work in a way that I feel is Freudian in the freedom it makes to linguistically make connections, to treat it as a sort of a surface game of tic-tac-toes without the search for the wish. I'm kind of—I have a tin ear for the wish-fulfillment part

of my dreams, or anyone's. I'm more interested in the décor. **(laughter)** And dreams have the best décor in the world. And if you read *The Interpretation of Dreams* just for these particulars, they're wild.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I mean, and, you know, and something, your saying that, makes me think, too, makes me think of, at least of many of your poems, of when *The Interpretation of Dreams,* when he was showing it in manuscript form to Fleiss, Fleiss basically said, "There are too many jokes in it," about the book. And you know, and dreams also have a very jokey way of working and a kind of deep comedy.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Isn't it great that the unconscious was too—no, he said, "You were too witty," and Freud, didn't Freud say something like, "The unconscious is too witty."? There's another thing actually in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, there's a footnote, where he says, it's just like two lines, the other thing I think I've gotten from Freud in general. Now, I'm not finding it, so I'm just going to paraphrase it. Yes, here it is. He says, "Just as every neurotic symptom, even the dream, is capable of overinterpretation, indeed demands it." That is the blessing that Freud's work gives us. And sometimes here he apologizes for overinterpretation, but he issues this mandate for overinterpretation. Which is—casually I want to say, or sloppily, is very Jewish, or is connected to some other parts of Jewish history.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: It's like that joke, "Jews are just like other people, only more so." **(laughter)** But, yeah, I mean, I think that overinterpretation is also, I mean, really—

one thing that I take, and the best thing that I felt myself taking away from him, was that radical skepticism which comes from overinterpretation. I mean, he's never at his best for me when he's trying to wedge everything into the arc of sexual development, into that one trajectory. But when he says, we can't—that our ideological systems are always forms of consolation, that we have to keep challenging these consolations. I mean, this is a Freud that I think the detractors of him are, you know, they miss, and they are uncomfortable with because it is inconsistent with other of his statements. But Freud's inconsistency is a deep one, and I think reading him, and reading his letters, and his essays, with some focus, what we see is that his voice carries through these differences of viewpoint, and he puts different lenses on his work, and he definitely evolves in his thought. And I think we have to allow him to contradict himself, and when he does so, you know, he's often—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: There are lines, I think, in Freud that stand above the system of Freudian thought as grand issuings of permission for a kind of almost value-free scrutiny of the things of the mind and of the world. Another line, maybe—you quote it, I think, in your book from the Leonardo case, where he says, "Just as everyone potentially could make a homoerotic object choice and in fact already has." Like an aside in a footnote, but that simultaneity of "and in fact already has," issues a larger summons for thought and opening of prison doors, I think, than the various minutiae of his, the drives, and the energy, and, you know, the compartmentalizations.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That's his generosity, and a generosity which also is not without his consolations. I have to tell this two-second anecdote because I was in Boston this week to give a reading, and afterwards this kind of Enoch Soames–like man shuffled up to me and said that he had worked with Edward Bernays, who was Freud's nephew, who was a publicist in New York. And that Edward Bernays had told him an anecdote of Freud, and the anecdote this guy reeled off is that they were sitting together in a restaurant and a fly landed on an overturned saucer that was in front of Freud and Edward Bernays starts to slap it off. And Freud said, "Why not allow the fly to promenade upon its plateau?" At least as a story, and somehow, I don't think it's untrue. I mean, and so he's allowing the fly its illusion of grandeur, you know, and he's letting it live for its fly fantasy of height—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: And it gets us back to Walter Benjamin, which we started—that in some sense the fly is a flaneur promenading through the arcade, **(laughter)** seriously, and that in some sense Freud with his collections of antiquities is a flaneur of psychic, the remains of the day, I think, is at least in translation a line from *The Interpretation of Dreams*. You know, "the remains of the day go into the dreams and form them," and that that material, like the stuff in shop windows in the arcades for Benjamin, is material.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That's lovely.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: We have—isn't it time for that Fifth Symphony to—

(laughter) (first notes of Fifth Symphony)

