

THERAPY (AND THERAPEUTIC)

Many writers describe their will to write as springing from a complex mixture of intellectual concerns and activities that support their fascination with language, their desire to investigate or understand thought, their commitment to self-knowledge (spiced by general or even unrelenting human curiosity), their drive to communicate (particularly for the introverts among us) or to develop a speaking platform (particularly for the dispossessed). Many authors also point to the affective dimensions of their craft, admitting that writing is also therapeutic process and a necessary constituent of their daily lives. Jeffrey Berman and Jonathan Schiff lay out the connections between writing and talking “cures,” emphasizing that while there are differences there are also many and important similarities, since both

encourage people to express their problems, find constructive solutions to them, and thus achieve control over their lives. Talking and writing are

therapeutic regardless of the explanatory system that is used and regardless of whether anyone hears or reads one's words. As [researcher] James Pennebaker [1990] has demonstrated, while writing about traumatic experiences is often painful, writing leads to short-term and long-term improvements in both physical and psychological health. Whether one believes that writing leads to the discovery of truths by which to live or the construction of these truths, what is most important is that by writing about our life stories, we are able to compare them with others' and broaden our point of view. If knowledge is power, then there is no better way to empower ourselves than through reading and writing. (2000, 308–309).

Historically, creative writers have been viewed as and have attested to being prone to depression and affective disorders (see "Creativity") and also regularly attest to their twinned sense of being marginalized and having a calling (see "Author" and Simonton [1999, 96] for a chart of "Alleged Psychopathology among Eminent Creators"). Productive writers take the attributes of risk taking, intensity or overexcitability, naïveté, intuition and perception, and transmit them into productivity. Jane Piirto suggests personality configurations exist among writers that would lead them to strive for the sorts of empowerment through writing outlined by Berman and Schiff above. Piirto found the following of the creative writers in her sample:

Highly verbal, highly conceptual, highly opinionated, often nonconforming, frank, highly driven writers are prone to self-abusive and self-destructive behavior even as they are enriching the lives of their readers. But this is not always the case, and there are many writers whose lives are not lived so tragically, or who have, as Styron said, "struggled through." The high incidence of depression would seem to be an indication of the intense sensitivity with which creative people apprehend the world. It is as if the senses were tuned louder, stronger, higher, and so the task becomes to communicate the experience of both pain and joy.

The creative person's products become consumable commodities for the public, but these very products are the stuff of life for the creative person. (2002, 75–76)

Not surprisingly, then, in interviews or in writings about writing, authors regularly attest to the therapeutic aspects of their craft, which they find are many and varied. Some see writing as a spiritual journey. "It's very profound self-analysis. It's like meditation," explains Erica Jong (Piirto 2002, 187). For others, writing aids in a process of reclamation or

self-empowerment, part of a healing process, medical or spiritual. Gary Snyder suggests writing is “a healing act . . . it means healing psychological distress, integrating people in the Jungian sense, their inner discontinuities harmonized . . . to be healed is to be sane, and to be sane is to be very energetic, rather than tranquilized.”

At the same time, writing offers the hope of connecting the (re)(integrated)self to the world. Patricia Goedicke explains, “I write to keep myself honest. I write for pleasure, for rolling words around in the mouth. I write for poetry’s great, healing ability to move us beyond ourselves” (Piiro 2002, 185). And writing protects the individual by allowing the writer to deal with chaos. “Maybe the reason for writing anything down, letters, diaries, poems or a grocery list is to keep what is from dissolving,” explains Lynn Lifshin. “I’ve shelves full of diaries,” she says, “sometimes they seem more like a moat around what is happening than a bridge” (188). Writing is regularly described as a tool in the search for integration and a talismanic act of self-protection and expression. “I keep writing to understand my own life, and express the truth as I see it around me” (187), explains Linda Hasselstrom.

In addition, published authors readily acknowledge their need to deal with intense psychological traumas. Early loss of parents. Physical and sexual abuse. Depression. Alcoholism. All are dealt with, transcended, and/or drawn upon. Willa Cather acknowledges the power of early life experience, believing that a writer “may acquire a great many interesting and vivid impressions in his mature years, but his thematic material he acquires under fifteen years of age” (Cather, 1921). And Milan Kundera sees the self as an inevitable subject: “But isn’t it true that an author can write only about himself?” (Murray 1990, 19).

