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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD.) to the School of Education and Lifelong Learning
31st August 2019

Title: *Poetry/Therapy*

Contents

Abstract

The subject of this thesis is the role writing plays in maintaining our mental health. It is primarily concerned with *poetry* and its relationship to therapy. The key idea put forward in this thesis is that language is experienced as a *fabric of meanings* which individuals use in therapeutic ways: as a means of self-expression, to attain agency, or to *change* the world as it is experienced to make it more *liveable.*

The methodology employed throughout is to apply literary criticism and theory (poststructuralist analysis) in a consideration of literary texts, workshop and interview material and evidence from the clinical literature in counselling and psychology.

Chapter one provides an overview of poetry therapy as a distinct modality. In this thesis I explore the relationship between poetry and therapy from two positions: as distinct therapeutic intervention and as a theme which runs through much writing practice and theory. The main finding here is that engaging in writing poetry for therapeutic purposes results in both an increased sense of personal agency and an opportunity to transform difficult or traumatic experiences. These findings are evidenced through the discussion of a series of poetry therapy workshops I facilitated at the University of East Anglia.

Chapter two provides an account and a discussion of a series of interviews with three *professional* poets. These poets are explicit about the fact that writing helps them to re-fashion the world and to achieve a sense of personal identity and agency: these are all benefits which are ascribed to *amateur* writers writing for therapy. I conclude that even when individuals write for purely aesthetic reasons there is a contiguous therapeutic effect.

Chapter three is concerned with how empathy is established and communicated in a therapeutic setting through the use of language. The focus of the chapter is a poetry therapy group I facilitated with four counsellors. The key finding which emerges from this chapter is that the *image* (or word) is a powerful mechanism for containment and transformation of feeling and is identified as the predominant function of group talk in this context.

Chapter four focusses on how poetic images can be employed to articulate trauma in an oblique way. The first half of the chapter is concerned with literary texts and explores the idea that one of the key psychological drivers to writing poetically is to have our experience represented in an *accurate* way —which takes account of what is known and has been assimilated at the conscious level *as well as* that which remains liminal at the lived edge of experiencing. In the second half I look at the ways in which images figure in therapy in an analysis of a discussion with two therapists and close-reading literary texts related to trauma. The key finding here is that poetic imagery provides a way of *naming* trauma which is able to articulate experience in profound and complex ways.

Chapter five addresses the idea of narrative: how extant narrative/s (or story) can provide a psychological resource for the individual seeking to make sense of, support or change their personal experience of the world. This chapter explores literary texts and narratives derived from other sources—narrative

poetry, material from *Twitter* and poetry produced in therapy are considered in the discussion.

Chapter six presents a final exploration of how language carries with it more meanings than what we ourselves bring to it. I examine poetry as a form of psychological ritual and the *ritual function* of poetry and consider the role poetry plays in magic and religion. This chapter includes a discussion of poetry which uses ritual forms in relation to a workshop I facilitated in which participants were invited to construct a 'personal ritual' for a specific purpose. This material is set in the context of both the anthropological and psychological literature on ritual practice.

This thesis brings together ideas from psychology and the therapeutic modalities with discourses from literary theory, philosophy and political thought; it also breaks down what has hitherto been seen as a boundary between the activity of professional poets and amateurs writing with an explicitly therapeutic intent. In this way, the approach taken to the topic offers a comprehensive explanation of why writing poetry in the service of mental health *works.*

Introduction

To Begin at the Beginning: an introduction to the topics and themes of the thesis and an explanation of the methodology employed

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.'

—T.S.Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'[1]

When you are writing a poem, you're working with language…you are quite distant from the experience…you're thinking about the language, if you've got the right word

—Ruth Fainlight in interview on Radio 4 Front Row 20 November 2018

The subject of this thesis is the role writing plays in maintaining our mental health and in it I put forward two key ideas: one is that all psychological well-being is predicated on the act of putting together a coherent and *comfortable* narrative of our experiences, which allows us as individuals to have a sense of being situated within a *landscape* which *makes sense* to us; the other is that the way we experience the world is predicated on the ways in which we represent it at an internal level—through images and networks of language-meanings which form such narratives as we make. This thesis is also primarily concerned with *poetry* and its relationship to therapy—and some definition of terms will be of use in reading what follows: when I use the term *poetry* I do so to refer to both poetry as it is commonly understood—a form of expressive writing which employs both figurative language and the sound

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[1] T.S. Eliot (1919) 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' collected in (ed. Frank Kermode) *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975)

of words in formal structures which are different to prose, *and* a way of reading other types of discourse in ways which pay attention to the role of figuration, symbol and structure (the poetic function); therapy is defined as both what happens between therapist and client, or in the therapeutic group, and as any activity which is psychologically helpful to individuals. Indeed, the original contribution to knowledge that this thesis makes is that it takes this broad and inclusive approach to the topic: as I explain in subsequent chapters, the material covered here (and this is something which is reflected in the bibliography) has typically been siloed into discrete disciplines or ways of thinking about knowledge; either knowledge is constellated around the therapeutic *outcomes* of writing poetry, or is somewhat more esoteric and abstract exposition of the nature of language. This thesis—facilitated by the fact that I have a dual academic background in literature/literary theory and therapy—brings together ideas from psychology and the therapeutic modalities with discourse from literary theory, philosophy and political thought; it also breaks down what has hitherto been seen as a hard-and-fast boundary between the activity of professional poets and amateurs writing with an explicitly therapeutic intent. In this way I feel that the approach taken to the topic is not only novel but offers a more comprehensive explanation of why writing poetry in the service of our mental health *works.*

Our individual experiences are necessarily disparate and fragmented: it is only when we form them into a narrative progression that they become a meaningful whole. Our *raw* experiencing of the world is nothing more than a collection of *sensory impressions*; it is only when we attach words and word-meanings to them that they become intelligible to us. So, the act of making mental representations of experience is then essentially a *linguistic* one—and the enterprise of *making sense* of our lives is by extension a type of *writing.*

In this way writing becomes a way of creating psychological *wholeness* and *coherence* at an individual level. In other words, writing is a way of making ourselves *well* in a psychological sense. This process is a complex one and does not occur solely at the conscious level. Rather, we frequently work with language at the edges of our awareness. This thesis takes the position (which is essentially Lacan's point) that language is an intricate structure of meaning/s in which words point to other words; that is, language is a fabric woven of all of the cultural material evolved through the history of language-use. When we choose a word to mean a *thing* we pick up that word to use in our particular context, yet what we pick up along with it is a whole *tranche* of other meanings, other contexts—the point being that language has *resonance.* So, when we work with language in an expressive or psychological way what we are essentially working with is this network of resonances. Symbols speak to us from *networks* of symbolisation and thus individual acts of expression are never *discrete.* Seen in this way, all acts of language usage—at the individual level—involve listening to the resonance of language, which is something that occurs at the edges of our experiencing. Any particular *meaning* we ascribe to a word or phrase is the tip of an iceberg with a plethora of *other* meaning and contexts just under the surface. These meanings are also available to us and we work with them and through them when we work with language.

Working with language at the individual level has three areas of operation— I will not call them phases as this would imply they are always sequential, which they are not: the first is *exploration* of this fabric of symbolisation, in which language whispers to us at the edge of our awareness; the second is *expression* when we feel that a word or series of words *fits* and articulates our experiencing; the third is *construction* where we use language to put together

a version of the world which is *livable* for us. In the context of what I have said above (and again, this is essentially Lacan's point) that what we experience of the world is mediated by language at a fundamental level then it becomes clear that this third operation is the most important one. This understanding of experiencing as an essentially *linguistic* act is central to what I will go on to say in this thesis and underpins the approach taken. When we use language we are doing something far more than expressing what we see and feel; rather in the act of expression we are *constructing* that which we experience. The investigation of this idea is the fundamental contribution of this thesis which will be unpacked and examined in the chapters that follow.

Taking a broad view, we might regard all acts of *therapy* as linguistic endeavours in ascribing meaning and constructing narratives which are *helpful* in maintaining a coherent and positive sense of self. This is the process which Freud points to when he adopts the term *the talking cure*[2] as a description of psychoanalysis. Taking a similarly broad view, we might also regard all acts of language—all speech, all writing—as ways of tapping into the resonance of language. And certainly we can see a kind of equivalence between Freudian 'free association' and the way in which I describe the individual working at the edges of consciousness when working with language. Writing therapy extends Freud's basic idea that it is in in the *naming* and *speaking* (in psychoanalysis this process is called *abreaction* and *catharsis*) of trauma that the therapeutic work occurs. Writing therapy substitutes the act of writing in the place of speaking, and its central premise is that through *writing* about trauma the negative feelings and behaviours associated with such experiences will gradually ease and subside. Taking a

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[2] Sigmund Freud, Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1995) p. 8-9

narrower view, though, what this thesis focusses on is the type of language acts—the types of writing—we call *poetry.*

Thus the majority of work in the field of writing therapy has focussed on the positive effects of expressing and thereby releasing difficult or traumatic experiences—what we might call the process of *working-through*. While this thesis will attend to what I see as the *expressive* operation of writing and therapy (working-through) I am perhaps more interested in those parallel areas of operation (exploration and construction) and in identifying the ways individuals interact psychologically with writing through what might be termed their *encounters* with language.

Greater consideration will be given to how *exploration* and *construction* occurs through writing and how this has psychological consequence for the writer. Also, although the extant work in the field considers expressive writing in a variety of forms (prose writing in the form of short stories or journal entries are common) in this thesis I have deliberately chosen to focus on poetry. This decision reflects the taking of a specific position with regard to the benefits of expressive writing. In the chapters that follow I argue that when language is used in a *poetic* way—in a way which foregrounds the features of language *other* than its being a simple vehicle for communicating a *message*—our attention is drawn to the *fabric of language itself.* When writing asks us to dwell on the myriad of elements which make up language and includes a focus on language-features such as rhythm, rhyme and allusion, we enter into psychological territory fertile with the possibility that experience may not only be *expressed* but can be *refashioned* in previously unimagined ways. In my view it is these particular qualities that make poetry an especially powerful medium with regard to the therapeutic process. The

point here is not to say that such features are absent in prose, but rather that poetry explicitly directs our attention to elements *beyond* a simple articulation of experience. Poetry often concerns itself with reaching towards that which we do not understand, cannot see, and cannot express; poetry draws on metaphor and metonymy in an attempt to express that which is inexpressible by any other means. Prose, on the other hand, typically approaches its subjects less obliquely.

The key point here is that the literature concerned with the therapeutic benefits of writing assumes that language foregrounds the intentions of the speaker/writer and is in this sense an unproblematic exposition of an *individual* experience. As will be seen, throughout this thesis I adopt an alternative position which draws in part on a poststructuralist understanding of language which is set out briefly below. The quote from Eliot included above provides a counterpoint to conclusions drawn by the majority of research in this field that the primary therapeutic value of writing poetry is its ability to be a powerful conduit for the release of emotion—that this *expressive* operation is in and of itself inherently *healing*. Eliot points to something in the process of writing that goes beyond what I have called the *expressive* function: he makes the point that writing does something more than allow us to *express* emotions in that it also facilitates an *escape*. What I think Eliot is getting at here is the capacity writing has to fashion both our experience of the world and the form/s we inhabit within it; in this *constructive* mode writing allows us to *escape* not only from emotions, but also from *personality*—from *self* itself. It is this lesser-articulated function of writing that this thesis seeks to explore. However as noted above, research has established a link between the expressive function of writing and the ability of the individual to *heal* in a psychological sense, and therefore this

strand of thinking is not excluded by what follows. Rather, I will take this work as the starting point for a discussion which extends our current understanding of what writing therapy is and does into an enquiry of the parts the *referential* and *constructive* play in the process.

In this thesis I will make a case that expressive writing not only offers an opportunity to *write out* trauma but does something more—something that allows us to explore aspects of ourselves and of language which are outside of or on the edges of our conscious awareness. I will argue that the *symbolic* function of language (through metaphor, simile, metonymy, motif) speaks to the deepest places within ourselves and allows us to negotiate these spaces through an exploration of the semantic *resonance* language has. Put more simply, language has two aspects when we are talking about the expression of experience. The first is that it allows us to communicate concerning the past, present and future. The second is when we attempt to communicate we enter into relation with the myriad of meanings and connotations and contexts; in this aspect of language communicating is like swimming in the sea, where the distinction between ourselves and the water is blurred. Eugene T. Gendlin calls this function 'thinking at the edge'[3]. Gendlin's work is discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

A clear and very simple incidence which makes the *referential* model of language which is put forward by this thesis more tangible is a comment I heard made in a recent radio interview. The interviewee was a man called Jens Voigt and he said he is well-known throughout Germany for his catchphrase, 'shut up legs'. Now, not knowing anything about Voigt or his

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[3] Gendlin, E.T. & Hendricks, M., (2000-2004), 'Thinking at The Edge (TAE)' *The Folio*, 9/1, Spring Valley: The Focusing Institute

history I could only speculate as to what this phrase meant; when I discovered he is a cyclist, that meant something to me as legs (and legs which complain with pain) are certainly apposite to the sport. However, it is only possible for me to communicate the full richness of this statement for him with you by adding the further context that this phrase developed in his mind as a consequence of his relatively disadvantaged childhood where his father would always tell him, when he complained of being hungry, that the mind is supposed to control the body—not the other way round. All of these contextual elements—a whole history—are in play when Voigt says, 'shut up legs'. Both the immediate context and what has gone before are in play; the *now* of the utterance (the specific moment of the race) is never discrete from wider referent. The need to think of language as an entire network of culture and psychology is further illustrated by Wittgenstein's example that even if a lion could speak your language you would not understand what he was saying. The point is, when Voight says 'shut up legs' loaded into that phrase is his relationship with his father, his approach to cycling, his anger and self-determination—a historical and psychological complex of experiences and ideas embodied in a single phrase. This expression is allowed through establishing a *dialogue* with a set of relationships within language which have been set up over time; that is, this phrase not only *expresses* but it *refers.* When we apply this notion of *reference* in the context of the whole of the fabric of language the process becomes infinitely more complex, more nuanced, more subtle, and more *arcane.* At its limit the referential aspect of language moves us into a field of meaning/s where what we intuit feels as though it comes from 'somewhere else'—somewhere outside of ourselves that is mysterious, secret, concealed, covert, enigmatic, *dark.* This is why words have historically been seen as *objects of power* which inform magic

and religion at the most fundamental levels as spells, incantations and litanies. This aspect of language is considered in the final chapter of what follows.

So, one of the things this thesis will attempt to explore is the way in which language functions—through poetry—to construct our experiences, and the way in which we work with its fabric of references. Nevertheless, the idea of *writing out* trauma through creative expression is the starting point and is also important to the any discussion of poetry *as* therapy and is therefore discussed in what follows. Poetry as therapy has a long and established precedent, appearing as early as the 1920s in the US when the approach was pioneered by poet and pharmacist Eli Griefer who hit upon the idea of dispensing 'poetic prescriptions' to his clients—readings designed to offer support with or insights into their psychological struggles. This work was built upon and developed by Jack J. Leedy in the 1960s and further refined by the social psychologist Pennebaker who applied therapeutic writing techniques to the treatment of trauma in the 1980s and 1990s. The approach which has become known as *poetry therapy* was popularised by Pennebaker in the 1980s and subsequently adopted more widely, resulting in a large and growing body of literature mentioned above, which supports the idea that writing creatively *is* beneficial for us, in a psychological sense. Such work makes the case for expressive writing as an *outlet* bringing about symptomatic relief and supporting individuals to develop a renewed sense of personal agency[4]. Now *poetry therapy* is recognised as a discrete therapeutic modality within the field of writing therapy, with its own distinct approach and training—and there is a significant body of literature and research evidence to draw upon. This thesis considers some of this work in chapter one, which also gives a more

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[4] Carroll, R. 'Finding the Words to Say It: The Healing Power of Poetry' *Evidence Based Complement Alternative Medicine,* 2005 Jun; 2(2): 161–172.

detailed account of poetry therapy itself. However, as noted above, the majority of this work has tended to focus on techniques and outcomes: in the main such work seeks to measure whether offering clients opportunities to engage in various forms of expressive writing serves to reduce symptoms associated with trauma and mental dis-ease and is in this sense an account of techniques and responses with a focus on the *practice* of therapy. What is largely absent from this body of research literature is a focus on addressing the *mechanisms* through which writing as therapy works[5]*; rather the research effort has been focussed on establishing simply that it *does.* The approach taken by this thesis is to locate itself in what I see as an important gap in in the literature on writing as therapy: that is to look at not the *what* but rather the *why* and the *how* of writing as therapy. Something else that sets this thesis apart from other work in the field is that it considers both writing done *as therapy* alongside writing done with a purely aesthetic focus; in general, clear divisions have been made between studies of 'writing for therapy' and 'writing professionally'. In my opinion this sets up false dichotomy between poetry-as-poetry and poetry written for a therapeutic purpose—another of the aims of this thesis is to break what I regard as an artificial barrier between what have hitherto been regarded as these distinct *modes* of writing down. I put forward the idea that the elements at play in writing as *therapy* share common ground with other types of writing done for other reasons. This is something which I explore in the interviews with 'professional' poets, in chapter two.

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[5] Nicholls, Sophie (2009) 'Beyond Expressive Writing: Evolving Models of Developmental Creative Writing' *Journal of Health Psychology* recovered on August 16 2019 from https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105308100201

The Contribution of Theory

Poststructuralism argues that the important functions of language are located in the play of meanings and ambiguities in metaphor and metonymy which occur in language as a medium; we do not stand outside language and simply pick up words like tools, but rather we inherit a structure of language and cultural understandings with which we must interact dialectically when we express ourselves. At the risk of oversimplification, from a poststructuralist perspective the language of poetry becomes an exercise in *trying to communicate*: it is a moving towards that which the writer does not often know *through* an engagement with a medium extends beyond the individual through the quality of *association* which is fundamental to language itself. Given poetic language foregrounds this quality of *association* (through employing metaphor and metonymy in an explicit way) it is in this way eminently suited to the activity of therapy. So, viewed in this way the structure of the self and the structure of language are not entirely separate and independent. The poststructuralist view contradicts the notion that the individual expression of experience is direct and unproblematic and suggests that it is not the things that we talk/write about that are important *per se*; rather it is the interaction with language, the process of trying to find the right words, that is paramount. Poetry does not focus on the message in the way that other forms of language does. It is to this point that the poet Ruth Fainlight speaks in the quotation taken from a recent interview, included above.

I am aware that at this stage in the thesis these concepts remain a little abstract. This is a necessary frustration in the context of a brief introduction. However, there is a body of work which has been done in the area of *narrative*

therapy which maps out the terrain with more clarity. Michael White[6] argues that typically therapy has viewed the discourse of the client from a *structuralist* perspective: as Jacques Derrida points out in his seminal essay 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (which is considered in more depth in a later chapter) a *structuralist* understanding of language assumes that existence of a central, organising consciousness which resides at the heart of discourse—in this case the novel; this central principle is consonant with the idea of an *author.* The implications for taking a *structuralist* view of language when we are considering the potentially therapeutic benefit of writing are significant: such a view presupposes that there is an underlying *authentic* and *coherent* core of consciousness available for *revelation* through the therapeutic process; therapy then becomes an enterprise in revealing the *truth* which lies beneath, and therapeutic writing (viewed as a type of discourse) is simply the medium through which this unveiling takes place. Alternatively, when we take a poststructuralist view which includes the idea of language as a shared cultural construct which we *interact with* in subtle and myriad ways when we engage in expressing ourselves, and which crucially does away with the idea of a fixed although hidden central *self,* then writing offers opportunities for more fundamental therapeutic *change.* White writes, 'The distinction between structuralist and poststructuralist thought is enormously important in understanding narrative work. I have found, however, that it is quite difficult to fully comprehend this difference, since structuralist thinking is such an integral part of our culture and language. In other words, we have constructed many ways of looking at the world and ourselves, and we have become so used to such understandings

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[6] White, Michael (2009) 'On Structuralism and Poststructuralism' Michael White Archive, recovered on August 16 2019 from https://dulwichcentre.com.au/michael-white-archive/?v=79cba1185463

that we have forgotten that they are constructions. In narrative work, it is very common to deconstruct these understandings. Through such deconstructions, the doorways to new understandings and new options are revealed'.[7] What White offers us in his integration of poststructuralist ideas is a way of looking at individuals engaged in therapy which foregrounds *process*—and it is to this *process* that this thesis attends.

Structure and Content

However, this thesis is not intended to be an abstract exposition of poststructuralist ideas; rather it is offered as an exploration of what *working with the fabric of language* looks like as a therapeutic writing *practice:* it considers what taking on board some of these concepts might contribute to our understanding of the relationship between poetry and therapy. With the idea of an *exploration of process* in mind, the overall structure of this thesis is deliberately loose. I wanted to allow enough space for a genuine exploration of these ideas, in a variety of contexts: the chapters that follow include interview material, case studies of groups I ran during the period of writing, discussions with colleagues, and examples of writing drawn from extant texts by well-known poets. My approach was to 'see where the ideas' took me, and this is reflected in a thesis which covers a lot of ground. What orientates the thesis is the central idea that the processes involved in the writing of poetry are similar to the psychological processes through which individuals relate to and inhabit environments more broadly: that it is in the internal representation of experience (which is fundamentally a linguistic representation) that psychological conflicts and difficulties reside—and where they may be resolved through the conscious manipulation of

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[7] ibid.

symbolisation that is involved in writing poetry. So, what follows brings together studies in the field of poetry therapy with ideas drawn from other literatures.

Chapter one sets the context for the discussion of these ideas and is in part a literature review, and in part an introduction to *poetry therapy* as it exists as a discrete modality. Although the current thesis deviates somewhat from has been done in the area of poetry therapy 'proper' (in that it introduces the ideas concerning the *nature* of language mentioned above) nevertheless, given that this is an established and important area of work—and one which is apposite to my approach and the wider themes of this thesis—this chapter explores *poetry therapy* at some length and gives an overview of the field. The studies included here indicate that writing poetry offers a number of key benefits: in poetry, individuals can recount traumatic experience in a way which is less direct than a straightforward narrative, and that poetry can mediate the process of recounting trauma and thus make it safer; poetry gives a sense of agency to individuals whose experiences may have left them feeling disempowered or silenced, in that the writing process is in itself an act which reinstates the individual as an actor; poetry offers an arena for the playing-out and transformation of experience; and finally, that the act of writing can lead to the integration of traumatic memory into the flow of normal experiencing, leading to better functioning of the overall person. It also presents an account of three therapeutic writing groups which I ran with students at the University of East Anglia. Here I discuss how the benefits of writing poetry for therapy noted above are seen in the lived experiences of students taking part in the groups. For the most part, the case for writing as therapy made by the literature included in chapter one is borne out: students were not only able to *express* (through writing privately and in groups) difficult experiences; they

were also to *transform* them in their writing in forms which were more supportive and more manageable in terms of their psychological impacts. For example, one participant 'came to terms with' her feelings of anger towards her brother's suicide by 'writing towards' (through a series of poems) an image of herself gently lifting him from the ground and bearing him on her back. In the group she spoke of this image as one which gave her great comfort.

Chapter two shifts the focus from writing done primarily as therapy, to writing done for purely aesthetic reasons. For this chapter I interviewed three 'professional' poets with the aim of understanding how they see their own poetic process—its functions and the reasons why they are *drawn* to writing. The findings from this interview material strongly support the idea which runs through this thesis that writing poetry is a way of working with language in order to construct a *livable* psychological environment. As noted above, a key difference between the approach taken by this thesis by the majority of studies in the field is that the latter have largely focussed on writing in which the emphasis is primarily therapeutic; the contribution this chapter makes is in extending what is understood about the value of writing for therapy into the domain of making art. This chapter concludes that may of the same processes are at play: in particular, what *writing for therapy* and *writing to make art* share is that they are both enterprises which involve an individual *remaking* a relationship with the world through language. Having undertaken a review of the literature, this approach is novel in that it brings together two areas which have hitherto been regarded as different and discrete.

Chapter three takes a broader view and gives an account of therapists working together in a writing and creative arts personal development group, which I

both facilitated and participated in. The focus in this chapter is less on the writing process and centres more on the interaction between group members. The wider theme of this chapter is a consideration of the idea of *empathy* and its relationship to creative engagement, which takes Carl Rogers' specific definition of the term as one of the *necessary and sufficient conditions* of therapy: '[empathy] means that the therapist senses accurately the feelings and personal meanings that the client is experiencing and communicates this understanding to the client. When functioning best, the therapist is so much inside the private world of the other that he or she can clarify not only the meanings of which the client is aware but even those just below the level of awareness.' [8] In this chapter I explore how empathy may be established and worked with through group discussions which centre on the creation of metaphor and visual images to express personal experience; the focus is on how *dialogue* between a group facilitates a more *satisfying* representation of experience, one which is deepened through engagement with the group process. Whilst this chapter deviates a little from looking at poetry *exclusively*, the discussion relates the process of working with images *in general* to the practice of working with images in language *specifically*, and in this sense speaks to central ideas explored in the thesis.

Chapter four builds on this discussion of group process and looks explicitly at the function of imagery in poetry and therapy; here I explore the mechanisms through which we represent experience through language— something which the practice of writing poetry foregrounds—and the psychological significance of doing so. This chapter is titled 'On Naming' to reflect the idea that one of the key psychological drivers to writing *poetically*

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[8] Rogers, Carl R. *A Way of Being* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980) p. 116

is to have our experience *represented* in an accurate way. I argue that the particular qualities which identify *poetic language* (metaphor, metonymy, symbol) allow for experience to be represented in profound and nuanced ways. This is an important idea which runs throughout the thesis as a whole.

Chapter five moves away from the image, however, and considers the *narrative* function of poetry: in this chapter I explore ideas of narrative from the perspective of narrative being an attempt on the part of the individual to carve a coherent path through a *field* of language—which includes discussion of how *symbolisation* is involved in the process, whilst introducing the idea that *narrative arcs* bring something else to the table when we engage in writing poetry. This chapter also includes a more detailed discussion of poststructuralist models of language—as a *field* or *chain* of signification—and explores the ways in which the act of writing poetry might be seen as opening a *dialectic* with language which draws on threads extant in the field of signification.

Chapter six attends to the ritual function of poetry and considers the role poetry plays in magic and religion—as well as giving an account of a workshop in which participants were invited to construct a 'personal ritual' for a specific purpose. The main component of the workshop was a group exercise in 'writing ritual' and in this chapter I reflect on both the group outcomes and the group discussion of the experience itself— in an attempt to highlight what is common across writing for ritual purposes.

Methodology

In this thesis I have indicated that I have taken a *literary* approach to the analysis—as opposed to using a qualitative methodology more commonly seen in the social sciences—and the aim of this section is to provide some explanation and justification for this decision: here I will attempt to describe what a *literary approach* is, what it means for how 'data' are received and processed, and what taking such an approach—as opposed to using a more conventional social sciences qualitative methodology—adds to the analysis of the material considered in this thesis. A key element of the methodology of this thesis is that it involves a forensic kind of *noticing* of language: it looks for what is *said* (or written) and for points of connection and evolution in that language. The particular literary approach adopted here is best described as *poststructuralist*. The ideas of poststructuralism are discussed throughout the thesis, however—in a nutshell—what is salient in understanding the poststructuralist approach and why I have used it here is that poststructuralism asserts that meanings are not fixed to 'objects' (or ideas) in the *real world*. Rather, when we use a word what comes to mind are other words—not immutable things that lie outside of language. For example, if we take the word 'chair' we can see without too much thought that it is not fixed to a definite object: 'chair' might mean an *armchair* which might connote a *living room* or the concept *relaxation*; or it might be a *desk chair* which might carry with it thoughts of schoolwork or scholarship; or *chair* may be read as a position on a committee or an academic post. What comes to mind when we speak the individual word is dependent on context and on our individual experience—we engage with language at a *psychological level.* The central

idea of poststructuralism is that in language there is no *transparent relationship* between *sign* (word) and *referent* (object-in-the-world); rather, language is seen as a network of word-relationships—an active force that can transform or create what we experience as *reality*. For this reason, it is, I believe, an incredibly powerful influence on what we experience at a psychological level: language does not only express and reflect our experience but offers the opportunity to *change* what we think and feel.

However, to understand the approach taken here it is first necessary to establish the distinguishing features of the *literary approach* more broadly—those processes and practices which mark it out as a distinct research modality. The primary distinguishing feature of all literary analysis is that it involves the *close reading* of texts; as a text is *read* the analysis acknowledges and integrates the responses (and speculations) of the reader into narratives about text, and in this way is less *systematic*—in the sense of imposing a pre-determined framework upon how text is read and processed—than other qualitative methodologies. For an example of how the *literary approach* differs from more standard qualitative approaches, we might consider *grounded theory*—which is perhaps the most sensitive and responsive *systematic* approach to analysing qualitative data extant in the social sciences: this methodology takes transcript material and codes each individual statement before grouping statements to form larger categories and themes through which *meaning* and significance is ascribed; in this way the analysis is led by the transcribed text and there is a strong effort made to retain the complexity and individuality of observations. In common with *grounded theory* the *literary approach* begins with the close examination of extant text (which is analogous, I would argue, with transcription); however in the case

of *grounded theory* the drive of the analysis is toward something which is more structured and more codified—and ultimately removed from the raw *text* itself. In contrast, the *literary method* remains at the textual level throughout the analytic process. While the researcher may make statements and draw conclusions about what text *means* at a more global level—which may include some element of systematisation in that it may attempt to show how the individual text intersects with other narratives and broader ideas—nevertheless, the substance of commentary, of the analysis, remains focussed at the textual level. So, what might be described as the *praxis* of the *literary approach* is something akin to creating a parallel textual narrative which runs alongside the text under consideration—the aim of which is to explore, to reflect upon, and to make meaning-connections in an enterprise of *making sense* of that which is there. In the *literary approach* this activity is called *textual criticism.* The following statement is useful in explaining what *textual criticism* is and does—as well as highlighting its limitations:

> Objectivity, in the arts, can be defined only as the attempt to be unbiased, un-eccentric, about personal reactions, the attempt to get them right, so that they may constitute value evidence not mere opinion. It cannot imply their exclusion; criticism that excluded them would not be criticism at all, for they *are* much of the literary work…[this] has led to claims that criticism is, or should be, an art, parallel to literature—rather than a commentary parasitic upon it. But both the etymology of the word, its current uses, and all the various traditional practices that have come under it, indicate 'criticism' to be an activity dealing with fictions but not itself fictional; it has never been considered strictly creative, but at most re-creative (and then only to aid appreciation of the original creative work). So creative writing that uses other literature as its raw material in the same way that literature uses life should be seen for what it is, a secondary art that is an extreme form of subjective meta criticism.[9]

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[9] Cook, Jon 'Critique' in Fowler *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms: Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 48

Criticality with regard to texts implies, under this definition, that the text under consideration is itself a *fiction.* In this thesis however I have chosen to approach texts which are both fictional and non-fictional—texts which are *aesthetic* and texts which are derived from transcribing *real* discourse. This begs the question, is it reliable or even appropriate to treat the transcription of interview data in this way? This question, I think, can be answered affirmatively in two ways. In the first place we can establish this as a *valid approach* in the social sciences by pointing to the example of anthropologists who work in a similar—although not identical—way; such research comes under the umbrella of the social sciences, yet its methodology has a compelling synergy with the *literary approach*: anthropology as a discipline typically spends longer *dwelling with* texts than in the endeavour of extrapolating to the level of a common structure or coded set of themes. That is what the *literary approach* has in common with social sciences scholarship in anthropology is its adherence to close textual analysis. In the second place we can point to the central tenet of poststructuralism, set out above: that if no discourse is a transparent representation of an external *reality* then the logical next step is to approach all discourse (both literature and transcribed talk) as *text.* This is the approach taken in this thesis.

A further question is what does paying such a close attention to text—which lacks a dominant drive to codify and systematise—bring to the table, which further implies the question *why did I take this approach in this thesis*? Fürsich argues that engaging in close textual analysis represents, 'a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that asks for special

scholarly engagement'[10]; I interpret this statement to mean that when we *close read* we are making a critical enquiry at the fulcrum of what is said and what is created or received and that this is a place where deeper and more complex—textual, meta-textual and even *structural*—elements reside and may be revealed. Accepting that textual criticism can never be said to be fully robust to the influences of biases and personal reactions—and given that no qualitative methodology, no matter how highly systematised can be validated as being fully impartial—then it can be argued that what close reading or the *literary approach* brings to the table is an enhanced sensitivity to more subtle elements at play in the data, which is something which speaks to the adoption of this approach notwithstanding the acknowledgement of its limitations.

The approach taken in this thesis as a whole is literary in the sense that the dominant way of engaging with the data presented is to *close read*—to remain at the level of text—and to remain sensitive and alert to the unfolding and interweaving of *meaning/s,* the latter being perhaps the primary goal of the analysis. Such an approach must acknowledge that the subjectivity of the researcher/reader (in this case me) suffuses the enterprise at all levels in the process of deriving theories and understandings of the phenomena it encounters; however in my opinion, the *literary approach* is nevertheless valid in the context of the work undertaken here—or at least not *less* valid than a more highly structured and codified methodology. As I suggested above, accounts of experience or data which purport to be solidly objective or 'factual' are never unproblematic in that language—writing or speaking

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[10] Fürsich, Elfriede. (2009) 'In Defense of Textual Analysis' *Journalism Studies*. 10. 238-252.

about phenomena—always does more than mediate an experience; all attempts to render experience in language are exercises in construction, and in this sense are subjective meta-fictions. Given the nature of the material considered by this thesis I would go further to suggest that the *literary approach* is in fact the most appropriate methodology: because such an approach is inherently sensitised to the nuance of pattern and meaning in language and its interplay with the psyche which is the subject of study—but also because criticism includes a tacit acknowledgement of the fictiveness of any given statement of truth as a pre-requisite of reading. I will clarify this point further, below.

So far I have spoken about the *vocabulary* of the *literary approach*—about what is done and how—but to fully justify applying this methodology it is necessary to talk about *lexis* and *praxis*: to also explain how the ideas which underpin treating data—all of the texts under consideration in this thesis—relate to the broader ideas at play in the undertaking. Speaking of ideas in relation to the reading of texts is an activity which brings us into the domain of *poetics*. The term *poetics* refers to, 'not the study of, or the techniques of, poetry (verse), but the general theory of literature'[11]. In terms of literary criticism, *poetics* determines the beliefs and underlying assumptions of the *literary approach* extant in a particular piece of analysis. For example, as a critic one's *poetics* might be structuralist, psychodynamic, feminist or Marxist. in this thesis the *poetics* of the analysis are *poststructuralist*—that is, as I indicate throughout the thesis, my approach to reading the material included is predicated on the idea that language is a fabric

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[11] O'Toole, Michael 'Poetics' in in Fowler *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms: Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 184

of meaning-relationships (significations), and that through engaging with language (speaking or writing) at a symbolic level we can re-configure or re-make our experiences of the world in ways which are psychologically helpful to us. Further, poststructuralist poetics holds that the world itself is only accessible to us through the fabric of signification, which is language, and therefore approaching the world through language—through symbolisation—is particularly apposite in a study of this kind. Brian McHale, a key scholar in the field of poststructuralist poetics, describes the approach as being orientated towards a focus on *ontology*—raising questions regarding the nature of *being* and the relationships between structures that constitute *being-ness*: what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? And so on.

Applying a poststructuralist poetics in reading moves the reader/critic/researcher towards a consideration of *how* things are figured and function within the domain of language. What sets poststructuralism aside from *structuralist* poetics—which similarly places and emphasis on *form*—is that in the poststructuralist approach the idea that there is one unified structure to text that might be 'revealed' is set aside; rather, what appears in its place is the understanding that all text (narrative) is fractured, partial and subject to change and—in the process of making that change—in constant dialogue with other texts, other narratives. This essential idea is important in understanding the approach taken in this thesis as it informs both what is *done* as well as speaking to the reason I have chosen to work in this way with this particular topic: whilst the ways in which we represent experience may lay claim to being a fixed and faithful reproduction of a *reality* which informs them in fact

they are narratives—stories which are neither consistent nor fully coherent.
The position this thesis takes is that the relationship between poetry and
therapy reveals how our narratives of what *is* are in fact mutable and full of
junctures and points of connection with and departure from a plethora of other
narratives—all of which operate at the symbolic level, through language.
Using the *literary approach* in the manner described above allows me to
explore this intricate and mobile set of relationships—which is in fact a
process—in a way which remains responsive to the *kinesis* of the area of
study. Why is narrative important? Or, 'as for the other way of construing the
question—why narratology in the world at large?…because narrative is
everywhere, because it pervades all the spheres of our lives…is not always
(maybe not often) benign…you can consume narratives with pleasure, and
even study them with devotion, but don't kid yourself that they don't have
designs on you, or that they necessarily have your best interests at heart.':
what McHale speaks to here is the way in which the *literary approach*
broaches the consideration of narrative through a close reading which reveals
the stories we tell are fictive—and reports back to us in what ways such
fictions are made and what our interactions with them imply. Further, this
point speaks to why such an activity is significant to our psychological well-
being—the question which is the topic of this thesis. When we look at
language in this way, as fundamental to the way in which our 'reality' is made
and received at the individual level, then this essential fluidity which is
ascribed to linguistic/imagistic forms offers an opportunity for that which is
difficult or *unhelpful* at the psychological level to be revised and re-fashioned
through the encounter with writing.

