The Weighty World of Nothingness: Salomo Friedlaender's "Creative Indifference"*

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Any serious discussion on creativity and Gestalt therapy must include the name Salomo Friedlaender. Indeed, Friedlaender should be given special recognition; not only is he one of Gestalt therapy's main theorists, but also his relation to the theme of creativity is already clearly alluded to in the title of his principal work: Creative Indifference (1918). Yet, Friedlaender is hardly known in Gestalt therapy circles (especially to non-German speakers), even though Fritz Perls explicitly referred to Friedlaender's central importance in his own approach:

"For a long period of my own life I belonged to those who, though interested, could not derive any benefit from the study of academic philosophy and psychology, until I came across the writings of Sigmund Freud, who was then still completely outside academic science, and S. Friedlaender's philosophy of Creative Indifference" (Perls, 1969, p. 13).

Perls, in his first book, Ego, Hunger and Aggression (1969), writes unambiguously about these men whose intellectual impetuses decisively affected his thinking: Sigmund Freud was one of the most prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century, and the significance of his psychoanalytic theory as a source of Gestalt therapy has since been properly appreciated (Bocian, 1994, 1995a, b); Salomo Friedlaender's importance for Gestalt therapy, on the other hand, has until now barely been noticed, let alone acknowledged and appreciated.1

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* Translated from the German by Nancy Amendt-Lyon.

1 Felix Branger (1981) was the first person to carefully consider Friedlaender in a Gestalt therapeutic context; unfortunately, however, this article ("Schöpferische Indifferenz – Salomo Friedlaender. Eine geistesgeschichtliche Einordnung einer Quelle der Gestalt-therapie" [Graduiierungsarbeit am Fritz Perls Institut, Düsseldorf]) has never been published. Branger throws light on Friedlaender's biographical and intellectual background and relates him to Perls' understanding of process. Hilarion Petzold's depiction of Gestalt therapy (1984), based on Branger, calls attention to the fundamental importance of Friedlaender for the principles of the Gestalt approach. Heik Portele (1992, pp. 91-103) compares Creative Indifference to Perls' concept of the "fertile void" and points out the connection to constructivist concepts and Buddhistic spirituality. My own understanding of Friedlaender's significance for Gestalt therapy in the context of a book on Gestalt therapy are found in Zen and Christian spirituality (1994) as well as in "Salomo Friedlaender/
Even Perls (like many others) would get Friedlaender's name wrong, although he highly respected him both as a person and as a writer/philosopher: "As a personality, he was the first man in whose presence I felt humble, bowing in veneration. There was no room for my chronic arrogance" (1972, p. 75). In his autobiography, Perls describes this personal relationship to the first of his three gurus: "His philosophical work *Creative Indifference* had a tremendous impact on me" (ibid., pp. 74–75). This tremendous impact is evident in *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*. Perls, here, proposes a revision of psychoanalysis in three points. Before even addressing the connections to Gestalt psychology and his concept of the organism, Perls first argues the need "to apply differential thinking, based on S. Friedlaender's *Creative Indifference*" (1969, p. 14). Creative indifference and polar differentiation – Friedlaender's basic philosophical subject – are in fact the starting points for Perls' therapy theory reflections. In my opinion, they comprise the central, structuring theme of his Gestalt therapeutic approach and can be traced to his fundamental therapeutic concepts, particularly to his "five-layer theory of personality", to which I will return. Perls adhered faithfully to the basic course of Friedlaender's philosophy up until the end, publicly and explicitly declaring his allegiance: "The orientation of the creative indifference is lucid to me. I have nothing to add to the first chapter of *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*" (1972, p. 76).

I. Who was Salomo Friedlaender?

His full name was, in fact, Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona. For, besides the philosopher Salomo Friedlaender, there was Mynona, the author of widely read, wacky, grotesque stories (an innovative literary form that he coined). Mynona, the German word for "anonymous" written backwards, was the pseudonym he chose to represent his alter ego, or in his words: "I am a serious philosopher and a humorist all rolled into one" (Friedlaender, 1982b, p. 35). Others called him "the Chaplin of philosophy" and "a German Voltaire" (Harden, in Hudier, 1972, p. 14). He was a scintillating, independent, and intellectual figure whom one could not describe with conventional clichés. Friedlaender felt more at ease in creative, bohemian, artistic, and intellectual circles than in groups of conventional academics. He was also largely

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2 Selig, an architect and sculptor at Esalen Institute, was the second. Mitzie, a white cat, was the third (Perls, 1972, pp. 70–71).

3 Lisbeth Exner's (1996) published dissertation in German philology gives us the most detailed information on the life and work of Friedlaender; Cardoff (1988) offers a valuable philosophical perspective; Kuxdorf (1990a) presents Friedlaender as "the commentator of an epoch".

4 I quote Friedlaender's works by using the following abbreviations: F = Friedlaender; M = Mynona; F/K = S. Friedlaender/Mynona – A. Kubin, Correspondence.