On psychoanalysis

From *Marjorie Morningstar*, Chapter 42, "A Game of Ping-pong"

Herman Wouk

Novel first published 1955

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Editor's Foreword

I have prepared the text below for two of its features: (1) a criticism of Freudianism and (2) the observation that a young woman benefits from meeting more than one man who can say interesting things.

While Freudianism seems to absolve us of guilt for certain things we do, still, if the Unconscious is responsible, this means we can have a monster inside us. I have thought this an important criticism. However, see my Afterword.

How I have prepared this text

I have underlined the passages containing the key ideas.

I first read *Marjorie Morningstar* in the winter of 1990 or '91. I had the third printing, from November 1957, of the Signet Books paperback edition of Herman Wouk's novel. I had taken this from a box of my parents' old paperbacks in Alexandria, Virginia. I was then in graduate school in College Park, Maryland. I did some of my ensuing reading during a visit to New York, where the novel itself was mostly set.

Some years later, in the aughts of the new century, when I wondered whether my memory of the novel was correct, I found it online, in the archive of an Australian women's magazine where the novel had been serialized. However, I could not find the passages I was looking for.

Later, I obtained the copy of the novel that I had read originally. In the summer of 2014, I read it again. The old glue of the spine gave way, freeing the pages. I scanned the pages containing the excerpt below. By means of `onlineocr.net`, I converted the scans into text files, which I then edited into the underlying `tex` file of the present document.

Original page numbers are bold and in brackets at the places where the pages begin.

I have not compared the transcription line by line with the original, though I have combed the original for its uses of italics, to see that these are reproduced here. Otherwise I have just read the transcription, looking for errors.

One error—which might read as a Freudian slip—is from the original; I have indicated it with "*sic*" in the transcription. It is on page 12 here, page 488 of the original, where the word "oral" appears in place of what was presumably intended to be "moral."

Two subtle errors that I have neither corrected nor indicated are three-dot ellipses that should have four dots (as shown by comparable instances where four dots *are* used).

Lines are just slightly longer in the transcription than in the original.

The scene

The scene below is set during a voyage from New York to Europe on the *Queen Mary.* The time is the late 1930s, and Marjorie Morgenstern, age 23, is on her way to find the older Noel Airman, whom she wants to marry, although he has fled from her. Marjorie has met Michael Eden, age 39, who accompanies her to her room during a rainstorm.

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She handed him the drink and staggered back to the bed. The rolling seemed worse. She said, "Did you really study in Vienna?"

“Why, sure.”

“I find that hard to believe. All you seem to say about Freud is old Broadway jokes.”

Eden chuckled. “You sound like my old analyst friends. I’ll admit I make stale jokes, Marjorie. I’ve fallen into the habit, from arguing with them. I think I believed in it all too strongly too young. Sooner or later you’re almost bound to [**484**] rebel against your boyhood faith. My folks didn’t have any, you see, and psychoanalysis rushed into the vacuum, once I came upon the first book when I was sixteen . . . Anyway, it’s pointless to argue this subject seriously, with real Freudians. You can’t win. Any position you take against Freud isn’t an intellectual comment, it’s a symptom of nervous disorder. Try to lick that! ‘You disagree with us, therefore you’re sick.’ They all concur that I’m hostile to Freud because I’m in flight from some terrible subconscious secret. Unnatural urge for an affair with a kangaroo, no doubt.”

Though he said it in a light tone, there was an odd quaver in his voice. Marjorie looked at him keenly. He met the look, his eyes expressionless, and said, “Like to take a chance on the dancing? You reel around and try to keep from crashing into pillars and other couples. It’s fun, in a wild way.”

“I’d just as soon skip it,” Marjorie said. “Thanks.”

Eden said, swirling the whiskey and looking into the glass as he talked, “I’m in flight all right, you know. But not from anything secret. I can date my break with psychoanalysis as exactly as you probably can your meeting with Noel. . . . In fact, I’ll tell you about it. Then maybe I’ll seem a little less weird to you. When I was twenty-three, Marjorie, just starting to teach, I fell for the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, and married her in two weeks. Gradually it turned out that she was a dreadful phony. Told me she'd dropped out of college to help support her family, when actually she'd flunked out in freshman year. Told me she was taking French lessons and studying sculpture—complete wild lies. She was just repeating things she'd heard from other girls. Boned up on book-review sections in newspapers and talked about all the new books very impressively. I was so blinded at the moment that she got away with it. Feminine wiles, pardonable enough maybe, because God knows she was in love too—but a mistake. It's one thing to try to seem a little better than you are. It's another thing, and a dangerous one, to pretend you're an entirely different person.