Now it seems pertinent to say something about how I conceptualise the data—the texts, the transcripts—under consideration here. The first and most important point to make is to emphasise that I am not treating any of this material as 'testimony'—that is as an account or reflection of an external reality—but rather as 'text'. Of course, in the case of the literary material included this point is in many senses a given; however, in the case of the transcript data this is something of a departure from a standard social sciences approach and should be explained. Treating transcripts as *text* means that the status of the material is changed from something which *expresses* meaning—that is, information or *truths* about the world—to something which is instead a *generator* of meanings: a process which takes place through activity of *closely* reading the text. Perhaps the activities of *close reading* and qualitative textual analysis (as practiced in anthropological research) are difficult to distinguish at the level of what is *done*; however, at a conceptual or theoretical level they emerge as very different types of enterprise.

The consequence of treating transcript as *text* is that they become not an *account* of experience, but rather *are an experience* in and of themselves: when I am reading in this way what I am essentially reporting is *my* experience of this encounter with language. We might call such texts 'pieces of the world'—snapshots of individual encounters with phenomena—nevertheless if we accept that these *are texts* then logic demands that when we (or I) experience (read) them no claim to objectivity or *truth* (we might say fixity) can be made. For example, if we assume that these are indeed *texts* and 'pieces of the world' then it becomes irrelevant to *notice*—to quantify within a thematic framework which has been imposed on

the data—how many times a particular theme has come up. The reason is that *texts*—in the *literary approach*—work as *wholes* and thus under this condition the reader (researcher) does not have the *authority* to impose categories which necessarily rely on the prioritising of individual terms, concepts or meanings that are *necessarily* derived from outside the *totality of the text*. Certainly, this view is supported when the *poetics* of the process are poststructural.

Given all of the above, we now face a really important question with regard to the methodology: when we are reporting back on these *pieces of the world* and our experiences of them, the key question is *by what criteria can we construct something that others can see and understand*—when we embrace the fundamental subjectivity of the analytical process, *how can we say anything meaningful?* The answer I think is to say that what the *literary approach* seeks to do is to construct *a persuasive argument* regarding what is seen (read) and what is *happening* at a textual level; this is not about *measurement* but rather about the ability to construct a discourse about text which is *cogent and compelling*. I hope that as the subsequent chapters of this thesis unfold, this is what the overall piece will achieve. Literary analysis differs from the qualitative approach in the social sciences in that in textual criticism the assertion of *objectivity* always ranks below a *subjectivity* which is *persuasive.* However this need not be seen as a weakness; rather what this front-and-centre acceptance of the problem of objectivity with regard to interpretation of discourse does—by denoting all as *text*—is to liberate the researcher to ponder, to conjecture, to *theorise* about data and to perhaps do something that is rather more nuanced than that which is permissible within a more rigid framework of categorisation. Further, this approach need not be

seen as less *useful* or less *true* than more conventional types of qualitative analyses.

To try and elucidate this point—which is tricky to pin down—I will give another example: imagine we as qualitative researchers set out to review interview transcripts conducted with two individuals, with the aim of answering the question *which one is the most moral*? Of course, such material might be assessed against a set of criteria. Nevertheless, such a piece of research would remain a matter of *persuasive argument.* As researchers we would argue for this behaviour or that attitude to denote more or less *morality*—thus in constructing our framework we would be engaging in constructing a *persuasive* narrative which would be intimately connected to our personal beliefs and values. What I set out to do in this thesis is to present a *persuasive argument* regarding the potential of language to affect at the deepest levels what we think and what we experience of the world. To do this I engage in a practice of *noticing*—which is another way of describing the process of close reading—points of connection and points of evolution in language (in text), and developing an argument predicated upon this key idea: that language *is* what we experience of the world and that through language what we experience can be *changed.*

Choice of Literary Texts

As already indicated, the way in which I have approached the writing of this thesis is to bring extant literary texts—poems by known poets—together with interview material, commentary on theoretical approaches, some clinical studies and original writing (and some artwork) by research participants. My aim has been to present an *exploration* of the field. As also noted, I have taken

the position *not* to divide poetic texts into the categories of 'writing for aesthetic reasons' and 'writing for therapy', as is more common in research in this field; rather I have chosen to try and identify those elements which are common to poetry *that may be identified as therapeutic*. Nevertheless, in choosing which well-known writers to include in this study I was guided by the principle of selecting poets who used imagery in striking or unusual ways: my thought was that writers who write in a way in which the figurative element is *foregrounded* in some way would be good candidates for understanding the ways in which the *poetic function* of language interacts with the ways in which experience is re/constructed at an internal, psychological level. For example, Emily Dickinson's use of imagery is famously *oblique*; her writing strives to encode her experience in ways which sever the direct 'understanding' of events from the forms in which they appear—forms which are more attentive to the personal, psychological resonance of events than to those events themselves. Frequently, Dickinson's writing has been described as a *puzzle* by critics. Also, Dickinson's psychological state and well-being has been a subject for discussion in criticism of her work and as such makes her a good candidate for inclusion in this study. Less attention has been paid to the psychology (aside from anecdotes of his drinking and preference to work in isolation from his family unit) of Dylan Thomas. Nevertheless, we can see an enterprise of 'world building' in language which takes place in Thomas' assiduous and foregrounded construction of images—which frequently attempts to access the heightened perceptions of childhood. Indeed much of Thomas' poetry is an explicit attempt to re/create a 'child-state' of mind—at an emotional level—which makes the interaction between writing and the *psychology* of his writing and interesting one, and one which it is fruitful to consider in the

context of this thesis. Poets such as Wallace Stevens and Shelley engage their writing in enterprises of world-building in very deliberate ways—the former considers this as the function of poetry, the latter through an interweaving of narratives which build a sense of 'emotional kinetic force'—and are thus seen as working at the intersection of writing and *therapy*, where therapy is defined as that which *affects* our psychological reception of events. Also included are some explicitly *confessional* poets whose work centralises a consideration of their psychological state: among these Sylvia Plath is the most obvious—this thesis includes a discussion of her late work, leading to her suicide, in the context of exploring how poetry may be understood as an important psychological *ritual*. So, whilst there is a good degree of diversity among the choice of texts included for discussion here, what emerges is a thread running through all of them: this is, each attempts in its own way to either articulate or exemplify the ways in which poetry interacts with *psyche*—and can be, in various ways, deemed to be *therapeutic* in being psychologically *affecting* either individually or at the level of audience, or frequently both.

The Poets

This thesis draws on texts from two types of writers: what I have called *amateur* poets—those with little or no expressive writing experience who are writing primarily for therapy—and *professional* poets, those who write for primarily for aesthetic reasons and for publication. Amongst the first group are the students who attended the series of poetry/therapy writing groups I ran at the University of East Anglia. A few of these had limited writing experience—the University has an established writing programme and a couple of the students were undertaking creative writing modules alongside

attending the group—but in the main the driver for attending the sessions for this group of writers was the element of therapy it provided. The second group, the *professional* poets, were all known to me to some extent which facilitated my being able to arrange to interview them. Aside from one of the poets (this is in the write-up presented in chapter two) I was not familiar with their work, however, before engaging them in the project—so this was not a driving factor in deciding to include them in a consideration of the therapeutic aspect of writing. I have given brief biographical details for these poets in chapter two, but I am conscious of preserving the anonymity of this group; in short, all three of these poets are between 45 and 50 years old and have considerable writing experience. One of the poets (X) has a history of psychiatric illness and explicitly links writing to personal development; one (Y) situates their work between writing and visual art; and the other (Z) is primarily concerned with the aesthetics of writing, with *form.* All three teach in Higher Education. It was interesting to see that all of the writers, despite the diversity of their backgrounds and approaches to writing, express an awareness that their writing does have a therapeutic element—although what this means for them and how this articulated varies.

A Note on Spellings and Terms

Whilst this thesis uses UK English spellings as a default, where terms have been coined by US authors then US spelling is preserved. This approach is designed to indicate when an otherwise common word is being used in a particular way: for example when I discuss Carl Rogers' idea of the *actualizing tendency* the US spelling is preserved. This is also the case when I speak of Eugene Gendlin's *focusing*—to differentiate his particular usage of the word from a more general one. Similarly, the *person-centred* approach

uses UK spelling to indicate person-centred therapy as a modality which has developed from Rogers' original work—when I am referring to Rogers' ideas specifically I use the term *client-centered* retaining the original US spelling.

Positionality

This thesis sits between disciplines and is in many ways an inter-disciplinary exercise in that it uses literary-critical methods and theories to discuss the psychological aspect of engaging in expressive writing and as it pertains to therapy; however, the approach taken to integrating and synthesising methodologies is something less than systematic and reflects, I think, something about the way I arrived at doing this research and something about myself as a researcher. My original academic background is literature: specifically, modern and contemporary avant-garde poetry—more specifically, the New York School. I love poetry and have always especially loved the way in which a poem can function as a 'door' (or window) into a way of seeing the world which is different from our own; furthermore the way in which we can enter into a worldview (frequently one that is better than our own) through the portal of language. This is what led me to read poetry and wanting to dwell on how this *magic* is wrought brought me to study poetry more seriously. Everything that interests me about poetry lies in the ways this process takes place, and thus criticism for me is the practice of close reading. So, this is the way in which I have approached this thesis: reading closely, listening carefully and exploring the ways in which such *worlds* are brought to being through language.

What this thesis is *not* is a conventional piece of social-sciences research because in many ways such a piece of work is beyond my skills set; rather,

the approach taken in this thesis is to meander around the key themes set out above, looking for examples and unpicking processes. My skills are those of the literary critic and psychotherapeutic counsellor and this is how I have approached the research. I trained in counselling in 2008 and have worked intermittently with clients ever since, mixing my day job as course leader for a Masters' programme with my client work and running workshops in listening skills. My approach as a therapist is humanistic and mostly person-centred and the attitudes I have acquired through my practice informs everything I do: that is, I aim to listen attentively to the minutiae of what is said, as much in the classroom as in the counselling room. Further, I have learned that when I listen *attentively* I what I hear is people speaking in language rich with allusion and imagery; what I hear is both what is *said* and what is *spoken* more obliquely through a fabric references, and in this way a fuller picture of what the speaker is communicating emerges. In this type of close listening it could be said that talk becomes *text.* What I think this non-systematic approach brings to a consideration of therapy is—rather than being a deficit—a discussion which extends a largely abstract discourse on language and meaning into an enquiry which seeks to identify at the level of practice what such a view of language and the nature of its relationship to the human mind *means* for the individual and their lived experience. I do not believe that a standard case-study or qualitative methods approach would have been able to capture this with the same degree of subtlety.

My hope for this study is that it will offer a richer and more nuanced picture of the relationship between poetry and therapy than is represented by the clinical literature on writing for therapy—which is characterised by a focus on client outcomes; and also one which ties *lexis* to *praxis* in more concrete ways than work done under the umbrella of literary theory and textual study.

With this in mind, each chapter contains some theory, some close reading and some material gathered from the workshops and interviews that I have conducted with research participants in the process of putting this thesis together. Another hope is that this study will go some way in breaking down the barrier between what is considered to be *writing for therapy* and what is deemed to be *literature.* A central theme that runs throughout the thesis is that when we write poetry—whatever the reason or context—we are engaging in a *therapeutic* process: writing poetry offers us opportunities to transform the world and our experiences of living within it whether we do that writing as a poetry *novice* in a group therapy setting or as a purely aesthetic exercise. In this thesis I take the position that there is an equivalence between the *professional* and the *amateur* in that both are engaged in the enterprise of rendering the experience of living in more *livable* forms.

In writing this thesis I also hoped to develop my own therapeutic practice with regard to the ways in which I work with clients—specifically with what I can offer my clients in their journeys towards *feeling better.* Last week a client I worked with in a group setting said that writing poetry to express their experiences, 'makes me feel like a part of my brain is waking up—a part that I used to know was there, but that I had kind of forgotten about, and it has this different way of thinking about things which is kind of exciting because it makes me feel hopeful'. This is essentially what working with language in its poetic form does: it foregrounds the part of our minds which constructs the world through linguistic representation, and offers us the opportunity to work with it, for *change.* Working with images is a powerful force for change as it involves us reaching for something in language beyond what we currently have; this is the *dialectic* with language through which we *strive* towards wellness.

At a personal level this thesis itself represents such a process of *striving* to be whole again in that I wrote it in response to the death of my mother: a part of me sensed that I might be able to *write myself out* of the psychological trouble my mother's death gave me. In this sense the whole thesis might be seen as a single *image*—an attempt to represent my experience of language and of beauty, and to set my *world view* into some sort of order again. When I realised that talking about my grief in therapy was not cutting it I devised a more radical therapeutic *act* for myself: the thesis fitted the bill as the process of writing and engaging with ideas was substantial enough to match the volume of grief I had to work through. In the process I also found myself writing about the death of my friend Dr Laurinda Stryker (see chapter five) and more generally connecting with people having similar experiences of *living* to myself, both face-to-face and in writing. All of these things have been therapeutic in their own way.

As a closing point to this introduction what I would say of the fundamental relationship between writing and therapy is that it lies in a sensing of what Hélène Cixous calls *affinities*[12] between what is *livable* and what is not. That is to say that writing is a process of sensing out the image that *connects*—the image that is required in a psychological sense. As a concrete and personal example of this process I have been troubled for the last few years by a frightening feeling of *vertigo* which comes on me when I am falling asleep or waking up: a sense that I am standing on a small high precipice above a deep chasm of time in which all the years I have lived and all the experiences of my life are stretched out below me in a deep ravine. I guess this might be

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[12]Cixous, H. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 4

interpreted as a sense of *loss*. Quite recently I had a dream in which this image *changed*. In this dream the chasm suddenly concertinaed into what I can only describe as a kind of metal plate—the sort that might be used in engineering—which looked a little like the sign for infinity. This is a drawing of it I made in a notebook:
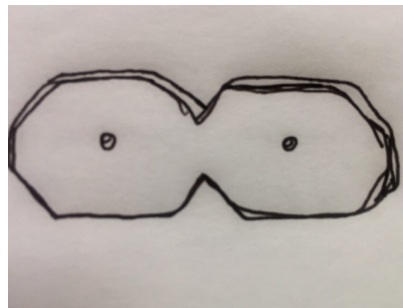
With the image came a profound sense in which I knew that all the years and all of the experiences were present *now*—and that I was no longer on a precipice above time, but rather firmly grounded in a *now* which contained all of time. This was encapsulated in the image of the widget. Further, since having the dream I can call to mind the metal plate—imaginatively hold it in my hand—and have that same sense of security. In this way the metal plate was the image that was *required* to stand in place of my dizzying sense of loss. Although this image came to me in a dream, essentially the process of *making* or identifying the image in analogous to what occurs in writing, particularly in the process of writing poetry. That is, when we work with language *poetically* we are engaging with the image—striving towards the image which is in a psychological sense *required.*

When we strive to develop psychologically we do so at every point through an engagement with language, or what Cixous figures as *the ladder of writing.* To return to a point made earlier in this introduction, if we regard writing as

a therapeutic act is not enough to see language in the process as being a simple conduit for the expression of experience; rather, we must see language as an active participant in the therapeutic endeavour because—as Cixous says so beautifully—'the ladder is neither immobile nor empty. It is animated. It incorporates the movement it arouses and inspires. My ladder is frequented. I say *my* because of my love for it'.[13]

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[13] ibid.

Chapter One

Poetry as Therapy: an introduction to poetry as therapy including case-study material from a therapeutic poetry group

'Tis a power
That does not come unrecogniz'd, a storm,
Which, breaking up a long-continued frost
Brings with it vernal promises, the hope
Of active days, of dignity and thought,
Of prowess in an honourable field,
Pure passions, virtue, knowledge, and delight,
The holy life of music and of verse.

—William Wordsworth*, The Prelude*[14]

At the source, at the end and whenever
The book lies open and I am again

—Eavan Boland*, Becoming Anne Bradstreet*[15]

The aim of this chapter is two-fold: firstly, it will set the context for the thesis and attempt to map out the terrain in which this particular project sits; secondly, it will give an account of the *lived* experience of working with poetry as therapy—through a discussion of the writing workshops I ran with students at the University of East Anglia in the Spring and Summer of 2013. It presents a brief history of poetry therapy, a survey of the relevant literature and an overall outline the project as a whole. In addition, it will begin to address the central question of this thesis: that is, what *is* the nature of the relationship between poetry and psychological well-being?

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[14] Wordsworth, W. *The Prelude* (1805 Text), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 2
[15] Boland, E. 'Becoming Anne Bradstreet' collected in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Women Writers Bridge Five Centuries* (Washington D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 2012), p. 64

In researching this thesis I also became interested in questions relating to language, identity and the construction of what we perceive to be our *reality*. However, in the main, poetry therapy proper does not explore this territory. These questions are taken up in the fields of psychoanalysis, psychology, philosophy and literary theory. Thus, I will be looking at some of the 'crossing places' of literature and therapy. Chaliff[16] says this:

> The use of literature in psychotherapy is long overdue. Literature is a natural analogue of the psychological aspects of therapy. Both depend for their success on the ability to verbalize emotions. The same psychological mechanisms that are at work in dream, fantasy, and all aspects of human thought also influence the work of art. In the case of many writers, the unconscious participates sufficiently in the construction of the piece to make it closely approximate the dreamwork, as in the works of Franz Kafka; or at least to make to make it reveal to us—if not always to the consciousness of the writer himself—the underlying psychological structure and problems of the creator. Sometimes the unconscious mind of the author communicates with the unconscious mind of the reader, without the reader's cognizance, as in the case of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or Edgar Allan Poe's short stories[17].

The complicating factor here is that these are very different types of discourse, each containing very different conceptions of what language—and the individual—is and does, and their approaches are not always a comfortable fit. In the previous chapter I suggested that the act of writing involves something more than personal expression—that is, that poetry is more than a vehicle for expression: rather, that writing should be seen as an action which brings the subject into the world and establishes them as an *actor*. The most important consequence of viewing writing in this way for therapy is that it carries with it the implication that writing can restore a sense of agency to the individual who is struggling to find a sense of self or purpose

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[16] Chaliff, Cynthia 'Emily Dickinson and Poetry Therapy: The Art of Peace', in (Ed.) Jack J. Leedy *Poetry the Healer* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973) pp. 24-49
[17] ibid. p. 30

in the world. For me, this is one of the key contributions poetry makes to the therapeutic endeavour.

The final section of the literature review will consider work which focusses on trauma—and makes the suggestion that poetry therapy might be represent a key intervention in the management and integration of traumatic experience. In summary, I suggest that the most important consequence of viewing the writing of poetry as a type of therapy is that when regarded as a creative *act,* what is implied is that writing has a fundamental capacity to bring about significant *change* in what we perceive of our *environment.*

Literature Review

1. Poetry Therapy

Poetry therapy as a modality has a distinct provenance and training—and in this sense the current project does not fall within the definition of *poetry therapy* proper: this project is also cognisant of the psychoanalytic and literary approaches to writing as therapy, where therapy is defined as any process occurring in or through writing in which difficult or traumatic experience is re-ordered, assimilated or otherwise transformed (this includes writing done for other reasons which nevertheless has a therapeutic element); however poetry therapy, and the body of literature coming out of the field, provides a starting-point for this thesis and is certainly important in terms of providing context.

Eli Griefer was one of the earliest pioneers of the poetry therapy movement: a poet, pharmacist and lawyer working in New York's East Village, in 1928

Griefer began a campaign to credit the reading of poetry (for its 'message') as an inherently 'healing' activity. He then went on to establish a 'poemtherapy' writing group at Cumberland Hospital, Brooklyn, where he met and worked with Jack J. Leedy[18]; while Griefer is widely regarded as the founding father of poetry therapy proper it is Leedy's work which is credited with the burgeoning popularity of poetry therapy in the 1970s and 1980s. Another worker in the field, Gil Schloss, author of *Psychopoetry*[19] joined with Leedy to found the Association for Poetry Therapy in 1969, which became *The National Association for Poetry Therapy* (NAPT) in 1980. The Association is still the main professional body representing poetry therapists. Further formalisation of the status of poetry therapy took place in 1983 with the establishment of *The National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy*. As stated on its website[20]

> *The National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy* sets standards of excellence in the training and credentialing of practitioners in the field of biblio/poetry therapy and authorizes qualified individuals to practice as mentor/supervisors. We maintain and distribute a Guide to Training Requirements, serve as a clearinghouse for questions about professional training requirements and trainers, approve applications for both training and credentials, and confer credentials on qualified trainees.

The Federation accredits the standard training qualification registered poetry therapist (PTR) and is in this sense the main regulating body.

As indicated, I include this brief description of the formal development of the field to give context to the current study. In this thesis my interests are broader, and the discussion will range beyond poetry therapy to include the

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[18] Leedy, Jack J. (Ed.), *Poetry the Healer* (New York: Lippincott, 1973)
[19] Schloss, Gilbert A., *Psychopoetry* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1976)
[20] Retrieved on August 7, 2019 from, https://poetrytherapy.org

extant therapeutic facets of poetry written in a range of settings for a range of reasons. Nevertheless, a consideration of established field of poetry therapy seems necessary and relevant before going on. It is also important to note here that poetry therapy has two strands: the *writing* and the *reading* of poetry, the latter being what is now called *bibliotherapy*. Bibliotherapy has a separate but related provenance and involves reading poems with the aim of accessing or ameliorating the emotions resulting from difficult experiences. The therapeutic use of creative writing (the *other* type of poetry therapy) is best seen as a sub-category of art therapy, which has different roots—although the discussion of such is beyond the scope of this thesis. As an appendix to the current discussion, it is also interesting to note that the development of poetry therapy—geographically—has strong links to the history of American poetry as a canon, which in itself extends the discussion of poetry as therapy beyond clinical settings into the realm of what we might call poetry proper. New York's East Village—where poetry therapy first emerges with the work of Griefer—is closely associated with experiments in poetry and poetic movements: *The St. Mark's Poetry Project* on St. Mark's Place has long been the established centre for new writing and is a stone's throw away from 8th Street, where Griefer ran his *Remedy Rhyme Club* in the 1930s—the precursor to the later more formal therapy groups which were established in Brooklyn. Another link between poetry therapy and the canon is found in the work of Arleen Hynes[21]—co-author of *Bibliotherapy—The Interactive Process: a Handbook* and founder of the *Bibliotherapy Roundtable*—became interested in using writing therapeutically while working as a librarian at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington DC which coincidentally is the institution where Ezra

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[21] Hynes, Arleen and Hynes-Berry, Mary, *Bibliotherapy—The Interactive Process: A Handbook* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986)

Pound was an in-patient from 1945 to 1958, and where he was visited by many well-known poets of the time, including Alan Ginsberg who had close ties with *The St Mark's Poetry Project*.   This is relevant in the sense that in later chapters I will be looking at how established poets have also engaged with poetry in *implicitly therapeutic* ways.

The earliest identifiable publications in the field of poetry therapy proper are Schauffler's *The Poetry Cure: The Medicine Chest of Verse, Music and Picture*[22] (mentioned above), Greifer's *Principles of Poetry Therapy*[23], and Harrower's *The Therapy of Poetry*[24]. As also noted above, Jack J. Leedy is arguably the most significant contributor to the literature on poetry therapy. He is responsible for two key collections of essays: *Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders,*[25] and—the arguably more significant—*Poetry the Healer,*[26] which brings together case studies by a number of practitioners in the field. In many ways *Poetry the Healer* is a key text because it provides a snapshot of poetry therapy as a modality at an important juncture in time—when the field was beginning to define itself in terms of what it *does* and what its central tenets are. For this reason, it is worth discussing this work in some depth.

Anthony Pietropinto's contribution to *Poetry the Healer*— 'Exploring the Unconscious Through Nonsense Poetry'[27]—is of particular interest in terms

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[22]Schauffler, Robert Haven, *The Poetry Cure: A Pocket Medicine Chest of Verse* (New York: Donald Mead, 1926)

[23] Greifer, Eli, *Principles of Poetry Therapy* (New York: Poetry Therapy Centre, 1963)

[24] Harrower, Molly, *The Therapy of Poetry* (Springfield: C.C. Thomas, 1972)

[25] (Ed.) Leedy, Jack J., *Poetry Therapy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969)

[26] (Ed.) Leedy, Jack J., *Poetry the Healer* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973)

[27] Pietropinto, Anthony, 'Exploring the Unconscious Through Nonsense Poetry' chapter 4 in (Ed.) Leedy, Jack J., *Poetry the Healer* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973) pp. 50-76

of the current study as it combines a theoretical discussion or what poetry therapy is and does, with qualitative evidence presented in the form of a case study. Taking Caroll's *Jabberwocky* as his example, Pietropinto defines nonsense poetry as, 'that which deals in a humorous or whimsical way with odd or grotesque themes, characters, or actions, often employing coined words that are evocative but have no generally accepted meaning'[28] and in this way regards it as a comparable process to what Freud terms 'the dreamwork' (in Freud's words, 'the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind'): 'because poetry, too, uses symbol (or metaphor), free association of words and images, condensation and merging of concepts, and deliberate distortion of reality to evoke strong emotional feelings'[29] and thus gives access to latent unconscious material and makes it manifest. So, poetry is uniquely equipped to allow us to work with thoughts and feelings which are—for one reason or another—out of our awareness ('nonsense is not logical, but logic is a notoriously ineffective tool for communicating with the unconscious'[30]. Pietropinto quotes Sullivan's 'The Language of Schizophrenia'[31] on this point:

> Language operations as thought are profoundly different, quite fundamentally different from language operations as communication and as pure mechanisms used in dealing with others; the more completely one becomes self-centered, the more utterly he becomes cut off from integrations with other more or less real people, and the more utterly novel, perfectly magical, and wholly individual become the symbols which he uses.[32]

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[28] ibid. p. 51
[29] ibid. p. 52
[30] ibid. p. 53
[31] Sullivan, Stack (1939) 'The Language of Schizophrenia' in (Ed.) Kasanin, Jacob *Language and thought in schizophrenia; collected papers presented at the meeting of the American psychiatric association, May 12, 1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1944)
[32] Pietropinto, Anthony, 'Exploring the Unconscious Through Nonsense Poetry' chapter 4 in (Ed.) Leedy, Jack J., *Poetry the Healer* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973) p. 13

When we enter the interior world of the client the form and function of language changes: it becomes *poetic*. *Jabberwocky* is chosen for this study because of its 'primal scene implications'[33], as psychoanalysis traditionally holds that when a child witnesses the 'primal scene' of his or her parents having sex this experience is typically repressed (as it is traumatic for the child) and frequently expressed covertly, as a fantasy or fantasy figure—a bogey-man, or *Jabberwock*—Pietropinto substantiates this point by referring to other works by Carroll and critical commentary on it. *Jabberwocky* also explores themes of the individual 'questing' to find the monster and striving to defeat it, which clearly lend themselves to a *psychological* reading. In the study subjects are presented with the poem and then asked to complete a simple questionnaire which asks them to discuss what they think the poem means. Pietropinto found that many participants were quick to impose a metaphorical interpretation with a universal application ('It definitely shows how good overcomes evil')[34]; other respondents, though, focussed on specific elements of the piece in drawing out themes ('the sword might be a symbol of understanding')[35] and generally respondents reported seeing elements of their personal circumstance and interests in the poem, indicating projection.

A quality particular to *Jabberwocky* is its use of neologisms in the place of all of the important nouns—to produce what amounts to an *idiolect*; this is key because it gives readers the latitude to insert their own objects into the text, guided by the syntactic structure and the cadence of the language. One respondent said, 'it gives you a chance to use your imagination and the opportunity to make the words mean what you want them to mean and,

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[33]ibid. p. 58
[34]ibid. p. 59
[35]ibid. p. 60

therefore, the chance to almost write a poem yourself by interpreting the words'[36]. Thus, in two important ways *Jabberwocky* works something like a linguistic Rorschach blot, inviting such personalised projections—both into the meaning of the narrative itself, and, more significantly, on to language as a medium. Something of the functioning of language *per se* is foregrounded here, and something is said, in particular, about the relationship of the speaker to the utterance. Pietropinto makes this point quoting Humpty Dumpty, 'when I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less...The question is which is to be master—that's all.'[37] We can find something of this struggle for mastery in Lacan (discussed in greater depth later in this thesis), who finds that no single word has the power in itself to 'signify'—or to *mean* in Humpty Dumpty's terms—in the absence of its current usage: '...we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable'.[38]

So-called 'found poems' and art which uses *object trouvé* should be mentioned here, too. Found poetry takes existing text—words, phrases and sometimes whole passages—and by re-framing it (by making changes to layout, order etc., or by introducing additions or omissions) expresses a meaning which is novel. (Examples of the form are common in modernist writing: the Dadaists in particular make works in this way.) The re-cycling of text in this way speaks not only to the nature of our relationship with language and the poetic process in particular, but also to what opportunities found language might offer to the practice of therapy.

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[36]ibid.
[37]ibid. p. 53
[38] Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (trans.) Sheridan, Alan (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977) p. 153

In his essay 'Self-Discovery for Teacher and Youngster Through Poetry' (chapter nine of *Poetry the Healer*) Art Berger discusses his work as a poet-in-residence in inner city New York public schools. Berger concludes that poetry can do two important things for children—particularly, children labelled as 'difficult' or 'troubled': it can help them to evolve a sense of identity, and he suggests *it may help them to connect with, and organize, the external world in a way which transforms self and environment.* This is something more than simply offering a cathartic vehicle for self-expression, which is so often cited as the benefit of getting children to engage in writing.

> The quest for identity comes by painfully in preadolescence. But for black children it is compounded in a world where whiteness is the norm set up for them to emulate. Fortunately, their culture resists this, and the poetry and music provides the nurture that is lacking in the curriculum. A child who had been written off as brain-damaged and relegated to a CRMD class, came to flower when she discovered Black Power, and has been shaping her identity in writing ever since.[39]

Although Berger does not explore this transformative function in any great depth, he refers to R.D. Laing's comment that 'disturbed' behaviour is the strategy that an individual invents in order to live in an 'unlivable situation'[40].

Laing remarks:

> Behaviour in both home and school becomes a game that is played in compliance to others. What to do, say, or experience is taught, imposed from outside the body and mind. The effect of all this violence done to the growing psyche in the name of love is to seal off any inner life or fill it with terror.[41]

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[39] Berger, Art, 'Self-Discovery for Teacher and Youngster Through Poetry' chapter 4 in (Ed.) Leedy, Jack J., *Poetry the Healer* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973) p. 158
[40] Laing, R.D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Tavistock, 1960) p. 17
[41] ibid. p. 151

And for Laing, that disturbance is represented in the *nonsense poetry* of psychotic discourse, which the psychiatrist must confront with all the skill of the literary critic:

> The personalities of doctor and psychotic, no less than the personalities of expositor and author, do not stand opposed to each other [. . .]. Like the expositor the therapist must have the plasticity to transpose himself into another strange and even alien view of the world. In this act, he draws on his own psychotic possibilities, without forgoing his sanity. [42]

What Berger argues for in his chapter is the capacity of writing, of language, to allow the psyche to re-fashion the external world into forms which it can comfortably inhabit—forms which contains space for, and affirms, its individual experience. Without this space—in essence linguistic—the psyche remains imprisoned and becomes distorted, deformed, disturbed. As noted above, one of the things the current project will explore is whether or not poetic language has the capacity to refashion personal experience, and how this process is played out at an individual level.

More recent work published in *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* extends the approach taken in *Poetry the Healer* and speaks to the diversity of settings in which Poetry Therapy has since been used: in particular there has been a recent burgeoning of projects undertaken in care settings—for example, speech and language therapists in clinical contexts helping patients with aphasia regain language skills[43]. Interestingly it is in the field of medicine— in the treatment of *physical* ailments—where poetry therapy, and writing therapy more widely, has had the most visible impact: notable examples are the use of writing groups to treat patients with dementia which is now a widespread practice. In this way poetry therapy is now entering the

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[42] ibid. p. 36

[43] Shafi, Noel and Carozza, Linda (2011) 'Poetry and Aphasia: A Clinical Outlook', in *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 24(4) pp. 1-5

mainstream. A selection of the research generated by this surge of interest from the medical field is discussed below.

2. Theoretical Approaches to Writing as Therapy

In *Psychology and Alchemy*[44] Carl Jung makes the following comment on the relationship between human psychological processes and what may be defined as the *poetic mode*—that is discourse which foregrounds the metaphorical and figurative aspects of language:

> Myth is the primordial language natural to [psychic] processes, and no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery. Such processes are concerned with the primordial images, and these are best expressed in figurative language'[45].

For Jung, the poetic is a fundamental of our psychic structure. Through symbol and fantasy the conscious mind locates and negotiates unconscious material, constructing in consciousness a representational landscape which the psyche inhabits, internally and, crucially, socially. At its conclusion this process results in the individual finding, 'out what it is that supports him when he can no longer support himself'.[46] More globally, Jung asserts that, 'every dawning act of consciousness is a creative act'.[47]

Similarly, Freud makes the case for the creation of images in dreams as a fundamental operation of the psyche ('It is essential...for the inner life'), going on to connect dreaming with the possibility of engendering more concrete creative acts in wakefulness ('for just as they create dreams, they may one day create other things'). While less esoteric than Jung, Freud himself had a profound and longstanding interest in the role of symbolization and the figurative, attested to by the collection of classical figures he kept in a room adjacent to the one he consulted in. These feature in the imagist writer H.D.'s

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[44] Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy* (London: Routledge, 1953; 2nd edition 1989)
[45] ibid. p. 27
[46] ibid. p. 27-8
[47] ibid. p. 28

account of her analysis, *Tribute to Freud*.[48] Here she describes Freud using figurative images as part of the therapy:

> I did not always know if the Professor's excursions with me into the other room were by way of distraction, actual social occasions, or part of his plan. Did he want to find out how I would react to certain ideas embodied in these little statues, or how deeply I felt the dynamic idea still implicit in spite of the fact that ages or aeons of time had flown over them?
> ...
> If it was a game, a sort of roundabout way of finding out something that perhaps my unconscious guard or censor was anxious to keep from him, well, I would do my best to play this game.[49]

The manipulation of representations in language lies at the heart of the analysis. In H.D.'s memoir the play of free association in the narrative displays elements of the metonymic displacements Freud observes in the dreamwork. We see this happening in the following passage:

> Sigmund, the singing voice; no, it is Siegmund really, the victorious mouth or voice or utterance. There was Victory, our sign on the wall, our hieroglyph, our writing. There was the tiny bronze, his favorite among the semicircle of the Gods or as "other people read: Goods" on his table. There was Nike, Victory, and Nike A-pteros, the Wingless Victory, for Victory could never, would never fly away from Athens...a city set on a hill; hill, mountain; there was Bergasse, the hill, Berg, and the path or street or way, gasse'.[50]

Following Freud, Jacques Lacan describes the unconscious as being, 'structured like a language' and his account of human development is predicated upon the acquisition of language—or what Lacan describes as the *entry into language*. For Lacan, when the developing child enters into language a connection to a reality which is unmediated by the social meanings and processes encoded in language is lost irredeemably; simply put, at the 'mirror stage', when the child recognises its image in the mirror as a coherent whole (what had been previously experienced as parts through its physical

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[48] H.D. *Tribute to Freud* (1st Ed. 1956); cited (New York: New Directions, 1984)
[49] ibid. p. 73
[50] ibid. p. 80

interactions with the environment) the child itself becomes an image—a linguistic 'signifier'—which is part of the 'signifying chain' of language and fully enmeshed with its social semiotic. This is the key development from Freud's understanding of the figurative: that is, the relationship we see in (for example) dream imagery is not between image and mental 'object' (signifier and signified) but rather between image and image (signifier and signifier); this is the signifying chain): [in The Interpretation of Dreams] Freud shows us in every possible way that the value of the image itself has nothing to do with its signification[51]

This means that language assumes the primary place in the psychological process of making meaning, and the structuring of the psyche itself . And it is a short step to see how poetry might figure in the therapeutic space: 'one has only to listen to poetry...for a polyphony to be heard, for it to be heard that all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score.'[52]

In the essay 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud'[53] Lacan makes the role of metonymy clear by giving the example of 'thirty sails' as a designation for '30 ships': 'by which we see that the connexion between ship and sail is nowhere but in the signifier, and that it is in the word-to-word connexion that metonymy is based...so that meaning can emerge there.' [54] This word-to-word connection is what we see in H.D.'s account, above.

[51] Lacan, J. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 153
[52] ibid. p. 148
[53] Lacan, Jacques, (1957) 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud' collected in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 146-178
[54] ibid. p. 156

More recent theorists have worked liminally with psychoanalysis and language. Julia Kristeva locates herself at the juncture of psychoanalysis and linguistics—and she coins the term *semiotic rhythm* to indicate how the psyche operates in language. The semiotic is associated with the rhythms, tones and movement of signification in the discharge of psychic drives; it is fundamental to the function of the psyche and (as in Lacan) involved in bodily processes. Kristeva distinguishes between the semiotic and the symbolic (fixed linguistic symbols). Kristeva's semiotic is closely related to the infantile pre-Oedipal referred to in the works of Freud, Otto Rank, Melanie Klein, British Object Relation psychoanalysis, and the Lacanian (pre-mirror stage); it is an emotional field, tied to the instincts, which dwells in the fissures and prosody of language rather than in the denotative meanings of words. In this sense the semiotic *opposes* the symbolic, 'which correlates words with meaning in a stricter, mathematical sense.' In her influential essay 'The Ethics of Linguistics'[55] she makes clear that poetry is central to its operation writing, '[language is] a heterogeneous process, with the speaking subject leaving its imprint on the dialectic between its articulation and its process. In short, this [establishes] poetic language as the object of linguistics' attention'.[56] In Kristeva's model, 'poetry is a practice of the speaking subject consequently implying a dialectic between limits'[57]; in other words, through poetry the psyche engages in a process of 'self-expression' and exploration within the figurative parameters of language.