Not only does writing help authors process the events of their younger years, it also helps them grapple with the continuing and developing affective challenges of their lives. Writing helps the survivor testify to personal and global trauma, war and dislocation. Early loss teaches how to deal with later loss. In writers’ explanations, we hear the echo of the Book of Job’s “I alone am escaped to tell thee,” and when we examine a definition of trauma, we realize why these experiences must be processed. “Trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside the bounds of ‘normal’ human experience, and the subject is radically ungrounded. Accurate representations of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ conception” (Tal 1996, 15). In fact, it might be argued that the work

of the writer or artist is to provide versions of such regroundings. And for readers, creative writers function at times as scapegoats, holy interpreters, and cultural healers.

Poets have acknowledged this testamentary function by designing forms for the ritual sharing of loss and grief (the aubade, the dawn song of lovers parting; the elegy, the memorial on the death of an individual). Confessional poets. Political witness. Memoir. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, at least, it has become increasingly obvious that writing helps individuals process and make meaning from the dark nights of their lives. In this way Isabel Allende survives the unimaginable, the death of her daughter, by returning to the written word: "But as soon as I started writing, I stopped taking medication and I could deal with the pain. I could set boundaries to the pain. I could see that this pain is called death; it's called love; it's called my daughter died. I could finally say the words aloud and I could deal with it. . . . By writing, everything became clear; it had its own space" (Piiro 2002, 183). Kenzaburo Oe, who has a son, Hikari, who was born with a brain hernia, finds that therapeutic writing returned him to the world, changed: "If Hikari hadn't been born, I think I would have given up writing or committed suicide. There I was, a famous young writer and I couldn't continue with my work. I started out an existentialist. I had to learn to hope" (157–158).

Writing, it would appear, helps set the house (of the psyche) in order, even if only temporarily. It helps humans create temporary order out of a bewildering array of lived experience, it's a speculative tool for spiritual investigation, and it's a lens that focuses the flame of catharsis. Why, then, are writers often equally eager to distance themselves from connections between writing and therapy? While a writer as prolific and successful as Stephen King might be willing to admit, "Writing is necessary for my sanity. I can externalize my fears and insecurities and night terrors on paper, which is what people pay shrinks a small fortune to do." For others, this is an admission not to be shared. If too confessional, if driven primarily by therapeutic aims, if sentiment overpowers craft, writers (possibly rightly) worry that their work will be seen as "mere therapy," and therefore not valuable art. That is, it will be admired for *pathos* and not for the power of the word, *logos*. Greek rhetoricians realized that effective writers drew on emotions, words, and a speaker's presence, *ethos*, to shape the constructed artifact (in their case, speech). Taste changes, and that includes our expectation for how much sentiment and emotion are allowed into the brew of a successful text. Our belief that excellent writing exhibits a

particular degree or sort of sentiment, presence, or intellectual wordplay has much to do with the communities of readers we affiliate with as writers (see “Postmodernism,” “Theory,” and “Reading”). For some, Charles Dickens is sensationalist; for others, not so much. But of course Dickens himself might have found something enervating and unsatisfying in the experimental novelists of our times.

Certainly there can be many a slip between the cup and the lip in moving between writing as personally valuable therapy of the sort practiced by unpublished authors and promoted by health care professionals (see the *Journal of Poetry Therapy*) to the shaping of public art of examination, witness, and testimony. *The Bell Jar*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and *Girl, Interrupted* perform different textual work than do the therapist’s notes, the patient’s unsent letters or journal, or the sufferer’s e-mail to his spouse.

While many writers would claim that all writing sinks its roots in the nutrients of the therapeutic process, there are others who would sharply disagree and who distrust the “merely” or “primarily” personal impulse in art, finding it messy and seemingly ungovernable. The problem seems to come when we forget that not all therapeutic writing is or should be public writing. Equally, we forget that in policing sentiment and emotion in writing we are probably doing so because we are disturbed by its disruptive, carnivalesque potentials. Aims and audiences matter crucially in this discussion.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” If all happy writings (like all happy families) are so undistinguished, and all writing based in trauma, like the unhappy Oblonsky family in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, is of much greater authorial interest, then it is no surprise that writers ply the profitable territories of strife, death, and love.