"It was bad almost from the start. I left Emily twice, and went back each time. She would come on her hands and knees, crying, beautiful, swearing she'd do anything I wanted, *anything,* go back to college, study nights. Once we were back together it was all forgotten. She just didn't have it in her to change. She'd sit at home and look mournfully at me because I was so bored and out of love. I met a marvelous girl at school, a student in one of my courses, brilliant, sweet, good—she's married to someone else, she's a doctor now—and I begged Emily for a divorce. This went on for two hideous years. At last she actually went to Reno. She came back after staying there three months and consuming all our savings—**[485]** and she hadn't done a thing about the divorce. Not a thing, simply sat there in Reno. She had an absolutely unbelievable capacity for doing nothing and hoping dumbly for the best." His voice was becoming hoarse and shaky. "Well, this can either take two days or two minutes. In two minutes, I was driving with Emily along a highway late at night. This was shortly after she'd returned from Reno. We'd had some frightful quarrels, and then a miserable half-reconciliation. I fell asleep at the wheel. We smashed into a railroad overpass. My skull was fractured and Emily was killed instantly. Her neck was broken."

He looked at Marjorie in a peculiarly embarrassed way, with a half-apologetic smile. No words came to her dry lips and dry throat. After a while he went on, "There was quite a bit of trouble with the police, of course. It takes a lot of red tape even to die accidentally. But what with me nearly dead myself, and no insurance money, and no other woman—this other girl had married long ago—the books were soon closed. It was an accident, and that was that, for the record.

"But not for me. For me it was only the beginning. From a Freudian viewpoint there are no accidents, you see. Or rather, accidents, mistakes, oversights, slips of the tongue, are icebergs poking above the water and showing colossal masses of motivation underneath. I fell asleep at the wheel, sure I did. But falling asleep is something the unconscious mind can bring about. Drowsiness in special situations can be a hell of a clue in unravelling a neurosis. That's all too true. I had felt myself getting drowsy, had even thought of asking Emily to take the wheel. What's more, I actually remember seeing the railroad overpass far down the highway just before I dozed off. From the analytic point of view—in which I then believed, with religious intensity—there isn't the slightest doubt that I murdered my wife, getting rid of an intolerable burden in the only sure way I could, and revenging myself for years of misery and a crippled life."

The bed heaved and rolled under Marjorie. She clung to the headboard with one hand. Eden's face had gone quite ashy, though his expression was calm and even unpleasantly humorous. She said, "I don't know enough about analysis to argue—but even if it were true you wouldn't be responsible, not in any real sense——"

He walked to the whiskey and poured his glass half full. "Exactly what my analyst friends say—or almost exactly, Marjorie. I can give you the patter word for word, I've heard it so often. 'You have unconscious death wishes, but you don't commit unconscious murders. It's a silly attitude. Your wife's death isn't really what's troubling you. You're covering your unsolved neurosis by harping on the accident. Find out what's
[486] *really* bothering you, and you'll stop worrying about having murdered your wife."

"Can you tie that, Marjorie, for obsessed mumbo-jumbo? I killed my wife, sure. But that's not what's really bothering me. Hell, no. I was taken off the breast too early in infancy, *that's* what's bothering me. And when I've gotten furious at this silly obduracy and started raving at them—I could rave now, just remembering these arguments—why, they've sat back and nodded wisely. More symptoms.

"Whenever I do manage to corner them completely with chapter and verse from Freud, they say I'm the typical psychology teacher, all book-theory, no clinical experience. All I know is what Freud *said* about these things. I don't understand the scientific facts of human nature that emerge from analytic practice to verify the theories, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing and so on, with a hey nonny no . . .

"You see, these dogma-blinded bastards have never been involved in a fatal accident. They can't imagine what it's like. They go blandly on spinning the old palaver, not realizing that the packaged comfort they dispense is sheer poison to a man in my spot.

"Ordinarily, Marjorie, you understand, the wonderful thing about psychoanalysis is that it *frees* you from responsibility and guilt. You walk into the doctor's office an adulterer, a liar, a drunk, a phony, a failure, a pervert. In due time, after lying around on a couch and babbling for a year or so, it turns out you're none of these things at all. Shucks, no, it was your Unconscious all the time. An entirely different person, a guy named Joe, so to speak. Some occurrence in your childhood sex life has festered into a sort of demon inside you. Well, you track this demon down, recognize it, name it, exorcise it. You pay your bill and go your way absolved.

