UNDERSTANDING EVA

Elizabeth Brewster

Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

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Introduction

"Understanding Eva" by Elizabeth Brewster

Therapists vary in the extent to which they are self-revealing. The focus of the psychoanalytically oriented therapist on the transference necessitates limiting self-revelation in order to approximate a "blank screen" for the patient's projections. Other therapists are guided by the belief that self-revelation begets self-revelation. In turn, patients struggle with how much they want to know about their therapists' personal lives, and how they will go about gratifying their curiosity. "Understanding Eva" draws our attention to the implications of one patient's coming to know the very human aspects of her psychotherapist.

Understanding Eva

Elizabeth Brewster

Can I hope to understand Eva Fischer? Can the subject of psychoanalysis ever analyze the analyst? Why do I want to understand her, anyway? Isn't this attempt at understanding a proof that the old obsessive concern with her still exists? Or is it an indication that now, twenty years after the psychoanalysis, it has finally succeeded, and I am able to be detached from her? During that period of two years when I was visiting her, I certainly could not see her as herself. I saw her as mother, enchantress, witch doctor, quack, goddess. I depended on her. I loved her. I hated her. But only rarely did I glimpse her as a woman with hopes, fears, failings like my own.

At first I hardly saw her at all, except as someone who might help me. She was a psychoanalyst recommended by my doctor because I was suffering from headaches and tension. Why? I was a young unmarried woman without a lover, working at a boring job, and living with my parents in the rather dull Ottawa of the mid-1950s. (An incomplete explanation, but it will do well enough.) I had recently become a Catholic, and my parents disapproved of the conversion.

"Mrs. Fischer is a Catholic," my doctor told me when I mentioned this

circumstance. “She is a Jungian psychoanalyst, has studied with Jung himself, I believe. You’ll find her quite a personality.”

I was late for my first appointment because I got lost on the way. Intentionally or unintentionally? Eva would probably have guessed intentionally, but I think not. I got off the Bank Street streetcar too soon and took a wrong turning.

The address was an apartment in a new highrise. The voice that answered my ring and told me to come up was thick and guttural. Was this Mrs. Fischer? I rose in the elevator to the tenth floor, found myself outside a door with an elaborate knocker in the shape of a mermaid.

The door was answered when I knocked by the owner of the voice, a tall, white-haired woman in a black dress and a maid’s starched white cap and apron. She indicated in her rather limited English that I should wait in the living-room, and I sat down gingerly on the edge of a brocaded sofa. My wait was not long—after all I should have been there fifteen minutes earlier. The maid returned, and led me into an inner office where Eva Fischer faced me across her desk. A woman no longer young, though I could not place what her age might be. Somewhere in her fifties, perhaps? Her hair was still dark, and she had kept her figure; but the lines on her forehead and around her mouth must have been cut by age or grief, or perhaps by both. Her cheekbones were high and prominent, and had been somewhat accentuated by rouge. She had

also taken some care with the eyebrows which curved over what were still fine lustrous dark eyes. A woman who had been pretty in her day, and was still not without her attractions.

"Thank you, Else, you may go," she said to the maid, who withdrew discreetly, closing the door softly behind her.

Mrs. Fischer indicated a chair opposite her, and I sat down. "You are late, Miss Summers," she said to me rather formally and with a touch of severity.

I explained that I had lost my way. Her look expressed disbelief, although it was less severe. I found myself disliking her. I was not sure what I had expected, but I had not expected this middle-aged Teutonic woman who doubted my word and who was critical of me for being late when I knew I was always early.

However, now that she had shown her disapproval of lateness, her manner became more kindly and she set out to put me at my ease by asking those routine questions one expected in doctors' offices. Eventually she asked a question which was, for me, less routine, though I suppose it was routine enough for her. "Have you ever had help of this kind before?" she asked.

I hesitated. Did I like her well enough to tell her the truth? It wasn't a question of liking. I had to trust her, because I did not know if I could find anyone else. "Only once," I told her hesitantly, "from a psychiatrist in a

hospital just after I had tried to kill myself."

To my relief, she did not look upset or even much interested. "And why did you do that, Kate? I may call you Kate?"

"Because I was fond of someone who married someone else," I said telling one part of the truth.

