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POETRY

Climate of Opinion: Sigmund Freud in Poetry. Edited by *Irene Willis*. New York: International Psychoanalytic Books, 2017, xvi + 206 pp., $19.95 paperback.

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The poet, writer, and educator Irene Willis has published an intriguing book of poems that derive from or refer to psychoanalysis. Her original intent was to solicit from a variety of poets poems that make explicit reference to Freud. Her purview expanded when she began receiving poetry that did not explicitly mention Freud but that concerned itself with psychoanalysis generally and individual analyses in particular. The results are varied, often quite original, and generally fresh and engaging.

The book takes its title from W. H. Auden's "In Memory of Sigmund Freud." In her introduction Willis quotes the relevant passage:

> For one who'd lived among enemies so long:
> If often he was wrong, and, at times, absurd,
>   To us he is no more a person
>   Now, but a whole climate of opinion

This well-known and well-crafted homage to Freud, the first poem in the book, is followed by Hilda Doolittle's famous poem "The Master," a lively tribute to her analyst that is in part encomium, in part a peevish scolding for what she experienced as his unrelenting sexism—an accusation, she persuades us, that is not without merit.

These extraordinary poems are followed by two by Anna Freud, one written as a young girl, of lesser power but of biographical and historical interest. I'm puzzled by the inclusion of Anne Carson's "Freud Town," intended, I take it, to describe the terrors of the unconscious; and I would have chosen Philip Larkin's brilliant "Aubade" or "Sad Steps" over his bellicosely ironic "This Be the Verse."

Fortunately poems of exquisite poignancy vastly outnumber lesser ones. Lisken Van Pelt Dus's "And These Are My Fears" appears at first

reading to be a catalogue of fears we all are prey to; on a second reading the loss of a beloved sister virtually leaps off the page at you. In Cynthia Read Gardner's "Accused" a frayed umbrella is skillfully deployed as a metaphor for an analyst's irrevocable betrayal of his patient. Perhaps most powerfully, Louise Glück demonstrates why she is regarded as one of America's preeminent poets. In "Humidifier" she limns our sad dependency on mechanical contrivances to soothe ourselves in the absence of a reliable internal maternal object. And in a deceptively relaxed narrative style that characterizes the puzzlingly titled "The Sword in the Stone," she contrasts the deeply intimate discourse of her analysis with the superficial repartee with a dinner companion after her session. I understood this wonderful poem as a statement about the uniqueness of analytic interchange.

Little about the psychoanalytic process seems to lie outside the purview of this book. Sexuality, for example, is archly but movingly depicted in Juditha Dowd's "Viewing Manet's Olympia with My Granddaughter," in which an older woman takes note of signs of her granddaughter's sexual arousal while looking at Manet's famous portrait of the courtesan, only then to suddenly recognize her own. We are left to wonder whether her recognition comes with amusement or dismay. In Jean Hollander's skillfully understated "And They Shall Wear Purple . . . ," a woman remembers herself as a girl of thirteen, scolded by her mother for wearing a "dress of lilac." She remembers being overcome with "the guilt of purple / Color of my soul." I think the poet here has mislabeled the painful emotion, which is closer to shame than to guilt; the young girl has correctly perceived that the mother cannot bear her daughter's burgeoning sexuality. The mother's intolerance of her own envy, perhaps? The reader is free to make that inference, one that would be far beyond the grasp of a shame-ridden adolescent. The brilliant evocation of color in "the guilt of purple" is nicely reminiscent of Hester Prynne's scarlet "A."