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[55] Kristeva, Julia,23-35 (1974) 'The Ethics of Linguistics' collected in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1st Ed.1977); cited (New York: Columbia, 1980) pp.
[56] ibid. p. 24
[57] ibid. p. 26

Jacqueline Rose writes in the space between psychoanalysis and literary criticism. Rose's approach is not the meta-textual one of Kristeva, but rather addresses itself to the individual poem and is frequently couched as textual criticism—or *close reading.* Writing in the introduction to her collection of essays *On Not Being Able to Sleep*[58] she comments on the capacity of literature to function as a 'supplement' to psychoanalysis, 'as in Freud's own suggestion that we should look to the poets when he stalls'. Creative writers have, she suggests, the ability to 'put flesh on what happens to a mind when it really slips its own moorings or spins too far out of control'[59], resulting in a deeper, more subtle, exposition of the process than is available to conventional psychoanalytical methods. In testimony to this point, Rose includes close readings of poems by Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich and others in this collection of essays which, 'place the act of writing in a realm between uncertainty and meaning'[60].

The person-centred view of writing as a therapeutic tool is less theoretical and more practice-focus than psychoanalytic accounts; in keeping with the person-centred approach, it is the act of creating (which lies with the creator) which is of value, not the product of that process or its interpretation (specifically by the therapist). Person-centred therapy has tended to define the therapeutic contribution of writing in terms of its *expressive* capacity: that is, in its ability to promote personal growth and healing through allowing unexpressed emotions to be 'spoken' by the client, perhaps for the first time. Natalie Rogers writes in her book *The Creative Connection*[61] 'we are not

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[58] Rose, J. *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003)
[59] ibid. p. 52
[60] ibid. p. 64
[61] Rogers, Natalie *The Creative Connection: The Expressive Arts and Healing* (Paolo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1993)

concerned about the aesthetics or craftsmanship' of the writing, 'we use the arts to let go, to express or to release'[62]. Carl Rogers expressed an interest in the creative capacity of the client as early as 1954 in his influential paper 'Toward a Theory of Creativity'[63] in which the creative process is defined as the 'emergence in action of a novel relational process'[64] between the individual and their environment; the creative impulse is seen as self-actualizing and arises out of a personal need to give symbolic expression to inner experience. Creative expression also gives rise to the possibility of being able to manipulate or toy with thoughts and concepts and is in this way instrumental developing a satisfactory relationship between self and environment. In the person-centred approach, self-actualization is defined as: 'the curative force in psychotherapy—man's tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities... to express and activate all the capacities of the organism.'[65] The person-centred approach maintains a basic trust that within all individuals there is a fundamental drive towards growth, and towards the expression of self.

As noted above, Natalie Rogers has worked extensively in the area of creative expression. Drawing on her father's work, she states her basic premise, 'part of the therapeutic process is to awaken the creative life-force energy. Thus, creativity and therapy overlap. What is creative is frequently therapeutic'[66]. While this idea is present in many—if not most—of the therapeutic modalities (for example, psychoanalysis uses the terms abreaction and catharsis to describe the release of psychic energies, while Gestalt speaks of *completion*)

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[62]ibid. p. 34
[63] Rogers, Carl R., (1954) 'Toward a Theory of Creativity', *A Review of General Semantics* Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 249-260
[64] ibid. p. 253
[65] ibid. p. 254
[66] Rogers, Natalie *The Creative Connection: The Expressive Arts and Healing* (Paolo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1993), p. 66

what is particular to the person-centred approach is the stance taken towards the individual/client, and it is this which pertains in the writing workshops for this project: in person-centred practice the growth of the self through therapy is a self-directed process, in which the therapist's role is to be non-directive and to be led by the client; in crude terms, clients choose what they write and how they write about it, and the kind of therapist interpretation of what is written common to psychoanalytic approaches is avoided. Natalie Rogers suggests that there are clear theoretical reasons behind taking such an approach, which is likely to augment what creativity brings to the therapeutic process: that is, in allowing the individual to lead the way is opened for the individual's intuitive knowledge about self—which may not otherwise be available to consciousness, and thus to the therapist—to be marshalled; 'involving the mind, the body, and the emotions brings forth the client's intuitive, imaginative abilities as well as logical, linear though'[67]. The integrative force of intuition and cognition brings about the therapeutic benefit of the approach.

Although the psychoanalytic approach is clearly suited—and has been widely applied—to the analysis of writing, interestingly most of the *clinical* research done in this area (that is, research which uses creative writing in therapeutic settings) has been *humanistic*. A possible explanation for this is that the humanistic modalities, and the person-centred approach is notable in this regard, provide a context in which individual expression is respected and prioritised as a medium for personal growth—as Natalie Rogers makes clear, above.

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[67] ibid.

3. The Research Evidence

There is a substantial literature which discusses the use of 'expressive writing' for therapeutic purposes. Broadly, these studies fall into three categories: outcome focused studies; process-orientated studies, which address and attempt to explain the forces at work when clients write therapeutically; and case studies which focus on trauma as the key mechanism for the laying down of unhelpful and unhealthy mental images, which must be re-fashioned through the therapeutic process, and is fundamentally to do with the relationship between the psyche and language itself.

3.1 Outcome-based Studies

In reviewing the literature, a useful starting point is Heimes 'State of Poetry Therapy Research (review)'[68] which presents a summary and overview of poetry therapy research to 2010. Heimes finds that most research has been conducted in the US, 'in the fields of psychiatry and psychology'[69]; however, there is some evidence that other areas of practice (social work, oncology, nursing) are generating work which points to wider applications[70]. Research output peaks in the period 1999 to 2010, indicating that interest in using poetry therapeutically is growing and becoming more established (evidence-based studies see an increase in this period, too). Heimes concludes that this may be because of an emerging trend which, 'continuously brings to light new aspects of poetry therapy and has paved the way for poetry therapy to now be seen as a holistic, interdisciplinary treatment method[71]. Unsurprisingly, most

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[68] Heimes, S., (2011) 'State of Poetry Therapy Research (review)' *The Arts in Psychotherapy* Volume 38, Issue 1, pp. 1-8
[69] Ibid. p. 3
[70] Heimes, Silke, *Why Writing Helps: Efficacy Studies in Poetry Therapy* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012)
[71] Heimes, S., (2011) 'State of Poetry Therapy Research (review)' *The Arts in Psychotherapy* Volume 38, Issue 1, p. 7

of the work reported by Heimes are evidence-based studies which focus on improvements in functioning—such as coming to terms with life-threatening illness, improving family relations, the reduction of alcohol dependency[72]. In terms of the present thesis, in which the processes of writing and the writers' relationship to the work is foregrounded, these studies are of little interest beyond establishing the forms research into the therapeutic uses of poetry have taken thus far.

McArdle[73] brings together a number of more general studies and finds, 'the use of writing to [enables] people with mental health problems to enjoy and express themselves, develop creativity and empowerment, affirm identity and give voice to views and experiences (Campbell 1992, Kane 1992, Bolton 1999)'.[74] Further exploration of the literature indicates a number of ways in which 'expressive writing' might be helpful. It may: increase interest in the outside world by freeing clients from excessive and distressing preoccupations,[75] enable the exploration and understanding of fantasies and problem,[76] promote the exploration and understanding of fantasies and problems[77], and increase insight[78], self-awareness[79] and adaptive and healthy

[72] Heimes, S., (2011) 'State of Poetry Therapy Research (review)' *The Arts in Psychotherapy* Volume 38, Issue 1, p. 2

[73] McArdle, S. et al (2001) 'Fiction, poetry and mental health: expressive and therapeutic uses of literature' *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* Vol. 8 Issue 6, pp. 517-524

[74] ibid. pp. 518-9

[75] Gersie, Alida and King, Nancy, *Storymaking in Education and Therapy* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1990)

[76] Remocker, Jane and Sherwood, Elizabeth T. *Action Speaks Louder: A Handbook of Structured Group Techniques* (New York: Churchill Livingstone, 1999)

[77] McGarry T.J. and Prince M., (1998) 'Implementation of Groups for Creative Expression on a Psychiatric Inpatient Unit', *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing* 36(3) pp. 19-24.

[78] Wenz, K., & McWhirter, J. J. (1990). Enhancing the group experience: Creative writing exercises. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 15*(1), 37-42.

[79] Gersie, Alida and King, Nancy, *Storymaking in Education and Therapy* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1990)

functioning[80]. McArdle concludes that while, 'various benefits have been described', for the most part, 'accounts do not include evidence of clinical effectiveness' and further work on outcomes is needed to establish the effectiveness of this approach.[81]

Nevertheless, a recent meta-study demonstrated that writing therapy constitutes a useful treatment alternative for patients who do not respond to other evidence-based treatments, resulting in significant and substantial short-term reductions in post-traumatic symptoms (PTS) and co-morbid depressive symptoms[82] For this work six prior studies which met eligibility criteria were identified and included in the analyses; these existing studies included a total of 633 participants, of which 304 were assigned to writing therapy and the rest to a 'waiting list' control group. As noted, the writing group experienced significantly better outcomes than the control; however, there was no difference in efficacy between writing therapy and trauma-focused cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

The paucity of evidence-based outcomes studies may be due to the fact that such an approach does not fit well with the ethos and practice of expressive writing therapy, and I will not focus on such studies here other than to mention them. Most of the literature takes the form of small-scale case studies and discusses outcomes of individuals and is interested in the process of writing and the experiences of writers, rather than the objective measurement

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[80] Torem, M.S., (1993) 'Therapeutic Writing as a Form of Ego-state Therapy', *The American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 35(4) pp. 267-276

[81] McArdle, S. et al (2001) 'Fiction, poetry and mental health: expressive and therapeutic uses of literature' *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* Vol. 8 Issue 6, p. 519

[82] van Emmerik, (2012) 'Writing Therapy for Posttraumatic Stress', *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics 82(2),* pp. 82-88

of the overall efficacy of the practice. The current study, too, takes this approach and will consider how individual writers taking part in the therapeutic poetry group interact with and respond to writing creatively. It may be that this approach will ultimately lead to more subtle measurement tools which will be able to quantify and identify outcomes and key processes and form the basis for future investigations. However, the area of study for this project will be 'process' as opposed to 'outcomes'.

3.2 Process-orientated Studies

Of greater interest are studies which give an insight into the processes and forms of writing which are produced in the therapeutic setting, and there are a number of these—it is also interesting to note that can be found across modalities. In this vein is Holmes' 'The Language of Psychotherapy: Metaphor, Ambiguity and Wholeness'[83]. This paper argues that psychoanalysis and poetry are related disciplines, which can shed light on each other, because 'both communicate mostly by metaphor'. In this essay Holmes cites Langer[84] who puts forward the position that psychoanalysis can in fact only 'make sense' as a process if it is understood that the analysand is engaged in a poetic process ('my aim is to show that psychoanalysis does make sense, not common sense perhaps, but poetic sense'[85]); Langer uses the term 'presentational symbolism' to describe the kind of personal, metaphorical language typically used by the analysand. Holmes looks at Robert Lowell's 'Waking in the Blue' (in which the poet describes a stay as a psychiatric in-

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[83] Holmes, J. (2004) 'The Language of Psychotherapy: Metaphor, Ambiguity and Wholeness' *British Journal of Psychotherapy* Volume 21, Issue 2, pp. 209-226
[84] Langer, Marie (1951) 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth', *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* VII, 1949-1950, pp. 3-9
[85] Cited in Holmes, J. (2004) 'The Language of Psychotherapy: Metaphor, Ambiguity and Wholeness' *British Journal of Psychotherapy* Volume 21, Issue 2, p p. 204

patient), in the context of Langer who uses literary/linguistic analysis to reveal elements of the experience which are communicated in symbolic form. Reading is compared to the process and experience of analysis:

> The reader must enter a state similar to that required in 'listening with the third ear (Reik 1948) to a psychotherapeutic session: free-floating attention, a state of active receptiveness, or, negative capability, in which a meaning can emerge—evoked by, but not the same as, the surface or factual meaning. In the poem, an artefact, each image is chosen to evoke these deeper meanings, and is the end result of a previous selection by the poet from his own consciousness. In the psychotherapeutic session the therapist and patient together have to learn to select out the significant thoughts, images and feelings and separate them out from the less meaningful.[86]

What is important about Holmes' paper in terms of the current study is that it speaks to the potential of the poetic mode to represent what is, perhaps, a deeper level of experience than can be rendered by common speech; it is this that I am interested in exploring in the writing generated in groups contributing to this study. Reik's *Listening with the Third Ear: The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst*[87]—which is also discussed by Holmes (2004)—similarly speaks to the operation of poetry in the therapeutic setting by bringing in the idea of the magic spell:

> The kingdom of the psychologist is not of this world, not material reality. When conflicts arose in the mind of primitive man, when his wishes remained unfulfilled, he tried to master them by projecting their power into the external world, into lightning and thunder, rain and fire. He used magic and spells; he became a sorcerer…[88]

Without having to enter into the realm of the supernatural, culturally spells are essentially, transformative linguistic acts—and in this way can be included in a consideration of the role of language in the 'talking' therapies,

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[86] Langer, S.K. *Philosophy in a New Key A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1951), cited in ibid. p. 212
[87] Reik, T. *Listening with the Third Ear: the inner experience of a psychoanalyst* (Oxford: Farrar Strauss, 1948)
[88] ibid. p. 17

particularly in relation to the role of poetic language in the therapeutic process (this is an idea which I explore in greater depth in chapter six of this thesis). Reik makes the point here that spell-making is fundamental to what the human mind does. In fact—despite distancing himself somewhat from the esoteric in Jung—Freud makes a similar point:

> A layman will no doubt find it hard to understand how pathological disorders of the body and mind can be eliminated by 'mere' words. He will feel that he is being asked to believe in magic. And he will not be so very wrong, for the words which we use in our everyday speech are nothing other than watered-down magic. But we shall have to follow a roundabout path in order to explain how science sets about restoring to words a part at least of their former magical power.[89]

Humanistic studies tend to be first-person narrative accounts by therapists focussing on qualitative outcomes; for example, Seizer and Solka[90] report the case of a client with 'burnout syndrome' who 'attained better self-perception and self-knowledge through poetry therapy so as to cope with everyday life more easily'. In contrast, psychoanalytic studies tend to be more technical : Holmes approaches analytic discourse from the perspective of linguistics and finds 'transference...is a special type of metaphor' and notes that, 'ambiguity is...an intrinsic aspect of aesthetic language'.[91]

3.3 The Trauma Literature

As noted above, expressive writing and the writing of poetry in particular, may be useful in processing traumatic experiences; this is because it allows traumatic material to be dealt with 'at a distance', and also because it offers the possibility of re-organizing and re-casting traumatic memories and images

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[89] Freud, S. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1st Ed. 1905); (trans. James Strachey).(New York: Basic Books, 1962)
[90] Seizer, R. and Solka, P. (2008) 'Writing the Self', *Journal of Writing as Therapy*, Volume 47, pp. 31-39
[91] Holmes, J. (2004) 'The Language of Psychotherapy: Metaphor, Ambiguity and Wholeness' British Journal of Psychotherapy Volume 21, p. 220

in narratives in which transform them—and crucially the writer retains a high degree of conscious control in this process.

In terms of the literature on trauma, *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Chronic Traumatization*[92] is a key text. In this extensive and scholarly work the authors argue that, 'the essence of trauma is structural dissociation of the personality'.[93] Structural dissociation is defined as, 'a particular organization in which different psychobiological subsystems of the personality are unduly rigid and closed to each other'.[94] More simply, they argue that when an individual becomes traumatized—by a single trauma or by multiple traumatic events—a part or parts of the personality become shut off from the normal everyday personality which deals with the world, what the authors term the apparently normal personality (ANP). These shut-off parts become shut-off because the memories and emotions that they contain are too painful or frightening for the ANP to deal with; shutting them out is a defence strategy which attempts to make the ANP safe from the material which they carry. These shut-off parts are termed the emotional personalities (EPs). The EPs carry the emotions pertaining to the trauma, and in this way remain 'stuck' in a developmental sense. Problems arise for the traumatized person when the material carried by the EPs bleeds into the awareness of the ANP—which invariably occurs—causing significant disruption in terms of feeling and behaviour. At its most severe the tendency to dissociate results in full-blown dissociative identity disorder and the creation of alters (multiple personalities) with little or no awareness of each other; however this is only the extreme and the authors of *The*

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[92] van der Hart, O. *et al*., *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Chronic Traumatization* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006)
[93] ibid. p. vii
[94] ibid.

Haunted Self suggest that dissociation in fact has a wide spectrum, and what is seen more frequently is, 'a host of common and pathological alterations of consciousness'.[95]   That is, pathological alterations of consciousness—the unwarranted and unwanted feelings and responses of trauma—are commonly experienced in traumatized person, and may not be recognised as 'altered states' as such. In this way the self is seen as haunted by the experiences it has had and carries.

The authors of *The Haunted Self* take the work of Pierre Janet—who was an important influence on Freud—as their starting point. Janet posits a model of psychological development in which the individual moves through stages of functioning of increasing sophistication; trauma is seen as short-circuiting this process, causing the individual to become 'stuck'. Developing their approach from Janet, the authors of *The Haunted Self* posit a *phased* approach to the treatment of dissociation which seeks to assist the individual in integrating the stuck parts into the whole (the ANP), which functions at a higher level. Without going into further depth of what is an extensive and complex treatment model, what I want to suggest at this point is that there are clear parallels between the processes involved in the integration of dissociated material and what often occurs when people write creatively. Many writers have described the experience of *speaking from another self,* or part of the self, and of being surprised by the material which appears through the process of writing. I believe this is what is being described when writers speak of 'the muse' or similar and is something I will touch on in chapter two which looks at the process of poets who write *professionally*.

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[95] ibid. p. viii

What the trauma literature indicates overall is a move towards using expressive writing as an intervention with individuals suffering from PTSD. As an example, Springer[96] finds that writing poetry is helpful not only for such clients but also helps the therapists working with them—to avoid absorbing the hurt and traumatic feelings these clients carry. Penny Parks[97] has developed a way of working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse which uses creative writing to construct narratives which re-fashion traumatic experience in empowering the 'victim' and helping them to overcome the effects of abuse.

All of the studies which focus on trauma indicate that the effect of using writing as therapy is not simply cathartic; rather, what is involved is the structured exploration, transformation and eventual integration of traumatic material. Again, this will be explored more fully in later chapters.

The UEA Poetry/Therapy Groups

In the Spring and Summer of 2013 I ran two consecutive 8-week poetry therapy groups with students at the University of East Anglia. In recruiting for the groups I was keen to avoid having entire cohorts comprised of participants who wrote regularly, participated in other writing groups and were generally very confident in writing and reading poetry. Given the University has a strong reputation for its creative writing and literature programmes, recruiting an entire group of *writerly* students was a real concern: to counter this I was careful to invite each potential participant to a

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[96] Springer, W. (2006) 'Poetry in Therapy: A Way to Heal for Trauma Clients and Clients in Recovery from Addiction' *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 19, pp. 69-81
[97] Parks, P. *Rescuing the Inner Child: Therapy for Adults Sexually Abused as Children* (London: Souvenir Press, 1990)

pre-group interview in which I stressed that it was the *process* of writing I was interested in, not the *product*, and that this would be a very different experience from a poetry workshop or seminar. The reason I gave (to myself) at the time was that I did not want students who would put a distance between themselves and the therapeutic element of writing in favour of aesthetics. On reflection, I think this was simply a bias of mine against recruiting the kind of *arty* upper middle-class English and American white girls I remembered populating UEA writing classes when I was an undergraduate. In the event, this was both an unfair judgement and fundamentally *wrong*: there were a few such girls in both groups, but in the end their process—in terms of their engagement with their worries and emotional *baggage*—was no less powerful and no less profound than others. This in itself was a learning point both for me and for the therapist colleague I co-facilitated the sessions with. Although all of the participants were female—something which is noteworthy although I am choosing not to explore here—I did managed to recruit two groups of students with a mix of experiences and interests; and in fact, both groups displayed quite a lot of diversity— in terms of age, academic discipline and programme of study, experience of writing, nationality and facility with the English language. In both groups there were a few British and American literature/creative writing majors in their late teens, interested in writing poetry as a means of self-expression and keen to share their work; however such students were balanced by others from the sciences, who had never written before, largely postgraduates and international students from Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. We also had mature students, some of whom were part-time. In fact, the mix provoked not only *balance* but a genuine cross-fertilisation of ideas and writing practice.

Each session followed a fixed format, although I varied the exercises, I introduced week-by-week—this was done largely in response to what had occurred the week before. The standard format for a two-hour session was this:

1. *check in*—a round-robin with each participant saying how they were feeling today. Sometimes I asked them to choose a figure or postcard which matched the feeling, to give them a starting-point for talk;
1. *group writing exercise*—a quick 'warm up exercise' to encourage sharing and to support less confident/experienced writers in the group to get over any inhibitions about writing;
2. *individual writing exercise*—usually this was an extension of the group exercise, or an exploration of a theme or an idea emerging in the group that day;
3. *sharing writing*—participants were invited to share anything they had written in the session or at home with the whole group;
4. *check out*—another round robin with participants sharing how they were feeling at the end of the group.

In practice, while we always did the *check in* and *check out* the format did change somewhat from week-to-week depending on what was 'brought' to the session by the participants themselves. These functioned as 'bookends' to hold the boundaries of the therapeutic space and to allow me to find out how participants *were*. This proved to be a very important element of the process as, as the weeks unfolded, group members began to bring quite difficult or psychologically deep material into discussions and writing; the 'safety net' of the group was increased by myself and the therapist colleague I ran the groups with being available by email, by appointment outside of the sessions and at the end of each workshop—to allow space for any unresolved issues to be talked through. In the main, though, the group itself and the support participants gave each other turned out to be its own *safety* and in this the group process was at least as important in a therapeutic sense as the writing itself.

As an example of the group process in action, one week during check-in a participant (a mature postgraduate student) said she was feeling 'not good' because it was the twentieth anniversary of her brother's suicide. As the check-in went around the room, other group members started to talk about important losses they had experienced: moving to a new country, the death of a grandparent, a relationship break-up, the death of a pet. Although the experiences were diverse, what emerged during talk was a profound sense of *empathy* with the first speaker; *loss* emerged from the group process as a dominant theme. While individual members developed the theme of loss in their own way in writing done subsequently, in the initial *moment* of the check-in what was shared was a collective sense of sadness and absence.

What followed from this at the individual level was that the participant who had experienced the loss of her brother went through a process of *transforming* her relationship to the event through writing a series of poems over a period of three weeks. When she first spoke of his suicide in the check-in, she expressed a deep sense of anger directed towards her brother—and a concomitant sense of having to defend herself against 'sad feelings' about his death. In the first poem (written immediately after the session in which she first talked about it) she sees herself as a heavily-armoured figure engaged in a process of *laying down* her arms:

> I put down my axe, my hammer
> take off my shield and unbutton my breastplate
> I lay all of these things down
> on the ground
> I lay down my fury, and my spite…

At the next group session, I gave each member a postcard and asked them to write a brief message to someone (alive or dead—real or imagined) they

wanted to communicate something to. This led to the participant writing a second poem, this time directly addressed to her brother:

> Dear ___,
> I promise this Easter I will rise
> Up through Heaven
> To shake your hand
> Kiss your cheek
> Smile in your eyes *blue blue
> Choose now your next life
> But you must promise me
> To live longer than 33 and never
>   buy a gun

After this session, she then wrote a third poem—entitled 'Resurrection'—in which the relationship with her brother and his death is fully transfigured in the imagery of the writing:

> …how has the last crying sage, rosemary and bay just vanished?
> My garden begins to bear witness to a new spring
> But deep within the cold dark soil still lies silent.
> Should I dig deeper down to where my brother waits
> With golden flowers in his hair?
> Awaken & lead him out once more
> Towards the sun?
> He can rest upon my back.
> His wings are soft enough.

Here she blends reflection on the time of year (it was Easter) with reflecting on her developing feelings to arrive at an image in which she can integrate the death of her brother into a fuller set of feelings which include sadness at the loss and a deep sense of *caring* for him; through her use of images, she figuratively *digs him up* and carries him forward with her, on her *back.* Speaking of the process of writing, this participant said that she felt her brother 'had been returned' to her in a way which allowed her to move past her feelings of anger and to allow herself to 'remember' in a fuller way.

Another participant used the *postcard* exercise as a simple, cathartic expression of emotion:

> F**ck you, you bastards
> You never listened while I spoke
> Not once
> I was a nothing

The use of asterisks her—which are not mine—is interesting to note: this participant was not comfortable with using swearwords—and this was connected to an habitual avoidance of expressing anger or strong feeling openly—and yet here the *postcard* allows for this very brief flash of fury to be given voice. This particular participant, who was also dealing with chronic illness, went on in to write a 'letter' to her doctor (who had made her feel disempowered and afraid) which she read in the following week's session, in which she very powerfully voiced what she felt towards him and her condition. When she read the letter out, the effect on the group was marked and profound—one participant burst into tears because the piece was so emotionally moving.

A mature international student used the *postcard* exercise to open up a dialogue with her father:

> Dad -
> Exploring every flower
> Every plant
> Looked after small hamster on field near our house
> Waking with you every day
> Holding your small finger
> Smiling together to sun
> Discuss about philosophy
> Seeing love in your eyes
> I miss that a lot…

The simple imagery and word-choice of this piece reflects the fact that this participant—recently arrived from Poland—was still struggling to master English. The effect of this, however—which she discussed in group talk—

was to cause her to focus on using 'childish' words to express herself, which in turn brought her closer to her child-self which informs the feeling of the poem. This participant went on to share that she had left a violent marriage and 'escaped' to England with her children; she also disclosed that she had been sexually abused as a child by a friend of the family, and this had caused a rift between herself and her father. She said that writing this poem had allowed her to remember 'happy times' and encouraged her—subsequently—to contact her family in Poland to try and repair the rift. The effect of writing in English gave her a 'new space' to review her emotions, devoid of the baggage that thinking and writing in Polish carried with it. In essence, she was returned to 'childishness' in English—in that she was forced to be simple and direct—and new thoughts about old experiences were therefore free to emerge.

The more practiced writers I was concerned about—the *English lit girls*—did produce work which was more self-consciously mannered as in the piece below. Largely their process in writing was one of self-fashioning with regard to their feelings and thoughts and images are selected more for the effects they create rather than the degree to which they match *feelings*:

I am a moon
Rising from the east
Spilling moonlight softly

I am a sun singing
Rising from
Old jazz songs on a Sunday

I am a mockingbird
Rising up against the window
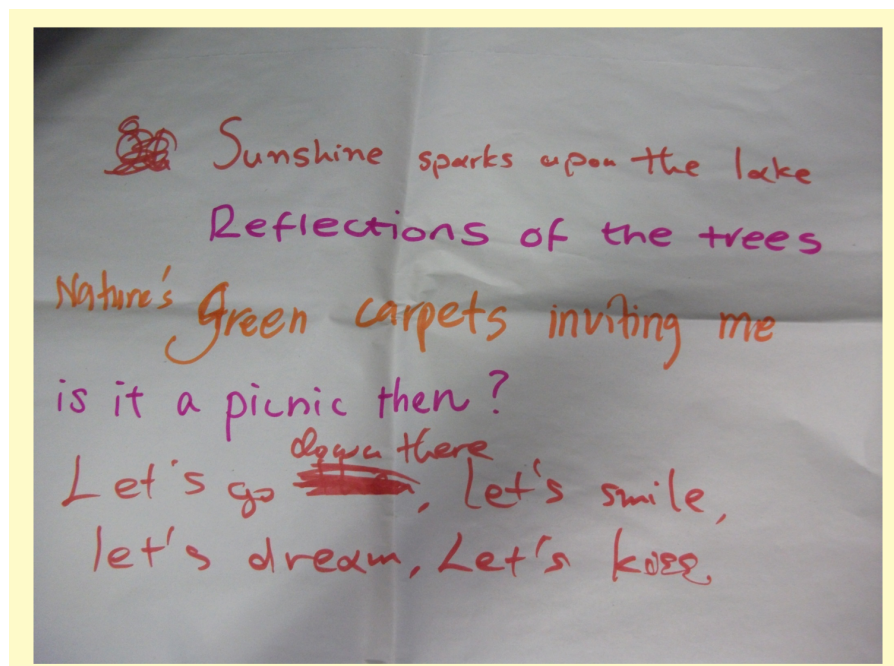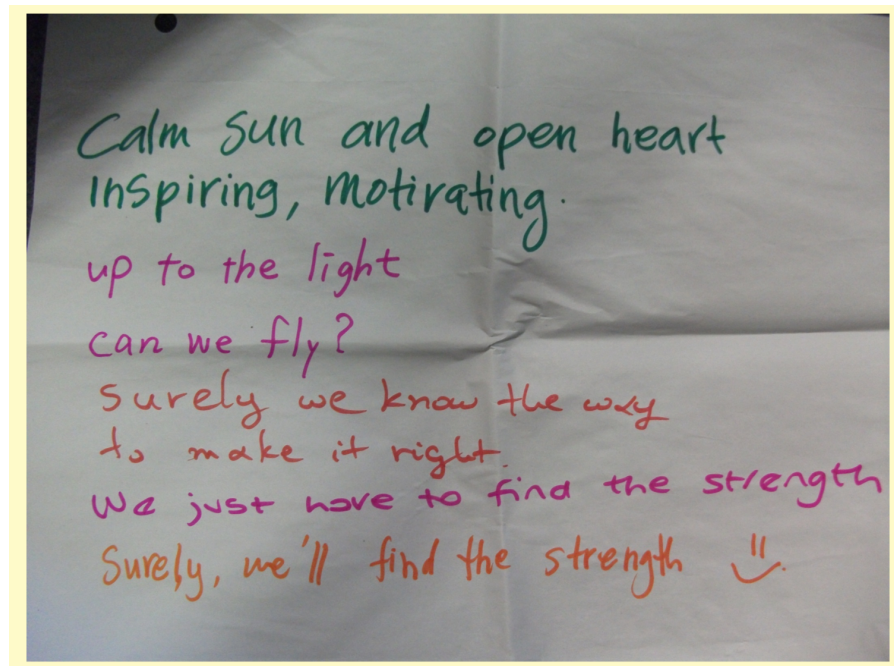Acting like you in August

Although a first reading of this piece suggests that any genuine feeling in the poem is struggling against a weight of artifice, the effect of reading it to the group and the following discussion was somewhat more profound: this participant said that she was consciously trying to focus on things that made her feel 'happy' because she was depressed—being dumped by her boyfriend had caused old feelings of worthlessness to resurface, and she was currently feeling overwhelmed by them. Reading the poem allowed her to introduce these feelings to the group and provided a starting-point for a very supportive conversation to occur. Similarly, with this piece by another participant—an American exchange student—the artifice evident in the initial writing was overcome through the group talk which followed:

> I'm afraid to write
> I wish I could scrawl I
> In invisible ink
> Put the words out there
> Test them against the universe
> And let them draw back
> into the page
> Before their sentiment
> Cements itself as truth
> And turns creeping thoughts real.

This participant used the reading of her poem to the group to open up into talking about her experiences of 'social phobia'—which had gotten worse since being in the UK—and in particular a panic attack she had experienced on a recent trip to Paris. In both cases something about the *artifice* of the original writing had made the feelings distant enough so they were now 'safe' to talk about. Whilst this may run against the idea of poetry being therapeutic as a direct way of *expressing* experience, here we can see how writing can contribute a *distancing effect* which puts emotion at one (safe) remove. And in both cases, it was the group-talk process which was foregrounded in the

process of emotionally *working-through* the experiences introduced in this way, in writing.

There were many instances of participants—and the group as a whole—wading into deep psychological waters: students shared experiences, in talk and writing, of depression, eating disorders, sexual and domestic abuse, grief and loss—and in one case, the collapse of the government and social structure in their home country which was having a profound effect on their mental health. However, much of the group process was also *playful* and light-hearted. These moments came most frequently as a result of the group writing exercises—which participants were particularly keen on and began to request. One group exercise I used was *what it is for me now*: designed initially as an ice-breaker and to get participants to feel less inhibited about writing poems, the brief was for each person to write on a piece of flip-chart paper—very quickly—the first words that came to mind. Then they would move around to the next person's piece of paper and contribute another quick line, and so on until they got back to the piece with their first line; then they had to write a concluding line, before the piece was read to the whole group. Another feature of *what it is for me now* is that it focusses participants on the present and gives a 'snapshot' of the current feelings in the room. Below are some of the products of this exercise.

Calm sun and open heart
Inspiring, motivating.
up to the light
can we fly?
Surely we know the way
to make it right.
We just have to find the strength
Surely, we'll find the strength ☺.

Sunshine sparks upon the lake
Reflections of the trees
Nature's Green carpets inviting me
is it a picnic then?
Let's go down there, let's smile,
let's dream, Let's kiss.

Participants reported that they liked this exercise because it made them feel 'happy thoughts' and that they were with 'friends' in the groups. While this is perhaps not the profoundest of emotional revelations, it was in fact the sense of supportive 'collegiality' which allowed the group to feel *safe* enough for them to be able to explore more sensitive terrain subsequently. Another

group exercise invited participants to investigate 'movement words' and to relate them to current feelings:
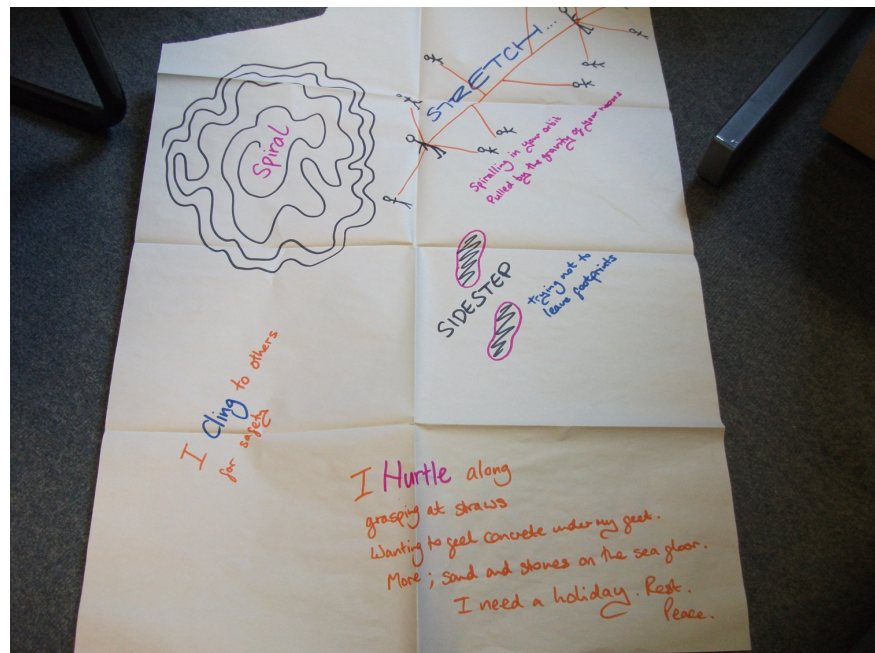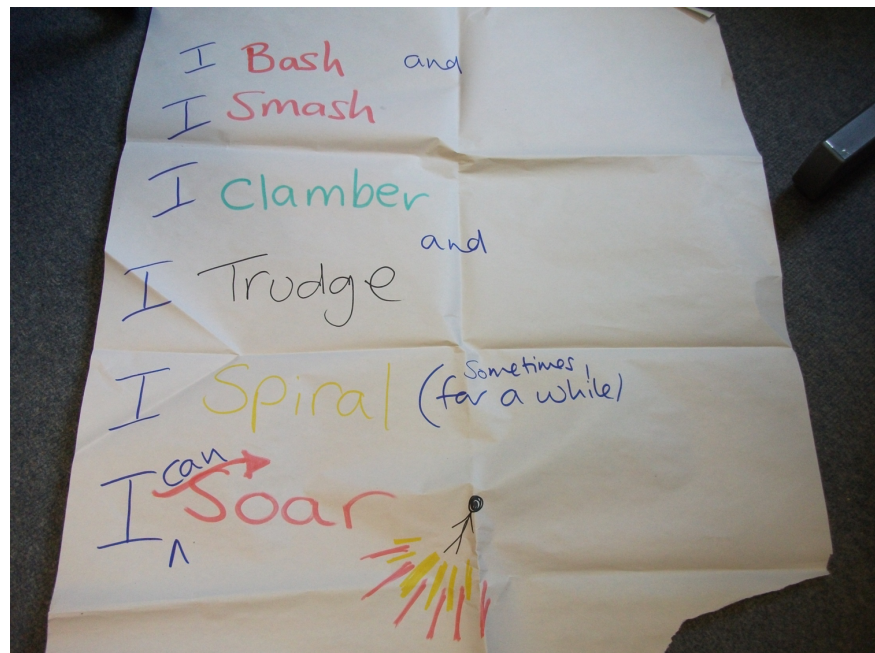
The purpose of this exercise was to 'loosen' participants' experience of using language *poetically* through asking them to contribute and explore single words. During this exercise it was interesting to observe participants making physical movements—hopping and spinning—while suggesting words. Play,

then, was a way of establishing a group bond and in inviting 'in-the-moment' feelings to be captured in words. One thing that really facilitates the therapeutic process in writing is when writers manage to step aside from pre-conceived notions of what a *poem is* and work in this much freer way with the fabric of language itself. So, while the *products* of the group exercises may appear less significant than the more intricately worked individual pieces—the therapeutic aspect of such 'group play' does *signify*.