To my surprise, she laughed. She had a pleasant, musical infectious laugh, and I almost, in my astonishment, laughed with her.

"You must excuse me," she said. "Believe me, I know it is serious. But it is your English understatement that is funny. You are fond—only a little fond —of someone, and you try to kill yourself when he marries someone else? You must see that it is funny."

Perhaps I might like her, just a little, after all.

The interview did not last long. "You must understand," she said, "that if you come late you will have a shorter session. I have another patient coming. Next time, you come on Saturday morning, at ten AM. On time."

I had not been altogether certain that I would come for another interview, but decided after all I might as well.

Within two weeks I was writing in my diary that I felt much better, that my headaches were going away, that perhaps I might complete the treatment within a few months. I had almost forgotten my initial dislike of Mrs. Fischer. I

had never known anyone who was such a good listener, who was so ready to accept all those details of childhood guilt and misery. After the first few sessions, the chair I had sat in disappeared, and I lay on the analyst's couch of all those cartoons, staring at a painting (I seem to remember a beach scene with blue water and white sand, but I am not sure) and talking to Mrs. Fischer as she sat beside me. Sometimes I was disconcerted when I looked up by chance and found her either too interested or not interested enough; usually her eyes were half-closed, and she wore what I thought of as her hooded look.

What I told her then no longer matters. It is Eva Fischer I am trying to understand, not myself. I suppose those accounts of childhood troubles must have been fairly routine for her; she must have been bored at times. No doubt she was well enough aware fairly soon in the process that the analysis would take longer than the three or four months I had so optimistically predicted. No doubt she knew I would be worse before I was better. She was not, I suppose surprised by my dependency, the period when I was clinging to her and found it hard to live between sessions. She tried to explain to me the nature of transference, that I felt for her as a child feels when it is separated from its mother, or woman when she is separated from her lover.

All children feel curious at some time about their parents. If I told her everything, I also wanted to know some things about her. Who was this Mrs. Fischer, the Mrs. F. of my diary? Where did she come from? What had her life been before she came to Canada?

I put together, piece by piece, information, as one puts together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. She was the widow, I learned, of a writer, an Austrian Jewish novelist whom I had never heard of, but who Mrs. F. told me had been well known in his time and place. She herself had been the daughter of a wealthy Viennese family, not Jewish. She and her husband had taken refuge from Hitler in Switzerland, and after her husband's death she had come out to Canada with her daughter, who was now grown-up and living in New York. Yes, she had been psychoanalyzed by the great Jung himself during her life in Switzerland.

I couldn't think why she would have been psychoanalyzed, except out of curiosity. Aside from that flight from Hitler, I thought her life sounded happy enough, in the small glimpses she gave me to illustrate some point she was making about my own life. There was an idyllic childhood in Vienna, with her adored parents—especially her adored father—and her older brother who had later become an actor in America. She had been a lively and talented girl, had acquired some reputation as an artist. Some of the paintings on the walls were her own, although she no longer painted. Her marriage, although to a man much older than herself, sounded happy. She had obviously adored Josef Fischer, considered him one of the great talents of the age, and clearly supposed (though she did not say so in so many words) that my reason for not knowing his work was the backwardness, the rusticity of a little city like Ottawa.

My curiosity about the Fischers could not have been as great as it later became, for I did not immediately try to hunt up Josef Fischer's books. Perhaps Mrs. Fischer discouraged me. Did she say that they were for the most part badly translated? Or was it just that I lacked the energy, in the early days of analysis, to find my way to a library that might have translations of his work? I was wrapped up in my own concerns, of course, and was chiefly interested in Mrs. Fischer's marriage as a model for some hypothetical marriage I might make myself. Might I possibly, like Eva Fischer, marry a famous author older than myself? Was marriage especially difficult for a woman with talents? I thought of myself as a writer although at present I could not seem to write. Mrs. Fischer had been a painter, was obviously a woman of intelligence. Yet she seemed to have been rather domestic, to have enjoyed looking after husband and child. I was delighted by the model of married harmony that she provided for me. Might I also manage to have the best of all worlds—be a writer myself, sympathize with the career of a brilliant and charming husband, and at the same time cook nourishing meals for my lively children? Before this time, I had been rather contemptuous of women who were interested in their houses or in their own appearance. Yet it was clear that Mrs. Fischer thought these matters were not unworthy of attention. Not to care about appearances, she seemed to suggest, might mean that one didn't respect the selfhood behind the appearance. "How can a young woman who thinks she wants to marry not bother powdering her nose?" she

inquired of me one day, rather acidly. Ah, Mrs. F., Mrs. F.! I suppose she was old-fashioned. Or was she?

