

# **The Writing of Karen Horney: A Psychoanalyst's Search for Self-Understanding**

Bernard J. Paris

Since the publication of my book on Karen Horney, I have become aware that it has created a good deal of uneasiness among members of the AAP. This was brought home to me once more by the notice in the Winter, 1995 issue of the Association *Newsletter*, which described the book as "controversial" and said that it was being seen "as both tribute and exposé, and criticized and praised for being both." I assume that members of the AAP are not displeased with the tribute to Karen Horney but are disturbed by those aspects of the book that they take to be an exposé. The book was not intended to be an exposé and so far has not been treated as such by reviewers, but I can understand that members of the Association are more sensitive than non-aligned readers to some of its revelations about Horney the person and that they may fear the biographical portions of the book will damage Horney's stature and that of those who employ her theory. While I was writing the book, I had such fears myself. Why, then, did I include unflattering biographical material? A brief account of the writing of the book may help readers to understand how the biographical portion came to be there and why my portrait of Horney is "uneasily divided," as Eva Hoffman astutely observed in the *New York Times Book Review*.

My initial proposal to the Yale University Press for a book on Karen Horney did not contain a biographical component. My intention was to make the case for Karen Horney, to focus on the evolution of her ideas, their place in psychological thought, and their applicability to other disciplines. For several decades I had been writing books and articles that showed how Horney's theory could illuminate the study of literature, but I had often met with resistance to Horney and demands that I justify my use of her ideas. Books on Jane Austen and Shakespeare were not the place to do this, and I began to think about writing a book devoted to Horney's thought. I welcomed the appearance of Marcia Westkott's *The Feminist Legacy of Karen Horney* in 1986 and Susan Quinn's biography in 1987, and I hoped they would help to bring Horney the attention she deserved. I thought that Quinn did a much better job on Horney's essays on feminine psychology than she did on her mature theory, and I feared that her perfunctory treatment of the later writings would make Horney seem a figure of merely historical interest and thereby contribute to the devaluation that Quinn sought to counteract. In 1988, I submitted my initial proposal to Yale.

After I submitted this proposal, I was asked by *Contemporary Psychology* to review Quinn's biography. In preparing the review, I reread Rubins and Quinn and *The Adolescent Diaries of Karen Horney*, which had been published in 1980. The diaries had not been available to Rubins, and I found that although Quinn had used them to good effect to reconstruct the events of Horney's life, she had only glimpsed what was for me their most interesting story, that of young Karen's effort to understand herself in order to obtain relief from her emotional difficulties. I then recast my proposal to include a biographical component and started to work.

My first step was to review all of Horney's writings, and because I had read *Self-Analysis* only once and long ago, I began with that book. With my head full of the diaries, I was startled to find

that the patient Clare in *Self-Analysis* sounded much like the young Karen, and I gradually became convinced that the case was highly autobiographical. When I reread the diaries in the light of *Self-Analysis*, I realized that they give a misleading picture of Karen's relations with her mother and brother. Both Susan Quinn, and, more recently, Janet Sayers, accepted that picture at face value. With the knowledge of Karen derived from the diaries and the story of Clare, I was able to see that all of Horney's writings, beginning with her essays on feminine psychology, are continuations of her search for self-understanding.

My other major sources of new biographical information were the interviews I conducted and, even more important, Jack Rubins' interview notes. Rubins' notes were extremely difficult to understand, since they were written in a shorthand of his own that he may have developed for use during analytic sessions. One of my research assistants worked for an entire term deciphering these notes and providing me with a readable transcript that consisted of hundreds of pages. Susan Quinn had also had access to these notes and had made considerable use of them, but I am not sure she had deciphered them all, since she did not utilize them fully. On reading Rubins' notes, I discovered that he had suppressed much of the information he had collected about Horney and had deliberately presented a sanitized picture of her. I could understand his motives, of course, and had to struggle with the question of whether I should suppress this information also. I was tempted to do so, since my objective in writing the book was not to diminish Horney's stature but to enhance it, and I certainly did not want to make it easier for her detractors to dismiss her.

After much soul-searching and many consultations, I decided not to withhold the information in my possession. There were a number of reasons for this. To begin with, Susan Quinn's revelations about Horney it impossible to return to Rubins' version of her as a gentle rebel of psychoanalysis. As an advocate of her ideas, I would surely be accused of distortion if I presented her as a less troubled person than the world already knew her to be. More important, the information I had about her life was highly relevant to my study of the relationship between her character and experience and her psychological theories. In my work as a literary critic, I have always been interested in the ways in which the author's history and personality are reflected in his or her work, and I have drawn on Horney's theories to explore that relationship. It seemed natural, and fascinating, to ask similar questions about the relationship between Horney and her work. Moreover, it seemed to me that we Horneyans should not engage in the kind of suppression of information about the leader that has sullied the behavior of Freudians. One feels uncomfortable about invading another person's privacy, but is it not important to understand how the ideas of Freud, Jung, Klein, Horney, and others were influenced by their lives and personalities? Another consideration was that the information I had was, quite properly, being placed in the Karen Horney Papers at Yale and would be available to other scholars. Would it not be better for me to present it in the context of an appreciative treatment of Horney than to have someone else treat it in a sensational way and use it to denigrate her? Finally, it would have gone against my scholarly mission, values, and temperament to conceal what I knew. Analysts are accustomed to keeping knowledge and insight to themselves, but scholars are not, which is one reason I like being a scholar.

I have tried to write a serious, balanced study of Karen Horney, not an exposé. My effort throughout was to present the biographical information in a dispassionate, responsible way that

would help us to understand the theory and the person without diminishing the stature of either. I address the relationship between Horney's strengths and weaknesses as carefully as I can in Chapter 25. In my view, Horney was an heroic figure who gained much of her understanding of human behavior by relentlessly confronting her own problems. In analyzing such writers as Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, I have argued that their psychological conflicts were a source of their creativity and that they redeemed the messiness of their experience through their ability to transform suffering into insight. To say the same of Karen Horney places her in no mean company.