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: The thing I want to ask you really quickly is about Jerusalem. You end the book with Jerusalem. Your father is a Viennese Jew. We—I raised that but then dropped it again. Can you just say something about why the writer of this book was in Jerusalem, exactly? Or Israel?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I can certainly say that having a New England Cabot Putnam mother and a Viennese father was certainly a recipe for schizophrenia, which I struggled to overcome in the course of writing the book. I was in Jerusalem—I lived there for quite a long time, I taught in university there and I fell in love with it as a small canvas on which you had types bigger than New York. I mean, as a writer, you could know everyone, and everyone was frightening in different ways, but fascinating. So I went back to Jerusalem, kind of fortuitously, near the end of writing this and had a conversation—which I won't rehearse—with someone, but which made me think of the ways in which this moment in history that *The Putnam Camp* deals with, for the Jews, in some sense, it ends there, and the search for redemption that is taken up in such virulent and such, I hope, un-Putnamlike ways, but American ways, there is something that Freud in many ways seems to intuit is a danger down the road, and I think the messianism and the sense that salvation can only come through a literal, uninterpreted enactment of our values, is what the Middle East struggles, as someone made a remark about—to me about how there's a weird sense in which in the Middle East—and this is a culturally biased remark,

I will frame it—but they say, you know, “Everyone is Jews but Jews without Freud,” which is a disturbing idea, and not correct, but there’s a way in which what I think is being expressed is that there’s an unanalyzed quality to action there. It’s all in that dream unconscious expressive of violent visionary self.

(first notes of Fifth Symphony)

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Great. We will take questions.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There are mikes on both side, we ask you to raise your hand.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: This person right there.

Q: I have two little questions. The first is what is a Boston marriage? And the second one was that, when you were going to bring up the paranormal and the occult, could you do that?

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: Yeah. Quickly. I’ll say Boston marriage and you do the paranormal, is that fair? Boston marriage is, as in Henry James’s novel *The Bostonians* is a genteel relation between two women that we’re not going to call lesbians. They live together, they do good things for society, they have a nice townhouse in the Back Bay, **(laughter)** and we don’t call them lesbians. So it’s a nineteenth-century pre-the

pathologizing of lesbianism and homosexuality, a way of talking about same-sex genteel women's relations. The paranormal—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And *The Bostonians* fits right into this, of course, because it's about a medium—this was a woman in a kind of Boston marriage herself. The paranormal comes into this book in different ways at different points but primarily because there was a wave of enthusiasm in the United States for different kinds of spiritist supernatural experience. Right before Freud comes, William James himself becomes obsessed with a particular woman who is a medium, who he becomes convinced has ways of communicating with the dead. And there are different ways in which I came to feel that the nature of the medium-and-sitter experience in America prefigured certain aspects of analysis.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: And it made them ready for Freud.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: It was a kind of conversation. We didn't talk at all about free association, but I mean there was a way in which the way the dead spoke was not so unlike what you might hear in a psychoanalytic session, I think, that conversation within this other—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: And the sense, also, that the paranormal is an interest not in predicting the future but in uncovering the past and *Interpretation of Dreams* ends with

a movement away from the future and toward the ghosts of the past that need to be allowed to speak, so it's totally—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That's exactly it. And these mediums often were inhabited by voices from the past—historical figures and made-up figures.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: So, another question?

Q: I was wondering about your assertion that when Freud arrived in 1909 he talked about bringing the plague. I think there was a lot of work that has been done recently who tend to show that this was an invention of Lacan, that kind of he spread out this news in some sort of a position to the way psychoanalysis was being adopted, or *his* psychoanalysis was being adopted in the States.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I missed the first part of that, could you?

Q: The first part is that people like Roudinesco, who is historian of Freud, uncovered that this was in fact a total myth that was being spread out by Lacan for his own purpose.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That which was the myth?