"That's all perfectly fine. Unless you happen to have been in a fatal accident and killed somebody. Then this whole scheme turns upon you. It can absolutely destroy you mentally. Because don't you see—this is what my benighted friends will *never* see—it's just as horrible to believe that a demon under the surface of your brain took charge and caused you to kill, as it is to believe that you killed in cold blood. More so, possibly. Because if you think about it, the implication is that subsurface devils possess you and can cause you to commit any number of shocking crimes.

“Well, I went through agonies I won’t bore you with, but the end of it all was a terrific nerve crisis, out of which I emerged unable to teach. I gave up psychology, and I’ve never gone back to it. It’s seven years since I’ve glanced into a professional journal, let alone a book in the field. In fact I have a kind of horror of the subject. I got interested in making **[487]** money. Making money is fun, you know, and very absorbing, I’m good at it. I started out by getting a job, and eventually went into business for myself. I play a lot of cards, and read a lot of books, and that brings you up to date.”

There was a marked contrast between these casual last words and the low strained tone in which Eden said them. He was standing by the porthole, holding on to one of the metal dogs, and as the ship rolled, black water crashed against the glass, and purple lightning showed in the turbulent sky. The scar across his white forehead looked like another streak of lightning. Marjorie, greatly disturbed, said to break the silence, “It seems like a terrible waste. You must have been an excellent teacher.”

“I was. Freud had been my ruling passion for about fifteen years. What an awful emptiness it left behind—and this on top of the loss of Emily! Believe me, having a sudden silent vacuum of death in my life, instead of a problem, was shock enough. Giving up teaching really did me in. For two years I was so close to suicide that—and I swear this to you—I didn’t do it simply because I didn’t want to give strangers the trouble of cleaning up a mess that used to be me.

“Marjorie, I’ve sat in hotel rooms for weeks, reading straight through Scott, Trollope, Zola, Balzac, Richardson, Reade, Lever, all the talky old novelists, just to keep from thinking. Because if I thought, the only thing I could think about was killing myself. Not for any dramatic reason, mind you. Not out of guilt or despair or anything. Simply because it was too much pointless effort to live. It was an effort to suck in air, when I thought about it. Seeing colors was a nuisance. Just to see a red and green neon sign and distinguish the letters was work, stupid work. And panic, I lived in torpor or panic, I knew nothing else, nothing, for two years. . . .

"Well, I guess I pulled out of this schizoid state, which was what it was, because I was meant to live, and not die. I don't know what else did it. And I emerged with this jeering attitude about analysis, which you call making Broadway jokes. It's second nature by now.

Once you lose faith in all that, believe me, you really lose it. An unbelieving Catholic is nothing to an unbelieving Freudian. Where's their id and their libido, anyway? In the brain? In the kidneys? When I was a kid arguing religion we used to say nobody ever saw a soul in a test tube. Well, who ever caught an id in a test tube? It's all a lot of metaphors—and when you take metaphors for facts, what you have is a mythology. Mind you, the old man was a Homer or a Dante, in his way, quite up to writing out a mythology that would span the entire range of moral judgments. That's what his work has become. The Freudians say they make no moral [**488**] judgments—I used to say so myself with great assurance—but the fact is, they do absolutely nothing else. They *can't* do anything else, because their business is evaluating and guiding behavior. That's morality. What they mean is they don't make *conventional* oral [*sic*] judgments. They sure don't. . . .

"All right, now I'll shut up about this, obviously it's my King Charles' head. I haven't gotten going this way in ages. In sum, Freud says I'm a murderer, and I say the hell with him, and that's my little story, Marjorie." He was pacing again. He stopped at the armchair, picked up Noel's letter, and flourished the pages at her. "Our friend Mr. Noel Airman really touched off this outburst, if you want to know. Noel's quite an iconoclast, isn't he? Probably impressed you deeply. Rightly so. He's a wonderful talker. Still, Noel is very much a creature of his time, so he takes the current myths for solid facts." He tossed the letter on the bed at Marjorie's feet in an openly contemptuous gesture. "The one thing in all those twenty pages that Noel takes seriously is the analytic explanation of his own conduct. He's right proud of it. It never occurs to him that the Oedipus complex really doesn't exist, that it's a piece of moralistic literature. He's as orthodox as your own father, Marjorie, in his fashion, but he doesn't know it. Judas priest, how well I know the type! Sweeping the dust of orthodoxy out the front door, and never seeing it drift in again at the back door, settling down in somewhat different patterns. The vilest insult you can hurl at them is to tell them they believe in something. Yet all Noel Airman really is, Margie, is a displaced clergyman. You have no idea, till you've read the literature of neurosis, how full the woods are of these displaced creatures. Brave skeptics all, making a life's work out of being dogmatic, clever, supercilious—and inwardly totally confused and wretched."

