4-1-2003

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Review: The View from the Couch
Author(s): Jeanne Marecek
Review by: Jeanne Marecek
Published by: Old City Publishing, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4024175
Accessed: 05-04-2016 20:25 UTC
The view from the couch

by Jeanne Mariack


In Bonnie Friedman’s memoir about seven years of therapy, she follows the time she freed and the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis: communicate everything that comes to mind. Do not exclude any idea because it is too disagreeable, indecent, irrelevant, or nonsensical. The Thief of Happiness includes interchanges with her pseudonymous psychoanalyst Dr. Harriet Sing, a pastiche of childhood reminiscences, assorted musings about love and life, and feverish fantasies. Friedman reports sundry details of meals, shopping trips, phone conversations and household chores. She puts readers in the position of the psychoanalyst who must locate what Freud called “precious metal” buried in the “many tons of ore” that free association produces. Those who prefer stories with discernible plots will throw up their hands. But there is method to Friedman’s madness: although she risks sounding self-indulgent, there is no more truthful way to tell a psychoanalysis.

As the varieties of psychodynamic theory, transference—the emotionally charged relationship between therapist and patient—was the pivot of the therapy. Dr. Sing was remote, austere and sparing in her words. Apart from her wardrobe—blue skirts, starched white blouses and riding boots—Friedman knew little about her. This left ample room for her unconscious to run free, which is precisely the effect Sing intended. Friedman was instantly propelled into an intense infatuation: “Little mattered now besides Harriet Sing. Everyone else was merely metaphoric.” Sing encouraged this absorption: “If I say I feel that you are not responding, ‘You felt lonely for me,’ and I know she’s right. A journalist...writes me a flattering letter and I compose a flattering reply. Don’t you see myself in him, ‘advises. It’s meant for me.‘”

As the years wore on, Friedman’s feelings for Dr. Sing grew more complicated and volatile, careening from lavish admiration to resentment to disillusion. Nonetheless, she remained besotted. Even when Friedman came to see Sing as another “thief of happiness,” the psychoanalyst’s hold remained tenacious and the attachment difficult to sever. In the century since Freud proposed transference love, psychoanalysts have recognized it in a number of ways. Transference is now broadly construed to encompass the full range of emotions that come into play in self-other relationships inside and outside therapy. Many analysts now understand it not only as the residue of early childhood but also as continually reshaped through daily living. Many theorists no longer focus narrowly on the patient’s emotional baggage: instead they view the therapist-patient relationship as an ongoing process in which both parties mutually influence each other.

Friedman’s notions of transference, in contrast, hew closely to Freud’s early formulations. She portrays her years in treatment as a time when mysterious forces gripped her psyche like tor- nadoes, they seemed to touch down without warning. They took their toll on her marriage, friendships, psychic equilibrium and even physical health, while she felt powerless to curb them. Then, unaccountably, the forces dissipated. Friedman seems to find the gains she made in psychoanalysis equally mysterious and uneventful. She says, for example, “I’m surprised, I turned into a person who could think judiciously.” In her psychoanalysis “is akin to witchcraft, and she sum up the experience as a “sweepingly useful...spiritual apprenticeship.” But attributing so much power to psychotherapy keeps her from crediting her own agency.

Readers may well ask what actually happened in Friedman’s therapy. Did she change because of her therapy or in spite of it? Her writer’s block—the problem for which she entered therapy—dissipated in two weeks. Why did she stay in therapy for seven additional years? Was analysis a trap that sidetracked her from productive and healthy living? Or did it ultimately enable her to write, live zestfully and rekindle a humid marriage? These questions have no easy answers. This is why scientifically-minded practitioners and (cost-conscious managed-care companies) are wary of psychoanalysis.

The Thief of Happiness as a story of self-discovery, spiritual growth and healing. Others will read it as a grimm tale of humbuggery. At one point, Friedman herself met with Dr. Sing a humbug—the “Great Gatsby of Psychoanalysis,” the “Wizard of Oz.” Was Dr. Sing brilliant or inept? Was she deftly duping Friedman; or did she just fleecing her patient? Friedman poses these questions, but adroitly sidesteps their answers, leaving them for the read- er to ponder. Psychoanalysis, after all, implies that reality is never what it appears to be.

I must underscore that Friedman’s enemies will perceive her therapy as heretical at all typical. Even among psychoana- lysts, the orthodox form that Dr. Sing espoused has been on the wane for several decades. To keep an individual, especially one who had no significant clinical psychopathology, in treatment for seven years is a dubious practice. And the author herself has largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman’s telling, Sing’s pronounce- ment of wisdom often sounds like metaphysical musings about love and life. Indeed, she sometimes sounds like a paragon of therapeutic arrogance. One example: Friedman wrote that “when pregnant until treatment was

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Women’s Review of Books / Vol. XX, No. 7 / April 2003
The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War

In some ways, Belli's story is a collective memoir, reflecting the experiences of thousands of professional, upper-class women and men who abandoned their privileged lives to join the war, at its base, a mass peasant- driven movement. It resonates with the experiences of the critical mass of women who became Sandinistas—nearly half the combatants and clandestine activists by the time of the war's assumption.

The Sandinista revolution was not the only national insurgency to coincide with the Women's Liberation Movement in the US and to the United Nations' criticism rarely found in revolutionary memoirs—Emma Goldman and Elaine Brown being notable exceptions, although neither claimed to be a great writer. She exhibits no bitterness, no vindictiveness or self-righteousness. Nor does she apologize for the revolution or regret her historical role in it.

Belli, like most Sandinistas, believed the FS LN would win, and that with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Reagan out of office, perhaps the Cold War rationale for outing the Sandinistas would be gone. When Nicaragua's revolution was finally disowned by the revolution, the death toll was up to fifty thousand. And it had to end like this.

The saddest section of the book is Chapter 35, in which Belli recalls her grief at the Sandinistas' electoral defeat. She had been disgusted with the FS LN's electoral campaign.

I watched the advertising on television in disbelief, wondering how it could have happened. Such an incredibly tacit, obnoxious campaign, complete with rock and roll music. While people mourned as many young kids who had died in the war, while they endured hunger and terrible hardships, the FS LN's propagation seemed like a sordid, futile atmosphere...

My desolation filled with the presence of all my dead friends, but this time the feeling was devastat- ing. I felt they were dying again, dying even more slowly, more slowly, even as their lives lasted. So many lives had been lost. And now there were more. With the counterrevo- lution, the death toll was up to fifty thousand. And it had to end like this.

There was the likeness of a revolution in the air. The FSLN had overthrown the "communistic terrorists" and restored Somocismo and Somoza dictatorship and its cruel regime. Berni, the press secretary, writes that it's "not really an insider's account... No woman will ever be able to write such an account, because no woman was ever admitted to the Sandinistas elite." I disagree with that view. Before the FS LN came to power and for three years after, Belli was the companion of Henry Re- bain, a member of the National Directorate. In 1985, she wrote a letter published in The Women's Review of Books saying that she had not been admitted to the Sandinistas' elite. I disagree with that view. Before the FS LN came to power and for three years after, Belli was the companion of Henry Re- bain, a member of the National Directorate. In 1985, she wrote a letter published in The Women's Review of Books saying that she had not been admitted to the Sandinistas' elite. I disagree with that view. 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