Overall, what I observed in the groups was how poetry functions *therapeutically* in a number of key ways. Firstly, language-based *play* offers a way of accessing experience which is engaging and yet safe—this is what we see in the group exercises, above. Secondly poetry offers the opportunity to *transform* experiences in profoundly helpful ways, which makes them *livable-with*: we see this very clearly marked in the sequence of poems where one participant addresses—and ultimately comes to terms with—her brother's suicide. Thirdly, writing poems makes the simple *expression* of feelings permissible—as seen in the *postcard* exercise, writing can provide a powerful conduit for communication, which carries with it the potential to develop a more powerful sense of agency and self-efficacy.

Next Steps

In this chapter I have given an overview of the field of poetry therapy, and also introduced the idea that the literature on poetry as therapy may be divided into two main groups: in the first place—which accounts for the bulk of work undertaken in this area—we have poetry used for its expressive function as a release for emotion, or a mode of connection with others; the second approach is the more *theoretical* one which initiates a discussion of what language *is*

and *does* and seeks to address *why* figurative (or poetic) language-use is psychologically affecting. In this thesis I will be exploring the relationship between poetry and therapy from both positions. Nevertheless, in this chapter what I have reported of the therapeutic workshops I ran at UEA has been the focus and has highlighted the *expressive* function of creative writing—and has demonstrated why and in what ways this was found to be psychologically therapeutic for group participants. What this brings me to now is what I have indicated to be a separation in the literature between what is considered to be *writing as therapy* and the activity of writing for aesthetic purposes—what we might term *professional poetry.*

In the next chapter I will look at how poets who write *professionally*—that is with an aesthetic rather than a therapeutic focus—are also working in similar psychological terrain in their engagement with poetry. Whilst much work has been done on the biographical details of individual poets which comments on how the life *informs* the writing, there is little to nothing on how poetry-as-poetry (as opposed to poetry-as-therapy) engages with the processes we see extant in the therapeutic writing group. One of the aims of this thesis attempts to *write into* that gap in the literature.

Chapter Two

Identity is Not in the Head: interviews with three poets

'Words taught me to fly and not to speak.
Showed me my own word shape,
built me walls and bars to keep words out
and finally gave me fire for each bridge
until I could not be reached but by birds'[98]

- Liam Aspin, 'Wirds'

"Stranger," his father answered, weeping softly,
"the land you've reached is the very one you're after"'

- Homer *The Odyssey Book 24:310-311*[99]

In the previous chapter I looked at the field of poetry therapy in the context of theories of writing and of language—and at how *amateur* writers engage with the practice of writing therapy in therapeutic writing groups. Through of a review of the literature, I also established that the majority of work in this area which is practice-orientated (i.e. gives an account of therapeutic creative writing done by specific individuals and groups) is limited to writing by *amateur writers*—that is, people not used to writing for an audience whose primary purpose is to communicate an emotional state rather than to create *art.* In what follows I will extend this exploration of the relationship between poetry and therapy into the domain of the *professional* poet/artist and consider whether we can identify therapeutic processes at play in work whose

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[98] Aspin, Liam (2000) 'Wirds' *Scintilla 4* p. 36
[99] Homer *The Odyssey* (Trans. Robert Fagles) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 477

primary purpose is aesthetic. What was also established in the previous chapter was that one thing figurative creative writing offers individuals is a way of re-configuring the world in more psychologically helpful ways. This is a key theme for this chapter: I both explore whether, and how, the professional poets interviewed engage in world-making or changing through writing, and also situate the points arising from the interview material within (predominantly) person-centred theories of creativity.

In this chapter I will explore the relationship that *professional* poets have to writing. I use the term *professional* only to distinguish between those who write solely for therapeutic or developmental reasons and those who write predominantly as a form of *art*. I want to preface what I go on to say below by saying that this is not a distinction that this thesis upholds: rather—as I will demonstrate in this chapter—in my view *all* expressive writing occurs in relation to the writer's mental health, although this is not an idea that is commonly put forward as there is a feeling that this is somehow undermining to the status of published works as *art*. I take the position that writing for therapy and writing for *art's sake* are not mutually exclusive activities. As already noted, generally a very firm line is drawn between poetry as *therapy* and poetry as *art*: the general consensus is that the former is somehow a different (or lesser) enterprise; this view is largely predicated on looking at the *outcomes* of writing—not at the process. However, in the visual arts there is a liminal space between the two areas of operation which is missing from writing on poetry: the art of children, psychiatric patients and prisoners who create art without the conventional structures of art training and art production is often categorised as outsider art.[100] Whilst this term does confirm that a

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[100] This is the *Tate Gallery* definition of 'outsider art' as it appears on their website https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/o/outsider-art

distinction is to be made between the art of the *trained* and that produced by the *amateur*, nevertheless it does make space in the canon for such works to exist and to be thought about in terms of aesthetics. In some cases *outsider artists* cross the divide and are accepted into the mainstream. For example, the painter Ken Kiff—who produced a series of works[101] chronicling his experiences in psychotherapy—is one such artist who has made this shift. Similar examples of creative writers are hard to find[102]; the boundary between what is therapy and what is art is more rigid when it comes to writing.

What I will suggest in this chapter is that the processes which occur in both types of writing—professional and amateur—are fundamentally *the same*: that is, *all poetry* offers the opportunity to facilitate personal *agency*, allows for the expression and working through of *experience*, and is fundamentally *transformative.* That is, what we observe amateur writers doing in the therapy group can also been seen in the practice of *professional* poets. Some commentators have held the view that seeing poetry in this way somehow undermines its status as *art.*[103] What I will show in this chapter is that a poet may be both trained and artistically skilled and yet nevertheless be engaging in the therapeutic functions and potentials that poetry as a broader activity offers. That is, the *process* does not affect the *product* of writing; rather, art which is psychologically informed can simultaneously be aesthetically *successful.*

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[101] Kiff, Ken (1971-2001) *The Sequence* was exhibited at The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich in 2018/19

[102] The radical feminist playwright and thinker Valerie Solanas (1936-1988), who became famous for shooting the artist Andy Warhol, is the only one that comes to mind; Solanas was diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and her work is largely read as being satirical—a reading Solanas herself disagreed with

[103] The Canadian poet Anne Carson makes this point in an interview with *The Guardian, "*I do not believe in art as therapy' (*The Guardian* 30 October 2016)

As this chapter will address *praxis,* I have prefaced the interviews with practicing poets included here with a discussion of the person-centred understanding of creative process. As indicated in the previous chapter, person-centred accounts of creative *therapies* largely orientate themselves around an enquiry into individual process—the work of Natalie Rogers is notable in this regard. The person-centred approach holds that, 'every human being has the potential to be creative…the psychotherapeutic process is to awaken the creative life-force energy'.[104] To engage in art-making is to engage with what Carl Rogers terms the *actualizing tendency*: this is the inherent tendency of the organism to develop its capacities in the direction of maintaining, enhancing and reproducing itself;[105] the job of therapy is to simply provide the right conditions for the individual's actualizing tendency to flourish, and engaging in creative activity is one way to provide such a conducive environment.

After conducting the interviews for this chapter my overall sense is that the process of writing is fundamentally related to the construction of identity— or the maintenance of that *sense of self* and a facilitation of a *sense of agency.* One of the key ideas that I want to explore in this thesis that having a sense of personal identity is a necessary element—one of the cornerstones— of what might be termed *mental health* or *well-being* and that this is something that can be achieved through the interaction with *language.* The other, related, idea that underpins the writing of this thesis is, *at a fundamental level, we are creatures of language:* what I mean is that *meaning* itself is something that

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[104] Rogers, N. *The Creative Connection: the Expressive Arts as Healing* (Palo Alto: Science & Behavior Books, 1993), cover notes
[105] Glossary definition of 'actualizing tendency' given in Nelson-Jones, R. *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Therapy (fourth edition)* (London: Sage, 2006), p. 459

we as humans engage with in a constant creative process—and that language is the arena and stuff of this most crucial of activities. This idea is explored in greater depth in the chapters which follow. It suffices to say here that *language has the power to fashion our experience of both our self and our environment*, and creative language operations in particular—which is how we might view poetry—offer opportunities to *re-make our reality.* In this chapter I will explore this sense with three published poets for whom writing is a regular practice and a serious craft. I talked with them about their process and experience in and of writing, in a series of semi-structured interviews. Some of the questions were sent to them in advance and address the premise stated above: that writing poetry is an exercise in identity-formation as it relates to well-being. I left spaces, though, for other questions to emerge and enter the discussion as the interviews unfolded. I also asked the writers to formulate their own questions prior to conducting the interviews—interestingly, none did. Overall, my aim in putting the questions together was to encourage the poets to interrogate their own reasons *for* and relationship t*o* writing poetry. What I wanted to offer these writers was the opportunity to construct the *narrative* of their process.

In the last chapter I suggested that writing poetry may have three key functions. The first two are that writing promotes a sense of self-agency, in that writing is an *act* and thus in engaging in that act makes us *actors*; and that writing offers the opportunity to re-write our experience, and in this way, we may process and in an important sense shape our experience as a personal narrative. The third function is in many ways a product of the first two, and that is that writing is involved with the formation and maintenance of personal identity—and that this is a process of *self-fashioning* construction in ways

which support good psychological functioning at the individual level. Erving Goffmann introduces the idea of 'performative identity' in writing about the qualitative research interview: 'What talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient, but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed, it seems that we spend more of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows'[106]. It may be that the narratives of process offered by the writers in the interviews are as much a *construction* (in fact, the concept of performative identity suggests that this is a given) as their poetry. For the purposes of analysing the interviews however, I have taken their statements at face-value. The thinking behind this methodological approach—which is simply to read the transcripts with a view to drawing out common and uncommon themes across interviews—is that as the topic of each narrative is itself a *performance* of a constructed world, then such narratives can be nothing other than the *truth.* In the interviews included in this chapter I spoke with poets about what their experience of writing is, with regard to notions of agency, the transformation of experience and issues of personal identity. In addition I try to explore whether Carl Rogers' ideas regarding creativity and therapy, specifically that through the creative process an individual may facilitate the *actualizing tendency* and reclaim the *locus of evaluation*, something which is discussed at greater length below. I argue that these allied concepts are central to the function of writing which bestows a sense of agency, and thus promotes psychological well-being.

All three poets chosen for this chapter write 'seriously' and identify, to some degree, with the idea of *being a poet;* all have published their work, and two also teach creative writing in higher education settings. The idea of including

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[106] Goffmann, E. 1974 pp. 508-509, cited in Kohler Riessman, Catherine *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), p. 106

only published writers here is not to belittle the importance of the work being done by the amateur writers in the groups (for a discussion of these writers, see previous chapter); rather, it is done with the idea that poets who have engaged more 'seriously' with their practice, over a sustained period, may have formulated their understanding of how and why they work, and thus be better able to articulate their relationships with writing. As the interview sample is small, as a result of completing the research for this chapter I do not expect to be able to say anything definitive about poets and poetry in general pertaining to a *relationship to writing.* I will only be able to explore what these particular poets do. Nevertheless, I do hope to be able to dig a little deeper into the processes at play for the writers in this sample and be able to comment to how the ideas regarding writing put forward in this thesis appear—or do not appear—in the thinking, writing and experience of the poets interviewed. So, this will be a chapter which is more about *explorations* than conclusions.

Toward a Theory of Creativity

In 1954 Carl Rogers published a paper entitled 'Toward a Theory of Creativity'[107] in which he sets out a 'tentative theory of creativity' and asserts the importance of the creative act, defining it as a 'social need' which has profound implications for all cultural constructs—including our education systems and all scientific endeavour ('I maintain there is a desperate social need for the creative behavior of creative individuals'[108]). In the creative act Rogers also sees what he terms the 'anxiety of separateness' (feelings of being alone, lost or abnormal) and the human desire to communicate as being in

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[107] Rogers, Carl R. (1954) 'Toward a Theory of Creativity' *ETC: A Review of General Semantics,* Vol. XII, No. 4, pp. 249-260
[108] ibid.

play ('He does not create in order to communicate, but once having created he desires to share this new aspect of himself-in-relation-to-his-environment with others'[109]). According to Rogers, the necessary preconditions for creativity are: an openness to experience which is *organismic,* that is, not limited to pre-conceived notions (e.g. 'trees are green'); an experiential *attitude* which has more *immediacy* than is common, which is permissive to ambiguity and change. Most significantly, Rogers identifies the creative process with the *locus of evaluation* and the *actualizing tendency*; both of these concepts are discussed below.

Something which is particularly pertinent to the ideas I am exploring in this chapter (namely, that writing poetry is in part driven by the poet's desire for a sense of identity and personal agency) is that here Rogers speaks of the creative process as being linked to the construction and individuation of the personal *'I'*. He suggests that a concomitant of the creative act is to draw individual experience into a coherent expression (Rogers gives the example of a scientist constructing a theory which focusses on those elements which builds towards the cogent establishing of knowledge; similarly, he sees the writer 'selecting those words and phrases which give unity to his expression'[110]). The idea of the *self* (the *self-concept*) is an important one in Rogers' approach and one which embeds the notion of the performance of a *creative act* in its very definition:

> [the *self-concept* is] … the organized consistent conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of 'I' or 'me' and the perceptions of the relationships of the 'I' or 'me' to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions. It is a gestalt which is available to awareness though not necessarily in

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[109] ibid. p.356
[110] ibid. p355

awareness. It is a fluid and changing gestalt, a process, but at any given moment it is a specific entity.**[111]**

The *self-concept* is essentially a creative act because it involves a dynamic engagement between self and environment—the *product* of which is not *fixed*, but rather a *process* in which the self is always *emerging* or *becoming*. McLeod[112] makes the interesting point that the self-concept might have been more accurately named the *self-process*, as this term more precisely captures the fluid, ever-changing nature of the self as conceived by Carl Rogers. Nevertheless, Rogers points out that the *self-concept* is (albeit momentarily) also a *specific entity*—a figure in the ground of the experiential flow—and in this way the point of such engagement is the *creation* of a unified sense of *self.*

[111] Rogers, Carl. R. (1959). 'A Theory of Therapy, Personality Relationships as Developed in the Client-Centered Framework' collected in (Ed.) S. Koch. *Psychology: A study of a Science*. Vol. 3: ed. *Formulations of the Person and the Social Context* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959)

[112] McLeod, John *Introduction to Counselling* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009) p. 36

The Actualizing Tendency

The concept of the *actualizing tendency* was first proposed by Rogers in the 1950s[113] and remains one of the fundamental principles of his *client centered* approach. The *actualizing tendency* uses a biological model to refer to the motivational force which lies within the individual to grow towards optimum psychological functioning. Thus, the actualizing tendency is also the sole motivating force of therapeutic change. As with plants, the conditions for growth are crucial. The role of the therapist is, then, to provide what Roger's terms the 'necessary and sufficient' conditions for therapeutic change and growth:

'—Two persons are in psychological contact.

—The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.

—The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.

—The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.

—The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client.

—The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.

No other conditions are necessary. If these six conditions exist, and continue over a period of time, this is sufficient. The process of constructive personality change will follow.'[114]

With the popularisation of Rogers' work in the 1970s the original six conditions proposed were reinterpreted and reformulated as the three 'core

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[113] Rogers, Carl R. (1957). 'The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change', *Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21*(2), 95-103

[114] Ibid. pp. 97-8

conditions' currently taught in person-centred trainings—*empathy, congruence,* and *unconditional positive regard.*

The relevance of this to the current project is that Rogers goes on to explicitly align creativity with the *actualizing* tendency ('[creativity] appears to be the same tendency which we discover so deeply as the curative force in psychotherapy—man's tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities[115]'); and in doing so he identifies creative writing as an essentially *therapeutic* act as a part of its very being.

As already noted, Natalie Rogers has focussed her work very specifically on the role the creative arts may play in psychotherapy, developing a theory which she terms *the creative connection.* Natalie Rogers' work is a development of Carl's and should be seen as refinement of the principles of the *client centered* approach which concentrates particularly on the function/s of creativity. The central principle of the *creative connection* is that (as Carl Rogers indicates) creativity and psychotherapy are parallel processes. In developing her model Natalie Rogers posits that the various forms of creative expression (movement, visual art, writing, sound) work together to facilitate therapeutic change. She describes the therapeutic work as, 'the deep faith in the individual's drive to become fully herself'[116]. Natalie Rogers makes a specific connection between creativity and the *actualizing tendency*, and suggests that the *conditions of worth*[117] must be confronted and the *locus of*

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[115]Rogers, Carl R. (1954) 'Toward a Theory of Creativity' *ETC: A Review of General Semantics,* Vol.XII, No. 4, pp. 350-351
[116] Rogers, N. *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing* (Paulo Alto: Science & Behavior Books, 1993), p. 13
[117] *Conditions of worth* is a concept developed in Carl Rogers' work. It refers to the conditions that an individual perceives are put upon them externally by those around them and which they believe have to be in place for them to be seen as *worthy*.

evaluation (discussed below) re-integrated into the self if the creative process is to be successful: 'this tendency to actualize and become our full potential is undervalued, discounted, and frequently squashed in our society […] In fostering creativity, we need to realise that there are both internal and external conditions needing attention. Carl Rogers defines the internal conditions as *openness to experience* and *internal locus of evaluation* […] When an individual is able to listen to the response of others, but not be overly concerned with their reactions, she has developed her *internal locus of evaluation.*[118] '

The *Locus of Evaluation*

in this chapter I will be exploring another key idea: that is, writing poetry speaks directly and explicitly to the person centred concept of the *locus of evaluation.* Carl Rogers introduced the term into the literature to refer to the tendency of individuals whereby they become increasingly less trusting of their own ability to evaluate and respond to their experiences as they develop from infancy, becoming more reliant on validation from the external world (what Rogers describes as *internalizing conditions of worth*). Through this process the place (*locus*) where assessments of experience are made moves from inside to outside the individual. Whereas all infants rely on a subjective *weighing* of experiences to arrive at an understanding of their environment and their self in relation to such, as young people grow and interact with others a 'separate self-concept' develops which moves the child away from the *authenticity* of the organismic valuing process. 'As young people interact with the environment, more and more experiences may become symbolized in awareness as self-experience. Not least through interactions with

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[118]Rogers, N. The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing (Paulo Alto: Science & Behavior Books, 1993), p. 14

significant others who treat them as a separate self, they develop a self-concept which includes both their perceptions about themselves and the varying positive and negative values attached to these self-perceptions' [119]. For Rogers the goal of therapy is to re-internalise the locus of evaluation in order that the individual may once more find their own experience a trustworthy source ('…the person increasingly discovers that his own organism is trustworthy, that it is a suitable instrument for discovering the most satisfying behavior in each immediate situation'[120]).

Rogers further characterises the process of therapy as the process of 'becoming oneself' or 'becoming a person'[121]. An important element in this process is that the concept one develops of *self* is one which is congruent with *organismic* experiencing. If this consistency is absent, then the individual will experience themselves as being *inauthentic* or at-odds-with their environment. Nevertheless, *self-actualization* involves something more than the immediate evaluations of the infant. Rather, it is a process which requires a degree of social mediation.

The *Actualizing Tendency*, The *Locus of Evaluation* and the Process of Remaking

A more modern exposition of the *actualizing tendency*—which includes an account of the locus of evaluation—is put forward by Mearns and Thorne[122]. In this reworking the organismic valuing process which is the key driver of the *actualizing tendency* finds a counterpoint in the notion of *social mediation*

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[119] Nelson-Jones, R. *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Therapy (fourth edition)* (London: Sage, 2006), p. 89
[120] Rogers, Carl R., *On Becoming a Person* (London: Constable, 2004; 1961), p.118
[121] The title of Rogers' second major work (1961)
[122] Mearns, Dave and Thorne, Brian *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (London: Sage 1998; third edition 2007)

which is used to moderate organismic *drives*. This account regards humans as essentially pro-social in their nature.

> In this revision of the theory the central concept becomes the *actualizing process* which is described by the homeostasis of the imperatives of the actualizing tendency and social mediation within different areas of the person's social life space and the reconfiguring of that homeostasis to respond to changing circumstances[123]

In this model individuals who fail to integrate social mediation into their *actualizing tendency* are described as being *ego-syntonic* to denote a style of being in which the imperatives of the *I* do not take into account the need to remain pro-social by accounting for possible effects on *others*. (Broadly speaking such individuals are overly controlling, do not display empathy and, at the extreme, display overly anti-social behaviours.) The developmental root of an *ego-syntonic* way of being lies in profound childhood abuse. The child takes refuge in an inner world—which is perceived as being safer than the external one— and refers to *this* rather than to the social context in which it is situated. We can extend this idea, of the creation of an *inner world* in which an individual takes refuge, to think about the whole enterprise of creative writing itself: in many ways we could describe the writing process as one of *world-building*—whether this occurs in a single short lyric (such as Dylan Thomas *Fern Hill* which configures the magical landscape of childhood) or a connected series of prose works (almost everything by J.R.R. Tolkien and the children's fiction of J.K. Rowling fall into this category) with a more epic scope. The point is the end result is the same: what we have is a *world* centred upon the writer's *creative act.*

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[123] Ibid. p. 24

Particular Features of the *Actualizing Tendency* in Writing

Taking on board the refinement Mearns and Thorne contribute to Rogers' account of the *actualizing tendency*, we can now see that there are several features of *actualization* as a therapeutic process that are particular to the writing process: in promoting a sense of identity and agency, and in its drive to transform experience, the writing process is in many ways an *ego-syntonic* one; it is one which explicitly places the self at the centre of the narrative in a position of control. This is especially true when the therapeutic function of the writing is to help the writer navigate traumatic experience, or experiences of disempowerment, or a lack of agency. In such cases *actualization* is achieved through the construction of an environment which refers solely to the *self* writing. In such cases this is the *point* of writing: redressing experiences of traumatic disempowerment require the self to be established as a centre of meaning and action, and there is an inherent drive to take *control.* The need for the self to become the *locus of evaluation* is magnified; it becomes *the point.* Writing is frequently an explicit attempt to *take refuge in an inner world that is perceived as being safer than the external one* and in many cases a response to childhood abuse. In Parks' *Rescuing the Inner Child*[124] the rewriting of the narrative of the experience of sexual abuse— where the writing self is cast as the 'rescuing hero' of the child-self—is put forward as a key therapeutic tool for recovery. This is not a pro-social form of *actualization* but one that refers only to the self and the reality it creates— rather than things as they external to the speaker, and in this it is *controlling* in the extreme.

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[124] Parks, Penny, *Rescuing the Inner Child* (London: Souvenir Press, 1994)

In my interviews with poets in this chapter one of the things I will be exploring the extent to which the process of writing is a process of interiority, and how far account is taken—if at all—of the context *for* writing. I will also be looking at the drive to—and effects of—such interiority. As stated above, one of the things that I am interested in is the capacity inherent in creative writing to *remake* experience and to *refashion* the self into forms which are more consonant with having a positive identity and sense of agency. Taking Mearns and Thorne into account, the question arises *does writing creatively represent a positive expression of the ego-syntonic state*?

Formulating the Questions

In the interviews I wanted to ask questions which focus on three key areas: first, I wanted to investigate how each of the poets approach writing, to have them describe their writing process as they understand it (questions 2 and 5); second, I wanted to explore the 'sense of a self' in writing (question 3) and whether they had an idea of a *writing self* which was differentiated from the everyday self, third, I wished to know whether they themselves saw writing poetry as something which was 'psychologically helpful' (question 8) and what it was that had prompted them to start writing in the first place (question 1). In addition I wanted to find out whether they thought they had ongoing themes which ran through their poetry (question 6) and whether or not they had any 'sense of an audience' when the writing was taking place (question 9). A copy of these questions is included in the appendix.

I had two major areas of concern in putting the questions together. One was that I wanted to make sure that the questions did not lead the participants into talking about their poetry in terms of the ideas I had already developed about the functions of writing poetry (namely, those of *identity, transformation, re-*

establishing the locus of evaluation within the self and the overall psychological benefits of writing); I wanted to leave enough latitude in the questions for the participant's to give their own account of the affective aspect of their poetic process. The second difficulty I had was that, unlike the participants in the poetry/therapy groups, these writers were not writing poetry as a therapeutic activity—and I did not want to make therapy the focus of the interviews, despite being interested in this aspect of their experience. Unlike the writers in the group settings, these poets were not primarily interested in *doing therapy* but rather in *making art*, and I wanted to respect this distinction.

Selecting the Participants

The participants invited to take part in the interviews were in many senses selected at random. All three poets are people I know in other contexts—one (X.) personally, and two as colleagues (Y. and Z.). The reason for choosing them was simply because they are all experienced writers who write primarily for publication—and more practically they were willing and able to take part in the project within the time-frame I was working to. I did not approach them based on anything in their work; in fact, in the case of Y. and Z. I had not read any of their work prior to the interview. I gave them a copy of the questions and a participant information sheet (appendix 2) and obtained consent a few days prior to talking with them—and had no other discussion with them about the project. My aim in the interviews was to get them to give me an insight into their own understanding of their poetic process. In the write-up I have tried to preserve the anonymity of the participants as far as is possible—I have removed names and the names of publications—but I give some brief biographical information where I feel it is helpful to contextualise statements

made in the interviews. Appendix 3 includes an annotated transcription of my interview with Y.

Interview 1

X. is a white British male in his late forties who has been writing for 30 years and has published poems in a number of journals and magazines. Unlike the other subjects interviewed, X. does not explicitly identify himself as a poet but rather as 'someone who writes poems'. Nevertheless, writing is something which he does with seriousness and he has significant experience and expertise in writing. It is also pertinent to the discussion that X. is from a working-class background and grew up in a post-industrial town in the north of England. He suffered chronic abuse and neglect as a child and has been diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder, attention deficit and hyper-activity disorder (ADHD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which has limited his ability to remain in paid employment. This background is helpful in reading the transcript of the interview as it is reflected in X.'s language, choice of themes, and discussion of his motivations in writing. Frequently in the transcript we see X. shifting between a colloquial and an academic register in speech, and there is much reference made to feelings of anger and disaffection. The hour-long interview was conducted in X.'s home at nine in the morning. X. did yoga throughout the interview as he said it was easier to talk while he was moving.

Interview 2

Y. is a white female in her later forties who identifies herself a poet and visual artist. She has published a number of books, had exhibitions and won prizes for her work. All I know of Y.'s background is what she tells me in the interview—she is from an economically deprived town in the south of

England and currently works as an editor and creative writing tutor, in addition to her work as a poet and artist. The interview lasted forty minutes and took place in a meeting room at the University of East Anglia.

Interview 3

Z. is a white British female who is fifty years of age. She is a professional poet and creative writing tutor. Z has published several collections of her poems and in common with Y. has won prizes for her writing. The interview lasted an hour and took place in a seminar room at the University of East Anglia.

The Interviews

Reading back over the transcripts of the interviews, common themes quickly start to emerge. All three poets say things which suggest that writing is seen as an encounter with subconscious processes: the poets describe writing as an almost automatic process of putting down on the page images which occur to them in a naturalistic way—images which they do not understand the import of until later, reading them back; in this way the writing process is seen as being something like the *dreamwork*. There is also a sense of writing providing (or constructing) a sense of identity or *self*: this self is a version of the 'everyday' self, but in most cases is something more coherent and with a greater sense of agency. And there were many references to the capacity of writing to re-fashion experience—particularly traumatic experience—into something more *beautiful.* All of the poets to varying degrees spoke of writing as an attempt to take control of experience and to articulate experience in a way which puts them at the centre of the narrative. A more surprising common experience was that writing offers a way of reducing a sense of physical discomfort: they spoke of feeling that they *hurt* or felt *itchy* when

they could not write; writing was seen in part as a vehicle for self-regulation. All of the poets to varying degrees spoke of seeing language as a *medium* rather than simple vehicle for the articulation of thought; the poets spoke about *working with* language, manipulating and fashioning it into shapes and patterns—as they might work with a physical medium; the images they used were seen as provided a sense of structure or scaffolding for whatever they wanted to express. Language was largely seen as a pre-existing structure or form. All of the poets, again to varying degrees, felt that writing—while not *therapy* in itself—performed a significant psychological function for them. Establishing a speaker in writing (a sense of agency) was a key function which served to support or empower them, particularly with regard to processing past traumas. What was described was something close to Rogers' idea of therapy moving the *locus of evaluation* from outside to inside the individual. All of the writers said that they had little sense of an audience when writing and that having their work read by others was not their primary concern. These themes are explored individually in more detail below.

The Writing Process

As noted above, participants frequently spoke of the process of writing as something which was tied to accessing subconscious—or *out-of-awareness*[125]— material.

> *I think that state of mind is that I just wait—it feels like I'm waiting for a kind of [slower] buildup of enough beautiful things in my mind…em…then enough structure around those, and then I'll write it down—you know, maybe like five hundred words at a time* (X.)

> *Apparently, things appear in my poems, although I don't remember necessarily seeing them my husband is like, oh that's that—we saw that like two years ago and I'm like, oh right. So I've stored it away somewhere and then when it feels appropriate it will apparently arise…which is interesting. It's like I've got a rolodex inside my head (…)Which is like*

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[125] In the person-centred approach material is seen as being 'out of awareness' rather than located in the 'subconscious', as in psychoanalysis

dreams, really…the way dreams work. I don't remember dreams. I don't…so maybe writing poems is the way of processing things in the way that dreams process things (Y.)

In describing their poetry, both Y. and X. used the image of a mirror:

There's just this reflection in poems…that they're…that's all that comes to the surface (Y.)

I think anyone who tries to write, no matter with what intention, or with what skill, will have the same thing happen to them—which is…a bit like when anyone looks in a mirror. You might look at yourself and think you're really beautiful when you're not, because you can't see yourself. But you're still having an experience where…it's almost a bit like exercise. The more you look in the mirror—like the more press ups you do—the stronger you'll get. But with the mirror it's more real…it will get…I mean I know it's not necessarily the case for people with mirrors, but with writing…there's something that you get with writing…erm…whatever your life is—whoever you have become and are, and what people around you are—will become a little bit clearer to you. It's a bit like [laughing] I said to Rat Man when he was complaining what's mu-…why bother listening to music? It's exactly the same answer, why bother writing poetry—it's that you might learn a little bit more about yourself which is the only thing you can know. It's exactly that…(X.)

In talking about her *process* Z. focussed on the element of craft which goes into the writing. She identified a clear shift in her working practices from writing what she described 'confessional' poetry in her twenties, to poems where the *self* is subordinated to 'story' (and the *I* becomes a crafted version of *self*):

[when I was younger] a kind of expressive, semi-confessional emotional exploration was probably one of the most—not always—driving kind of factors in my process. That's what got me…instigated, the catalyst, what got me writing then. But even then, language…I remember I would always try to er…how do I put this?…not be…I would never simply write about…if it was an emotionally driven poem, say, you know, I'd broken up with somebody and I was feeling absolutely overwhelmed…and I used to be quite an emotionally volatile person, and I don't think I am so much anymore thank God, but you know I'd be driven to write. But I wouldn't always directly write about that. As you say, it wasn't about journalling. I would deliberately disguise those feelings—so there would be a kind of perhaps despair, or darkness [laughter] or loss, but it was…and it wasn't always disguised as I think it probably was as I got older through imagery…um…and a kind of positioning of an other self in the poem.(Z.)

In her more recent work Z. has explored quite explicitly ways of interjecting—or working-through—personal emotional *content* through the

vehicle of *story*. In the case of one particular book this was the true story of village which was abandoned when the villagers were driven from their homes:

> *the whole point of that book was that I wasn't in the book at all. So, you know, twenty-eight poems that are not always stories, evoking a time and a place and a world that I knew nothing about. So, that was all research based. But I think what made—I hope—what made the poems work was…from the responses I got…was the way that I still started from the idea of a kind of semi-emotional state of loss or betrayal. So whether that exists on a personal level…you know, your lover disappears, has run off…or on a collective level…it was a community that was told they had twenty-one days to leave their homes. What that's…they're very different feelings…but they have come out of that same, difficult, juncture where there is rupture, change, instability…*(Z.)

Both X. and Y. convey the idea that writing reveals something of the subconscious self, that the act of writing is one of self-exploration and self-revelation. In this vein, Y. spoke of her early experiences of 'workshopping' poems with fellow students, where things would be pointed to in the poems in discussion—information about herself and her feelings of which she had formerly been unaware. In contrast, Z. frequently spoke about feelings being more present for her, and of writing as an act of *containment* or the *controlled* articulation of emotional experience. However, she did acknowledge that there was a strong element of self-exploration in her work, although her choice was to do this through the distance provided by the focus on *craft* in the writing process.

All of the poets spoke in to some degree about images in their writing as being *found* and of language as a pre-existing form which they work *with*:

> *It's almost like writing a word on a bucket, like getting…and now in the corner I've got a bucket that says hands and I'll chuck in any words that…I won't think that…I won't chuck in any words that occur to me, but I'll chuck in any words that I can crowbar into the concept of hands. Yeah, so it will end like…like by standing in the corner it will edit my thought process without me knowing for…without me being conscious of it…for a*

few weeks or months, depending how long it takes me to finish that bucket…you know, to fill it full of words (X.)

I think the way that I perceive poems are possibly the same as the way I perceive the visual things that I make, cause I see poems as boxes, as little things that can contain experiences (…) I think that I do see words as materials, and each word is a box. You know, you open it out and it's got…the word wheelbarrow. There's a poem, um, by William Carlos Williams which is called the red wheelbarrow poem—it doesn't have a title. But anyway, the word wheelbarrow in that poem can mean so many different things to different people whether you've used a wheelbarrow or not, you know and that whole poem…there's hardly any words in it…um, but it…with a small amount of words the whole piece unpacks (Y.)

My writing process…sometimes it'll come out of something I read, even which wouldn't have happened when I was younger. Now I might read something…um…I might even read something like a blurb on the back of somebody else's poetry book, and I'll think that's a really lovely word that that reviewer has used and that alone could spark me sometimes, just hearing sort of an unusual…(Z.)

Y. links this explicitly with her work as a visual artist (she speaks about her writing method as being similar to making collage or assemblage) and sees writing poems as a way of 'making things' without having to have studio space to store her materials. In the case of X. the image of collecting words as a material to work with (having a 'bucket') is purely metaphorical, as he does not work in visual media. Both see linguistic images as semantic *repositories* which can be accessed or unlocked through the dual processes of writing and reading. For Z. finding the 'right' image is often a matter of happenstance, which sparks the process of a more conscious *choosing* of the linguistic materials with which she will work.

Consonant with the idea of language being a 'physical' medium, both X. and Y. talked about the process of making poems having a structural or architectural aspect.

[Images are] almost like structures of…you know, like any structures you've got to have a sub-structure, haven't you? Yeah you know, to make it anything, so when I write—which I'm working on at the moment, which

is like a two hundred page poem…not really a poem, but whatever it is…then I need to have big chunks of structure, as well as little chunks of structure and they occur in exactly the same way…exactly the same way in that once I've finished a piece of big structure, like on hands, I won't start again until another piece of big structure occurs to me. I may wait six months, and then it'll occur to me to write about…um…seeing (X.)

Interestingly, X. goes on to differentiate between what he sees as the 'structure' of the poem and 'what it is about':

Because I'm always writing about the same thing, which is me—like I said earlier, my experience of the world and of myself doesn't really matter to me, what the structure is—in fact you could give me a structure…you could give me any word you wanted and I could do it…it wouldn't hinder my writing process [intake of breath] it's just nice if I can choose my own (X.)

The structure—and by implication much of the *fabric* of the poem itself—is regarded as constructing an environment for the subject of the poem ('me') to inhabit.

There are marked similarities with the way in which Y. talks about structure in her work.

I *mean with [this latest sequence of poems], I'm calling them wunderkammers. The wunderkammer is the Victorian cabinet of curiosities you know, like the forerunner of museums…so, in these little en-…wunderkammer environments…I keep thinking of the poems as environments because they are. So, in each of these environments I'm…I'm putting a woman in a state of, um, mental distress and she's going about this space. I have an Alice in wonderland one…so, it's wunderkammer with Cheshire cat and Escher stairs…so, she's in this house…she can't get out…um…she is…um…she's drunk…or she can't…she can't…she has alcoholism. So, she…yeah…and these Escher stairs keep winding and there's kind of a cat after her and…so…I don't know what your actual question was at the beginning [laughter]* (Y.)

Again possibly, and because of her history and training as a visual artist, Y. is more explicit about building structures (*wunderkammer*) and these are concretely physically imagined; nevertheless, both Y. *and* X. are describing the construction of an organised space within which the poem occurs. It is, I

think, significant that when both Y. and X. are very articulate in talking about the structure of their writing, once they move on to the *subject matter*—the ideas the poems are expressing—they become far less so, which is marked by a breaking down and trailing off in their speech. Possibly this speaks to the idea of poetry as an 'out of awareness' process, noted above. Although she does not work in visual media, Z. echoed Y. in speaking of *making things* in a physical way:

> *...maybe it's like using a sewing machine, when you've first got these things, these bits, and you've got this idea but you're not really sure if it's going to fit or come together until you actually start working it out, trying to use the machine and possibly do a bit of zig-zagging, or...[laughter] or reverse-stitch. Not a great metaphor, but the idea of course is...yeah...for me.* (Z.)

The Sense of Self

When asked whether they had a sense of a *self* operating in writing, all indicated that they did—but that this *self* was not their everyday self, but rather a modified version of it; in talking about the writing self, both Y. and X. alluded to its having a sense of being *empowered*.

> *I think I'm a bit darker when I write...and...um...people, when they meet me after my writing, they're surprised about how happy I seem. [S: yeah] [laughter]. So, that's where all the dark stuff goes...um...it's also where it feels the most freer. You know, where I can make...as I said earlier, you can make anything [S: mmm] happen there and you can make anything so [S: mmm]. Um...so...* [Y.]