It was autumn when I first started going to see Mrs. F. I dreaded Christmas, when she went away to New York for a couple of weeks. She seemed to realize my almost childish dread of her absence, and, instead of our usual session of analysis, invited me into her living-room for cake and wine. She had put up a little Christmas tree with wax candles, and gave me a present, a Mexican pendant with blue stones. I still have it, at the back of a drawer somewhere, although something has happened to the chain.

When she came back she talked of the relative she had visited, her brother, about whom she worried because he had a heart condition, and her daughter. I was surprised that she mentioned disagreeing with her daugther at times. Her family life was not quite perfect, then? I was also, as my dreams at the time showed, pleased that she did not always agree with the daughter. “Family jealousy, Katie,” she said to me teasingly. “You want to be my favourite child.”

I found a novel of Josef Fischer’s in the nearest branch of the Public Library and read it but did not like it. I tried to explain to Mrs. Fischer why I did not like it. “It was too romantic,” I said, “too Gothic. I like solid, sensible novels with real details in them.”

“Your tastes are incorrigibly English,” she said. “Or is it that you are

jealous of Josef too as well as of my daughter?"

Perhaps she was right. I began to be afraid, to be panicky about the kind of relationship that was developing.

"Don't worry, Kate," she said soothingly. "They all feel like that, all the patients. It's not really me you're attached to. Tell me who else you've been jealous of."

The winter passed. As spring gradually and grudgingly approached, I sometimes walked to Mrs. Fischer's instead of taking the streetcar. Some days come back to me: a cold, windy March day, for instance, when there has been snow and rain. A wind blows through the trees, which are full of little particles of ice that make a strange noise, as though pellets of glass were being rubbed against one another. There is a glare of ice underfoot, grey and glossy. While I am at Mrs. Fischer's a storm of thick, soft, wet snow comes up. I walk home through it, unable to see my way across the street. The ground becomes mushy rather than icy. There is a sense of release about that soft, blinding snow, connected with the ease of tension at the back of my neck just after I have talked to Mrs. Fischer. I come home weary, ready to curl up on top of my bed and fall asleep.

Or it is early summer. An Ottawa heat wave. Mrs. F. is planning to visit Vienna, for the first time in many years, and is trying to prepare me for her absence. I sense that she is already, partly absent. What are those memories,

of Vienna, of Zurich, that she returns to?

I myself go off for a solitary holiday in a small Laurentian resort. I walk daily to the village, where I sit in the small toy-like church with its clutter of candles and statuary. I stare at the crucifix, half praying, half letting my mind drift around past and future. Then I walk back to the Lodge, sit on the sundeck in a bathing suit and sunglasses, reading another book by Josef Fischer. I like this better than the one I read before, but am disappointed that I cannot see anyone in the book who resembles Eva Fischer.

When we had both returned to Ottawa again, the analysis seemed stuck in a sort of doldrums area. We circled around and around the same events in the past, the same problems. I seemed even to have the same dreams. I had a feeling of not having reached deep enough into my private world; at the same time I felt that Mrs. F. (or was it myself?) was directing me outward, to external practical problems. Should I get an apartment away from my parents so as to ease the strain at home? Should I attempt to find a job that would interest me more than the one I had?

One session, when we had seemed to be making more progress than we had for a time, we were interrupted by the paper boy wanting money. To my surprise, Mrs. Fischer scolded him very vigorously. He had been told not to interrupt her at this hour. He was a stupid young oaf. I felt that she was making too much fuss, and a critical expression must have shown on my face.

“As usual, Katie,” she said angrily to me, “you expect perfection. It would do you good if you lost your temper now and then at your parents or your detestable boss. I at least am not to be fitted into that kind of mould. He was not to come on a day when Else isn’t here to answer him. I cannot have my work interrupted.”