Marjorie said, startled, "Noel once talked about becoming a rabbi. He wasn't serious, really. But he worked himself up terrifically over it."

Mike Eden grinned. "It's just as well Noel didn't become a rabbi. It would have been hard on the husbands in the congregation." He walked to the whiskey bottle, picked it up, then set it down again without pouring. "I believe I have half emptied this bottle in less than an hour. Also more than half emptied my brain. I feel remarkably good. I feel like the Ancient Mariner after spinning his yarn for the Wedding Guest." He came to the bed and stood beside her. "I'm thirty-nine. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three. Twenty-four in November," Marjorie said uneasily, looking up at him. "Why?"

"When I got out of college," Eden said, "you were five years old." **[489]**

"I guess that's right," Marjorie said. "I'm not thinking clearly."

"Of course you're not. I've stupefied you with words." He took her hand. "Well, maybe I've demonstrated one thing to you that may prove useful in time. <u>Noel Airman isn't the only man in the world who can talk</u>. As a matter of fact, Margie, it's a completely negligible accomplishment." He pulled her to her feet, and kissed her once on the mouth, a real kiss. She leaned back in his arms, astonished, unprotesting, and more than a little stirred. She said softly, "Yes? What's this?"

Mike Eden's look was tender, shrewd, and extremely melancholy.

"Plain self-indulgence, I guess. I've always liked blue eyes and brown hair, and girls about as tall as you. Good night, Margie."

He went out, leaving her rather stunned.

Editor's Afterword

There the chapter ends.

As I understand him, Mike Eden wishes accidents like his wife's death could be accepted as such. By the Freudian account, which he tries not to believe, everything you do is on purpose. However, it may not be *your* purpose; it may the purpose of your Unconscious. If this bothers you, that is *your* problem. It is your responsibility to resolve the problem by further analysis. Presumably this analysis would reveal additional purposes of your Unconscious.

Freudianism seems deterministic. This becomes unacceptable when what is determined is something horrible. Wouk's whole novel is deterministic though. Like Oedipus, Marjorie tries to change her fate, but cannot: she still ends up a Long Island housewife.

A psychologist and a novelist cannot be *simply* deterministic, because Mike Eden's words about Freudians apply to novelists too: "their business is evaluating and guiding behavior." Wouk may wish to guide his readers towards accepting a traditional faith, although he probably fails in this. In any case, I do not know how this would have helped Mike.

Freudianism is the faith of Eden's youth. According to this faith, by any reasonable interpretation, and at any rate by *his* interpretation, he has killed his wife. Could another faith have told him the death was an accident, in such a way that he could accept this and be content?

Parents forget that they have babies asleep in the back seats of their cars. The parents may leave the cars in the sun, and the babies may die. Such deaths are accidents; but how can the parents be content to know this? Their babies are still dead.

The faith of Mike Eden teaches him that, *if* he is disturbed, he ought to undergo psychoanalysis. It is hard to see any objection to this, if "undergoing" analysis is really *engaging* in the activity of pursuing one's own thoughts.

If you are involved in something terrible, you probably don't want some know-it-all explaining to you why it happened; you will work things out for yourself. This is just what analysis is supposed to let you do.

When I reread Wouk's novel, more than twenty years after the first time, there were few surprises. Though there were plenty of scenes that I had not remembered, the general feeling was more or less the same.

An incident that I had remembered from the beginning, an ill-fated excursion to Long Island, turned out to be not so near the beginning.

I had not remembered that, at the very beginning of his novel, Wouk put the reader in Marjorie's bedroom as she got up, admired herself in the mirror, and went into the shower. In a story written at about the same time, another male writer put the reader in a toilet stall with a young woman not much older than Marjorie. That story was "Franny"; the writer, J. D. Salinger.