Earlier in the interview Y. described herself as being like a theatre director when writing:

> *I was interested in design and making those little stage sets, which I think that poems are. But with a poem, you're in control of all the things. You can control the lighting, and, you know...every aspect of the theatre of your poem* (Y.)

The sense of a 'writing self' expressed by X. was somewhat more visceral, but nonetheless was a version of self with an increased sense of empowerment:

The me [in my poems is] the articulate me that's ok, that says I'm ok, the world if it thinks I'm not its wrong and I know in which ways I'm making mistakes [intake of breath] so that if my argument doesn't stand up about me being an alright person I know why, I know where the holes are so I can plug 'em with the idea: yeah, I do lose my temper; yeah, I am frightened; yeah I am this—and so I have a coherent whole that says, this story—though it's only a, like, ninety per cent true, the ten percent where I am confident in myself where I shouldn't be I [laughter] can account for (X.)

In a striking comment X. compared the process of writing a poem to the working-through of a *mathematical proof* of the self:

…like a mathematical proof where you show that something is the case. When I sit down to write—when I was younger I used to sit down often to write to say um all these things outside of me are horrible and I'm not, you know, including the wider World and the way society's organised, jobs, everything I couldn't stand or couldn't fit in with [intake of breath] and if I wrote it down in a good enough way I could prove that it was that that was broken and not me [pause] you know [pause]. And that sense — but also weirdly, simultaneously I also have always had an identity where I know I am broken [brief pause] and I address that as well (X.)

The *self* established in and conveyed through the poetry has a power of articulation—and a sense of surety in its own speech—that the everyday self may lack. The way in which X. describes this process here resonates audibly with Rogers' account of the reintegration of the *locus of evaluation* in the process of *self-actualization*.

In the interview with Y. she spoke of one of her aims in writing as being to 'give a voice' to those that have been silenced in some way:

essentially, I'm kind of trying to find a voice for people who…um…who…[brief pause] don't have one. You know, even myself when I was in [an abusive situation]…I was, you know, trying to find a voice (Y.)

The relation to the self in writing which Z. spoke of was somewhat more complex: for Z. the speaking *I* was not so much a *version* of self—a self that was more firmly established and articulated than the everyday self (as with Y.), or one which is *made* with the process of writing (as with X.); rather, for Z. the act of writing is seen as an act which moves away from an individual narrator:

> *Um…I don't think I do have an identifiable sense of self. I think I probably did more when I was younger and I think something happened…probably, interestingly, I'd say it mirrored a shift away from a sense of self to a more global perspective, if I can say that. Interestingly, I would say—and I don't think I have ever said this to anybody else—I think if I'm really honest, I would say that it probably marries—ties to—a [brief pause] psychological shift in myself where…probably in the…probably in the mid-noughties where, from some things that were going on in my life, right after the birth of my second son…where I had him on my own, without a partner…um…and raising my kids on my own there were things going on that forced me…or not forced me, I chose to reevaluate who I was how I behaved in the world…my way of coping with difficulty and part of readjusting my framework—maybe in a kind of NLP kind of way—part of readjusting my outlook and my vision of how I choose to see the situations that are put on me. Rather than…moving away from, probably when I was younger, a more, dare I say—because of all sorts of things we won't go in to—slightly more 'glass half empty'. I made a…it wasn't easy, but over the period of a year or two, I know—and I'm still very strongly this way—moved to a 'glass half full'. And I know that's very facile…*(Z.)

Z. indicated that difficulties in her personal life had led her to shift away from introspection in writing, to what she describes as a 'global perspective'; in her poems this is expressed as a shift to writing about 'subjects' or 'objects' in the world, which offer a de-personalised vehicle for a more personal expression:

> *…sometime around that time my writing began to shift away from the kind of—dare I say—intensity of a slightly…of a slightly—it sounds dramatic—of a slightly damaged self that I probably did kind of carry around without ever overtly…probably did carry around for a long time. And that doesn't mean that I was a completely depressed person, I was…I had all the energy that I have now. But I think it was probably a little, tiny wound that I was able to just gently dry off a bit. It's not that it's not there. But it's not sore. And that's I think really important for my writing,*

> *actually…moving away from that slightly wounded self, to being interested in things and ideas and other people…erm…and…it feels almost unnatural to me now—although I'd still say that there's some darkness and some loss in a lot of my writing I find it…I don't enjoy it that much when it goes in that direction. And I also find other people's work…maybe they remind me of a self that I don't want to be anymore. So when I read students' writing—or even some of my peers' writing—that seems to me quite absorbed in a slightly wounded self there's an almost revulsion that I feel that I need to kind of intellectually get over and I think it's more of an instinctive I don't want to go back there.* (Z.)

For Z. writing about *objects in the world* serves to provide something which is *containing* for the personal *I*.

For both Y. and X. the articulation of a *self* has what might be described as a political aspect which is broader than the personal. (Y. situates her work in relation to feminist discourses while for X. it is more strongly related to narratives of social class.) When I asked X. if he felt that his work was in any way political, he responded:

> *I think, if I'm writing and I think I'm writing something which will offend people—I'll notice it with pleasure. You know, a particularly…err…middle class people…what I call middle class people because I associate them with a kind of control over language and a fundamental inhibition…er-er…a fundamental orientation towards a structured career life doing something really pointless and saying it's really worthwhile [intake of breath]. So if I can offend that group, I feel good. I have no intention of doing it but if I'm writing something and th-th-that's sort of just coming out of some experience I've had, and I can ex- …but I'm happy if I can offend anyone. That's the only thing I've had ever since I was small, I'll think if that can upset anyone then I'll get a little sense of pleasure* (X.)

For both Y. and X. it is in many ways true to say that the personal is political—in the sense that what political aspects the writing has is linked to personal experience, and the attempt to engage with those experiences in writing. This was evident when I asked them if they could identify *themes* are characteristic of their writing:

...the female experience. I think that is...that is probably my subject...um...and I feel as though I am coming to feminism quite late. Because ironically, I was being stifled by a man when most people's feminist sensibilities are being awoken. Um...so...yeah...if that makes sense... (Y.)

I do have a couple of really strong recurring ideas and they are sort of things that I've experienced...and they are the way adulthood is a really false notion and it allows...erm...not allows...but it's part of the process by which children are mistreated [brief pause] and which sort of...erm...[pause]. 'Cause your never really free unless you're away from an adult [pause] somebody who identifies themselves as an adult, because there's loads of [inaudible]...even a nice adult... (X.)

For both, the enterprise of the writing is to establish a narrative which runs

counter to a context of oppression:

If I wasn't going to write about it, he was still, you know, stopping me talk (Y.)

...all I am saying [in my poetry] is, I may be nuts but you're fucking crazy (X.)

In a more pragmatic sense, writing poetry was also seen as providing a sense

of identity in the world which acts as a counterfactual to a sense of having a

lack of a strong social identity or role. Being called a *poet* (although X. said

he did not define himself as a 'writer') offers writers a socially sanctioned

arena for an activity which might otherwise be seen as unproductive or *odd*:

I'm not a normal person, as it were [laughter]. I have to go to shops and get what I want from Sainsbury's and things...um...but my mind often goes straight to metaphor...you know...I go that way. Yeah. It's reassuring to know, though, that I'm a poet and artist rather than...you know...some kind of odd misfit who...you know. Because I spent time when I was growing up...you know...um...there was no such thing really...so you know poetry...it didn't really...people I like couldn't be poets. So...um...now you think so that's what I am then, that's ok then (...) It's given me a label [laughter] to make it ok [laughter] (Y.)

...when I was younger—writing was, it felt like, it could provide me with something I didn't have. Whereas now I don't really have any material

needs, so I don't need to sort of, you know, be a success in any arena (...) [Partly] why I keep doing it is because it [stutter] it just seems…the thing that I write seems to me so good that it…it sort of…it has…I'm drawn to being the person who wrote it, you know, it's quite…would make me feel good about myself… (X.)

The Psychological Function of Writing

I asked all of the poets interviewed the question, *does writing perform a psychologically helpful function for you?* Their direct responses to this question indicated that writing poetry *was* seen as being psychologically helpful for them:

…once you're writing the words will come directly to you, no matter how rubbish they are, and that is what you are, and you can't not see it. Because they came from somewhere—they didn't come from somewhere that's not you. So I think, in that sense, anyone who's suffering from anything or…erm…or [brief pause] has any sort of psychological problems, no matter how extreme, I think writing will eventually help with (…)I think that's probably is what kept me doing it without me knowing it. You sort of, it's in the back-…but that's a process in the background for me (X.)

I think if I don't write for a little while I start feeling bit itchy [laughter]. You know, just a bit aarrgghh, you know [laughter] what's the point of even living so it is…it must be…in some way a part of myself, and I couldn't't stop (Y.)

However, a stronger sense of the psychological benefits of writing came through in a more oblique way in the answers given to the other questions; for X. much of the *point* of writing was to create for himself a sense of beauty in the world which was felt to be lacking:

Funnily, I think that's what's [emphatic] always—the thing that's run through all the different sort of like thirty years of me writing [brief pause] the real sort of thing that's never changed, is that—is the beauty that you can discover sort of, in yourself and in the world that makes it a worthwhile exercise and what I keep returning to it… (X.)

Y. alludes to psychological process which is about giving shape and voice to *trauma*:

> *I don't know…you're just kind of traumatized by things and there's no…you can't really find a shape for it. And then I started writing about this person called XXXX and then I thought, yeah that's him* (Y.)

In doing this, Y. is frequently drawn to using mythic images and forms. She identifies *fairytale* as an important element in her writing:

> *another of my subjects…the things that come into my poems is usually myth and fairytale…but then there are feminist readings of all these things aren't there? Um..yeah…just the other world [inaudible] which is also I guess a feminist theme [pause]. Yeah…does that make sense? (…) You know, when you're just like spouting off…when you write things down…you know…you structure them…*(Y.)

Using feminist readings of fairytale characters in her work allows for the working through of the experience of domestic abuse, which is simultaneously seen as both personal and mythic. Y. has similarly used the tarot as a way of structuring and expressing individual experience. In this way, writing can be seen to have a *transformative* function which is psychologically helpful. For X. the transformation of experience is more about the evocation of something beautiful out of a personal experience that was *not*. X. understands this drive in his writing to be connected to both his history of trauma and his bipolar disorder:

> *…it's just more beautiful than the street outside and…um…it…I think…my instinct is that beauty…experience is that beauty always gives me energy and the experience of ugliness gives me none, so I, you know, so being bipolar you wanna focus on that which keeps your energy up not down [pause] You know, for me I've got the kind where I don't worry too much about mania so, like, I know it sounds…like…[pause, breathing] I was going to say that it sounds strange, but it doesn't—it's the same for everyone, isn't it?—beautiful things make them feel up and happy—but for me it's really…it's really strongly associated with energy. I constantly create and try to create a sort of energetic vibe, and anything that makes me feel sluggish [intake of breath] it's like a slippery slope to a place which is my worst…sort of…experience, my worst nightmare…so*

anything that's ugly, no matter how brilliant it is I wouldn't read it, or look at it, I don't care about it…it's of no interest to me. You know. Like Yeats said about Wilfred Owen [126] *[laughter].* (X.)

For Z. the psychological benefits of writing were to provide 'satisfaction', 'comfort' and—as with Y.—a sense of identity as a *poet*, which was perceived to be important to maintaining a satisfactory sense of self:

> *there have been periods in the last few years…I wrote XXXX in 2012 2013 and I was having to write a lot. But after, sort of between the Summer of 2013 and…er…[brief pause] 2015 [brief pause] I'd say I didn't write as much as I had hoped to, and I always…I didn't spend time worrying about it, cause I'm always busy doing all my different jobs and parenting, but I did think about it a lot, and did feel like…er…disappointed. And what's happened suddenly in the last, I'd say, three…maybe four months…is, for some reason I've started writing a little bit more and…um…[brief pause] and the feeling that I get is [brief pause] interesting to me. I remember thinking just the other day, isn't it weird after all these years Z. you still get so excited to have written a poem that you're happy with. And what's really lovely for me is, um, [brief pause] I've probably written three poems in the last four months that I'm really happy with, that I think stand up against things that I've written in the past um…so there is that almost childlike pleasure, um, as if you've been rewarded in some way…um, and it's self-approval—not coming from anyone else, no one else has seen the poems. Self-approval is a way for you to feel…you know, I do feel validated, um, and that seems very important. So I do still very much get that […] It's like a sense of..um…a sense of finding yourself again, however briefly—it sounds a bit dramatic, but it does feel comforting* (Z.)

Finding 'self' is—as with Y.—somehow seen as consonant with the performative aspect of *being a poet*; there is something about identifying oneself as a poet which validates and provides a positive environment for an everyday self which is experienced as *dis*-comforted by (or at odds with) everyday roles. Z. also alludes to a political aspect to the identification of *self* as *poet*, although as with Y., the political is experienced through personal experiences—in the case of Z., experiencing herself as an ageing woman in a society which privileges youth:

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[126] W.B. Yeats has been widely criticised for choosing to exclude Wilfred Owen from his 1936 edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, citing his reason in the introduction to be that, 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'.

...I just think it's more and more important for me to have this thing, to have this thing that I do. Because as we get older—particularly as women—you lose so…it sounds terrible, maudlin, but you lose other ways of connecting to the world. You're no longer the kind of 'clever pretty one', or whatever. Other people view you differently, you know, and while you might have the love and respect of your friends or partner, or children, or whoever, in the world…your transaction in the world is diminished because you're viewed as an older woman, and that has no currency in the world. So it does feel more and more to me that I have got this, whereas when I was younger the writing was more like…that being a poet was a kind of…very much a kind of energy…er…very much a kind of emotional connection to the world. I'd say now it's moved towards being something more of an art for me. Do you know what I mean? there's a slight difference. And a way to still connect myself and have currency even though I often feel—and I've written about this quite recently—the younger poets, in their twenties, are writing quite different things and do sometimes feel to me…it sounds really…I don't mean to sound judgmental…I'm being really facile, quite self-absorbed and I sometimes read that, or look at that work…not my students, I'm talking about published writers…and I look at that and I think, I wonder if I was ever that self-interested, that self-absorbed. I probably was…why does it feel strange to me now at this point in my life? um, why can't I access that in the way that I could when I was that age? So I think my writing is probably getting a bit more concerned…you know, as I say, away from a kind of self [brief pause] and more more concerned with a kind of artistic value and place. It's not about expressing a voice so much as art, or crafting something…that is yours and that identifies…because I do think your identity…you're already labelled by people, particularly by younger people, when you get to a certain age…(Z.)

In her overall narrative of her writing process, however, Z. stands out somewhat from the other two poets interviewed—principally because of her emphasis on *craft* and the role of *artistry* in the writing process. While Z. makes statements about her writing process which are broadly consonant with the other two, it is this explicit and repeated reference to the role of *craft* and those elements of the writing which are *crafted* which sets her account apart. For example, here she speaks about the role of *sound* in her writing:

...when I read my poems I am so much more interested in sound and the effects. But I should qualify that, because if somebody didn't know my work they might think that I was some sort of experimental kind of Oulipo, dadaesque…I can't…I can't deal with that at all. It very much has to be in the real world very much has to be, have, the kind of lyrical…lyric is so important to me. It's just that the impact of that…how do you create a lyric

that resonates? that has an effect? And it seems to me that sound, or tone, is very much a part of that…(Z.)

Time and time again in the interview Z. makes reference to the *formal* aspect of the writing process and was—I felt—reluctant to discuss the broader themes of her writing. With this in mind, I asked Z. whether—instead of *themes* as they relate to ideas or points of interest—she could identify *themes of tone* in her writing. This was something to which she responded positively:

> *…themes of tone. I immediately recognize what you're saying there…um…and people do say, you know, there's a tightness and that tightness is connected to tone, I would say…and…and language…I, I, you know, so something like assonance for instance. While I [laughter]—in a really kind of snotty way—I have very little time for something sort of…amateur…alliteration, and, you know, those devices they sort of teach at GCSE etc., a little bit facile. I always spend a lot of time thinking about the sounds of words. We sort of touched on this, but that is part of tone, I think and…um…so, tone and diction…ideas around sound, and internal…I will go back and change something if I feel it sounds more interesting. But not just interesting for its own sake, but in a contained way, as part of an ordering of the poem—which isn't quite the same as form because…um…yeah…because obviously language can order…through sound, and, you know, rhythm or tone, as I said. I don't know if there is another word. I like what you said about tone, but that might not be all of it though it's certainly part of it.* (Z.)

Discussion

At the beginning of this chapter I said that it is my sense that the process of writing is fundamentally related to the construction of identity—or the maintenance of that *sense of self*—and that one of the key ideas that I wanted to explore is that having a sense of personal identity is one of the building blocks of what might be termed *mental health* or *well-being.* Further, in this chapter I wanted to explore in particular the role writing poetry plays in constructing and maintaining both this sense of identity and the well-being associated with it. In conducting and reviewing these interviews it has become clear to me that identity *is* a key element in what constitutes poetic process for the participating writers. Also, there are strong indications that writing is seen as psychologically beneficial and contributing to a sense of well-being, in the ways in which individual writers conceive of this.

In the literature on trauma the idea has been well-established[127] that an integrated and present sense of self-identity is a necessary pre-condition for good psychological health: the experience of chronic trauma leads to, 'a lack of coherence and coordination in the survivor's personality as a whole'[128]. Such an individual has experienced a *structural dissociation* of their personality, and as a result of parts of their experience becoming cut off from awareness through multiple experiences of trauma. To redress this the personality must be reintegrated (through therapy) so that the self is once more perceived as a coherent whole. While Freud speaks of the need to reintegrate the *memory* of trauma/s through therapy, the idea of repairing a structural disassociation of *self* owes more to Freud's predecessor, the

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[127] This literature is brought together by van der Hart *et al* in *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Trauma* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010)
[128] ibid p. viii

psychologist Pierre Janet. Janet puts forward the idea that what such traumatised persons need to heal is not simply to identify and integrate traumatic memory—as in Freud—but rather to engage in *integrative actions* which facilitate differentiation between what *is happening* to what *has happened* to them; 'Survivors sometimes lack such core differentiation. When they confuse thoughts and objective facts, they may wonder, "Am I really at work or am I dreaming?" Or they may confuse hallucinations with reality'[129]. Writing poetry may be one version of this process of *integrative action.*

A key theme underlying X.'s writing is the experience of chronic childhood trauma. In the discussion of his work he frequently makes explicit reference to wanting to establish the *truth* of the present, speaking *I* of his poems; this *self* functions to provide a counterfactual narrative response to experiences which have presented him with a world-view which he finds bleak and *unlivable.* He sums up his writing endeavour as a desire to create 'beauty'. To do this he must first evolve a sense of identity which is strong enough to function as a self which can *speak* the counterfactual narrative; identity formation in poetry is about formulating a 'proof' that his voice is 'right'. Being right in this context is about showing that 'something is the case' (in this case that the world is not without beauty) and it is the speaking *I* that establishes this. I the case of X. this is a very reactive voice which is telling the alternative *versions* of reality to 'fuck off'. The other writers in the sample are less reactive in their mode of expression. Nevertheless, we still see references to this *action tendency* in the ways in which they speak about their writing process. For example, when Y. makes the statement, 'when you write

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[129] ibid p. 147

things down…you know…you structure them…' in reference to recasting her experience of domestic abuse in terms of a fairytale narrative she is alluding to the action tendency towards revising what is *past* in light of what is known *now.* So, writing itself is the *integrative action.*

A second idea I set out to explore in this chapter—which is closely linked to the idea that writing is helpful in promoting psychological well-being—is that language has the power to fashion our experience of both our self and our environment, and creative language operations in particular, offer opportunities to re-make our reality; certainly this is something which is evident in both the myth-making of Y. and the desire to *make beautiful* in X.'s writing process. The power poetry has to re-make experience is two-fold: firstly, it empowers the writer by placing them at the centre of the narrative in a place of narrative control (as suggested by Parks[130]); secondly, it allows the creation of an environment which is more *livable* (as in the case of X.) for the writer. Not only can writing hand ownership of experiences back to the writer, but it can also reconfigure the topography of experience in ways which are psychologically more assonant with how the *self* feels now. In this way there is no longer a disconnect between experiences and thoughts and feelings; experiences can be integrated, and the world *made sense of.*

Finally, I set out to explore Rogers' ideas about creativity in the context of talking to the poet's included in my sample. In particular, I was keen to look at Rogers' notion that the process of *being creative* is analogous to the process of therapy itself: that is, through therapy the individual is *self-actualized* and the *locus of evaluation* which both sifts and maps organismic experience and

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[130] Parks, P. *Rescuing the Inner Child* (London: Souvenir Press, 1994)

is also involved in the construction of a personal sense of *who one is and what one needs*, is shifted back from outside of the individual (from societal voices, values and norms) to *inside*—where it can once again be a truly organismic valuing process which allows the individual to assess and meet their own needs, and also have an accurate and healthy picture of their own identity as a self-in-the-world.

In the interview with X. there is a very palpable sense of a drive to relocate the locus of evaluation within the speaker of the poetry ('I could prove that it was *that* that was broken and not me') and this is described in terms of a mathematical *proof.* The poem becomes an exercise in proving that the speaker's version of events is the correct one; that the *organismic valuing process* is *accurate* in this case. In the particular circumstances of childhood abuse there is a tendency for the individual to have evolved a narrative about the self and its experiences which is derived from an external *locus of evaluation*: for example, an individual who has been sexually abused in childhood is likely to have a narrative imposed on them (usually by family members) which is at odds with their own experience of events—either it *did not happen* (covering up) or *it was their fault* (blaming). In such cases it is of crucial importance that experiences can be internally evaluated if integration (and recovery) are to take place (seen in X.'s statement 'I may be mad, but you're fucking crazy'). Bass and Davies[131] give a clear explanation of both the mechanisms and effects of what Rogers would term having an external locus of evaluation with regard to sexual abuse: 'Every time Emily spoke with her parents [who denied abusing her] she became ill—the conflict between what she knew inside and what they presented was too great. She was easily

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[131] Bass, E. and Davies, L. *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper and R,ow, 1988)

convinced that she was a terrible person for making up such lies. It was only when Emily broke off all communication with her family and established a consistent relationship with a skilled therapist who believed her that she stopped doubting herself and got on with her recovery'[132]. In Emily's case we can see the dialogue she establishes with her therapist as writing her own *narrative* which allows her to reclaim the locus of evaluation.

In the interview with Y. she talks about seeing herself as a 'theatre director' with absolute control over all of the elements of the production. With this in mind, she creates linguistic environments ('*wunderkammer'*) into which she places women in states of mental and physical distress. In this way she allows events to play out in 'real time' and situates her speaking self in a position where it can both direct and comment upon the action. A key theme is Y.'s work is the abuse of women and their subsequent 'silencing' (she speaks about this in terms of feminist discourse and as having the aim of giving voice to those who are voiceless) and she sees this as having political resonance. The poet and feminist theorist Audre Lorde articulates something similar to this in her essay 'Poetry is Not a Luxury', when she describes the poem as: 'the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought'[133].

Mearns and Thorne[134] suggest that the process of *self-actualization* (and the reintegration of the *locus of evaluation*) should be a socially mediated

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[132] ibid p. 90
[133] Lorde, A. *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017)
[134] Mearns, Dave and Thorne, Brian *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (3rd edition) (London: Sage, 2007)

process, and not one which is *ego-syntonic*—where individuals are overly controlling and do not display empathy with others); as I said above, in this context I said I would like to put forward the idea that there are features of *actualization* as a therapeutic process that are particular to the writing process: that is, in its drive to transform experience, the writing process is necessarily an *ego-syntonic* one—experiences of traumatic disempowerment require the self to be configured as the centre of meaning and action and there is an inherent drive to take control. Certainly this is something which might be said of Y.'s approach in writing the case of the *wunderkammer*.

In the interview with Y. she raised another issue pertaining to writing potential being an *ego-syntonic* act (that is not pro-social) when speaking about her students:

> *I like to tell students…don't think of other people [when you are writing]…with the XXXX book there was so much personal stuff in there— so much stuff about my family, and so much stuff about him and…um…I just got on with it. Some people can't do that. I have a few students of mine that really want to write about personal things, but they can't because whoever they want to write about is still alive…um…so, in a sense, they are still stifling them. So, I thought about XXXX. In a sense he was still stifling me. If I wasn't going to write about it he was still, you know, stopping me talk.(Y.)*

She identifies the tension between being able to use writing to *self-actualize* by constructing a narrative which expresses an internalized, *organismic* process of evaluation of events—and the potential for *hurting* others.

In many ways, Z.'s writing is immersed in the process of reclaiming and inhabiting the locus of evaluation, however this is a much more *covert* enterprise than that seen in the other two: topics or themes for writing which are presented as *neutral* (e.g. an abandoned village) provide a given

architecture for exploring themes which one senses have a more personal resonance—this is something Z. confirmed in talk subsequent to the interview when she shared another poem with me via email. Interestingly, the way in which *empathy* is defined by Carl Rogers does not exclude the potential for it to function in *ego-syntonic* mode; that is, I believe that Rogers' definition includes the capacity to empathize with *self*.

My intention in interviewing these three poets was to offer them the opportunity to construct a *narrative* of their own writing process. Kohler Riessman[135] makes the point that narrative forms of enquiry into phenomena (in this case writing poems) opportunities for both speaker and listener that other methods do not; 'most obviously, individuals…construct identities through storytelling'[136]. Bakhtin has coined the term 'heteroglossia' to describe a phenomenon in literary writing in which writing is informed both by what has gone before (the effect of influence), and in turn *influences* that which has gone before—in terms of how we read texts in light of new works of literature[137]. According to Bakhtin, *heteroglossia* is 'the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance'[138] in making any writing the writer must, 'appropriate the words of others and populate them with one's own intention'.[139] In *The Dialogic Imagination*[140] Bakhtin contrasts what he calls the *dialogic* and the *monologic* literary text. The *dialogic* work engages with other texts (being influence and in turn influencing, in the manner

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[135] Kohler Riessman, Catherine, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 2008)

[136] Ibid. p. 4

[137] Bakhtin, Mikhail (1940) 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', collected in David Lodge (Ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 128-139

[138] ibid. 132

[139] ibid.

[140] Baktin, Mikhail *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982)

described above) in a continuous process which influences the current text as much as what has gone before—in terms of how text is *read.* Certainly, Z.'s approach to writing—as a form of 'appropriation' of pre-existing structures (such as the village) and narratives—may be read in relation to Bakhtin's model. To a greater or lesser extent this is something we see as operating in the process of the other two poets, too: in Y.'s work this is fairly explicit; she takes—for example—a fairytale narrative and uses it to inform and provide a vehicle for a personal narrative of abuse, which in turn becomes a more general 'political' point about gender relations and the status of women, which speaks to her readership (in the reading, the text becomes influence again by the readers' own narratives and experiences). If we wish to pursue a structuralist (and poststructuralist) account of writing, what the reader is presented with is a set of textual *codes.* Roland Barthes puts forward the idea that meaning does not reside in the text, but is produced by the reader, and all the network of texts which are present in the reading process[141]. X., in writing much longer pieces (often novel length) has a tendency to generate his own *textual* codes; in his writing, and individual textual *utterance* may be informed by a much longer, broader, narrative which has gone before. I would suggest that our reading of X.'s poetry is also informed by our cultural awareness of writing which privileges the speaking *I*—much Romantic poetry, say—and we place it in context of our awareness of writers such as the Wordsworth of *The Prelude,* a powerful and central textual presence who both creates and orchestrates the narrative landscape of the poem.

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[141] Barthes, Roland *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen Heath), (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 79

From my interviews with these three poets, it is my sense that what is crucial to the act of writing poetry is that it not only facilitates the writer as the locus of *evaluation* but also the locus of *articulation*. And it is this dual function which confers the power to *re-make* experience and to express this remaking in ways which are psychologically helpful to the individual. As noted above, writing (or speaking) is an *act;* in performing this *act* the poet becomes an *actor,* and thus has a sense of agency. Something that has been well-established in the therapeutic literature is that having a sense of personal agency is one of the fundamental building blocks of well-being. Lysaka and Lyonhardt find that in the case of patients with schizophrenic illness recovering a sense of agency through the articulation of personal experiences was key to recovery from acute states,

> 'to recapture agency [refers] to regaining a larger experience of ownership and authorship of one's thoughts, feelings and actions. Agency thus involves creating flexible and coherent accounts of the *meaning* [emphasis added] of events…recovery can involve becoming able to find a way to describe what is wrong and not wrong in one's lives…a narrator who has become able to speak with a coherent authenticity that is not reducible to hope, symptom remission, or quality of life.[142]

Having *agency* not involves not only having a sense of personal empowerment, but also the *enaction* of such, through the construction of discourse. Thus, the sense of agency and its articulation are fundamentally synchronous and interdependent entities.

We may summarise these two entities (agency and articulation) as *having a sense of self.* Carl Rogers describes *self as:*

> *the organized, consistent, conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of the "I" or "me" and the perceptions of the*

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[142] Lysaker, P.Y. and Leohardt, B.L. (2012) 'Agency: its nature and role in recovery from severe mental illness' *World Psychiatry* 11(3): 165–166.

relationships of the "I" or "me" to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions)[143]

For Rogers, one of the key enterprises of therapy is the attainment of an *accurate,* undistorted sense of one's self which has the capability to accurately evaluate, discriminate and represent one's experiences. This is what is meant when we speak of the *re-internalization of the locus of evaluation*: when one has a clear and accurate sense of self and of how that self is situated within its social context, experiences can be *read* from the central point of inhabited by the *I.* In other words, we do not mediate how we feel about things (including ourselves) by referring to what others think or think of us (or what we *imagine* they think of us).

As we have seen, this construction of self is an important element in the work of all three writers interviewed. (And Rogers makes it clear that a successful piece of creative writing may be seen as analogous to a successful therapy in this way.) However, there is an important question raised by the construction of self in poetry, and that is how can it be regarded as being *authentic* (an important concept in Rogers' account) if it is at once so obviously an *artifice*? There are two ways to approach this question—both predicated on the idea that there *really is no essential or fundamental self.*

Taking a person-centred approach, the idea of *configurations of self* is a helpful one in addressing the problem of *artifice* in discussion of the role writing poetry plays in facilitating a tangible sense of *self.* This idea holds

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[143] Rogers, Carl R. (1959) 'A Theory of Therapy, Personality and Interpersonal Relationships, as Developed in the Client-Centered Framework', In S. Koch (ed.). *Psychology: A study of science. (pp. 184-256).* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), p. 200

that there is a degree of self-pluralism present in every individual (as an example, we may think of how we have *internal dialogues* where one part of our self talks to another) and that is not necessarily a morbid phenomenon (as in the cases of *structural dissociation* at the extreme of the spectrum)[144] but rather a natural way in which the *self-concept* functions:

> A *configuration* is a hypothetical construct denoting a coherent pattern of feelings, thoughts and preferred behavioural responses symbolised or pre-symbolised by the person as reflective of a dimension of existence within the self [145]

The second way of understanding why the concept of *artifice* is not problematic is to consider that within the model of *structural dissociation* itself, 'normal' functioning co-exists on the spectrum of dissociation: that is, all of us have, to some extent, *apparently normal personalities* (ANPs) which are seemingly integrated and deal with the day-to-day business of living— which are underpinned with *emotional personalities* (EPs) which are brought forth in certain situations and in certain sets of circumstances. The point I am making here is that all ideas of *self* are to varying degrees *fictive* and so in this sense what is made of the *self* through the act of writing is in an essential sense no less *real.*

Overall, what we see in the interview material presented here is three poets who are all engaging in the processes ascribed to the amateur writers in the poetry therapy groups discussed in the previous chapter. Each, in their own way, is engaging at a *psychological* or therapeutic way with writing; all are striving for a sense of *selfhood*, and *agency*—and engaging with the *transformative* potentiality of poetry. In this way we can see that it is

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[144] See van der Hart et al *The Haunted Self* (2010) for a fuller discussion of structural dissociation
[145] Mearns, Dave and Thorne, Brian *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (London: Sage 1998; third edition 2007), p. 125

fallacious to draw a hard and fast line between what is *poetry as art* and what is *poetry as therapy*: while the *products* of writing may vary—and the degree of self-awareness in and articulation of what is achieved—the *processes* in play are very much the same. Rather than seeing this as an undermining of *artistry* we may see this as a testament to the skill of the poet in working with language—*fashioning* that which is *needed,* in a psychological sense.

Next Steps

So, despite a view which is widely held in the literature that the division between what is *poetry* (art) and what is *therapy* is hard-and-fast, what I have shown in this chapter is that there are psychological 'operations' at play in the work of *professional* poets: moreover, these poets are explicit about the fact that writing helps them to re-fashion the world and to achieve a sense of personal identity and agency—all benefits which are ascribed to *amateur* writers writing for therapy. So, the question arises, *is all expressive writing an essentially therapeutic endeavour?* However, I am going to leave this issue aside temporarily to look at what is contributed to the therapeutic process by the structure of the therapeutic writing group itself—through the interaction of its members. We saw that the group itself had an important role to play in chapter one of this thesis, where we saw the therapeutic writing group contributing to a sense of well-being of individual participants—providing peer-support and a sense of *belonging* which participants indicated was experienced as inherently *positive* in a psychological sense.

In the next chapter I will look at how the group process functions—through talk—to develop images which are therapeutically important at an individual level, in the context of a group of therapists working with writing. In the

following chapter I also look at the concept of *empathy*—one of the fundamental tenets of the person-centred approach—and I explore how in the context of an understanding of empathy a therapeutic group can use language to modify and re-frame individual experiences, through the medium of group talk.

Chapter Three

On Empathy, Authorship and the Role of Metaphor: a therapist poetry/therapy group

No that's not the right word. I need to find another word

—Susie Orbach, speaking on *Start the Week,* BBC Radio 4, November 7, 2016

interrogate the symbol until it confesses its strengths

—David Groves*, Resolving Traumatic Memories*[146]

Meaning isn't a description of what is—but what is required

—Anonymous research participant

In the previous chapter I explored how writing poetry can provide individuals with opportunities to re-frame and re-fashion experiences and to develop a positive sense of agency. Below I will extend my inquiry into a consideration of what the dialogue of a group may contribute in terms of developing psychologically helpful images which function at an individual level.

This chapter will focus on the concept of *empathy*—specifically how empathy is established and communicated in a therapeutic setting through the assiduous and meticulous use of language. However, empathy in therapy is not a given. While Carl Rogers[147] asserts that one of the 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for a therapeutic interchange is that 'two persons are in

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[146] Grove, D.J. and Panzer, B.I. *Resolving Traumatic Memories: Metaphors and Symbols in Psychotherapy* (New York: Irivington, 1991) p. 7
[147] Rogers, Carl R. (1957) 'The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Psychotherapeutic Personality Change', *The Journal of Consulting Psychology*, Vol. 21, pp. 95–103

communication' *empathic communication* is something which needs to be *established*; it is a *construct* which is co-created by therapist and client. So, how does this relate to poetry?

What poetry has in common with effective therapy is that it involves—indeed it is predicated on—the precise use of language. The therapist must understand the way the client wields language and makes meaning, and further s/he must signal this understanding to the client through usage. We might say that the therapist becomes a *reader* of the client's discourse. Therapy might also be described as a process of language acquisition—in which the therapist learns to speak in the client's tongue. In this process meanings must move towards being *shared* and—as we see below in the account of the therapist therapy group presented here—this becomes an *interpersonal* process of negotiation. Another important element of this process is the client's learning to access their own lexicon: to *find the right word* to speak of and to their own situation—and this chapter will also look at how clients find images to accurately represent personal internal states.

This chapter is also about the idea of *authorship* and the ways is which in which it is key to our experiences of psychological well-being and dysfunction—and we saw the idea of *authorship* emerge as being an important element in figurative writing in the previous chapter and warrants further investigation here. I see the notion of *authorship* as being fundamentally connected to our ability to see ourselves as a cohesive psychological *whole*—which has implications for the capacity we have to make sense of our experiences and our *situation* in the world. In her

autobiographical novel *The Words to Say It*[148] Maria Cardinal gives an account of a seven-year analysis in which the central protagonist undertakes what might be described as a *voyage* through metaphor in order to reclaim her life from her 'madness'. In the book, the central character is trapped between a desire to *assimilate* with her mother and, 'a fear that this will result in an annihilation[149]'. In resolving this fundamental dilemma, the protagonist—who is a proxy for the author—is forced to negotiate with the landscape of her psyche by the construction/deconstruction of a series of *metaphors.* Frequently the metaphor of *food* is manipulated in order to allow access to the central *madness*—what the speaker calls *the thing*; it is significant that *the thing* itself may not be accessed directly, but only obliquely through the deployment of metaphor. The image of being 'eaten' and the danger of being 'eaten by' the mother both offer the potential for the desired connection with the mother to be enacted, and this representation allows for the playing out of the central dilemma which is wanting to be *with* and yet *differentiated from* the mother:

> Maria's dilemma structures itself between two desires, two sources of satisfaction: first, the familial pleasures of being inseparable from mother; and, second, the unfamiliar pleasures discovered with her own body (and witnessed in her mother's) that imply severance of any mother-child connection[150]'

Metaphor offers an arena and a structure for the dilemma of *madness* to be explored and potentially resolved.