I was moved by two coming-of-age poems of sharply contrasting styles, each describing a passage through a prolonged period of despondency. In the first, Stephen Dobyns describes how, as a despairing, directionless college student, he was able to take courage from the example of Thelonious Monk: "I bought the album / for Mulligan but stayed for Monk." The musician's revolutionary style emboldens the poet to believe that he too will be able to live more extemporaneously, without a previously charted course. Laurel Blossom's "No Is the Answer, the Answer Is

No" is an amazingly dense poem, full of unexpected twists and turns: "you wince / to find yourself intact and standing / in the room you wanted so badly to stand in— / empty, bare white, no windows, no secrets, / two doors and a ladderback chair with a rush seat / planted in the middle of the floor. *This is your life*. / It makes you want to throw up." The poem ends with "dear old / dead Fred Astaire dancing up and down the rungs of his chair." This is a poem that defies explanation. Read it and be moved.

True to the spirit of the age, the vast majority of the poems in this volume are written in free verse. For much of the collection I looked in vain for more formal poems. It was a welcome surprise, then, to come across James Cummins's "Freud," a classical sestina. I delighted in its mocking tone, its refusal to take itself seriously, even as it paradoxically conforms to all the strict demands of this thirty-nine-line form. Listen to the zaniness in these lines from the third stanza: "Freud got a few things wrong—that's worth a beating? / Let's whack some Christians instead of poor Freud. / It's clear they understand about "The Gun"— / but what about "The Cave"? No, no, not Mom's— / and let's not even go there about Dad's. . . ." It goes on and on, delightfully, in this vein.

Another formal poem very much worth mentioning is "Your Unconscious Speaks to My Unconscious," by Kate Light, a poet and violinist who died shortly before this volume was published. Light describes two unconscious minds in conversation. One says, "Why are you doing this? Why / do you leave me? Aren't you staying?" The other replies, "Sweetheart, I / am right here. I am here. Your eyes / Looking into mine." The poem concludes "For I have already watched you go, / in the movie, in the darkness, through the snow." I cite this poem not only because it succeeds so economically as lyric poetry, but also because its rhythms, meter, and rhyme scheme all suggest a skillfully written sonnet. Unfortunately, it has fifteen, not fourteen lines. Did the poet forget? Did she count wrong? We'll never know.

I should mention two fine poems by a practicing psychiatrist, Richard M. Berlin. One, whose title, "Freud," is far simpler than its message, dares to take on the old man in an oedipal struggle in which the exigencies of professional ambition come up hard against the softer realities of the poet's adoration. In the second, "How a Psychiatrist Writes a Poem," the poet simply describes the associative process during an analytic hour, cleverly leaving it to the reader to infer the profound kinship between the loosening of logical connectedness involved in free association during an

analytic hour and the associative loosening necessary to generate poetry that probes more deeply than expository prose can hope to do.

To her credit Willis was open to accepting a few poems in which Freud and his discipline are something other than objects of veneration, but not all of them fare well. In one such offering Charles Brice, who is described as a "former analyst," lights not only into Freud, but also into Lacan, Anna Freud, and Robert Stolorow, tarring them all as charlatans, and managing to drag in poor Emma Eckstein in the process. One can only wonder at the origins of his Crews-like animus toward psychoanalysis. Far more rewarding is Susan Wheatley's "The Winter Meetings of the Freudians," which provides a warm, but uncaring background to a drama in which a young woman finds herself exposed to unspecified dangers at Newark's Penn Station. She is protected by two unidentified men, who stay with her until she is safely aboard the right train. There is a lively plurality of metaphors at play in this complex dramatic narrative.

Perhaps the spirit of this book, its charm, can best be summed up by a brief poem, "Study Group," in which Arnold Richards mocks himself as a pompous know-it-all. If anyone still believes that the psychoanalytic enterprise is too lacking in humor and self-awareness to fertilize poetry, this modest contribution ought to put such skepticism to rest.

The final poem in the book, "Freud Quiz," a series of multiple choice questions fashioned by the poet and editor David Lehman, seems to me to trivialize the book. The vast majority of poems in *Climate of Opinion* have considerable merit and deserve a more fitting postscript. Wills herself tells us she has high hopes for the circulation and influence of the book. I do too and wish her—and it—well.

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