I agreed that I was too anxious for perfection, that I had, as Mrs. Fischer would have sometimes said, an overdeveloped superego, or, as a priest might have said, an excess of scruples. I did seem to demand of myself that I should always be sweet, gentle, and compliant, as well as very competent; that I should keep all the commandments, even the minor ones. (Mrs. F. said that I was a Baptist Catholic.) I knew that such a demand for self-perfection could prevent me from doing anything or gaining anything. I hesitated to write a poem for fear it might be flawed or to make a friendship for fear it might be a failure. Was I applying the same sort of standard to Mrs. Fischer? Surely she had the right to lose her temper at the paper boy? Yes, but not to shout at him, I thought.

Time passed, another autumn, another winter. I moved away from my parents into a bachelor apartment with a couch, a lamp, and a card table. I made a few friends. I played at cooking and keeping house. I did a little writing. I had a new job at the Public Library.

It was there, in flipping through a reference book on twentieth-century

authors, that I found an entry on Josef Fischer. Why had I not looked it up before? Had I been incurious, or had I felt that I ought not to trespass on Eva's earlier life? (By this time I called her Eva, in my mind at least. She was still Mrs. Fischer when I talked to her.) Josef Fischer was, as Mrs. Fischer had said, an author of considerable reputation with a long list of novels and biographies to his credit. What about his personal life? A few years after the first Great War, the notice said, he had been separated from his wife Selma, by whom he had had several children. After his tragic separation from her (why was it tragic?) his companion had been the painter and illustrator Eva Wiebe, by whom he had also had a daughter. They had lived in Switzerland, where he had died in 1940.

I was startled by this information. Had Eva not, after all, been married to Josef Fischer? What did that word "companion" mean? If she had been married to Josef Fischer, how could she, as a Catholic, marry a divorced man? What were these implications of "tragic" circumstances? In her picture of a happy marriage (which I felt was intended as a model for a possible life of my own) there had not seemed to be room in the background for another wife and children, perhaps deserted on Eva's account. I felt that my image of Eva had been shattered, and along with it my view of the kind of person I ought to become and the kind of life I ought to lead.

What seemed especially upsetting, when I thought of it, was that Eva had not told me the truth. I had told her everything about myself; and

although I had not expected her to tell me everything in return, I had not expected her to tell me lies. Surely, though, "lies" was too strong a word? Even though she might not have been legally married to Josef Fischer, she had lived with him for many years and had borne him a daughter. Baptist Catholic though she might call me, I was not so conventional as to suppose all marriages were made in church before priests.

I was not due to see her for several days. However, after spending a disturbed night, I telephoned her, as I had rarely done. What in the world had I been reading, she asked? Yes, Josef had had an earlier, unhappy marriage, made when he was only twenty-two. Frau Selma Fischer had been a difficult, indeed an abnormal person, and the marriage had not worked. There had been problems with her and with the children, though Eva had looked after the youngest child herself. It had been a difficult life in many ways, but certainly not one to be ashamed of. She would tell me more when I came in for the next interview.

When I arrived after work on Monday for my interview, I found her looking tired and worn. She had put on a black dress and had omitted her usual make-up. She was alone; it was one of Else's days off. She arose to greet me, as she did not usually do, and took my hand in both of hers. Looking earnestly into my eyes, she said, "I wish I could know what goes on in that funny little head of yours, Kate. Why are you so upset by all this? It's my tragedy, not yours. Why do you think I should have worried you with it? Am I

not entitled to a life of my own, to my own past?"

"Yes—yes, of course you are. But still it is partly my business. If I went to a surgeon to have my appendix out, his character wouldn't matter, only his hands and his skill. But you aren't just operating on my appendix. It's my mind, my soul even. I have to trust you, you see." "Can't you still trust me? I haven't lied to you; I've just omitted to tell you some truths which I didn't think concerned you. Do you think I am an evil woman? I am only an unlucky one."

"Of course I don't think you are evil. But I thought of you as my model for a happy life. I wanted to be like you. Now I'm not sure."

"I see what you mean. People imitate their parents' marriage, and I have become a second mother to you. It was a good marriage; it had its trials, but it was a true friendship to the end, and it was not at anyone's expense, whatever Selma Fischer said. I did not ruin her marriage. She ruined it herself, before I ever met Josef."