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[148] Cardinal, M. *The Words to Say It* (*Les Mots Pour le dir*) (Grasset, in French) English Edition (New York: Van Vactor & Goodheart, 1983)
[149] Hoft-March, E. (1997) 'Cardinal's The Words to Say it: The Words to Reproduce Mother, ' Studies in 20th Century Literature: Vol. 21: Issue 2, Article 8
[150] ibid. p. 436

It is not insignificant that the Cardinal protagonist is undergoing a tradition Freudian analysis which is heavily reliant on the role of symbolisation and the role of the therapist/analyst to interpret symbols. From its inception, person centred therapy is an explicit move away from the role of therapist as an 'expert in interpretation'—and towards the role of the therapist as being to enter into the client's meaning-landscape, through *empathy*. However, in this chapter I want to suggest that there is a deep synergy between the client's process in both therapeutic modes in that both privilege language as the medium of therapeutic change. In both modalities clients may be observed in the process of formulating and negotiating the symbolisation of internal states in and through language. In this the client is involved in the process of *authorship* as s/he writes and re-writes the landscape of experience in order to make *livable* what is currently not so.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the key concepts introduced in the title (empathy, authorship and metaphor) and considers how other writers have interpreted them, before coming to a working definition of the terms as I will use them. It then moves on to give an account and discussion of a poetry workshop conducted with therapists in which the participants were encouraged to work explicitly with imagery and symbolisation. Finally in this chapter I will attempt to draw conclusions regarding the significance of the role metaphor plays in establishing empathy in therapy and what the implications of this are for notions of *authorship* as they relate to mental health.

What is Empathy?

As therapists we frequently assume a simple working understanding of the term 'empathy' and cursory reading of texts recommended for therapists in

training yields numerous examples: Pete Sanders describes empathy as, 'trying to see the world of another person from their point of view'[151]; Tolan writes, '[empathy] sees the whole world as the other person sees it and is wholly accepting of that world'[152]; and Mearns and Thorne—whilst acknowledging that the process is somewhat more complicated—offer this definition, 'empathy is a continuing process whereby the counsellor lays aside her own way of experiencing and perceiving reality, preferring to sense and respond to the experiencing and perceptions of her client'[153]. Campbell Purton offers Carl Rogers' classical statement on empathy as part of a more nuanced and revisionist discussion of the term which draws on Gendlin's[154] *focusing-orientated approach*:

> According to Rogers the reason that empathy is crucial is that the client needs to feel understood if the conditions of worth are to be dissolved…what is crucial is that the therapist should understand the client and that the client should experience this understanding…[one] important way of checking that the therapist has understood is through reflecting back to the client what the therapist thinks the client meant. Reflection can thus be understood as a procedure for checking on the accuracy of the therapists empathy, but it needs to be distinguished from empathy itself.[155]

What Purton adds to the definition of empathy—via an understanding of Gendlin—is that it is not that the therapist is consistently accurate in terms of their responses to the client, but rather that the overall process of the therapeutic dialogue should support the client's *carrying-forward* of their experiencing:

> For Gendlin, what is crucial is that the therapist should facilitate the client's carrying-forwards…through the therapist's reflecting back to the

[151] Sanders, P. *First Steps in Counselling* (London: PCCS Books, 2002)
[152] Tolan, J. *Skills in Person-Centred Counselling and Psychotherapy* (London: Sage, 2003)
[153] Mearns, D. and Thorne, B. *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (3rd Ed.) (London: Sage, 2007)
[154] Gendlin, Eugene T., *Focusing* (1978) Third Ed. (London: Rider, 2003)
[155] Purton, Campbell *Person-Centred Therapy: the Focusing-Orientated Approach* (London: Palgrave, 2004), p. 202

client the therapist's articulation of the client's experiencing. The client can then check whether what the therapist has said does articulate their experiencing…[a] lack of understanding by the therapist is not *necessarily* a bad thing. Through being *mis*undstood we can come to appreciate what we really do feel.[156]

So, what *matters* about empathy is that it is a *process*—one which occurs iteratively through the therapeutic interaction—and not a stable state nor a fixed destination. Rather, therapeutic force of empathy lies in the to-and-fro of the interaction itself; what Gendlin contributes is a problematising of the process of empathy, as it describes an interior individual process which is fundamentally unclear and constantly evolving—if the client is unclear about feelings and perceptions, how may the therapist even attempt empathy? The answer offered is that the therapist may *accompany* the client in this process, facilitating a journey to the edge of their understanding (*thinking at the* edge) where growth occurs: 'the experiencing process of the client [is] facilitated by the presence of the therapist. The mere presence of another person can be facilitative'[157]. I have dwelt on this point because it is pertinent to what happened in the group interactions, discussed below; each of these sessions provided a playing-out of the to-and-fro of individuals attempting to come together, in an emotional sense, through talk—to develop a group *empathy*.

The *problem* of the concept of *empathy* is addressed by Gibbons'[158] who provides a systematic literature review of the topic: it starts from a position that while *empathy* established as a key concept in therapy, it has been less well-articulated in the literature on therapy: Gibbons' position is that our

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[156] ibid.
[157] ibid. p. 207
[158] Gibbons, S. (2011) 'Understanding Empathy as a Complex Construct: A Review of the Literature'
Clinical Social Work Journal 39(3):243-252

'common understanding' of *empathy* is in fact a fallacy and brings together *varieties of empathy* to substantiate this point—he shows that *empathy* may be seen as an intra-personal evolutionary strategy or as an inter-personal drive to organise individual experiencing, and that the definition of *empathy* is far from stable or clear.

While the counselling literature in the main focusses attention on the inter-personal aspect of empathy, represented by the therapist working towards an understanding of the client *as they understand themselves*—sometimes described as *attunement*—the intra-personal element is also crucial in the therapeutic process and should not be neglected. In a study of patients diagnosed with *depersonalisation disorder* (characterised by a feeling of being 'numb' to emotional experiences)[159] it was found that it was the inability to empathise *affectively* with self which played the key role in the disorder. While participants could engage in *cognitive empathy* with self (i.e. understanding how they felt intellectually and the reasons for that) with the *affective* part absent, participants remained emotionally numbed.

Empathy, Congruence and Accurate Symbolisation

A simple definition of *congruence* is that it is a quality of *agreeing* or *corresponding*: in mathematics *congruence* denotes a relation between two numbers indicating that the numbers give the same remainder when divided by some given number; in person-centred counselling the term is used to describe a state in which the therapist is in touch with and 'genuine' about his or her experience—with themselves and with the client. Thus, in some sense we can see that the notion of *congruence* in counselling is a metaphor. Rogers

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[159] Lawrence E.J., et al (2007) 'Empathy and Enduring Depersonalization: the Role of Self-Related Processes *Journal of the Society of Neuroscience*, 2007.

speaks of congruence, and its significance in the therapeutic process, in this way:

> The more the therapist is him or herself in the relationship, putting up no professional front or façade, the greater is the likelihood that the client will change and grow in a constructive manner.   This means that the therapist is openly being the feelings and attitudes that are flowing within at the moment. There is a close matching, or congruence, between what is being experienced at the gut level, what is present in awareness and what is expressed to the client.[160]

In therapy as in life, we all have a desire for *congruence,* both in our inner experiencing and in our   interactions with others: we desire that our interactions with the external world 'fit' with our understanding of and feelings about our environment, and we desire that in our communications with others our messages are 'received' accurately; and it is in this desire to have an accurate reception that congruence and empathy become aligned. They key to both lie in the accurate symbolisation of experience, by both self and the *other.* So, in the desire for congruence we can identify the essence of empathy—as Rogers puts it, it is a process of *matching*.

We can regard *metaphor* as way of enacting this matching: an attempt at achieving *congruence* between the inner and outer experience which marshals language in process of both expressing our inner states, and in turn making the *outer state* (the world) fit for the habitation of our psyches. Almost all of the major therapeutic modalities subscribe to the notion that finding words and images which accurately symbolise our inner experience is core to the process of therapy. I believe this is what Susie Orbach is alluding to above, when she speaks about the client needing to, 'find another word' in the context of psychoanalysis. In the same way that the person-centred therapist

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[160] Rogers, Carl R. (1957) 'The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Psychotherapeutic Personality Change', The Journal of Consulting Psychology, Vol. 21, pp. 95–103

works towards a state in which s/he both feels and conveys *empathy* to the client through paying careful attention to language, metaphor may be seen as a similar intra-psychic process between client and 'world' which attempts to make the environment itself *empathic.* However, seeing the process of 'metaphor-making' or 'matching' in this way superficially shifts us away from the traditional understanding of how language *helps* in therapy, which does not necessarily involve the concept of *empathy.* The Freudian understanding of this process of 'matching' which occurs in language is that the aim is *catharsis:* idea that when we achieve an accurate symbolisation of our experience (of our *trauma*) the psychic energy inherent in the experience is discharged, and the 'wound' is healed. However in foregrounding of the role of language in his account of psychoanalysis, Lacan may provide us with a link between the notions of *catharsis* and *empathy* (in the form I describe empathy above) which goes some way to resolving the apparent incompatibilities: according to Lacan, when we acquire (or 'enter into') language, the world as it is (the *real*) and the environment we subsequently inhabit is a purely linguistic *realité.* In this account it is a logical possibility that in speaking (in the process of *matching*) the product of such speech may have a tangible effect on the environment/world itself, given that it too is a linguistic entity. This is something more than *catharsis,* and somewhat closer to the enterprise of eliciting an empathic 'response' or state in the environment itself. While this claim may seem overly abstract and tending towards sophistry, we can see the same idea being formulated by many practising writers when they speak of needing to write to *live in the world.*

Authorship

In many ways the world we live in is a function of the narrative/s we hold about it. Narrative enquiry is a type of qualitative research which privileges

such stories (e.g. narratives of illness and trauma) and uses them as the central means of investigating phenomena. In this approach, participants might be regarded as the *authors* of their experiences; in turn, those experiences make up *reality*—or 'what is'. In terms of this chapter, the idea I want to take from narrative enquiry is that what '*is*' is that which is *told* —by the individual narrative or by a conglomeration of multiple parallel narratives. Coming back to the idea that writers write *in order to live in the world,* we can see why the notion of authorship is key. Taking the position that our reality is essentially a function of our narratives, the capacity to assume authorship carries with it the potential for fundamental change in our experiential landscape. In this way *authorship* can reconfigure the world to be more *livable* for the individual.

Roger Fowler[161] problematises the idea of *authorship* by posing the question, 'are all writers authors?'; his answer is that authorship requires the writing to be the *creation* of the author. Where writing is characterised as being (for example) *divinely inspired* then the writer becomes not the author, but the *scribe.* This distinction is useful when we think about the notion of *authorship* in the context of therapy. Such a configuring of the author carries along with it notions of agency—the capacity to act and create—which have been shown to be important factors in the therapeutic process, especially with regard to the therapeutic benefits of creative writing done by individuals whose experiences have left them feeling powerless and without a sense of agency. It is perhaps worth also noting here that an important wider theme that this thesis as a whole puts forward is that the generation of a sense of agency is one of the key therapeutic effects of engaging in creative writing practices.

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[161] Fowler, R. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge, 1973)

Most of the studies referenced in the literature review section of this thesis (see chapter one) acknowledge that one of benefits of writing creatively is that it fosters a sense of personal agency. A very explicit example of this is Penny Parks' approach to working with survivors of childhood abuse which is predicated on the idea that the authorship of a new narrative is the catalyst for healing. In Parks' practice clients are asked to figuratively *rescue the inner child* who has been subject to abuse, by writing a *rescue scene:* 'a scene where the adult charges in to stop the abuse and take the 'child' away to a safe and pleasant place'[162]. While acknowledging that the abuse can never be forgotten or erased, 'there will be a pleasant memory to soften the pain—a positive memory to leave good feelings: feelings of a conqueror instead of a victim'[163].

If *authorship* leads to *agency*—both the *capacity to* generate and the *outcome of* the generation of new and more helpful narratives, then *metaphor* is the *medium* of therapeutic change.

Metaphor

Exploring the role of *accurate symbolisation* in the process of therapy foregrounds the work of *metaphor*. in their book *Metaphors We Live By* Lakoff and Johnson[164] coin the term 'embodied cognition' to express and understanding of human conceptual systems as being fundamentally metaphorical in nature—and in this sense the term has resonance with Lacan's account of the psyche; Kopp developed *metaphor therapy* in his book

[162]Parks, P. *Rescuing the 'Inner Child': Therapy for Adults Sexually Abused as Children* (London: Souvenir Press, 1990)
[163] ibid.
[164]Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

of the same name[165]. Geary asserts that, 'Metaphorical thinking is essential to how we understand ourselves and others, how we communicate, learn, discover, and invent. Metaphor is a way of thought long before it is a way with words.'[166] What these authors have in common is that they take the view that finding a metaphor to accurately symbolise the experience of the client is fundamental and crucial to the therapeutic process.

The novelist Maria Cardinal gives us an example of how metaphor might work in practice in therapy, in her memoir of her breakdown and subsequent psychoanalysis *The Words to Say It*:

> That evening it was apparent to me that the Thing was the essential element: it was all powerful. I was made to face the Thing. It was no longer so vague, although I didn't know how to define it. That evening I understood that I was a madwoman. She made me afraid because she carried the Thing inside. She at once disgusted and attracted me, like those magnificent reliquaries in a religious procession enclosing the remains of a saint. The lamentation and the ecstasy…[167]

Here we have a tangible manifestation of a psychological state as *metaphor* in the 'thing' which is perceived by Cardinal to be inhabiting her. Her experience of 'madness' is thus accurately symbolised in language—leading to the beginnings of insight into her condition.

Grove's 'clean language' is a questioning technique in which the individual is encouraged to follow their own personal chains of symbolisation in order to engage in a *dialogue* with the process of making metaphor—what

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[165]Kopp, R. *Metaphor Therapy: Using Client Generated Metaphors in Psychotherapy* (London: Routledge, 1995)
[166]Geary, J. *I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World* (London: Harper Collins, 2011)
[167] Cardinal, Maria *The Words to Say It,* p. 203

Tompkins has called 'conversing with metaphor'[168]. *Clean language* techniques slow the process of making metaphor down to draw attention to the individual linguistic elements of writing, inviting the writer to modify metaphors in an iterative attempt to 'drill down' into the image. For example, Groves has an exercise he calls 'separating the modifier from the modified' which is directed at, 'releasing the noun from the tyranny of the adjective' [169] with the aim of allowing a stepping-back from habituated ways of representing experience in order to consider whether such forms still serve us. Such an exercise might look something like this:

'I am a bad person'
'and what is that "person" before they are "bad"?
'What is "bad"?'
'I am a "person"'
'what kind of "person" am I?'
'I am a "frightened" "person"'
'Am I a "bad" "fright"?'

Such an exercise promotes *enquiry* into the use of metaphors by stripping nouns of their modifiers—which may be so deeply embedded that the speaker is unaware of them—allowing concepts to be refigured in more helpful (or at least more *accurate*) ways. Thus the process promotes a kind of symbolisation which is congruent with a speaker's *present* lived experience. Building on the work of Groves, Lawley and Tompkins find that while people typically make use of common metaphors to describe experience, the moment these are explored they become 'idiosyncratic and unique to the individual' and that, 'an individual's use of metaphor has a coherent logic that is

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[168]Tompkins, Penny (2001) 'Conversing with Metaphor' *New Learning* (journal of NLP Education Network), Issue 9, Spring 2001

[169] Lawley, James & Tompkins, Penny, (2000) 'Separating the modified from the modifier' Retrieved on August 9 2019 from http://www.cleanforum.com/forums/showthread.php?662-Separating-the-modified-from-the-modifier&p=2622#post2622

consistent over time'[170]. They develop an approach to working therapeutically with metaphor which they call *symbolic modelling,* which involves taking a client through a series of discrete steps or stages, which are: 1. identify a metaphor; 2. develop the metaphor; 3. work with the metaphor; 4. mature changes. What this approach takes from Groves' *clean language* is that it leads the client to really strip back and drill down into the metaphor at a linguistic level, and to fully consider the meaning/s at play. They write, 'symbolic modelling [stays] entirely within the logic of the metaphor, to keep asking Clean Language questions, and to follow the natural direction of the metaphor as it evolves and unfolds. While the nature of a client's metaphor may lead you down a few *cul de sacs* or round a number of circles, in the end the metaphor contains the seeds of its own transformation. The changes that emerge organically are usually more novel and more appropriate than anything we could have dreamt up on the client's behalf.[171]' They take the view that once a client has selected a metaphor, there are 'logical consequences' which follow; the role of the therapist is to facilitate the client to *follow* this trail to allow novel insights to emerge.

T.S. Eliot[172] uses the phrase *objective correlative* to describe 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion' that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader. In writing which is designated as *therapeutic* it is the *intra-personal* import of the image constructed which signifies: that is the form of the *objective correlative* must be congruent with an internal sense of 'what is' and at this point *may* open up

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[170] Lawley, James & Tompkins, Penny *Metaphors in Mind: Transformation Through Symbolic Modelling* Developing Company Press, London, 2000.
[171] Ibid. p. 70
[172] Eliot, T.S. (1919) 'Hamlet', collected in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920)

or *evoke* greater psychological access to that with which it *corresponds*. In the group discussed below my aim was to encourage participants to work towards finding *images* which spoke to their experiences—in Eliot's terms, to find *objective correlatives* which would facilitate psychological access to experience, and ultimately in some form be experienced as *therapeutic.*

Bion's *Experiences in Groups and Other Paper*[173] puts forward the idea of the 'containing metaphor' in what might be regarded as the place of the *objective correlative*: building on the work of Melanie Klein, Bion makes a case for the group—specifically the ordering processes through which the group ascribes *meanings* to phenomena and experiences—as the mechanism through which *containing metaphors* are arrived at. He calls this the *alpha process.* Briefly, the *alpha process* is the sense of meaning and coherence that the mother provides for the developing child's piece-meal set of feelings and sense-impressions; in therapy, the analyst can perform this function, as can the therapeutic group. Without the *alpha process* in play, individuals remain stuck in a morass of inchoate (*beta* process) feelings which cannot be worked-through nor assimilated; thus the individual must seek the *alpha* if good psychological functioning is to be attained: without the *alpha* individuals typically feel anxious and *stuck.* I offer this brief note on a key aspect of Bion's work which I think sheds some light on what I observed happening in the counsellor group, discussed below. While my use of Bion is deliberately selective—his theory of groups has a number of elements not discussed here—highlighting the *alpha* process does help us think about the relationship between the group, the work of the *image,* and what occurs when a particular type of *empathy* is established within groups.

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[173] Bion, W.R. *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (1961); (New York: Bruner-Routledge, 2001)

The Counsellor Writing Group

When I originally conceived of writing this chapter my idea was to run a six-week therapeutic writing workshop with a small group of counsellors. I had previously worked with them in an informal group, in which we used art therapy methods (drawing and painting leading to talk) as a form of peer-supervision—and my experience of this group had been a positive and productive one. What prompted me to invite this group to take part in the therapeutic poetry workshops was that—while not writers—all members were comfortable and skilled at working with images and feelings at depth, and they had some considerable experience of working with creative methods in a therapeutic way. My thinking was that this counsellor group would be capable of exploring *affective* terrain in a more self-directing way than the students recruited for the student therapeutic writing groups (considered in chapter one) convened for this project. In practice in turned out that—while this group produced many examples of writing *expressing* or *describing* feelings—there was little or no evidence in the individual pieces they produced *alone* of them engaging in acts of *making* or *remaking* observed in the work of both the 'serious' writers and the amateur student groups; that is while there were attempts to articulate *lived experiences*, there was no indication that writing was an attempt to make such experiences more *livable*. Rather what was seen was how the group process itself wrought changes—through talk. The relationship of individuals in the group to their experiences became a matter of *negotiation* occurring through discussion which developed images as a *group process*. The significance of this for the role of metaphor and what it tells us about the effect of *empathy* is explored below.

The counsellor group ran for six consecutive weeks and had four participants, all of whom knew each other and had worked together (in peer supervision) before. The sessions lasted for two hours and were conducted in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning art room at the University of East Anglia. The decision to hold the workshops on University premises and to have a strict start and finish time was taken in order to introduce a sense of *formality* to the meetings: as mentioned above, I had worked with these participants before in a much more informal context —and thus knew them well—and so the decision to move to a more formal space was an attempt to set a psychological boundary around the work done in the writing group, to avoid the sessions becoming too *social*. Moving contexts in this way did work well and meant that the sessions were very much focussed on the work undertaken there. The format for the sessions was as follows:

1) 10 minutes of *focusing*[174] and 'check in'

2) brief warm-up exercise using drawing/painting materials

3) main writing exercise, using a particular technique or theme

4) 20 minutes discussion of the work and *process time*[175].

The first thing to note about the therapist group was that very little poetry was written. Despite the fact that all of the participants expressed enthusiasm for the *idea* of writing poetry when recruited, as the sessions unfolded none of them wrote without being directly prompted during the sessions themselves— which was occasionally an uncomfortable experience for me, as facilitator.

[174] *Focusing* refers to the technique developed by Eugene T. Gendlin
[175] The term *process time* refers to group members discussing what has happened in the group, focussing on key interactions and reflecting on their own responses.

Various reasons were given for not writing outside of the sessions: these included not having enough *time*, being involved in larger life events, and feelings of *self-consciousness* and *artificiality* connected to the act of writing itself. However this *resistance* to writing was also evident in the sessions themselves, and it throughout the duration of the group. The poetry that was produced suffered from a feeling of being forced—and this was something that was commented upon by more than one member of the group. Nevertheless, there was clear evidence of working with language—with metaphor and with striving for *congruence* of expression—and this emerged in and through the group process.

In the extracts from the *process time* discussions included below, participants talk in ways in which meaning/s are negotiated and changed in an effort to refine expressions of experiences. In these extracts we can also see a parallel process in which versions of their experiences are *authored* in the ways in which they are shared *with* or told t*o* the group. In speaking, participants characteristically focus on particular words (this is indicated by italicisation) and in doing so a process of hitting on the *right* word is foregrounded. What we see here is very much a process of group therapy: the group work together to pick up on and expand individual contributions, which in turn facilitates individual therapeutic process. I have included an extended extract from one of the sessions below to illustrate this process at work.

Given the general resistance in the group to—or difficulty with—writing poetry, I took the decision to use a variety of 'creative methods' as a way into writing; consonant with Natalie Rogers' approach (Rogers holds that 'imagistic' creative work done in one form will transfer to other modes of expression in such a way that the central *metaphors* endure) which uses

music, dance and visual art-making as well as writing as *ways in* to exploring individual experiences creatively, all of the writing exercises done in the group had a drawing or movement element as either a preface or a parallel activity. Generally the exercises invited participants to develop an *image* to represent experience—so while the means were various, the aim of arriving at a set of words (or a metaphor) which *spoke* the individual's experience remained the same. I include some of the images produced below to contextualise the talk contained in the transcript material presented here.

The extract discussed below is taken from the tape of the *process time* discussion which concluded session two of the group. In this session the task set was for individuals to strike a pose which expressed something of what they were feeling; they were then partnered with someone who asked them for key words about the pose, as they drew a picture of them, and these key words were added to the drawing with the aim of capturing the feeling of the speaker. The final phase of the exercise was to write a poem based on the words produced—although only one member of the group did this last part of the exercise. The pictures are included below for reference (fig.1-4). My own contributions to the discussion are denoted by *S.*

    [D] This is very classroom-ish though, isn't it?

    [S] It couldn't be more!

    [D] All the felt pens…

    [K] I like it

    [D] Yeah. But it just triggers stuff…

During the course of the group *D* frequently reported a strong negative response to being in the school-like setting of the art room and comes back

to this point later in this discussion. In contrast, *K* repeatedly expresses a positive response to the environment (and the group itself) which is interestingly belied by the other things she says as the talk goes on. Here *K* discusses her response to the posing/drawing exercise (fig. 1)
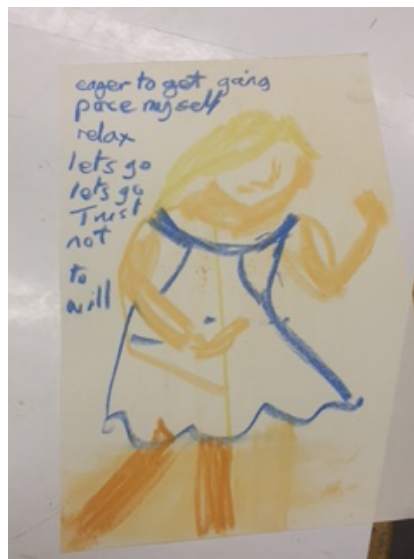
Fig. 1

[K] Mine was…I had a position like this because over the last few weeks, and it's got intense…it's like I've…I'm being pulled back—not pulled back but it's like I want to go and my leg's holding me…

[S] The horse-riding accident…

[K] Yeah so there's that, and also the parallels with my relationship with [partner] but also, I feel incredibly grateful to my leg, so I wrote a poem…which is, ode to my knee and my leg:

I sacrificed you for a moment and lost my balance,

I lost our balance.
You fell on me [so when I said you I meant the horse, Dot] and crushed my knee.
Only love I have felt for you, my girl [the horse],
For you my knee,
For you my leg,
For you, my body.
Patience, I thought, patience.
And you have continued to support me. How could I feel anything but love?
You, my leg; you, my knee; you, my horse.
The only time I waver is when I fear, when I lose hope I will ever be able to run again [makes grunting sounds]
Despite appearances, I continue to be vulnerable.
My leg, it's so hard to keep up. I love you. Thank you.
You have made a miraculous recovery, said the loving doctor.
He touched my feet with such love that I felt the quiet support flowing into my legs.
The miracle: why do some people do better than others?
I tell him that I love my knee, that I never give up on her,
She is part of the family and my love feeds every cell in my body.
We smile, we part, he writes a loving report.
And now I am getting better. No more painkillers to sleep.
Fear creeps in. Will I ever truly be back as I was?
Patient. I have had to be in this experience. I pause.
Oh knee, oh leg, oh knee. I do hope we will be able to run, cycle, play
As we always have done.
Patience is truly the only way.

[laughs]

In her poem the key image *K* chooses to represent the experience of her horse-riding accident and the resulting damaged knee is *love.* She draws parallels between the personification of her knee and her feelings for her long-term partner, who she is in the process of breaking up with at the time the group takes place. It is significant that she also says she feels *gratitude* towards her knee: as *K* identifies as a Buddhist, being someone who embodies an attitude of *gratitude* and *love* is central to her self-concept. In many ways this poem feels 'artificial' (and feelings expressed are subsequently contradicted) as she is engaged in *authoring* an account of the relationship break-up (and the breaking of her knee) in which more difficult feelings are edited out—feelings which may be perceived as being at odds with the concept of self as a calm

and loving presence. These more difficult aspects of the experience emerge in the talk which follows.

[K] Well, you know from doing yoga and things like that, if I think that I might not be able to do all the things I have always done, I could panic…I can't really though [deep sigh]

[S] …at the moment…

[K] Yeah. What I mean is, I can't go down that road. Otherwise I will panic, and get upset; so instead I have to be patient…and loving…and that feels…better [pause] a better place to be

…

[S] It sounds like it really mirrors what you were saying before [about partner]—and say if I am imposing…

[K] No! I don't think it is. It's the same sort of stuff, yeah yeah yeah. That's what I'm not saying but that is what it is. We talked about, didn't we, the parallels with the body. The trauma, or whatever. Yeah. And just—I'm just terrified in my psyche that I've destroyed my leg in the process [taps chalk on table] Well, y'know…sort of…you self-sabotage, don't you? When you hurt, you're hurting yourself, don't you…well, I've done that in my life.

[S] I do that all the time…

[K] I just hope that it gets better.

Here *K* expresses her fear that something irrevocably damaging has occurred. She explicitly regards the depiction of her experience as a *loving* one as an attempt to ward off psychic trauma. Significantly, she then begins by framing her experiences of the exercise very positively (as above in her response to *D*), before admitting that the exercise was neither useful nor enjoyable for her. Seemingly *K* is given *permission* to do this by what *B* says about her experience of the exercise, which is then echoed by *D*:

[S] So did you find the exercises useful?

[K] I love it! I love all the words, and the poetry.

[B] I found the exercises quite hard tonight…

[S] To find words…?

[B] I did it, but it didn't do anything for me.

[S] Sort of artificial…?

[B] mmm

[S] But you got something out of the drawing…? (fig. 2)

Fig. 2
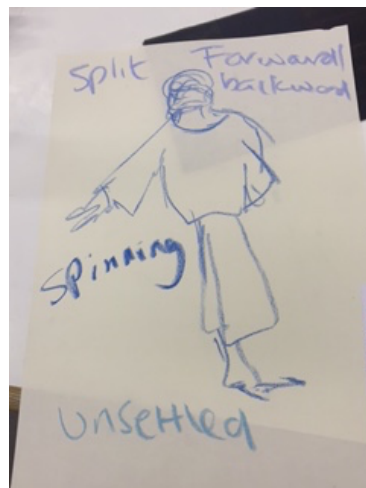
[B] Sure, yeah, the standing. The having to find a way to be and having to work out what it is

[D] I get very bored with my words [fig. 3], actually. They seem to, umm…

[S] From what perspective? You don't find them very interesting…?

[D] No, no…I don't.

[S] You don't think to choose different ones? Or are they all…

[D] Umm…they don't come. I suppose they don't come.

[S] You're more sort of visual…?

[D] I think more…more…I'm trying to think…

Fig. 3

[S] More words…? [laughter]

[D] And that is the truth!

[K] Do you think you're self-conscious, or something? There's some blocking that happens?

[D] I think it's to do with my brain and the way it functions…the way that sometimes I can be very articulate, and other times I can't even string a sentence

[S] …cause you're really articulate actually…
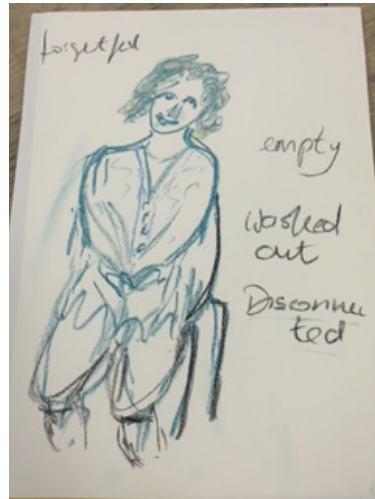
[D] Sometimes…mmm…and other times, just so pedestrian I would…you know…[laughs]

[K] no words…

[D] No words today, [D]…[laughs]

Here *D* expresses a feeling of inarticulacy in which she sees herself as having *no words*, and in doing so speaks to the words captured in her picture (fig. 3) which indicate a sense of emptiness and disconnection: having *no words* is equivalent to be cut-off and emptied out of meaning/s. I then go on to ask *D* if she is feeling alienated by the school-like room, and she makes a link between feeling *inarticulate* and feeling *stupid*; she makes a *semantic* shift in her narrative which substitutes the work *stupid* for the words thrown up by the exercise ('forgetful', 'empty', 'washed out', 'disconnected'):

[S] Have you still got the school-y feeling?

[D] [drawing noises] Yeah, I s'pose so. Yeah. I feel…yeah…I s'pose I feel a little bit stupid today.

[S] Is that the space?

[D] Yeah. I think school…I was fucking stupid at school, so…yeah.

[S] It's bringing stuff up…?

[D] Yeah. But I could…I could…again, that's narrative isn't it? Ooh, I feel something today! That must be…isn't it? Because I'm in a classroom! It might not be anything to do with that at all! Fuck all! I'm just here…yeah [laughter]. These little narratives keep creeping in…

[S] …and you feel like you need one…

[K] You get bored with them, don't you, your narratives?

[D] Yeah. Well with…generally, yeah. I do. Yeah. Cause…

[K] Because…

[D] I know it's just my brain trying to make sense, and then it gets a bit repetitive…

[K] …and you're thinking, what the fuck, what difference does it make, this story that I'm making?

The substitution of *stupid* seems to move *D* onto a deeper—perhaps more *authentic*—discussion of her feelings. She becomes more animated (angry) and questions the whole notion of constructing *narrative.* This in turn allows *K* to begin to access her own latent (avoided) feelings of anger, which belong to the situation of her break-up, but here is attached to what is said by *D.* When *K* asks, 'what the fuck' there is a strong sense that she is speaking to the fact of her own narrative as represented by the 'loving' poem (above). In this way the group process can be seen as an *organic* negotiation of the linguistic landscape, which has similarities to a piece of jazz played by an ensemble: each *player* in turn takes up a common theme—interpreting and developing it in their own way, before it returns to the group to be picked up

by another member. In this therapeutic group such *movements* result in deeper levels of exploration of individual experiences, in which further levels of feeling become revealed. Crucially, the medium and mechanism for such therapeutic *shift* is *language*: we observe it happening when the group *negotiates* language meanings—between members (different interpretations of the same word) or *intra*-narratively (with substitutions of words for other words). We can observe *K* make the narrative shift away from the *abstract* concept of 'loving' which she first introduces, into a deeper (and more authentic) account which allows for the existence of her anger. She continues to work with the metaphors she has already introduced (in session one she wrote a poem about her toaster) but the register of speech changes ('fuck', 'aarrggh'), and the metaphors in their original form are relegated to a jumping-off place for a more active and *lived* account of feelings:

[B] I was trying to think why the words didn't work out, and it was something about distilling down, or separating—and I think that where I've found writing has helped before, its provided focus on something bigger, and then it's distilled down, and then it's helpful. But for me, it was just trying to put layers that didn't need to be put on…

[S] You'd said it all, with just the…?

[B] Yeah. Yeah…

[K] It was the opposite of the process…

[B] Yeah, yeah.

[S] So it sort of took you away from it?

[B] Yeah.

[K] That's interesting, cause I mentioned the knee last time, after the toaster, I wanted to do something about the knee, so in a way I used that…I wanted to talk about the knee…but it was more from the words we did last time, than from that.

[Pause. Drawing noises]

[S] Did you get anything out of the pose?

[K] No. No, I didn't [pause]. I just acted it…

[S] You went down the charade…

[K] Yes, I just acted it. It's quite complex to talk about that particular…being grateful to my knee, somehow. But I didn't quite know how to convey the mixture of, I wanna get going! and…but I didn't want to say that the knee's holding me back, cause I'm so grateful to the knee…if that makes sense. It's like…and so it was easier to convey all that in the poem…than…and that was by-the-by. I was trying to add that to this…

[S] You were trying to say that…?

[K] Well, yes. But I thought, the pose, the pose, the pose. And like when you were busy going round the room I thought, well I might try that, but I'm busy doing what I am doing today—which is this. But also, I suppose, with the knee being bad like…uhhh…I can't crouch. I was trying to look for something—I'll have to lie on the floor if I have to look for stuff at that level. Just irritating! Like, he's fucking taken my stuff and what else has he taken!

[S] He's what?

[K] He's taken these things. Like, he's taken all the frozen food—he said, oh! what about what's in the freezer? So I carefully divvied up…but he took my stuff as well, and…it just annoys me. What else did he take? It's like, he's taken…the soap and the shampoo—achh!—the washing powder!

[S] Really unnecessary?

[K] Well, they're just little things, but you just think, oh for God's sake!—it just annoys me…cause it's irritating for me—and actually, since he hasn't made—he's just been living as a—as a bloody teenage boy in the house—I've been buying all the stuff, so it just makes me— aarrgghh! It makes me so *angry*.

At the beginning of the following extract (from session four) we see *E* engaging in an explicit process of *negotiating meaning/s* in language. In this session the task set was to produce a *cut-up* poem using words from newspapers and magazines (fig. 4-6).

Fig. 4

[E] Mine [fig.4] was a bit of a miserable one…part misery and part…I'm going through a bit of a phase of feeling a bit…like I said last week…

[S] Cause you were feeling quite anxious last week, weren't you? And a bit…

[E] Yeah…and *lost*…that's a bit too dramatic, as a word…

[S] But it's in that ballpark…?

[E] Yes, a bit…*rootless* and…y'know…[pause] erm…

[K] Did you know you've got 'didn't say' [written] twice? Was that deliberate?

[E] Yeah…cause I think I used to *not say things* a lot, when I felt them…erm…[pause] and you know, so I think *oohooh*…so then you feel like you've got to *do* something, and I…sometimes I feel calm, but then sometimes I feel *what?* Erm…but these are p'raps more positive ones at the bottom [pause]—to feel a bit more *hopeful* and a bit less [K speaks over—unintelligible]

[S] *Wish* is a nice word…

[E] Mmmm [pause] … and *hope.* Cause I don't really expect…I was saying to people, about their *hopes* and *wishes* really…

[S] *Decision* is really big…

[E] Yeah. It was just big in the paper, actually [laughs], so I'm not sure…but it is about…I've always *struggled* a bit with decisions. And sometimes I just make rash ones, just to get it *done.* And sometimes I think, *oh what shall I do?* but I don't even know what I am trying to decide. So, *decision* is always a bit in that…[pause]

Here *E* considers whether she has chosen the *right* words to represent her experience and engages in a process of talking-through meanings. She indicates that some words are chosen to represent feelings she identifies as owning, while others (*hope, wish*) function as talismans to introduce elements into the poem/experience she would like to be present. Significantly, when I draw attention to one of the more positive words (*wish*) she shifts the focus back onto the more troubling *decision*: she if effect identifies this as being central to the feelings she wishes to convey—something which is confirmed by her talking about her experience of making decisions at some length. At this point in the talk, *B* picks up the word *decision* and speaks about it in relation to her own experience:

> [B] [unintelligible] even down to what to watch on the TV, so [my son] *punishes* me and says, *you've got to decide*—and I won't, and I'll just sit there, and I can't take the responsibility…
>
> [S] Is that what it's about? Having the responsibility?
>
> [B] Yeah. Films, you know, when I'm going out, I can't…if I can *possibly* avoid it I do.
>
> [S] In case it goes wrong? or it's crap…?
>
> [B] Yeah. The responsibility of everyone having a rubbish time…and then being *judged* for it [pause]
>
> [E] Yeah, some of the decisions I made I don't really think they were *decisions*—I think I just said something to get it done quickly, cause sometimes it's better to do that, or…best not talk about that, really. [Pause]
>
> [S] What about yours, [B]?
>
> [K] Can you *show* it?
>
> [S] You seem to have a nice *feel* with the pastels…

While *B* ascribes ideas of *responsibility* and an attached threat of *punishment* to the word *decision*, for *E* the notion of a *decision* is better described as being linked to a sense of *regret* (for decisions made poorly in the past) and an

inability/reluctance to make present decisions. At this point in the talk *B* holds up her cut-up poem for the group to see (fig. 5) and this acts as a catalyst for *B, E and K* to involve themselves in the discussion—each developing the theme of *decision* in a way which is consonant with their own experience.

