In the kingdom of the Seriously Old

The Wound and the Bow

Philoctetes was a Greek hero in the Trojan War; famous for his magic bow. One day he was bitten by a snake, and the snake bite caused a stinking wound that refused to heal. Unable to heal the wound or bear its festering stink, the Greeks exiled Philoctetes to an abandoned island—only to find that they couldn't win the war without his magic bow.

The snake that bit Sigmund Freud was anti-Semitism. Vienna had exiled him from its neurology labs. So, out of wounded pride, Greek mythology, and a bit of that withheld development, Freud created a magic bow, one that fashionable Vienna would not be able to resist:

Ever since the Renaissance European cities had adorned their buildings with mythological figures to enthrall those who stared up at them. Freud, too, must have been enthralled; attracted, as poets and novelists have always been attracted, to the elliptical way that pagan characters mythologize the human condition. Freud's magic bow, a procedure soon known as the "talking cure," became the rage of Vienna. Freud endowed it with the names of Greek characters: Oedipus, Narcissus, Psyche.

There could also have been another aspect of mythology that attracted Freud. Most of Vienna was Catholic; they saw their faith through the eyes of St. Thomas Aquinas who drew his philosophy from Aristotle, a Greek pagan. Who knows whether devout Vienna was aware that the source of much Catholic thinking was pagan thinking? But Freud may have been aware. By illustrating his "talking cure" in terms of well-known Greek myths he could give his cure an acceptable gloss carrying the endorsement of devout Aristotelian Catholicism. And no taint of Old Testament Judaism.

Would his new therapy heal the wound? No. But it would set in motion a new way that cultivated Europe and the States would define itself-- complete with a classic vernacular.

There's a story that at the end of his life, Freud was asked if there was anything else he wished he could have studied. He is reputed to have said. "I would have liked to have studied neurology.