Morning and Evening

Jon Fosse. Trans. Damion Searls. 2015. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.

A Sorrow Beyond Dreams

Peter Handke. Trans. Ralph Manheim. 1975. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Some books just stop me. Not because they are difficult…they can be… but because they land inside me, they rhyme. Jon Fosse's *Morning and Evening* is that kind of book for me. I learned of him following his Nobel Literature Prize win in 2023. As a long short story, it holds the whole of a human life, from the anguish of birth to the threshold of death. I read it in one go and found myself sitting with it for days after. Even today, as I write this, I feel touched. I noticed myself, in the days after finishing it, thinking of my own father's last two days, somewhere between still being here and already leaving.

I read *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* by Peter Handke more recently, after a recommendation during group supervision where we discussed how to talk about a client's suffering without flattening it. A colleague mentioned this book almost in passing, and something in the way she described it stayed with me. The novella is a frank work about the impossibility, but also the necessity, of accounting for another's experience. Written more than fifty years ago in the immediate aftermath of his mother's suicide, it is a memoir as well as an act of grief. Throughout the work, Handke tries to reconstruct his mother's life while questioning, almost on every page, whether this is even possible without betraying her. After reading it, I understood what my colleague had meant. I wonder how often a version of a client I carry away from a session to supervision is the client at all, or only a shape formed by my listening.

I wanted to review these two books together, as they are short enough to be read even by the busiest of therapists. Both are written by European authors, less known in the Anglo-world. They both write in a phenomenological tradition, paying close attention to the inner world and to time. They speak directly to the existential concerns of our lives and our practice, asking what it means to have been a human being in the world, and whether our existence can ever be truly understood by the other. I do not think I am alone, as a therapist, in returning to those questions.

In Fosse's Morning, the first part of the book, he follows Olai as his wife gives birth to a boy, Johannes. In Evening, the second half, Johannes is an old man, waking on what turns out to be his last day. The prose moves in very long sentences that take some time to get used to. I felt mentally out of breath by the time I got the hang of them. What is quite devastating is that Johannes does not know, at first at least, that he is dying. He wakes

up, feels an unusual lightness and starts to move through his morning rituals of coffee and bread, the sea smell. His dead wife Erna moves in his thoughts. His old friend Peter, who is also dead, appears and accompanies him. Only gradually did I realise – but well before Johannes – that he is moving in the transitional space between living and dying. Medard Boss insisted that death is not an event that happens at the end of our lives but a structural feature of existence from the moment of birth. Fosse makes this felt; he does not argue it. Johannes's confusion, his sense that the day is both familiar and strange, captures something I recognised, not just from reading, but from sitting with parents at the edge of their own lives. Johannes is not distressed but glows as he meets his (sort of) homecoming. The book shows that a life, even the most ordinary, matters, as it leaves a small dent in the world. Johannes's existence mattered. Fosse does not declare it, he shows it. I found myself thinking of clients and others I know, whose lives seem small to them, and wanting, like Fosse does, to show them that we all matter and leave a little dent.

In his book, Handke writes about the act of writing about his mother, and in doing so raises questions that we all hold. What does it mean to give an account of another person's life? Can a story ever do justice to a human life, or does it inevitably betray it by imposing certain forms (that is, character, chronology) that a real life resists? This is not an abstract question. I think of the case discussions I take to supervision, the way I sometimes catch myself reaching for a familiar shape because that is easier to hold than the person. I recognise Handke's discomfort with his own words in myself.

He traces his mother's life from a childhood of poverty in rural Austria to a marriage that promised escape but delivered domestic drudgery. Handke is not sentimental, nor does he pathologise her. He simply tries to truly see her, even while doubting that he can. He reflects that every sentence he writes misrepresents her, that these words are a form of violence, dissolving a human being into a certain type. Boss similarly insisted that a person cannot be reduced to a case or a set of symptoms. They are always this person, in this situation. What troubled me – and I will admit it troubled me personally not just as a reader – was that his mother had begun to open up in her middle years. She was travelling, making new friends, emerging out of her suppressed self. But then she became depressed, and finally made her choice. Handke does not judge her suicide. He holds it as the outcome of a life in which her world's openness had become, over time, catastrophically limited. I have sat with grief after suicide in my therapy room and personally, and know how rare and how valuable this refusal to judge really is.

It strikes me that both writers model something about the quality of attention that the existential encounter demands, something that I try, imperfectly, to

bring into the room myself. Fosse attends to Johannes with a patience and a love that never becomes sentimental. Handke attends to his mother with a rigour that never tips into coldness. Both are in the presence of a human life that resists to be fully known, and both resist the temptation to pretend otherwise. According to Boss, the therapist's task is one of *Gelassenheit* (letting-be), which is about allowing the client's existence to show itself, not about imposing a framework. I try to manage this but I also notice, in my practice, how often the impulse to understand urges me to the desire to resolve, and how different those two things are. Both Fosse and Handke let their subjects, Johannes and Maria, show themselves.

These are beautifully unsettling books. *Morning and Evening* left me with a knowing deep inside my body, that every morning contains an evening, until, one day, it does not. *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* left me with the image of a woman who lived, as we all do, with the weight of the possibilities she might have been, and yet, in the end, was not. These books deepen our capacity to be fully present not just in our own lives but to our clients in their uniqueness. Both are short enough to be read in an afternoon. Neither will leave you quickly.

Ondine Smulders