Fig. 5

[K] Mmm, yeah…so the first word I found was *panorama* [laughter] and I think because I'm in this phase of *looking forwards looking back* I'm *re-writing* bits to see how I feel…

[S] The feet going one way, and the other…

[B] Yeah. So it's a sort of looking *back* and looking *forward* thing. So…sort of going back to *school* and feeling quite *safe*, with it being cold and…feeling *angry* about stuff…and then going out into the world a bit more and having good fun with my brother and his gay friends…and then finding *love* and *wine* go together quite well…[laughter] Erm, and then actually making a *decision* to move, and becoming a *mum,* and all my vintage stuff and moving to Norfolk…but still having this big *secret* that can never be *unlocked* or *spoken about.* Erm…at the same time there were *good times* and *passion* and the therapy, starting with the therapy stuff…erm…but feeling a bit like, like there are some *deadlines* now. You know, feeling time was endless before, you could do what you want…sort of feeling that's not really the case anymore. But that I've got a lot of *treasures* to look back on, and I do I s'pose—there's got to be some bonuses, and hopefully a new *man* in there somewhere [laughter]

[E] I get the *deadline* bit because you do…you know…when your *young* you think there's always endless *choices* and then you start to feel that doors are…it isn't just about…I don't think it's just about being negative yourself; I think society is quite ageist…

[K] I think the menopause *physiologically* is the end of something, and then in your mind—in *me*, my experience of it is, *oh my God, that's over!*

[E] Yeah…

[K] Oh my God!

[E] It's *choices* [pause] even if it's things you don't *want*—still, having the doors *closed…*

[B] …it's not a *possibility*, even if you don't want it…[pause]

[K] I think it's brilliant: the way you've *woven* your *story*. You should put that up on the wall somewhere in your house.

[B] It's interesting that if I hadn't seen the word *panorama…*

For *B* the presentation of her life history as a series of key words sparks anger—*decision* (from the cut-up by E) is the decision to keep the *secret*[176] which has affected her life. This is the *panorama* of her experience. When *E* picks up on the word *deadline* included in the piece by *B* she is able to go a further in refining her understanding of her word *decision* in terms of *B 's* introduction of the word *deadline*: decisions now represent the shutting down of choices and allied to the passing of time. *K* in turn takes up the notion of *decisions* and *deadlines* in terms of her own current experience of splitting with her long-term partner whilst also being menopausal; the word *menopause* is substituted by *K* as a proxy for *deadline* and *decision*: she is making the decision to split from her partner at a time when the deadline for making new sexual relationships (she feels) has expired. In this way the three women work together through talk to explore and refine their own meanings and language-terms, in a way which allows them greater access to their experience. *K* is now discussing in a much more open way the things she indicates are *fearful* in the excerpt from the previous session. It is worth

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[176] The group know B's 'secret' but I have omitted explanation of it here as it makes her identifiable

noting that *B* refers to the image of herself going *back* and *forwarded* she presented in the previous session, despite saying that the exercise was 'not useful' at the time; something of the metaphor of contrary movement is continued here[177]

The image of going *back* and *forward* (belonging to *B*) now makes an appearance in *K*'s discourse, where it is transfigured as a *split* self. Here *K* is talking about her piece (fig. 6) in a continuation of the extract above:

Fig. 6

[K] I found [the cut-up exercise] too limiting, I guess. It's like I had many more words in my head, but these are the ones I *found…*

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[177] After this session *B* returned to this image again, producing the following poem:
Half of me goes forwards, and half of me goes back.
Not at the same pace, so tension in the middle.
Energy dissipates with no discernible progress, so
Spinning not moving.
   Try not to topple over.
   Fun but unsettling.
   Adrift if unchecked?
   Hope the top catches up with the bottom,
   To move forwards, not backwards.
   Channelled energy in an insane time zone,
   Past and present
   Spurious
   Allowing the future-space to emerge.
   Bathed in the womb of the ship, thrums.

I wanted to find treasures
detectives
gold, silver, Copacabana
opening, bringing, free life
closer together
encouraged [I don't know what that is]
clubs [so this bit is the after bit, I don't know what that is—going to clubs]
love affair, action drives work, let us crack on, saved [laughs] [I've got this awful feeling]
saved, but for how long …

cause I think I'm like that with all the men I go with…I end up…and *become…*it's like I lose my *power…*

[S] You lose your *power* when you're with somebody…?

[K] Unless I…I think there's a *split* in me…and…I experience the split in me now, it's less painful because I tend to…it's like I *miss* [partner]…the *bit* of [partner]…so what I did…I'm a glass half full…the thing with [partner] is I [pause] You know how I like all these pretty patterns and pretty colours and things that go *well*? That is how my mind…*frames*…the *world*. So, I'm like *well [partner's] a bastard* and I'm like, *well no he's not da da da da*—and I make it all rose-coated, and then it's like a *nightmare*, so…and it *splits* me cause I'm no longer able to do all the things I want to do, so I do them *secretly,* and then I feel like a *thief* and a *villain*

[S] Like coming here…?

[K] Coming here, and also drinking with my friends and smoking fags and all the things he doesn't *approve* of, so there's this *split…*[pause] So, I'm not with him. But that *split* is still in me because I think, *oh his cups*—or whatever—I mean not *really* not *deeply* but…

This allows *K* to return to exploring the situation with her partner and consider whether her current situation has a wider resonance for her way of *being* in relationship. Significantly the *split* which became apparent in the talk of session two—between the *loving* way she wrote about feeling and the *angry* and *traumatised* nature of the feeling that subsequently emerged are extended here and encountered at more therapeutic depth.

As mentioned above, *D* experienced a negative reaction to the *school-like* atmosphere of the environment in which the groups took place, and this

resulted in her not contributing to discussion as much as the other members. However, when she did choose to engage her contributions were quite profound. In the example below from session 3 *D* opens the talk about her picture by talking about the death of her father.

Fig. 7

[S] This (fig. 7) looks very *accomplished…*

[D] I did it when I thought about my father dying. I remembered feeling like an *adult* like it couldn't go on like that after that, like that was the end of it…

[E] …it's unchaotic, very streamlined…

[D] There was something very *whole* about my response in that. I remember feeling very instinctive. I felt that it was *complete*, a complete experience in a way …cause there was nothing left

[K] cause you forgave him in a way, too…

[D] There was something about behaving in the *right* way

[K] In the right way…

[D] Which is only in the right way according to your nature, according to your heart…

[S] Doing what you need…

[K] …what you need to do

[E] It's slightly clinical and emotionless

[D] cause I'm thinking about [S] not being angry, you know [with your mother], and thinking, well, I could have been really angry with him, but it wasn't at the time…I just didn't think… That came *out* of that, when I was talking about that

[S] Do you understand it at all?

[D] No.

[K] Well, does it need to be understood?

[S] No. I think *understood* was the wrong word.

[D] But there is an understanding, but I can't put that in words perhaps.

[K] *Accomplished* is a good word for it.

[D] Thank you. There is a part of me that can be quite *adult* and whole, I think.

Here it is interesting to note the *funereal* nature of the image *D* has produced—which references the idea of a death in both colour (the lack of) and form (slab-like); it is also interesting that *D* does not modify or *change* what she wants to say about the piece in response to interjections by the others. In this way we can regard the image as being a *complete* one which is intra-personally conceived—not as a consequence of the group process. It is significant that *D* says she does not *understand* the image; it seems to indicate a different style of relating to image-making than that exhibited by other members of the group: as a metaphor the image is *complete* in itself. As she indicates, the experience itself was a 'whole one' and in this sense free-standing of any ongoing *process.*

I took the opportunity to interview *D* alone outside of the group, three weeks prior to the first group meeting. I went to the summer degree show at Norwich University of the Arts with her and taped our conversation afterwards. As *D* had attended art school—although dropped out before finishing her degree—I asked her about her own experience of making art and whether she was making art now:

[D] I think doing the art pieces gave me a sense of *being* that was not related to the overbearing identity that you're [um] asked to [um] *identify*…

[S] …as somebody on [the housing estate]?

[D] Yeah. And so, in a way, I think it was an instinctive drive. I had done some art training [um] with [um] a couple of people, and they were really into *found* objects and stuff like that, which is why I was able to do it actually. So I was just picking up everything and making collages, which I *love.* And [um] but more recently…like I haven't been paying much attention to it, getting distracted, but then somebody said my work was like *relics* so…there's something…they're like relics, so…OK but it didn't really mean much to me until recently, when I was watching telly, and a couple of things came up about these *reliquaries?* whatever they're called [S: yeah] …and one contained a finger, supposedly, and if fits in…

[S] When they put them in those beautiful boxes?

[D] Oh yes, that's what relics are…and then I thought it's about something that's connected to the *past* …an *attachment* ...an it's almost a desire to form an attachment…with something *way* back, something *ancient* and my story is—and this might be complete bollocks as well—that it's a connection with, it's an interpretation of experience, or understanding of *being* that is outside of…the…our [pause] what's available to us at present. It's to *try* and understand, if you like…it's not like a *moral* interpretation …the trouble is—like where I do my work [S: the hostel] is that unless you *have* [um] understanding of other ways of experiencing stuff …like this person's experiencing trauma, this person has [um] an attention regulation difficulty then you can only interpret that through some moral thing, or they're not trying [S: yeah] it a waste of time…

[S] …whereas what you're talking about sounds more like empathy…

[D] Yeah. So, it's that kind of empathy and *maybe* that …the … what it is, trying to connect to something …some *ancient* thing—or it may not be ancient, it may just be very deep, very difficult to connect to—that is a way of experiencing yourself in relation to others and your environment …if any of that means anything…

[S] Absolutely.

[D] So then I started to look at the little *things* again, thinking, you know, I'd like to make some more of those, but perhaps develop it into something else. So, the other thing is that I do actually believe that I have ADHD.

[S:] You got your son's report…

[D] Yes, and I had to answer the questions as well …and and I did that, and that helps me to understand my *life*, and all the bits of it, and the counselling, you know …so, that is the story of my life: learning how to do something, and then when I've learnt to do it, I'm so bored with it that I want to do something else. So, the other thing that I understand from that is, that with that condition, it's very uncomfortable to be in your body, that being in your body is not a comfortable experience. And so I'm now beginning, when I understand that…it's like a relief! Because until you understand that, you think, *it's them* or *it's this* or …it's very hard to sit in your body if you have that condition. So now

I'm starting to work from that position …so I've got felt tips in my bag …so I'm going to start doing more [um] just *anything,* any kind of *colourful* [um] *design* while I'm going about the place, I've decided, to try and [um] allow myself to register what it feels like [pause] and to comm- …and to put that outside of myself, and then to *see* what grows from that …does that make sense? [S: yes] It's like, what does the world *feel* like? So, it's the difference between *thought* and *experience*, isn't it?

…

[D] Somebody told me I was an *artist* and I thought, that's alright, but then I felt like a *fake*, I thought, not really …but I am always questioning, and it feels like boredom, but I think I just disengage because I don't have the chemicals to engage, like my synapses just aren't firing…it seems like boredom. It's difficult to explain that, or it has been, but I understand that better now.

….

[S] Lots of the writers I've talked to for this project said something about when they found a group of writers, they felt for the first time they could be fully *present* in a space…

[D] Well I've sort of found that with our counselling group, actually, the *art* group—most of the time—I feel OK. But I don't quite know how much of that is my *desire* to feel OK [laughter] or whether it is *OK*, I'm not sure… but it is about, yeah, feeling OK, so I think it's really important, um…

…

[D] I was thinking about this *reliquary*—about how it stimulates so much—because it is also about your experience to suspend disbelief when you are looking at it, that you can't really *think* too much when you are looking at it, you can't think too much…

[S] …because it's obviously fake, isn't it?

[D] …it's *fake…* so it's about how that's enriching, how it can be a positive experience, to *experience* that reliquary…

…

[D] So, I'm gonna start doing my *scribbles* on a daily basis and see what that leads to … and to try and write a bit about it as well. For me it feels like the right thing to do, so I can *connect* to it—otherwise I couldn't connect to it.

The sense I got from interviewing *D* (and this was supported by the contributions she made to the group) is that her way of working was more *intrapersonal* than the other participants; in this way is was closer to the way

of working observed in the 'serious' poets. She refers to her way of working as *instinctive* and mentions that she has had some *art training*, which I feel is significant: what we observe here is a *facility* for working with metaphor in an independent way which is lacking in the other group participants. In the extracts above we so other group members working *collaboratively* through talk to explore and establish congruent *images* and *narratives* of experience. However for *D* this process is much more an internal one—and indeed we see her *resisting* modifications of her personal narrative by group talk in the extracts above. An important aspect of *D*'s process is her ability to let the image *arise* or *arrive* in consciousness, in a naturalistic way: here she finds she is drawn to the image of a *reliquary* without understanding why. An *interrogation* of the reliquary as a *metaphor* is a secondary process and linking it to life experiences comes later still. In this way she is able to work with the process of image-making in a more *authentic* and therapeutic way. The other participants speak of their art-making (the exercises) as often being a bit *forced,* and in this way *inauthentic*; they are only able to access a deeper level of engagement through talk in the group process. In many ways the interview with *D* presents an example of someone developing their *affective empathy* to combat an experience of *emotional numbing*; this is explicit for *D,* who says here that she is drawing more now to *register* feeling.

Saying and *Making*

In his extended essay *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016)[178] poet Ben Lerner questions the received wisdom that engaging in writing for expression will produce poetry, and challenges the idea that writing is about the expression

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[178] Lerner, B. *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2016)

of feelings *per se*. For Lerner such 'amateur' writing about one's feelings is

not consonant with the act which he denotes as poetry:

> We all have feelings inside us (where are they located, exactly?); poetry
> is the purest expression (the way an orange expresses juice?) of this inner
> domain. Since language is the stuff of the social and poetry the
> expression in language of our irreducible individuality, our personhood
> is tied up with our poethood. "You're a poet and you don't even know
> it," Mr. X used to tell us in second grade; he would utter this irritating
> little refrain whenever we said something that happened to rhyme. I think
> the jokey cliché betrays a real belief about the universality of poetry:
> some kids take piano lessons, some kids study tap dance, but we don't
> say that every kid is a pianist or a dancer. You're a poet, however,
> whether or not you know it, because to be part of a linguistic
> community—to be hailed as a "you" at all—is to be endowed with poetic
> capacity.[179]

For Lerner, writing poetry is ideally more fundamentally an act of *making* as

opposed to *saying*: something which is beyond the 'ordinary' communicative

act and something which is inspired—potentially *divinely* inspired. Lerner

offers the example of seventh-century poet and mystic Cædmon as a way of

alluding to a something more being at play in the writing of poetry than simple

expression and to foreground this aspect of poetry as a *making*. In the story

Cædmon is instructed in a dream to, *sing the beginning of created things*;

wonderful verses praising God pour forth, and Cædmon awakes as a poet.

From this Lerner concludes that, 'poetry arises from the desire to get beyond

the finite and the historical—the human world of violence and difference—

and to reach the transcendent and divine'.[180] Nevertheless Lerner's theme

overall is the gap between what is an *ideal* of poetry and what is *possible* as

praxis in contemporary poetry: he rejects both the bathos of Mr. X and what

is regarded as the *transcendental posturing* of visionaries like Whitman—

leaving him somewhere in the middle where he sees, 'this lacuna – the break

between what's ideal and desirable and what is realistically possible to

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[179] ibid. p. 4
[180] ibid. p. 17

achieve – as an insurmountable aspect of poetry-making, whether one denounces the art form or defends it'. Lerner concludes that poetry which is *universal* and timeless—the ideal—is in practice an impossibility. Poems are always located in time and space and will always be *more true* for one person or group than another; universality is a myth which undermines what poetry *can do* in its limited way: that is, poems 'can actually be funny or lovely…they can play a role in constituting a community'.[181]

So, how does this relate to the ideas put forward so far in this chapter? The group discussed above could be given as an example of the *failure* of poetry: the group either wrote with a sense of *artificiality*—or *did not write* at all; writing was neither *transformative* nor felt to be *expressive* in any authentic sense. What did happen instead was that the group itself assumed the role of 'developing writing' (*writing* being defined as the production of images which do the poetic *work*) in the group talk during process time. The *talk*— the *poems*—of the process time in this way played a vital role in *constituting the community* of the group. The group itself took on the function of pushing language—through the constant modification of images through *talk*—into a *transformational* or *poetic* role. The group process also helped individuals arrive at representations of experiences in language which were seen to be closer to the *truth* than the more *artificial* images resulting from the writing exercises undertaken alone.

Returning to Bion's idea of *the containment function,* which was introduced above, it seems that something of this was manifested by the group process. For Bion—who builds on the work of Melanie Klein and in particular

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[181] ibid. p. 80

Klein's theory of *projective identification*[182]—the primary site of *the*

containment function is the relationship between mother and child.

> Using Klein's insights, and his development of them, Bion suggests that the baby has sensations, be those coming from outside herself or from inside, which the baby cannot cope with. He counts both pleasure and pain among such sensations. Since the baby cannot 'tolerate them' (for whatever reason) or comprehend them, she can only get rid of them, that is expel them, or rather expel that bit of her that feels them (as Klein says when describing projective identification). The baby can breathe them out, she can urinate, she can scream them out or use any kind of physical means at her disposal.

> A question that could be asked is: what happens with the sensations she expels, where do they go? It is obvious that in reality they cannot 'disappear', it is equally obvious that there can be no growth, well-being or development without modification.
> Where do these projected bits of experience go? They go into the mother who modifies them through an emotional function that transforms the baby's raw sensations into something that—if all goes well—the baby takes back into herself and becomes the basis for the baby's awareness of her feelings and, eventually, thoughts… A contact barrier [is formed in the psyche of the child which] is a combination of alpha-elements that eventually can become permanent albeit elastic and can manifest itself, for instance, in a kind of narrative, such as that of a dream. The development of a contact barrier is at the base of the differentiation between an 'unconscious' and a 'conscious'. It keeps them separate from one another whilst also being permeable and allowing for communication between them.[183]

On the one hand, the group provided its individual members with an *alpha*

function through talk. In the case of *K.* this function was to help her process

beta-elements connected with emotions (anger, sadness, a *desire to be loving*)

into a more coherent narrative which brought together a number of contrary

emotional imperatives connected to the break-up of her relationship into a

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[182] Projective identification is the idea put forward by Klein that in close relationships—such as the mother/child or therapist/client relationship—one party splits off from parts of their *self* and projects them into the *other.* For the therapist this is most often experienced as a sense of having feelings which do not seem to *belong* to them. The function of projective identification for the child/client is to have the *other* take and process feelings and experiences they do not have the capacity to process themselves.
[183] Riesenburg-Malcolm, R. 'Bion's Theory of Containment' in Bronstein, C. (Ed.) Kleinian Theory: a Contemporary Perspective (London Whurr Publishers, 2001), pp. 165-180

form which was more cohesive and which she could *assimilate* into awareness; in this the group is roughly analogous to the *mother* in Bion/Klein. On the other hand—and this is a more important point for the position put forward in this thesis as a whole—we might see language itself as performing the *alpha function* and as the fundamental mechanism of *containment* as the concept is specified in Bion.

There is a broader point to be made here—and it is one which is discussed in the conclusion to this thesis—about the potential for language itself to perform the *alpha function* and provide containment which is somewhat beyond the current discussion of the counsellor group; however I introduce it here as it gives context to what I see has happening through the *process* of the group. What the group talk essentially facilitated was access to the pattern of signification—the connections and patterns of meaning—latent in language as a construct, which allowed the individuals in the group to *make sense* of their experiences: what was made available to participants *in language* was an analogue for feelings experienced partially and somewhat chaotically and thus not being available for *assimilation* (in other words as *beta elements*) which was more *complete* and *organised* in relation to the structures of signification fundamental to language. Through the group process talk emotions where *projected on to* language itself (through the debate around *is it this word or that?*) where they were *modified* and made amenable to assimilation. The therapeutic process is itself seen by Bion as a version of the mother-child interaction of *containment* and we can see the counsellor group fulfilling this role; however, I would argue that it is not the group *in and of itself* which performs this function, but rather it is *the group as it facilitates the interaction with language* which signifies here. As I said this is a somewhat broader point than is useful to make at this point and I one which

I will return to in subsequent chapters. Suffice it to say here that what we see through the interactions of the counsellor group in their *process time* is something like *containment* leading towards the construction of a *contact barrier* constructed of language itself. A simpler way of saying it is that through talk language eventually provides a form of words which both captures and *makes sense of* the various elements of experience—and results in a satisfactory *containing metaphor* which can form the basis for assimilation of experience.

When the individual does not have an intrinsic *facility* for making art— acquired either through experience or having a natural tendency toward image-making or both—then an important step in the *making* is left out: this is the step where the maker *encounters* something which is extraneous to self—whether residing in the unconscious or in a realm we might term *inspiration*. In the counsellor group discussed above, the individually produced piece was frequently just an example of *saying*—where *saying* is defined as speaking without making reference to such edge-of-awareness *knowing* which characterises successful *art*—predicated perhaps on an understanding of *poetry* as an *holistic* (or complete) expression of experience which is aesthetically *put*: that is, a somewhat simplistic understanding probably acquired from reading and writing poetry at school. Such an approach seeks to reach the *goal* of making too quickly—neglecting the process of evolving an image which is more *authentic* as an expression of experience. In such examples of poems as *saying* (as opposed to a more profound *making*) what is produced is not what Eliot calls *the objective correlative.*

What was interesting about the counsellor group—and what ultimately facilitated the process of *making* of individual members—was that when intrinsic processes of *making* failed (where in the opinion of participants themselves found to be *inauthentic* and devoid of genuine emotional content) then the group process was foregrounded as the mechanism through which *making* takes place. What was even more interesting to observe in the group was the way in which, via group talk, participants did not move—through a process of negotiation—towards *shared* meanings of particular words and images; rather participants used group talk as a *space* or a *resource* which allowed them to develop and arrive at images which were understood and functioned in highly *individual* ways. Above we see individual members *pick up* images from other members, only to develop and establish them as metaphors for their own experience.

One thing that may account for this process where the group effectively becomes the *author* of individual narratives, is the effect of the exercises themselves on this group of largely inexperienced (with the exception of *D*) *makers*: exercises such as the cut-up poem and the one where participants put forward words which were written on a drawing *by someone else* may have served to highlight the quality of language as a *material* which can be used for *making.* This *problematises* the process of simply *saying* (seeing language as something one works *with* not simply *says through*) served to introduce the important element of the *making* process observed in the 'serious' writers interviewed in for chapter two—it slowed down the process enough to allow a more *authentic* and representative image of their experiences to emerge. The exchanges between *B* and *K* where they pick up on each other's images of *contrary movement* and *splitting* (of self) allow both to evolve individual metaphors—to *author* personal accounts—which allow them to access deeper

levels of experiencing. As testament to *authenticity* of their *making* we see that for both *B* and *K* these images endure; they are not put aside, but instead endure and reappear in later meetings. We see something similar in the work of *D* where images reoccur over time. However, of *D* this process is an *interpersonal* one which is not reliant on the group process.

To return to the quote from Susie Orbach which prefaces this chapter, when we observe the group process we see repeated group members saying something to the effect of, 'No that's not the right word. I need to find another word'; we observe a process of negotiating ways towards—what Cardinal calls—*the words to say it.* If the goal of person-centred psychotherapy is to facilitate an accurate representation of the client's experiencing in their awareness[184] it becomes clear why finding *the words* should be experienced as *therapeutic.* In the extracts included above what we observe might be described as individuals engaging in a quest for *linguistic congruence*—an accurate match between what is felt and the words that express feeling— which is facilitated by the iterative action of the group process. What we also observe, though, is something *more* than a drive for accurate symbolisation: we see participants simultaneously engaging in a process of constructing *coherent* metaphors and *narratives*—a process of sense-making which mitigates difficult, fractured and disorientating (in some cases *frightening*) experiences; and in this way, participants engage in a process of *authorship.* The image of the *reliquary* which is introduced by *D* is apposite when taken in the context of a process of *authorship* which has as its goal 'getting a handle on' difficult experience: the reliquary as a vessel for holy relics (i.e. body parts of a saint) which simultaneously may be endowed with miraculous

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[184] Kevin A. Fall, Janice Miner Holden, Andre Marquis *Theoretical Models of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 194

power, may be read *metaphorically* as a container for our experiences which at once lends *structure* and *boundedness*—in much the same way as authoring a narrative—to that experience, whilst also containing the power inherent in the experience itself. To quote Eliot again—this time from *The Waste Land*—reading the image of the *reliquary* in this therapeutic sense, the image becomes, 'these fragments I have shored up against my ruin'; in this way, the image becomes not only what *is*—but also what is *required.*

Next Steps

What I have shown in this chapter—among other things—is that the *image* (or word) is a powerful mechanism for containment and transformation of feeling; this emerges as the predominant function of the group talk discussed here. In the next chapter I will focus more specifically on the idea of imagery itself, in deeper exploration of what figurative language both *is* and *does*—and in order to do this I will first look at texts which are overtly literary in nature. In particular, I will look at the ways in which figurative language may be employed to mitigate trauma. In the second part of this chapter I extend the discussion to include interview material in which two therapists discuss their experience of clients using metaphors; the overall aim of this chapter is to establish the role of *metaphor* as one which is central to the therapeutic process—especially with regard to the processing of trauma.

Chapter Four

Naming and Shaming: how using figuration in language can function to contain, negotiate and mitigate traumatic experience

It's my mouth I can say what I want to[185]

—Miley Cyrus, 'We Can't Stop'

Neither is right, the fiction
or the fact. It is as if
What happened were good enough ...[186]

—Donald Finkel, 'Target Practice'

In the previous chapter I looked at the significance of the group itself to the process of engaging with language therapeutically—through talk. We saw how figurative language may be employed to both *contain* and to *transform* 'difficult' psychological material, and in this way make it more tolerable for the individual—offering the possibility of integration. In this chapter I look at how language functions in poetry itself—largely with images extant in text: here I am concerned with the function of poetry and poetic language which allows for the expression and mitigation of *trauma*. This belief—that by writing we can somehow *write out*—trauma is widespread and forms the basis of most arts-orientated therapeutic interventions. It also connects with the twin processes of *abreaction* and *catharsis* put forward by Freud which

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[185] Written by Douglas L. Davis, Michael Len Williams, Michael Len Ii Williams, Miley Cyrus, Pierre Ramon Slaughter, Ricky M. L. Walters, Theron Makiel Thomas, Timothy Jamahli Thomas • Copyright © Universal Music Publishing Group
[186] Donald Finkel 'Target Practice' Finkel, Donald *Not So the Chairs: Selected and New Poems* (Washington: Mid-List Press, 2003), p. 35

remain the backbone of psychoanalytically-orientated therapies: through talk—through *speaking* which is a proxy for writing—we arrive at the 'central event' of trauma and then discharge it of its power by expressing it in therapy. When I talk about trauma in this chapter I will largely (although not exclusively) be referring to the trauma of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is particularly difficult for an individual to deal with as the event frequently engenders feelings of shame which cause the abuse to be a buried memory for the victim[187], or one which resists *speaking.* Such a response fundamentally problematises the process of recovery: either because memories remain inaccessible, or because shame inhibits the victim from being able to speak (and therefore process) the trauma; victims frequently experience both repression and shame. Under these conditions engaging in any kind of writing which has the aim of being *expressive* of the trauma— and is therefore therapeutic—is problematised in a fundamental way. Ferenzi[188] describes the individual in these circumstances as being *structurally dissociated*—a state in which parts of the personality become split off from other parts, so that the trauma can be 'held' in largely unknown and unknowable spaces of the psyche allowing other parts to function *in the world*: 'trauma involves an enduring division of the personality, in which one dissociative part manifests as the "guard against dangers…and the attention of this guard is almost completely directed against the outside. It is only concerned about dangers, i.e. about objects in the outside world all of which can become dangerous"'.[189] While the dissociated 'guard' is involved with defending the individual against the world, the internal 'abused' part of the

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[187] I am choosing to use the term 'victim' here rather than the more ubiquitous 'survivor' as I feel that the term expresses something more about the crime and effects of sexual abuse
[188] Cited in Van Der Hart, O. et al *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Chronic Traumatization* (New York: Norton, 2006) p. 50
[189] ibid

personality is largely inaccessible. So the question is how, given these conditions, can poetry be said to perform a therapeutic function? How can poetry be 'expressive' or 'speak truth' when the event of abuse itself causes the psyche to split into what might be regarded as a collection of *fictions* dedicated to defending the *fundamental wound*?

In attempting to address this question I consider the writing of the American poet Emily Dickinson below, who famously wrote, 'tell all the truth but tell it slant'[190]. The point Dickinson makes with this statement is that what poetry offers—aside from an oblique way *telling* which defends both writer and reader from unpalatable *truth*—is a way in which a set of *conditions* can be fashioned which allows a *truth* which may be beyond our understanding as it stands to emerge through the twin processes of writing and reading. In this space *truth* is rendered *liminal*: occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold of what is *known* and *not known*—what is *revealed* and *yet to be revealed*; in this way poetry is the space in which structurally dissociated portions of the *truth* of our trauma may be encountered. Writing about the operation of the unconscious, Jacques Lacan describes the process as one in which, 'I think of what I am where I do not think to think', and we might read this as analogous to how poetry works under the circumstances described above: poetry under these circumstances has a type of *liminal* truth where what is unspoken—the experience of trauma—hesitates on the threshold of text. However, this is taking a step further in the argument put forward in this chapter; first I would like to establish what *truth* looks like and represents in the context of expressive/poetic writing which has a therapeutic function.

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[190] Emily Dickinson (Poem1263)

Telling Tales

One way to describe therapy is that it is a process of *telling*: telling the story of our experiences, our feelings and our difficulties. In the context of person-centred therapy the truth of such a telling is primarily a process subject to only *internal verification* by the client; the *truth* is that narrative which most closely replicates the *truth* clients inner experience. The achievement of such a *truth* is the keystone of facilitating what Rogers has termed the *actualizing process*, which is the goal of person-centred therapy; Rogers writes:

> Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. Neither the Bible nor the prophets -- neither Freud nor research -- neither the revelations of God nor man -- can take precedence over my own direct experience. My experience is not authoritative because it is infallible. It is the basis of authority because it can always be checked in new primary ways. In this way its frequent error or fallibility is always open to correction. [191]

We can see poetry in this way, too. Poems are similarly an expression of what we experience, think and feel; poetry is a fashioning of language which renders our experiences in some way *concrete.* However, the process of *telling* is not in and of itself congruent with *telling the truth* in an 'everyday' sense—and for Rogers there is no need for truth to be externally verifiable as long as it is consonant with what the client feels to be the *truth* of their experience. In therapy, we may try as best as we possibly can to tell the therapist the *truth as we see it,* but this is always a partial and iterative telling which relies on the perspective of the teller. The therapist may intervene, offer alternative perspectives or *truths*, but whether or not these become

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[191] Rogers, C. *On Becoming a Person: a Therapists View of Psychotherapy* (1961); British Ed. (London: Constable, 1967), pp. 23-4

assimilated into the narrative of the teller—whether such interjections *move the story on*—is always uncertain.

Poetry differs in this from the process of therapy. While the teller may have the sense of a *reader* as the destination of a poem, the sense of a reader is rarely (if ever) at play in the construction of poetic narratives. Poems are not subject to interjections from an *other* perspective; in this, the writer is alone. So, what then does *telling the truth* mean when considered in the context of the poem? In the previous chapter I introduce Eliot's idea of the *objective correlative*: a phrase or formulation of language to describe *a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion* that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader. This idea which is particularly active in poetic *telling* further problematises the process of *telling the truth* of our experience, in that the enterprise of the poet—as opposed to the client in therapy—is to represent that *truth* which, while it *corresponds* to what is perceived to be the *truth* of the matter, is presented imagistically in ways which render *telling* a *fiction.* This is not to say that the aim of the poet is not to *speak truth*—and in many ways to articulate a deeper truth through the employment of symbolism; nevertheless, what poetry reveals is that such *telling*—and perhaps all telling—involves the construction of *fictions.*

The British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) highlight the therapeutic importance of the image, in a public document which defines art therapy is defined as follows:

> The focus of Art Therapy is 'the image' and the therapeutic process involves a transaction between the creator (the patient), the artefact and the therapist. As in all therapy, bringing unconscious feelings to a

> conscious level and thereafter exploring hold true for art therapy, but here the richness of artistic symbol and metaphor illuminate the process…' [192]

When we apply this definition to the therapeutic work of poetry, this statement holds true. What this statement also highlights is the degree to which such images are the 'property' of the author, in a therapeutic sense; that is, the role of the therapist is merely the midwife in bringing unconscious material into awareness and representation through the medium of the image. When we speak of the image (or metaphor) what is contained within is the 'truth' of its author. The process of therapy is a joint enterprise of 'unpacking' those contents. This brings us on to what is meant by *truth* in poetry, as it relates to the therapeutic process.

Poetic Truth and *Psychic Truth*

Herman[193] questions the idea 'whereby a survivor of traumatic experience can begin to deal with her past through integrating it into narrative…a so-called *narrative cure'*[194]. What Herman interrogates in this paper is the idea that, 'has become central both to psychotherapy[195] and to literary criticism on writings of trauma as a means of ethical, 'truthful' testimony and of healing': this line of argument seeks to question the correlation between testimony and 'cure' through analysing the function of the 'narrative cure' in a psychotherapeutic text and in a literary text. This highlights how any notion of 'truthful' testimony is always underwritten by fiction, 'which raises crucial

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[192] Standing Committee of Arts Therapies Professions (2000) 'Artists and Arts Therapists: a brief discussion of their roles within hospitals, clinics, special schools and in the community' (London: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 2000), p. 5
[193] Herman, Judith *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992)
[194] Ibid. p. 15
[195] Penny Parks' *Rescuing the Inner Child* is a good example of this type of approach to therapy

ethical questions about the relation between fiction and 'truth', testimony and 'cure' and psychotherapy and literature'. The author argues that the idea 'narrative cure' (the articulation of traumatic experience) is 'not a privileged space of *curative 'truth', but a point of tension between memory and amnesia and between 'truth' and fiction'*.

Deshpande[196] argues that one of the major functions of creative expressive writing is to create, 'a space for truth, without disturbing other areas of the writer's life, thus creating the "safety" that is required for Phase I of trauma recovery'. Writing, then, is a *bounded* arena in which *truth* may be approached with a feeling of safety precisely because it is discrete from the truth of the sequence of day-to-day lived experience. Such a revealing of *truth* does not necessitate that, once revealed, it is 'owned' as part of the lived experience of the writer as they have known it. So, in what way might such a *truth* be 'true' if it is not necessarily 'owned' as part of a *true* personal history? From a psychoanalytic perspective, Busch offers the idea of 'psychic truths':

> Psychic truths are embedded in the stories a patient has in her mind that impel her to certain ways of being. It is what leads her to come to an analyst for help. Inherent in these stories are facts and fiction, reality and fantasy that speak about the patient's experiences and how she thinks of them. Thus, it is through stories that psychic truths appear in psychoanalytic treatment. Compromise formations and other psychic mechanisms inform these stories and disguise their truths. Yet in whatever way they appear, it is the patient's inner world that holds her psychic truths, which in turn show us how she experiences and relates to the world. What is new about analysis is that it is the only discipline which considers that the search for truth is in itself therapeutic. Not a truth with a capital "T" because you can't find that, and it changes. But the fact is that the search for truth, for psychic truth, is the therapeutic factor. From the perspective of psychoanalytic treatment, the patient's psychic truths are always true.[197]

[196] Deshpande S. (2012) 'A Writer's Look at Literature, Fiction and Mental Health' Indian J Psychiatry;54:381-4
[197] Fred Busch (2016) *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 85/2 pp. 339-360

Finding an image which will represent an experience is a type of *naming*—another important operation at play in poetry and in expressive writing more generally. I will also discuss the idea of naming as it relates to the work of Dickinson, below, as *naming*—or often failing to *name*—is a key feature of her writing, and one which is intimately connected to intimations of trauma.

Naming

For the purposes of my argument in this chapter, I will define a *true name* as a name of a thing or being that expresses, or is somehow identical to, its true nature; in this, we exists in parallel to what Eliot has called *objective correlative*. There is a myth that if we know something's true name, when that name is spoken we will have power over that thing. This is an idea predicated on the notion that words have some specific sacred power—expressed in Christian theology as the *logos* and somewhat more arcanely in narratives concerned with *majick* as the name of a *daemon*—and one which is ubiquitous across cultures; it has been central to philosophical study as well as various traditions of religious invocation and mysticism (mantras) since antiquity. When we examine this idea in the context of therapeutic writing, we can see the possibility that therapy might be as an enterprise which engages with finding the *true name* of our trauma. This arcane function of poetic *making*—seen in the spell, the religious liturgy and the mantra—may be seen as connected to a faith or belief evident in many if not most therapeutic modalities that were we able to *name* our pain, this act would offer us power over it. This is a view of poetry—and therapy—as a type of *ritualistic* act in which words figure to bring about a kind of *transubstantiation* of experience.