She told me the story of herself and Selma and Josef, of Selma's half-insane jealousy both before and after the divorce, of the perpetual lawsuits with which she pestered her ex-husband. The figure of Selma which was presented seemed bizarre, extravagant. Could I believe her? Was Selma unbalanced to the point of evil, or was she only pathetic and neurotic? Eva must be telling the truth; the conviction of sincerity was in every word she

said. And yet Eva's truth and Selma's truth were probably different.

Did she not have some pity for Selma, this half-crazy suicidal woman?

Of course she pitied her, she tried to understand her. But it was not just a mild neurosis, I must understand. "You are seeing her as like yourself," she said glancing at me shrewdly. "You are wrong, of course. You are sane and reasonable—maybe too sane and reasonable. You are neurotic, you have your problems, you get depressed or maybe tense; but there is nothing wrong with your reason, your power of understanding. Believe me, you are not at all like Selma. You would not, if your lover or husband left you, come half-clad howling at his door like some kind of wild animal."

I laughed. "Of course you laugh at the idea," she said. "So would I. You are more like me than like her, after all. You must not go over to her side, Kate. She turned enough people against me there in Europe. Why should she turn you against me now because you have read a silly paragraph in a book?"

She was right, of course. I was not turned against her. But I could no longer see her as someone infinitely strong, wise, and joyous placed above the storm of circumstance. She too had been unsure of herself. She too had suffered scruples of conscience. She too had lain awake all night worrying. She too was sometimes ungenerous. She too told half- truths. She too, in short, was imperfect.

That was, I suppose, a turning-point in the analysis. I never depended on

Eva to quite the same extent again, and yet at times I felt closer to her than I had before. After all, I now knew something about her. Not long after that, her brother in New York died of a sudden heart attack, and once more I saw her stricken. Which of us was helping the other, I wondered, when I saw her visibly grieving? My own troubles seemed somehow smaller than hers.

I continued seeing her for my remaining six months in Ottawa, although less frequently in the later months. Then I moved to Toronto to work. I went to see her before leaving town, a mute, embarrassed farewell session, like the farewells in railway stations. For a time in Toronto I had periods when I missed her greatly. Once or twice I came to Ottawa for a weekend and had lunch or tea with her. These occasions were pleasant; we talked to each other politely about movies or books or art exhibitions. But across a table in a restaurant we no longer seemed to be quite the same people.

Then I had a period when things went wrong for me again, and I found myself blaming Eva. Had I somehow been shortchanged in my analysis so that I was not able to cope with an emergency? On one visit to Ottawa I met her on the street but failed to recognize her until she was past and did not speak to her. (How could I fail to recognize her?) She did not see me, or did not appear to see me. Yet I still remember her face as I glimpsed it then, half smiling.

Ten years after the analysis was over I heard she was dead, had died suddenly of a heart attack on a visit to Vienna. So her widowhood was over.

My own parents were dead; I was no longer a Catholic; I had never made that ideal marriage I had imagined for myself. But I still sometimes heard Eva's voice in my ear, though I did not always agree with what it said. I no longer thought her a bad analyst because my life had not been ideally happy. Why should it be? I had gone on living. I had even gone on writing. She would have been satisfied, I thought.

Lately, after all these years, I have been looking again at Josef Fischer's novels, especially that last novel he wrote, the autobiographical one. I don't remember reading it before. Was it not in the Ottawa Public Library? Was it one of the novels that Eva told me was badly translated? It is really, I discover, quite a powerful novel, though an uneven one. It tells the story of the unhappy marriage of a famous German novelist. Bertha, the novelist's first wife, is rather like Selma as Eva had portrayed her to me. And yet she has in her youth an odd charm, an absurdity that is almost lovable until she turns into a witch and ogress. She is the character who makes the book live. And then there is Johanna, the young woman who is first the hero's mistress (does Fischer use that word, or is it Bertha's?) and then his second wife. Johanna is affectionate, gentle, courageous, loyal. She is a talented musician. I recognize her high cheekbones, her dark liquid eyes, her laugh. But can Johanna be Eva? She has no temper. She is all sweetness. She is too perfect. Did Josef Fischer not understand Eva? Did I understand Eva? Did she understand herself?

And what about Kate Summers? If I have never understood Eva, do I

understand Kate.