

The Long Vacation: A Memoir

By Rosemary Dinnage

Lulu Books, London 2012

A Review by Nic Bayley

Readers of *Sitegeist* are likely to be familiar with this author without necessarily knowing it. Rosemary Dinnage has reviewed books for papers in London and New York for many years, specialising in psychotherapy. This lifelong work, combined with her books on Annie Besant, on patient's accounts of psychotherapy, on death, on 'outsider women' and on Buddhism led to her being listed in *The Observer* newspaper's list of the top 300 British intellectuals in 2011. And now, tacitly following Bion, her memoir. The comparison with Bion goes deeper than the title, for there are similarities in the life stories – at least in the origins in childhood – and in the tone of both writers. But whereas Bion's autobiography (*The Long Week-End*) is written by an analyst, Dinnage's is by an analysand. The differences, as well as the similarities, are fascinating.

It may be no coincidence that such voracious readers as Bion and Dinnage echo Raymond Chandler in their choice of titles. *The Long Goodbye* is partly autobiographical as well as carrying biting social criticism. It was written while its author, prone to suicidal depression, lived agonizingly through his wife's terminal illness. Dinnage, too, has struggled with misfortune and depression but found optimism in writing.

Like Bion, Dinnage has spent her life immersed in books and she writes with clarity, insight and poetic beauty and, again like Bion, though about 25 years later, Dinnage was born into a Victorian colonial family and sent overseas at a young age. Ironically enough, after an early childhood in which her parents were often away from home and frequently overseas, Dinnage was one of the children of academics whose parents thought Oxford not safe enough during the Second World War: she was sent across the Atlantic to Canada. She writes of how she suffered throughout the rest of her life from alienation, depressive episodes and difficulty in maintaining relationships. Her analysts were variable in effectiveness until she persuaded Winnicott to see her in the last year of his life.

The chapters dealing with Winnicott show him in a favourable light (many of the therapists in her book *One to One: Experiences of Psychotherapy* fare considerably less well). Who amongst the analysts who read her book will not react with empathy to her excited discovery, after Winnicott's death, of her own session with him reproduced in *Playing and Reality*? Desperate after failed relationships, including a failed therapy relationship, and having read Winnicott, she travelled to Scotland to hear him speak. She offered herself for therapy with him but at first he resisted, claiming he was old and ill. When she started to see him he asked her why she'd left it so late - too late, as he was dying. They both knew he had not long to live and she joined the small group of people who have experienced the ultimate 'satisfactory' ending, going with eyes wide open to the death of one's analyst. (Unlike Jane Haynes, who discusses her experiences elsewhere in this volume.)

The courage, wit and acute observation with which Dinnage writes about her bleak and repeatedly bereft childhood emerge in a revealing tone, not defensive, but truly 'true speech'. Her 'privileged' childhood at Rhodes House in Oxford was a life of coldness and disdain in the 'environment' – not only her mother's relationship with her, but the whole apparatus of middle-class professional family arrangements at the time. She writes of lavish meals sent up to the nursery in a lift but with no adults present; of the parents' vacations away from the children, who on one occasion were left in such unsatisfactory circumstances that they were temporarily taken into care.

One of the differences between reading an analyst's account of his struggles with himself and his relationships, like Bion's, and reading a comparable life written by an analysand, is that although Dinnage shows an awareness of the 'basic fault' running into her

childhood and deeper into her psychic structure, she does not attempt – in this book at least – to analyse, overcome, ‘learn from experience’. This is a great relief. The reader can share the horrors and disasters and also the delights and triumphs without (to quote Bion’s favourite phrase from one of Dinnage’s favourite poets) ‘any irritable reaching after fact or reason’.

Dinnage apologises towards the end of her book for being too old and frail to complete it properly. She is mistaken in her modesty, for the vignettes with which the memoir ends, coming after the brave and clear-eyed account of a life lived richly if painfully, are beautiful in their poetic evanescence.

In this informal and delightful book the author muses on the enduring horrors and incidental pleasures of a long life. Coming from the privileged childhood of academia she is nonetheless intensely aware of the political map, not least because her evacuation to Canada in the war had permanently broken her sense of home. And her parents were very conservative. She quotes Orwell writing a book review of her own father’s book, *Democracy and the Individual*. ‘Marxism may be a mistaken theory but it is a useful instrument for testing other systems of thought, rather like one of those long-handled hammers with which they tap the wheels of locomotives.’ Dinnage comments: ‘Orwell’s point seemed to me perfectly clear and perfectly valid. It still does.’

It is the small details of observation or comment that make this book a worthwhile and memorable read. For instance, Dinnage met Kafka’s lover in London one day when flat hunting, but didn’t take the room as it was too dirty. She had a mad analyst (before her therapy with Winnicott) and tells how he had said to her that she was having affairs that she was keeping secret from him. ‘Affairs? I believed myself to be quite old, quite finished, totally unattractive. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, I couldn’t believe it either when he said I had been rifling through his private life in some way. And yet I couldn’t think that this intelligent professional man had gone mad.’ So, in a muddle, that analysis ended. It sometimes seems that for Dinnage, reading was almost her most efficacious therapy. She writes: ‘Reading *The Divided Self* [by R.D. Laing] I had the relief, like so many readers, of disentangling some of the current ideas of “real” and “self” – an abyss of mystification that had frightened me was mapped out.’ She found herself at one time very weighed down by reviewing books on Freud but was taken out to lunch by Paul Roazen and flattered into continuing. Roazen mentioned Helene Deutsch. ‘“Oh yes – wasn’t there a biography of her?” [Dinnage replied]. Roazen countered: ‘Yes, I wrote it and you reviewed it.’’ A constant but never over-played theme of the book – the long vacation of the title - recurs as the ‘black gulf’, the coldness of the maternal greeting on her return from Canada (‘My mother had sent off one parcel, a child in socks, and got back a different one, in bra and one-inch heels’), the terror in mid-life (‘Behind everything, the terror is going on: as though just behind a screen people are screaming silently and hurled off cliffs and cut by sharp swords into pieces’). It is no surprise that it was Dinnage who Winnicott quoted in *Playing and Reality* as saying to him, ‘Reality is more important than comfort.’

Worthwhile for its many witty and acute observations, this book is above all a fascinating account of the struggle to stay alive – in that word’s fullest, most Winnicottian sense – despite everything.

References