

Kurt Koffka: An Unwitting Self-Portrait. Molly Harrower. Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984, xiv + 334 pages, \$30.00.

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Molly Harrower arrived at Smith College in 1928, at the age of 22, as a graduate student in experimental psychology. Born in Johannesburg and educated in England (with a year in Switzerland), Harrower was a mature student although young in years. She had come from England to study and research with Kurt Koffka, who had assumed a chair at Smith the year before. Thus began a professional relationship that blossomed into correspondence two years later when Harrower took a year off to teach at Wells College in New York.

This book for me is the story of the rare friendship between Harrower and Koffka, 20 years her senior; a relationship that lasted until his death in 1941. The story is told with minimal editorial comments through quotations from their letters (we are told that the exchange constituted 2166 letters). Most of the letters excerpted here are Koffka's, since the author/editor's main purpose is to depict aspects of the noted Gestalt psychologist's self that are not evident from his published writings, facets exposed "unwittingly" by his great need to communicate with a close friend and colleague.

Who was Kurt Koffka? Boring's *History* depicts modern Gestalt psychology as the product of three minds: Wertheimer, first in Gestalt chronology with his experiments on perception of motion (the phi phenomenon). Wertheimer is depicted by Boring as having the most creative mind. Next, in order of fame at least, is Wolfgang Köhler, who is known to most students for his studies of insight in the problem-solving of chimpanzees, conducted when he was trapped on Teneriffe during World War I. Third in importance, according to Boring, Kurt Koffka was most interested in systematizing Gestalt psychology, an effort he pursued first in a 1922 *Psychological Bulletin* article and later in his 1935 *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (which Harrower read and edited in draft), and in his many lectures. A thoroughgoing and uncompromising scientist, Koffka's writings are difficult to follow and his lectures were often too complex for lay audiences. In contrast, Köhler, with whom Koffka shared many interests, gained some popular recognition for his work with chimpanzees and his exposition of the role of values in scientific work.

Boring believed Koffka to be the least creative of the Gestalt troika. It is interesting to look through references in Koffka's letters to this contemporary (Boring was a reader on Harrower's Ph.D. examining committee), a task made easy by the excellent index; it is clear that Koffka found Boring to be rather unsympathetic to the Gestalt perspective.

Thus the Koffka we see depicted in these pages is at times a frustrated man. He had trouble communicating his ideas, particularly to undergraduates; not the least of his frustrations was his continual lack of success at gaining a more prestigious university

post. When he finally did get a job at Oxford that might have become permanent, he was forced to leave by the burgeoning war in Europe; he returned to Smith College in 1941, and died that same year.

By and large, this book is an intellectual biography; Koffka's life as represented in his letters was dominated by concern over ideas and experiments. However, the letters also reveal a man with a passion for music, a man interested in theater and film, and in politics and social life. As I have indicated, it is the *relationship* between these two people that fascinates me. The letters depict a strong collegial friendship between two professionals who constantly shared ideas and criticisms of the other's work and pursuits. Mentor, friend, colleague—Koffka was all these to Harrower. We know that they visited from time to time—photographs in the book depict them mountain climbing in Switzerland and also show a 1937 visit Harrower made to Koffka and his relatives in Bavaria. However, Harrower seems to withhold from the reader the exact nature of their emotional ties.

Clearly, Harrower's book gives us an interesting glimpse into the life of an important psychologist—a perspective that we could find nowhere else. The letters have been selected to fit the story that Molly Harrower wanted to tell about Kurt Koffka, and fortunately she has or will soon make the letters available to scholars through the Archives of the History of American Psychology. We are fortunate to have this book that presents a sympathetic portrait of Koffka by a devoted but independent disciple.

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Subscription price:

Institutions: N.kr. 270,— \$45.00 — Individuals N.kr. 140,— \$23.00.

Published quarterly by Universitetsforlaget, P.O. Box 2959 Tøyen, Oslo 6, Norway
— P.O. Box 258, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York 10533, USA.