

A psychotherapist speaks

Book review

Herman, N (1987) **Why psychotherapy?** London: Free Association Books, ISBN 0 946960 72 0 pbk.

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Why psychotherapy? is a highly personal view of the role of psychotherapy and its process at both the individual and the social level. The personal nature of the text affects not only the content of the book but its structure and its mode of expression. While the documentation of Herman's therapeutic philosophy is interesting, the eulogistic style of expression is often intrusive and irritating. Although the book is divided into clear chapters, its structure is determined more by the conversational style of the text.

Reading the book is a little like having a conversation with an elderly person reminiscing about their past experience; as a listener one experiences a range of emotions from fascination with the tale to mild boredom. However one is always the listener; there is no debate.

The book opens with an introduction in which Herman documents her personal journey from family practitioner with the National Health Service to Kleinian psychotherapist. Her decision to change her focus within the helping profession was made when she realised that a number of her patients frequently reappeared in her surgery complaining of minor ailments which responded to conversation rather than medication. Reluctant to prescribe psychotropic drugs to deal with these psychosomatic problems and recognising her lack of skill to do anything

else, she decided to train as a psychotherapist. Her experiences as a training analyst are recorded in her earlier work, *My Kleinian home* (Herman, 1985).

Throughout her book Herman challenges psychiatric orthodoxy for lacking the courage to address the root causes of psychic ill-health. As an example she quotes the poverty of psychiatric history taking. Referring to this process she writes: "Where the end in view is seen as labels hung hastily on a superficial reading of mere outer signs this, by default, becomes a tomb in which all hope for genuine growth and true development is laid to rest, a miscarriage in the course of which honest opportunity has been shabbily subverted" (p15).

Psychiatry's major failure has been its inability to embody a unifying theoretical approach to the substance of the discipline. The bulk of Herman's book comprises an alternative and includes a presentation of aspects of the work of Freud, Klein and Bion. The chapter on Freud entitled "Towards a method" concerns the earliest period of Freud's psychological work when, together with Breuer, he investigated the psychological disturbances that lay at the root of apparent physiological malfunction. The substance of the chapter is very thin and the continual use of exaggerated metaphorical comparison gives the text an annoyingly sentimental tone. I quote as an example: "Is not our first experience of the majestic work of Freud that of the poet's upon 'first looking into Chapman's Homer'? (sic) ... There we will take a cursory look at the fledging in its nest which would later grow a mighty wing span: psychoanalysis" (p56). By contrast with the threadbare treatment of Freud's work, Klein's theory of the early stages of ego development are thoroughly dealt with. The eulogistic tone continues but there is a better balance between content and adoration.

Herman describes Klein's documentation of the intrapsychic conflicts experienced by the infant from the moment of birth. On the basis of observations she developed a therapeutic process in which she replaced free association with play and fantasy talk of children as a means of gaining access to their unconscious. According to Klein the infant is object-related from the start of life rather than auto-erotic as suggested by Freud. The loss of the warm safe world of the uterus at birth forces the child to seek a replacement. The breast of the mother rapidly becomes the needed object. The frustrations that result from the fact of the mother's unavailability and the threat that this poses to the infant's sense of

omnipotence, result in a swing from sublime pleasure to destructive fantasies.

The failure to travel this passage of conflict intact results in the subsequent relational difficulties experienced by most of us. Herman is her best when she deals with the dilemma of human relationships as in her chapter entitled "Work and love". She writes with inspiration, compassion and understanding of the struggle many people experience in forming close relationships. Those who have failed to resolve the crisis of separation from mother will relive the pain of that experience whenever an intimate relationship presents itself. Whether the fear is of submersion and loss of self or of damage to the other because of the intensity of destructive impulses, the result is the same: an inability to relate intimately while maintaining separateness. In answer to the question, **why psychotherapy?**, Herman suggests that integration of the split-off parts to form a healthy whole capable of forming appropriate relationships is the reason.

Her attempts to extend the realm of psychodynamic interpretation to the social world are less successful. She argues that work provides the individual with the opportunity to make reparation for darker aspects of life and the impulses of destruction.

This has been a difficult book to review in part because it is never clear who the imagined reader is. Psychotherapists will find it heartening in parts, and extremely tedious in others. Interested but uninformed others may find the sketchy theoretical background rather too thin to allow them access to the passionate claims on behalf of psychotherapy.

And unfortunately the sceptical reader will have many of her suspicions about the lack of rigour of psychodynamic psychotherapy confirmed. Should you feel your faith in the therapeutic process slipping read the chapter "Work and love". The personal voice of Nini Herman is inspiring.