However, for the writer in the academy, the writing and therapy connection gains another layer of complexity when one considers the classroom as a site of sharing. Writing may be a therapeutic process, but a writing class, most agree, is not and should not be a course in personal therapy. Ann Murphy reminds us that “the analogy between the two professions [psychotherapy and teaching] is not symmetrical: analysis . . . may be a ‘pedagogical experience,’ but teaching is not a purely psychoanalytical one” (1989, 179). Because of this, it’s important to distinguish between terms. “Therapy . . . is a change-process that takes place with another person (in our culture, a person who has undergone rigorous training, controlled and prescribed for the specific fields within the profession). Processes can be therapeutic; they can make you feel healthy and facilitate

change, but the processes themselves are not ‘therapy.’ Thus, ‘therapeutic process seems to be the more appropriate term for what happens in a writing class’” (Reid and Lord, qtd. in Bishop 1997, 144).

Certainly some writers choose to disclose “the facts” of their lives, but we should be wary about assuming that disclosure equals truth. Instead, we should understand that the result of writing as a therapeutic process is the public rendering of a version, like any other constructed version of reality. John Edgar Wideman offers a useful caution to those who equate confession or the exploration of trauma or even apparently artless testimonial writing as indisputable evidence that the author is sharing his inner soul: “When I write,” explains Wideman, “I don’t open up my life for people to see; I open up what I want people to see. Writing is both revealing and an act of concealment. It is deciding to construct a public persona. It is often a preemptive strike. One might write because one doesn’t want people to know one’s life.” Understanding that the personal made public is a crafted version may help teachers of writing deal with a pedagogical life spent in intense emotional terrain.

Many teachers focus on the process and on the product, refusing to treat the resulting construction as an unrevisable memorial to Truth, or fact. They are equally careful to respect the person behind the project. Identity politics and postmodernism (qq.v.) have complicated our understandings of the personal in the writing classroom and are discussed in useful depth by Michelle Payne in *Bodily Discourses*. While published authors, viewed professionally, have a body of texts and traditions that legitimize the personal subject, student writers are caught in institutional hierarchies of powers that seek to regularize their behavior in ways that suggest emotions and investigations of the personal are aberrant and solely individual. Payne suggests that “it is important that we, as writing teachers, stop seeing emotion, pain, and trauma as threatening, anti-intellectual, and solipsistic, and instead begin to ask how we might, like therapists, feminists theorists, and philosophers, begin to recognize them as ways of knowing” (2002, 31). In teaching writing, we are moving from the days of *don’t* to the days of *might* toward the days of *should*. For instance,

As Pennebaker [1990] and others have shown, most people are helped by speaking or writing to another of their experiences even if the “other” is not a trained therapist. . . . Felman and Laub argue in their book *Testimony* that personal and cultural recovery from trauma requires a conversation between the victim and a witness, that indeed the witness is an utter necessity to complete

the cycle of truth telling. If we shy away from offering our students the opportunity to tell their truths, we may be preventing them from learning what control they can have over their own lives. The more violent and threatening our culture becomes, the more we need to acknowledge the effects of trauma on our students. Those of us whose professional lives are defined by the classroom need to be aware that every pair of eyes facing us has probably borne witness to some difficult moments that can affect learning. (MacCurdy 2000, 197)

However, for many writers, the fact that they are sensitive investigators of and recorders of human history is exactly what sets them apart from other individuals, even when these individuals are their students. Writers, they know, go beyond therapeutic personal journaling and group therapy training to construct the written record. Lynn Freed speaks to the tacit worry many writers share that making too strong a connection between writing and therapy will trivialize their art and result in the sense that anyone can open up a vein and bleed sentiment onto a page. For Freed, the task facing the writer is to “avoid the awful curse of sentimentality and nostalgia,” which “clouds the truth with threadbare images, useless abstractions” (2005, 24).