Q: That Freud said, you know, looking at the Statue of Liberty and the bay said, "I bring you the plague," it's a beautiful kind of a screen memory that didn't exist.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: But then—that seems to me that makes it even more a colorful, weirdly transmitted—it's not only that the plague—that he didn't even say it necessarily but that it came via Lacan, through, I find that that's an enriching genealogy if that's true. **(laughter)**

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yeah, I mean, you know, these conversations—so many of these conversations were relying on one observer at a point in a group full of talk. In a sense here, I think we take an interpretation, we take these words that seem to resonate correctly through an experience, and that idea of the plague, I mean, it, certainly, there's a way in which Freud did infect, there is a contaminant, there is something that came with his—

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: But it's also, in the way the whole Freud text is always present, and it always gets cited here and there, but it's a flat surface that's composed of various citations. Your book is also fiction, though it is completely well researched and everything is footnoted and proved, there is a way that its palimpsest is as fictional and reconstructed as the story of Freud, and what he said and meant, is.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And maybe this, I think it is worth saying, also, that this comes back to what we began with, with those questions of *voice* and what we look for when we read history or biography. I mean, not to quote the American military, but I would look for shock and awe in reading history, because I think we owe the past this, I mean, it's

not only the mulch from which we came, but it's the place we're going and it looks like for a rather long time, that particular spot. So, right, well. . .

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: It makes Freud sound like Dracula, which of course he always was like, but you mean, "I bring the plague," coming over on the boat to England or whatever. Another question?

Q: When you, to Mr. Prochnik, is that the pronunciation, at the very end of your talk, when you, I may have misinterpreted or made the wrong inference, but you seemed to be talking exclusively about Jewish fundamentalism of a small minority of Israelis. Or did you also think of Islamic?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: All fundamentalism, including Christian.

Q: But Islamic fundamentalism as well.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I'm just making a statement—the Middle East is a cauldron of fundamentalism.

Q: Yes, but you seemed to—well, then I misunderstood. I thought you were referring to the small group of fanatic Jews who want to—well, I made a mistake.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I'm referring to, you know, the people who have made the world the dangerous place it is, wherever they originate.

Q: You suggested that Dr. Freud was very hopeful that his ideas would take root in the United States, perhaps more than Europe. But it was a country that he didn't know too much about and apparently didn't like so much, why was he so hopeful, and as a matter of fact, as he proved correct, didn't he? But why would Freud be so hopeful about the United States as receptive to his ideas?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I mean, first of all, as you say, I think "hope" is a problematic word to use in that context, because he was very afraid of this embrace, and I don't know why he had this sense that there was a future for his theories here. He wasn't sure about it. We know that, because the first time he was invited to speak here, he actually turned it down because he wasn't offered enough money. He said he needed to see his patients and he wasn't going to be able to make up the difference in the trip. He thought—there was something he intuited in the American character, and there was something perhaps—and this isn't thought through, but the aspects of analysis which have a sensational quality, even the focus on sexuality, or most glaringly that focus. I mean, he knew the way ideas in this country, as his nephew the publicist would exploit—burned through the culture in a very aggressive way. It's so much more of a society in flux than what he knew in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time, which was such an unbelievably ossified bureaucratic system, I mean, one of the reasons that he rose up so slowly, apart from the real anti-Semitism, was just that this was the way the bureaucracy worked. He knew that

here things were in a much more dramatic flux, so that if he could insert himself into the argument then he would catch fire, I think, and so this happens, but it doesn't stop him from making one-liners all through his life. I mean, he famously said, I think that this one is not apocryphal, he said, you know, "America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake to be sure, but still a mistake." And the idea behind that stays with him, so it was a hope mixed with this real sadness, that "this is who ended up liking me," you know, it's like if your book—Jonathan Franzen with Oprah, you know, it's a bit of this kind of syndrome in a—

(laughter)

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM: But also he's somebody who's capable of thinking, or he thinks in these broad strokes, that the people of Israel is just a neurotic phase, they got stuck at the wrong—you know, their arrested development, that monotheism is just, you know, a kind of a mistake like that. It's a great privilege to think that broadly and therefore incisively, I think. Another question?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A pregnant silence. Well, it has been absolutely wonderful. George Prochnik, Wayne Koestenbaum.

(applause)