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The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Apr 18, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/book-review-essay-the-writing-cure-by-emma-lieber/>

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Book Review Essay: “The Writing Cure” by Emma Lieber

Review of Lieber, Emma. *The Writing Cure*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. 160.

‘It is the impossibility of knowing “*the real addressee* of the text of our desire and of the writing of our life ... that is, precisely, what the story of the Other is telling us each time anew and what female autobiography ... is striving, at its most profound, to narrate”, Emma Lieber tells us in the opening chapter of her book, which may or may not be a female autobiography, quoting Shoshana Felman, in the context of a discussion of quotation and plagiarism and context (p. 29). The overt embracing of such impossibility cannot but then open up the question of why we write. It appears to imply a compulsion, a need to write before any addressee and, yet, there always is, acknowledged or not, an addressee who is, at some level, known. And if there is an addressee, there is cause.

The impossibility of knowing the addressee of the text is not only a problem for the one who writes but bears just as immediately, if perhaps less heavily, on the one who reads. In a sense, insofar as we pick up the book and choose to read, we position ourselves as the addressee. The text, as we know, doesn’t exist as such without the reader to read it. A book unread is only actually a physical object. It requires a reader for any potential meaning to be produced. The position as addressee is only likely to be maintained, however, where something in the text grasps the reader. This something can be manifold, a topic of personal concern, a fascination with the life of author, or simply with the telling of lives, or, perhaps, something itself unknown, perhaps even the cadence of the writing, or even the unsaid that draws the reader on, uncertain, page by page, what it is we are being led into. This latter is an unfamiliar tactic in the world of academia where presenting the reader with a road map is the hegemonic convention. That Lieber, a recovering academic, opts to eschew academic conventions is itself refreshing and risky. She places all her chips on her ability to write, to grasp the reader by force of the word, the crafting of her sentences, on holding our attention when there appears to be no obvious reason to read. Few of us know Emma. There is little monumental in what she tells us of her life. Of course, the voyeur in each of us hungers to know what transpires in others’ analyses, quite possibly because the narcissistic paranoid in each of us wants to know, impossibly, if we ourselves are doing it right. There is a rich and seemingly growing canon of texts in this genre of analytic confession, some of the finest of which are discussed in Lieber’s opening chapter. What is clear from these texts, although it is perhaps clear enough already, is that the writing of an analytic experience is not the same thing as an analysis. So what is it that Lieber and her fellow travellers are doing? There is a danger here of a genre hovering near and really, other than in form, indistinguishable from lyric poetry. Both consist in the first-person presentation to an unknown addressee of that which is really of very little interest or even accessibility to anyone but the presenter.

Another relevant genre here is the emergent genre of autotheory, as made popular by Maggie Nelson and the best selling *The Argonauts*. Autotheory has the advantage over conventional autobiography that it does not rely solely on an interest in the writer themselves. But it does rely on the conveyance, and usually

confounding, or at least development of theory. Here Lieber perhaps falters on her own desire to distance herself from her academic past. In choosing not to explicate and clarify her theoretical references, she commits the classic undergraduate fault of leaving the reader not only unsure of what she intends to say but unsure if she herself understands what she intends to say. The book is peppered, as we might expect in a book on the experience of analysis, with allusions and references to Freud and Lacan, among others, but it is never really clear how Lieber understands Freud or Lacan. I would guess that her position is of Lacan curious rather than Lacan embracing, but I would be guessing.

Where the book is stronger, paradoxically, is in its use of literature. Lieber studied Russian literature and there is good evidence here, despite her desire to step away from academic convention, that she is a solid literary analyst. And perhaps there is some emerging truth in this realisation, that there are different forms of analysis for different goals. We explore and work things out through writing. Perhaps the distinction between the poet and the theorist is that the theorist presents the product of the working out and the poet presents the process. In this regard, Lieber is more poet than theorist.

Bio:

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Publication Date:

November 30, 2021