Our stories can't simply be “told”; they must be shaped. In the workshop (q.v.), the focus is on the tools and techniques of craft. While writers have long expressed their personalities in the bar and at the late-night gatherings at the conference, they have been trained to focus on the text, just the text, Ma'am, in their own version of New Critical rigor. Most of the last century, writers went to school with images of the master writer-novice relationship filling their heads (and the Oedipal and Elektra baggage some of these images engender). They continue to be trained to seek to join the tradition, which means emulating masters and modeling via imitation and emulation (anyone who attends the AWP convention knows the writer arrives dressed differently than the MLA attendee, and emulation can and does move from dress to lifestyle).

Creative writing teachers in that sense are different from certain of their counterparts in composition who may not view themselves as writers nor view the subject of writing in a similarly personal manner. Composition teachers, have, in fact, tended in recent years to move from personal pedagogies toward social pedagogies (see “Theory”), even as some in the field suggest that there is an artificial divide created by such distinctions (see Payne 2002). Inevitably, *student* writers draw on the same wellsprings as any individual making meaning through text making. Because of this,

Lad Tobin (1991) argues for exploring the connections between health professions and the professions of writing instruction, and Robert Brooke (1987) and Eric Torgerson (1988) suggest that the teaching relationship is about transference (students becoming deeply interested in the teacher's self) and countertransference (teachers becoming deeply interested in the student's self), which may involve teachers and students in emotional relationships with ethical dimensions. "You cannot lay pen to paper, you cannot write a poem, without the desire to communicate . . . we're all in this together. It's our own blood that we're writing with, using this ink. That's all right. This is our little secret," explains Alicia Ostriker. When the creative writer's "little secret" is being extended to thousands of college students across the country via required writing classes—which are currently being taught so well that those moments of transference as well as the image of creative writer are leading students to an elective creative writing course in a subsequent term—discussions about the therapeutic aspects of the endeavor are sure to arise.

We should be wary of the tradition that suggests that when an expert mines the psyche, trauma is a "normal" subject, but when a novice explores the same territory, she's indulging in abnormal behavior and producing a text fated to exhibit the hallmarks of naiveté, indulgence, and aesthetic murder. When a student enters the writing classroom, we can predict that student brings along with him a history of complicated life experiences; they can't be left at the door, and the testimony of successful writers suggests that they shouldn't be. "Psychiatrist Alice Miller wrote that creativity results when there is trauma with warmth present; destructiveness is the result when there is no warmth present" (Piiro 2002, 155). The pedagogy that doesn't treat trauma with warmth (of certain sorts) is contributing to a culture of destructiveness. Tilly Warnock finds that "[t]here is no guarantee, of course, that reading and writing make people act more wisely. But, writing and reading, by expanding our experience and repertoire of strategies, can provide additional possibilities from which we may choose in order to live and act effectively in specific contexts" (2000, 51). And Mark Bratcher argues: "For cultural workers—teachers, critics, and others—who want their work to serve the end of positive social change, a psychoanalytic writing pedagogy offers the opportunity to undermine the psychological roots of many social problems, such as intolerance and various forms of self-destructive behavior" (1999, 2).

Creative writers have long learned to harness the power of the personal in their own lives and writing and have the chance to amplify those

insights as they work with young writers. This does not demand a course in counseling (though that could never hurt), but it does suggest that writers bring their own sensitivity about these issues to the pedagogical scene. Michelle Payne emphasizes that “we don’t need to reinforce the violence that has destroyed someone else’s humanity by banning that person’s story from the classroom or rallying around our roles as gatekeepers of the rational class” (2002, 128), arguing instead that writing teachers need to be willing to listen to stories and texts, to help writers shape what they find there within supportive yet professional classroom communities. Mark Bratcher directs us toward language, claiming that “[i]t would be much more prudent for them [teachers] to follow Lacan’s advice to analysts and, instead of trying to divine students’ needs and desires by means of their own empathetic and intuitive powers, focus like Lacanian analysis on students’ language and help them recognize and grapple with the desire embodied in their own utterances” (1999, 182).

Language and the desire embodied in utterance. Writing as a therapeutic process. We have admired the bravery with which the poet writes about loss, the memoirist writes about abuse, the novelist writes about violence and dependency. We have turned to those works that investigate the unhappy (and sometimes even the happy) family and in so doing join in a literary conversation of reintegration and, some feel, redemption. We have turned to the work of peers for solace. We grapple with our pasts and find our futures. We have revealed and concealed. Evidently, we, as well as our students, craft our work from and with our lives.