As therapy, the naming of the trauma in writing is what gives—according to standard narratives—writing its therapeutic *power;* in this sense, the *ritual* of the poem is that which banishes the *demon* of trauma by speaking its *true name.* However, given the problematisation of the process by the presence of *shame* and *splitting* in cases of sexual abuse trauma (although this is not limited to trauma which is sexual in nature, *shame* and *splitting* are characteristic of sexual abuse) is it ever possible to *speak trauma's true name* under these conditions?

Above I introduced a tension between what we might regard as *standard truth* and what has been termed *poetic truth*: a *psychic* truth whilst being true for the individual, may not conform to externally applied notions of veracity. Here I would like to suggest that the whole notion of *speaking truth*— including the naming of experiences—is further problematised by the fact that in therapy, and in writing, language is frequently used to *conceal* the truth rather than reveal it. In the case of individuals who have been abused, such concealment may be a conscious and deliberate enterprise born of the *shame* of naming the circumstances of the trauma; or it may be born out of unconscious processes of *splitting* and repression, which similarly militate against telling *truth.* So, where does this leave us in terms of discussing the therapeutic value of poetry when it is subject to these conditions?

Poetry *in Therapy* vs Poetry *as Therapy*

In reading through what I have written above, it occurs to me that I may be conflating two distinct modes or forms of expression and therefore some clarification is required: we need to distinguish between poetry as a form of therapeutic *disclosure* and the essentially aesthetic exercise which is poetry

as an act of making *art.* A consideration of the literature on the former—poetry *in therapy*—clearly privileges disclosure; the disclosure, and subsequent integration, of traumatic experience is most frequently regarded as the aim of writing *therapeutically.* In the therapeutic domain it is perhaps easier to discuss notions of truth and truth-telling, and how this process might be problematised by trauma. The standard position on poetry *in therapy* is that disclosure, or *expression*, helps. Tufford says this of the therapeutic function of expressive writing: 'The acts of writing and reading poetry on this issue serve to synthesize and release intense emotions including loss, betrayal, frustration, and anger.'[198] Such an expression allows for a *writing out* of negative experiences—a discharging of bad feelings, a release.

The question then arises, *is poetry which is written for aesthetic purposes doing the same thing?* Is discussing poetry—even, and perhaps especially, poetry which is self-consciously 'confessional'—in terms of *truth* a valid enterprise at all? Raab speaks to the question *should poetry be true?* in the context of Robert Lowell's admission that many of the poems in *Life Studies* are consciously crafted *fictions*—in terms of the details of their narratives:

> If I admired [Lowell's *Skunk Hour*] before, why should the literal truth cause me to change my mind? Shouldn't I continue to admire it as a poem? But how would I feel if, after many readings of Life Studies, I learned that Lowell had had a wonderfully happy childhood, never suffered from manic breakdowns, had always made his home in Iowa, and never even visited Boston or Maine?[199].

At the end of the article Raab concludes that,

> the making of the poem is a difficult engagement with those facts, and out of this engagement—in which what was the truth of the life becomes

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[198] Lea Tufford, (2009) 'Healing the Pain of Infertility Through Poetry' *Journal of Poetry Therapy* Volume 22—Issue 1 (pp. 1-9)

[199] Lawrence Raab, (2014) 'Should Poems Tell the Truth?', *New Ohio Review*, Fall 2014

material—the truth of the poem emerges. Lowell's discovery that a family of skunks enormously improved his poem over a single skunk is a good example, therefore, not of falsifying the facts, but of discovering the truth inside the fact that transforms mere incident into art.[200]

Perhaps it is in poetry's capacity to *discover the truth inside the facts* that its therapeutic power lies. Such a way of viewing poetry embraces both the *therapeutic* and the *aesthetic* and in this way offers some kind of an intersectional approach to discussing the form and function of *poetic truth* which goes some way to mitigate the problems encountered by having to speak of a poem as either *this* (therapy) or *that* (art). It is worth reporting here something which was said to me by a poet who also works with groups writing poetry as therapy; when I asked her what the difference was between writing for therapy and writing for publication, she stressed that—while she drew on personal experience when writing for a public audience—in writing for publication her main consideration was *craft*: *the pleasure of language, making beauty where there is none, and the transpersonal nature of experience*. In this way she conveyed that she saw writing professionally as a qualitatively different experience to writing for therapy. However, in chapter two of this thesis, the poets that I interviewed suggested that their own writing practices were much more closely aligned with a 'therapeutic' process or function—although simultaneously being mindful of the craft of writing and engaged with the aesthetics of text; and this I think speaks to how we should read poets such as Lowell: as neither *this* nor *that,* but rather operating therapeutically and aesthetically at the *same time*. I raise these issues here to give context to a discussion of Dickinson's work, below.

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[200] ibid.

The Case of Emily Dickinson

When exploring this terrain, the poetry of Emily Dickinson is interesting for a number of reasons—not least for the various and distinct approaches to criticism of her work, which regards is a *either* a veiled form of disclosure *or* carefully crafted discourse on contemporary events and themes in wider society. Certainly, the details of Dickinson's biography and the fact that she writes in such an oblique way about her subjects has encouraged critical commentary which reads her work as *confessional.* Many critics have read her through the prism of sexual abuse—and clearly there is a case to be made that her often very oblique writing deals with this theme in myriad hidden ways. However, other critics have seen this as a diminution of her work—as mere *therapy*—and read her in more or less nuanced ways, making links to key events such as the American civil war so the subjects of her works are then external ones. What interests me particularly about Dickinson is this very obliqueness—this difficulty in pinning the work down in terms of theme. Dickinson also does very interesting things with the idea of *naming*; she either does not *name* or calls one thing by the name of another in her writing. I don't think that it is too much of a leap to describe Dickinson's writing as having a *ludic* aspect—which frequently confounds commentary.

Dickinson is explicit about *telling* and *truth* in poetry:

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
>
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind --[201]

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[201] Dickinson, Emily *Poem 1263*

The opening line of the poem, *tell all the truth but tell it slant*, is frequently read as a maxim expressing what Dickinson does in her own poetry: that is, to tell the truth of her experience in a veiled way obscured by an arcane symbolism which leaves the reader at a loss to determine what the *truth* of the matter is. As noted above, a number of critics have speculated that this is because Dickinson's *truth* is the unpalatable experience of sexual abuse, which resists *telling*[202]; under such conditions *truth* must remain veiled or *slant.* Here Dickinson says that the *truth* would blind us if we regarded it unveiled, and thus there is 'success in circuit' which is code for allowing the truth to instead emerge through writing which approaches *telling* askance.

Despite having a background in American literature, prior to writing this chapter, I was not really familiar with the work of Emily Dickinson; she is someone I was always *aware* of but—for one reason or another—someone I had not *read* and so I came to her work somewhat naively. As I was researching this chapter I was also looking for some 'stimulus material' to use with students in a therapeutic writing group; so, stumbling across Dickinson's poem 'Its name is—"Autumn"'[203] I chose somewhat randomly to use it with the group.

Thus, when I gave it to the group it was more or less new to all of us—it was *fresh* and free of the taint of *standard* readings. After reading the poem out we began with some fairly free discussion of what the poem was about: taking our cue from the title, we talked about how this was an 'autumn' poem;

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[202]Perriman, W.K. *A Wounded Deer: The Effects of Incest on the Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006)
[203] Dickinson, Emily *Poem 465*

certainly, this was not a Keats' autumn of *mists and mellow fruitfulness.* The group suggested that *autumn* then might be a *metaphor*—but what for? Almost all of the group thought it must be something quite *horrible*. They found the *bloodiness* of its imagery disturbing, and at odds with the usual associations made with the season. A couple suggested that this might be a poem which has a 'secret'—specifically, a *sexual secret* and was possibly an expression of sexual abuse; following further discussion, broadly this was the group consensus. Sometime after the session I gave the poem to my husband to read; I asked him, *what do you think this is about?* He said it was about *autumn,* of course. I said, *don't you think it's strange it's so bloody?* He said no, and that what he saw in it was the very red trees of New England running down a road into a valley

Fig. 1[204]

basin, and in this way was a very *true* picture of an autumn. I told him what my group had made of it, and he read it again. He said, *oh yeah, it is weird…*

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[204] Photograph of New England in Autumn (royalty-free, uncredited)

I include this anecdote in order to make the point that what I see happening in Dickinson is the creation of the very particular kind of *liminality* introduced above which questions the very function of metaphor in poetry and therapy. What we find in Dickinson is a fundamental *ambivalence* with regard to meaning: and we see this reflected in the body of criticism on her work, which explores *what she might have meant* through a process of combing through the life or the context in which she was writing, but never comes to consensus. The only consensus is, *we do not know enough of either to say with any certainty what is meant.* The critic of Dickinson is thrown back on a *Lacanian* understanding of the image as something which is not discrete—an image pointing to a meaning—but rather a seamless part of the flow (the *chain*) of symbolisation, in which *everything is present.* This is both the *difficulty* of Dickinson's work and its *contribution,* which I will attempt to discuss below. Having read and re-read the poem over the course of a week now I am still no further than agreeing with my husband—*it is weird.*

In the previous section I discussed the role of metaphor in the interplay between poetry and therapy. For Maria Cardinal the trajectory of therapy leads to an accurate *naming* of trauma—finding a metaphor which fits. I wondered if this is what was going on in Dickinson's poem. Certainly, concurring with the group, it is easy to construct a psycho-sexual reading of the piece. A close structural reading of 'Its name is "Autumn"— one which breaks it down to its component parts—reveals the poem as one which is *written on the body.* It is *sanguine* in both senses of the word: both in its lightness of tone (where things are *sprinkled* and *eddy*) and in the deeper way which underlies the embedded metaphor in that it is *bloody* through and

through. The poem is structured around a central image of the body in which a torrent of arterial blood is traced from the head ('hue' connotes complexion and therefore *face*) issuing from the neck beneath ('An artery—upon the hill'), along veins which become roads, permeating the landscape. Structurally the poem suggests a downward movement in which the *body* bleeds out into landscape. All this is set out in the first stanza.

> The name—of it—is "Autumn"—
> The hue—of it—is Blood—
> An Artery—upon the Hill—
> A Vein—along the Road—

Similarly, the images which follow refer to the body—specifically a female body, which is relayed in sexualised terms. In stanza two 'blood' becomes a 'shower of stain'; returning to the downward movement of the poem, we might read this as *social stigma* generated by the 'blood' reaching the two below, and thus becoming *public.*

> Great Globules—in the Alleys—
> And Oh, the Shower of Stain—
> When Winds—upset the Basin—
> And spill the Scarlet Rain—

The images here might refer to any *secret* —in terms of the social practices of Dickinson's time and class—female bodily operation: menstruation, abortion, birth or sex itself are all connoted by the image of a 'basin'; the basin is a *private* object located in a *lady's* bedroom, designated for *intimate* acts which occur hidden from the public gaze. In the final stanza the 'shower of stain' is on full public display and is significantly imaged as a *stain* on the feminine, 'it sprinkles Bonnets'.

> It sprinkles Bonnets—far below—
> It gathers ruddy Pools—
> Then—eddies like a Rose—away—
> Upon Vermilion Wheels—

Fig. 2[205]

We might read the image of the sprinkled bonnet as saying that the *blood shame* of the female body will out even with regard to that most demure of coverings. (As I am writing I am put in mind of the recent adaptation of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.) The poem ends with the pervading *redness*—which originates in the artery on the hill and runs downward through the roads of the poem—being washed away along the gutter at the *bottom* of the piece. Here too the image connotes the feminine: the 'rose' is both the ideal image of female beauty and also the *flower* of female chastity, which is lost. The choice of the word 'vermillion' is an interesting one; the colour *vermillion* is both bright red and insoluble in water: the implication is, though it is washed away, it *endures*.

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[205] Still image from the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017)

Fig. 3[206]

Possibly it is going too far in the analysis, but *vermillion* also has important cultural significance connected with female sexual identities: *sindoor* is the tradition in Hinduism of married women applying vermillion to the parting of the hairline, first done by the groom on the woman's wedding day—the parting of hair is symbolic of a river of red blood full of life, consonant with the fertile feminine; when a woman is widowed the *sindoor* is ceremonially removed, signifying the end of fertility.

Another reading of the poem sees the piece as referring to the American civil war which was taking place in the background of the Amherst in which Dickenson writes. David Cody[207] describe it as, 'Dickinson's response to one of the most bloody and traumatic periods in our national history—the season

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that John Greenleaf Whittier referred to as the "Battle Autumn" of 1862'. The blood which permeates the landscape is that of the battle, and in this analysis the 'vermillion wheels' referenced in the final stanza are that of a gun carriage in a rutted road. Nevertheless, Cody admits that the piece remains ambiguous, calling it, 'A riddle of daunting complexity' which resists *reading* definitively and, 'continues both to beckon and to baffle its readers'.

Many critics of Dickinson fall back on quoting the poet herself, 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant—/ success in circuit lies' to account for this apparent absence of a definite referent in her writing. The poet and critic Adrienne Rich in her essay 'Vesuvius at Home'[208] warns against what she calls the *speculism* of Dickinson criticism which attempts to marry the meanings of the poem with the life. She describes Dickinson's method as a kind of *explosion* or eruption of meaning in text: 'it is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment—that explodes in poetry'. Most recent criticism of Dickinson has, though, engaged in the kind of *speculism* Rich talks about; it has concentrated itself primarily—as my reading of 'The Name of it is—Autumn' does—with taking a psycho-sexual approach which attempts to link the poems with instances of sexual trauma or repression in the poet's life. Perriman's *A Wounded Deer: the Effects of Incest on the Life and Works of Emily Dickinson*[209] is an example of this genre of Dickinson scholarship. Using evidence from letters and poems, and testimonies from people who knew Dickinson, *A Wounded Deer* concludes that her enigmatic poetry may have originated from a personal exposure to incest and views the work as a *therapeutic* attempt to resolve trauma. Clearly this kind of explicitly

[208] Rich, Adrienne (1976) 'Vesuvius at Home', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* Vol. 5, No. 1, retrieved on August 11 2019 from http://parnassusreview.com/archives/416
[209] Wendy K. Perriman, *A Wounded Deer: The Effects of Incest on the Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006)

biographical criticism of Dickinson's writing is problematic. Dickinson was a notoriously private person—latterly a recluse—and she never spoke openly about any actual instance of sexual abuse, nor were any specific allegations made in her lifetime. It seems fair to say that *A Wounded Deer* situates itself within the genre of 'speculism' Rich describes.

Further problems are encountered when criticism of the work is so fundamentally wedded to the *life*. Despite the argument put forward in this thesis that therapy and craft can be seen to co-exist in poetry, it does seem to me to be a diminution of Dickinson's poetry itself to disallow her work to stand alone; as a writer, Dickinson is better than that. Further, such an approach opens the way for the diminution of poetry more generally as it disallows the reading of a poem on its own terms—and has implications for reading and responding to poetry as *art*. Such an approach renders the poem a kind of coded—and for this reason lesser—form of biography. I would suggest that poetry as a form is *more* than that: *poetry has the capacity to discover the truth inside the facts* in such a way that the *facts* themselves fall away as the *truth* is illuminated. Does it matter if the poem maps onto the *facts* of the poet's experience? Consonant with Raab's account of Lowell's *skunks*, I think not.

However, with that said I am not arguing *against* reading Dickinson through the prism of psycho-sexual trauma, and nor do I think this element is not present in her writing—or within her experience. What I am arguing is that we can read the poem psycho-sexually *on its own terms*; that is, we can confine our reading to the interiority of the text, and we need not treat the poem as simply a dispositive object which confirms a particular view of the life.

Jacqueline Rose's essay on Plath[210] is an example of how criticism which is makes explicit reference to the *life* need not avoid reading the poem on its own terms. In fact, in this essay Rose is writing specifically to address criticism levelled at what has been seen—by the Plath estate—as an appropriation of her biography by critical commentary on her work.

> '[Plath's] 'Parliament Hill Fields' has been read with reference to a miscarriage that Plath suffered shortly before writing the poem…
>
> > On this bald hill the New Year hones its edge.
> > Faceless and pale as china
> > The round sky goes on minding its business.
> > Your absence is inconspicuous;
> > Nobody can tell what I lack.
>
> In these opening lines, the speaker seems to me to go to some lengths to make it very hard indeed to know what she is talking about. This is a form of language refusing to identify itself: what is absent is inconspicuous and what is missing to the speaker cannot be told. Although it becomes clearer in the course of the poem—'Already your doll grip lets go', 'The blue night plants, the little pale blue hill/ In your sister's birthday picture starts to glow'—these are the shreds and hints which take on the aura of something that slips and fails…Plath writes a poem in which what is biographically loss—loss of the unborn child—loses itself in turn. She offers the experience as something which can only be reached indirectly, which the speaker can only circle in words. To name the event as if this is what the poem is 'about' arrests the process. Not knowing, we as readers undergo a radical uncertainty about what language can and cannot do. What in the world can language grasp, when the world itself has not been entered?'[211]

In common with Dickinson, Plath chooses to tell the truth *slant;* the power of the poem lies in *not-naming* the event of the piece—not articulating the facts of the experience being considered, but rather in choosing to *circle* them in language in the way that Rose describes.

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[210] Jaqueline Rose, 'Sylvia Plath—Again: This is Not a Biography' collected in *On Not Being Able to Sleep* (London: Vintage, 2004) pp. 49-71
[211] ibid pp. 53-54

Naming (or *not-naming*) *an* event or experience is in this context not a lucid articulation of the *facts* of an experience. Instead it is a more arcane constructing of an *artefact*—the poem, the image—which stands for and contains experiential matter. Further, when we regard *naming* as the construction of an *artefact* it is a short step to see how poetry has *therapeutic* resonance for writer and reader alike: the poem in the sense of *artefact* allows text to function as a reliquary of experience—including connotations the idea of a *reliquary* carries with it in the context of Catholic belief, where it becomes the container and site of *power*. However such an image is only a partial rendering of the fullness of experience, of *truth*—something which is iterative and to which we can and must return if it is in any sense to be regarded as *therapeutic*, or indeed *true*; and possibly this is the reason that writers choose to construct narratives in ways which do not fully 'reveal' the experiences on which they are predicated: such texts are *kinetic* in their circling of a certain referent, and therefore rich with the possibility that further *truths* may be revealed. Keats' *urn* is constructed in this mode: while initially drawn to describe the activity in the scene depicted on the urn, the poem concludes with the speaker conceding that he will always remain distant from it—the *urn* is an *artefact* which has its own kinetic momentum which can never be successfully decoded by the viewer; it is a 'closed system'. In this context we can perhaps re-read the poem's closing lines—*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know*—as a statement on the obliqueness of poetic truth which is weighed against the power of the *truth* to nonetheless be *affecting.* The power of poetry to contain whilst never fully revealing *events* is represented by the image of the *urn.* To some degree the *urn* offers an answer to Rose's question: *What in the world can language grasp, when the world itself has not been entered?*

What language *can* do is to create this liminal space, through its construction of images—or *artefacts*—which become containers where the *truth* of experiences can reside, resisting articulation as fixed, linear and singular narratives. When such *artefacts* are created in language space opens up for the *truth* to be multi-faceted. In this space *truth* is no less *true*; rather a different *type of truth* is freed to emerge, which is perhaps closer to the psychological truth of experience. Rarely are our narratives of our experiences—particularly when those experiences are traumatic—*true* in a literal sense. Try as we might, experience has shown us that when we speak of the things that have happened to us it is difficult to do this *objectively*: our sense of our audience, conceptions we have about ourselves and feelings we may not be aware of all militate to invade and change our account of *what is true.* In other words, *truth* resists *naming*—when we try to *tell it straight.* What poetry as an *artefact* of truth offers is the possibility of retaining multiple elements of experience in a space which never ties those elements down; the details of our experiences remain available to be can be arranged and recast in multiple ways. The *objective correlative* of the poetic image is *the best we could do at the time.* However, in casting the image in language—constructing the *artefact* of the poem—it continues to be available for other facets of experience to be explored and articulated. In therapy, therapists often speak about clients bringing 'rehearsed material'; these are accounts of key events in the client's life—frequently traumatic events—which have been told many times. A large part of the enterprise of therapy is encouraging clients to tell stories *differently,* in a way which opens up the possibility of revising set and stuck narratives which are unhelpful. Later on in this chapter I include an interview conducted with two person-centred therapists in which they discuss truth-telling in therapy, with particular reference to how clients

tell the *truth* of traumatic experience—or in various ways, *fail to.* First I would like to look at an example of what I consider to be a poetic *artefact,* to consider how and in what ways it is concerned with the *naming* of trauma: I present Frankie Boyle's *mermaid.*

The Most Brutal Joke Ever Told

Although it may seem something of a leap from a discussion of Dickinson, this joke by the controversial Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle is pertinent to the argument I have put forward above. For the purposes of the analysis I am going to treat the 'joke' as a poem—and I believe that this is warranted: in conceiving of and delivering this *joke* we see Boyle as engaging in fracturing the territory of his stand-up routine and allowing something more profound— and akin to Dickinson's work—to emerge. I first came across the joke when I watched Boyle performing on television, and for some reason it *stuck* with me. Searching for the joke online, I realised that it had resonated with a lot of people; someone had typed it out and titled it *the most brutal joke ever told.* The context for the joke is Boyle addressing a teenage boy—'Johnny'—in the audience, and it comes at the end of a set. Below is the joke as text.

> Should I tell you why I'm like what I'm like, Johnny?
>
> I think I can explain myself to you. When I was a wee boy my grandad used to take me up in the loft. He'd take down a chest, he had up there. He'd open up the chest. Do you know what was in it? A mermaid. He'd have me strip naked as a wee boy and make love to that mermaid on the floor while he watched for his sexual gratification. Now years later when "the old bastard" was dead, I went back into the loft I took down the chest and opened up. Do you know what I found in there? A dead monkey with its legs sewn together.
>
> You remind me of that monkey, Johnny[212].

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[212] [212] Retrieved on August 16 2019 from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oX1jMmfG2Xk

Written out like this, the way the flow of the narrative is *fractured* by the narrative element of the joke is immediately apparent: the *story* of the mermaid is clearly sandwiched between the set-up and pay-off of the joke, which both conform to the standard format of a joke. What happens in-between, however, is something more abstract—a *stranger* narrative *erupts* between the familiar beginning and end.

How should we read this joke as *poem*? One approach, and one which I think is implied by Boyle's setting up of the piece, is that it is offers us a complex metaphor for the effects of trauma: he asks 'Johnny' if he should tell him, 'why I'm like what I'm like'—implying that the story will provide the *reason*. Television critic Boyd Hilton has described Boyle as a, 'professionally offensive comedian' who does nothing more than breach the boundaries of good taste; Boyd asks, 'is Frankie Boyle even funny?'. For Boyd, this is simply a rhetorical question to which the answer is *no* to—he sees Boyle's narratives as a series of grotesque cheap jibes. However, I would suggest that 'jokes' such as the one above are not meant to be funny; rather, they present us with psychological content which is rendered in the *liminal* space of the poetic image.

Returning to Dickinson's 'Its Name is—Autumn', what this piece has in common with Boyle's *mermaid* is the quality of *enigma*: both pieces present us with a vision which we know is disturbing, but one which eludes being fully *explicated.* Continuing with the reading of the joke as trauma narrative, we might say that what Boyle describes in constructing the story is a process in which the 'site of trauma' (the attic) is *revisited* (in the story this is literal) and the memory of abuse is *revised* (not a *mermaid* but a *dead monkey*). Unlike Dickinson who *alludes* to a potential sexual trauma in her work—

superficially at least—Boyle presents us with the abuse *explicitly*. Nevertheless this apparent *explication* is something of a red herring because it makes the twin images of the *mermaid* and the *monkey* no less bizarre— they remain enigmatic and *estranging.* In the video of Boyle performing the joke the audience is unusually—members of the audience respond to the 'punchline' with laughter which sounds like a kind of *relief* at being back on more familiar and less estranging territory, where the joke is *about* laughing at the boy. In this process the central narrative of the mermaid in the attic remains cut-off; the material of the narrative remains *unarticulated.* In terms of *naming the trauma*—the essential element of therapy—such a naming does not occur. Rather, what we have is an *artefact* which contains the *elements of a truth* and the potential to generate the revelation of other *truths* further down the line.

Exploring the joke further we can make the case that Boyle is referencing the *Fiji Mermaid* (or "fee-jee" mermaid) which was exhibited by the American showman P.T. Barnum as a freak-show attraction.

[213]Fig. 4[214]

Barnum's 'mermaid' was a construction made by sewing the top half of a juvenile monkey on to the tail of a fish. In common with Boyle's granddad's mermaid, the *Fiji Mermaid* was a *fraud.* In this reading of the joke/poem we can make a case for sexual abuse being a type of *fraud* perpetrated on its victim. The way the victim perceives the act of abuse as a child is frequently contingent upon the narrative of the adult perpetrator—in many cases a narrative in which the perpetrator presents themselves as a loving protector— which is at odds with the child's experience while the abuse is taking place. The perpetrator may in fact perform the role of an affectionate care-giver *most of the time.* Research evidence from studies concerned with why victims delay disclosing abuse indicates that a key factor influencing whether a victim *tells* or *does not tell* is the degree to

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[214] Fiji (*fee-jee)* Mermaid (1842) illustration originally published in *The New York Herald*

which they have a close personal relationship with their abuser (see work by DiPietro, Runyan and Frederickson, Smith and Wyatt & Newcomb[215]); it is as if the *narrative of affection* is being preserved by the exclusion of the *narrative of abuse* which threatens it: thus, the fraud is maintained. There is another way in which the *Fiji mermaid* is a good *correlative* for sexual abuse—and that is, it is something monstrous: the *mermaid* is a frightening *chimera* of two different animals—the monkey and the fish—purporting to be a *third thing.* The caregiver who abuses is in many ways just such a monster: the loving parent and abuser are *stitched together*.

So how is Boyle's *artefact* of the joke *therapeutic*? How, and in what ways, does it *name* the experience it deals with? We might also ask, *is it true?* Although Boyle offers the joke by way of explanation as to *why I am the way I am*[216] the context and manner in which the narrative is rendered suggest that this is a less than serious attempt to disclose abuse as a way of explaining Boyle's aggressive public persona. However, the way the story is told has many features consistent with the memory of actual abuse and we can see the account as an extended metaphor for *abuse trauma*: as a case-in-point, the taking down of the suitcase years later—at which point Boyle sees the *mermaid* for the monster it actually is—is a close approximation of what occurs in therapy when a client returns to a memory of abuse and 'opens it up' to have a look inside. In doing so, the client may experience a *revelation* which is deeply *therapeutic—*if painful and disturbing. However, this does

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[215] Cited in Margaret-Ellen Pipe (ed.) *Child Sexual Abuse: Disclosure, Delay, and Denial* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 265
[216] Television critic Boyd Hilton has described Boyle as, 'the ultimate example of what brilliant standup Stewart Lee calls "professionally offensive comedians"' (*The Guardian* 19 December 2010)

not directly answer the question *is the artefact of the joke therapeutic* in and of itself?

I would say this poem does represent something which is therapeutic, and the quality of its *therapy* lies in its ability to present us with an *image* which captures an *essence* of an experience—in such a way that that experience remains present and available for further exploration. We could say that the *poetic image* is a little 'machine' which carries the *force* of therapy, the essence of the *thing*; it is such an image that Jacques Lacan terms the *non-dit*—the *thing* that cannot be spoken in any other way[217]

Despite the fact that I have gone some way in 'unpicking' the image of the mermaid above, what is really important about the way in which poetic images operate—and what gives them such latent power—is that ultimately such an image *resists exposition.* This is an idea that I will return to in the final section of this chapter—but first I want to look at the way that person-centred therapy works with images and notions of *truth* in practice.

Telling the Truth in Therapy

In preparing to write this chapter I interviewed two experienced person-centred therapists (*A* and B) and asked them to discuss their experiences of the ways in which clients *tell the truth* in therapy: in particular, I asked them to consider how client narratives fit with what might be considered an *objective truth* with regard to an account of an experience.

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[217] See chapter 6 of this thesis for a fuller discussion of Lacan's formulation of the *non-dit*

One of the things that distinguishes person-centred therapy from psychoanalysis is the way in which a client's metaphors are *read*. Typically in psychoanalysis the analyst's role is to *interpret* the images a client brings— with the aim of *revealing* latent content relating to unconscious processes and thoughts. In this way the client (in psychoanalysis the client is termed the *analysand*) is *moved on.* However, person-centred therapy this is not the case: rather than *interpreting* the client's use of imagery, the therapist seeks to *empathise*; this process is also known as *entering the client's frame of reference.* While in both modalities the therapist/analyst is seeking to understand the client/analysand, the crucial distinction lies in the degree of *power* which is ascribed to either party. For psychoanalysis, power resides with the analyst who is the *interpreter* of images; in person-centred therapy, however, the power lies with the client—it is *their* frame of reference the therapist must enter, and it is the client's *insights* which count. Psychoanalysis deals with metaphor in an *expository* way whereas in person-centred therapy images are treated more *immersively.* This distinction of approach came across quite strongly in the discussion. Here is an extract taken from the transcript of this conversation, about half-way through what was in total a forty-minute discussion.

    A. I really like it when clients work in metaphors

    B. Yes

    A. Um…because I think the metaphors themselves are interesting.

    B. Mmm. Yes.

    A. You know, just what is the metaphor…um…to me it seems to reveal more of something, rather than just telling the facts. The metaphor has something—has a much deeper meaning—a broader meaning, perhaps.

    B. I think that we have to be careful in—um—because for me, I'm— I've heard a metaphor and assumed, ah, if you're saying that's like that

I now understand what you mean—but actually, when I've checked it, it didn't really mean that

B. Oh they're really personal—and we use metaphors as well, don't we? And I think sometimes—you know sometimes you get the client going [widens eyes] [laughter] as if to say—they're sort of acknowledging it in a way that says no, I don't get that one… So, it's useless then. But I think it's quite a learning—you know—to get inside what that person actually means by that metaphor

A. …Yeah, and the need to check that out…

B. Yes.

A. And I will often work with the metaphor

B. …Yes, oh yes…

A. And…for *me* get to a deeper meaning…to get to a deeper understanding with the client.

B. You wouldn't say that, would you?

A. No. I would sort of *respond* to it—*so, it's like* this *or* this—*oh, so that fits with* that—or whatever it might be.

B. Yeah, you wouldn't—what did you…?

A. …*ask questions,* I think, *I wouldn't ask questions…*

B. …No…

A. …about it. I would *respond* to it…in a *questioning* way.

B. Yes, but I think…I think we have the same experience of encouraging supervisees to do more of that—rather than saying *oh why did you…*

A. Yeah

B. Because it's much more productive if you *stay with* their metaphor

A. …yeah, yeah, yeah…

B. …rather than…

A. …than *changing* the metaphor, which—which I have done sometimes. Or introduced another metaphor which doesn't *fit*

B. …mmm…

A. Well, I can normally tell because…

B. …of their face…

A. I can see that that isn't right!

B. But I think what it *tells* you in that *enquiry*—because the metaphor is there—so, it *alerts you* to something that the client is trying to tell you in a particular way

A. Mmm

B. So, it sort of alerts you to—I think it sort of alerts me to the fact that quite often we could be talking about a particular situation, and I think I've grasped the nub of it—and I *haven't*. And that can go on for *sessions*. Usually I realise. I think quite often they've gone along with my *take* on it…

A. …yeah, yeah…

B. which is quite *powerful* and then—and then you sort of have to say: *you know when we talk about* that thing*, well I've assumed you meant* that*, but you don't, do you?* Actually, I had a really good example, because I had a woman a long time ago—I can't remember what it was now, but she—she used to say something about her husband…and I thought I *got it*—and then one day I said to her: *oh! you don't mean that, do you—you mean such-and-such.* And she—the thing is, they keep bringing it back…yes. She *kept on telling me* until we got to the *truth of it.* I would—I think I would say that there—the truth of what she meant by that phrase… She used to sit there. I always knew, [laughter] but for a long, long, time I completely got it wrong. And she didn't say *you've got it wrong.* It came up—again and again and again. It was a funny phrase…

A. And I think, sometimes that sort of thing happens, and it isn't just *me* that gets the full meaning of it, but it's the client as well. That—you know—a metaphor or a particular use of words can mean *part* of it—and then *suddenly* it means *more of it*, to both.

B. Yes. That's a really good point.

A. Mmm, I've a client who was horribly abused by her stepfather—who she calls her father—and, I'm not allowed to use the word *abused*—she hasn't mentioned the word, but she's made it very clear that…it…she doesn't want it to be called *abuse.* But she came with a picture—her stepfather had cleared some things out of the house and given it to her—and she came with a picture of…er…a *sexy witch* outfit that she'd been made to wear when she was about thirteen, and he took photographs of her. And she'd talked about a witch outfit, and I'd got this picture in my mind before she even brought the picture—but—and she wanted to *show* it to me to *reveal* what it was—but didn't want to talk about it. So. we'd both got these images in our minds—the *truth* in our minds—but are skating around it. Um, and…and we refer to it, and we can…

B. Just the picture, or…

A. The whole thing. We can *refer* to it, but we can't *name* it

B. Right

A. It…it…I don't know. Yeah. The picture sort of *illustrates* it.

B.   When said that just now—that the picture *illustrates* the experience—I was aware that—the *process* that I imagine we both go through, that somebody says something and you—somebody says something happened and we, then—I feel quite emotional about it—we then go into *what* that felt like. We automatically…I sit here thinking, *she's thirteen, he makes her put that on, she will know at some level I'm not comfortable this is horrible*. But she's not saying that to you.

A. Well, she is—she's saying *that*—in a… No, she's not! I'm *hearing it* but she's not *saying it.*

B. So, would you offer it? As a…

A. Absolutely

B. So you're doing that work, aren't you? She says here, *we can't talk about it* but you're already *working out* what she may well have been feeling.

A. Yeah. And can *present* that to her—and she will then work with *that*—accept *that*, or not. Um…

B. So you're providing a lot of the—what?

A. It feels like I'm sort of *building up the jigsaw…*

B. yeah

A. …mmm…

B. …around *that thing…*

A. Yeah, and I'm—I'm—responding to *that*, the thing that she cannot *name* but wants me to hear. I think that's the key, she wants me to *hear it*, but she can't *say it.* I can respond *to it*, but I can't *say it* either.

B. But you can respond to the *feeling*?

A. Yeah

B. Then and now?

A. Yes.

B. What do I always…I can't think whether I always leave out the *now*? I don't think I do…Well I was just thinking that we—you know—I *noticed* that I automatically started to think what that might have been like for her. And then I thought, well would I have left out what she would be feeling while you are doing it?

A. Well, we worked for about fifty minutes—cause she had the picture on her phone in her bag, and she said *I want to show it to you, but I can't*

B. Oh, goodness…

A. And I knew—I just *knew* what it was. Um…and so I responded to her not being able to do it, and wanting to do it, and with about ten minutes to go she brought it out. Um…so for a lot of the time I *was* working with the *now*

B. I think I was probably being empathic then, when I…[laughter]

A. I'm sure you were!

B. I don't know about that. I just thought, *ooh, maybe I would have just missed out the* now… but…maybe I wouldn't

A. No! [laughter]

[Pause]

A. Because it was a really big deal for her, to show it to me… because if I saw how awful it had been, *goodness knows* what I would have thought of her

In this lengthy extract A. and B. speak to many of the points I have made above about *imagery* and notions of *telling the truth;* and they also go some way to explaining the therapeutic process we engage with when those truths are *poetic* ones. They suggest that when metaphor is part of a therapeutic discourse, there is a potential to get to a level of meaning which is, 'broader than just telling the facts'—and by implication *deeper*. Both A. and B. indicate that the client has a sense of when an image is *right*—or consonant with their experience—or in Eliot's terms, when the *objective correlative* has been found: a client will reject an image that does not *fit*. An important point made in the discussion is that *reading metaphor* and the Rogerian concept of *empathy* (one of Rogers' three *core conditions* for therapy) are interrelated activities. As noted above, what distinguishes the person-centred approach from psychoanalysis is that it dispenses with the need to *de-code* the image; person-centred therapy requires the therapist to *enter in* to the client's image

in a way which preserves the integrity and interiority of the image itself. We see this in the extract when A. cautions against *asking questions* and offers a reframing of therapist *enquiry* as a process of *responding* to images, 'in a questioning way'. This subtle distinction again preserves the integrity of the image as it is presented by the client. It is not changed or modified by any expository actions of the therapist; rather, through a process of *responding* the latent content of the image is allowed to *unfold.* The image is seen as an *alert* to the presence of something that cannot be *named.*

In the context of person-centred therapy, 'getting to the truth of it' (B.'s words) means in the first instance finding an image which fits with or captures something of experience; the corollary is that, once found, working with such an image engenders a process which not only captures experience but is empowered to *reveal something more* about that which it contains. The outcome of this process in which the therapist works in concert with the client and the metaphor is expressed by A. as, 'words…mean *more* of it to *both*'. Metaphor is something that is worked with over time, to reach a 'deeper meaning'; this is a process which is analogous to 'working towards' a truth and we can see how it works in practice in the example given by A. of the client who brings a picture of herself dressed as a *sexy witch*.

In this example the photograph captures the client's *sense* of the experiences of abuse she cannot *name*. The image contains what she feels and what she remembers. However, this is not a simple articulation of what is *known* by the client; rather it is more akin to something that is *sensed* on the boundaries of her awareness. It also *summarises* a variety of experience and multiple facets of something that cannot be fully articulated in any other way. A.'s (and B.'s by proxy) strong response to the image is a testament to its power to capture

and convey something *essential* of the experience of abuse, and in this way the photograph might be said to have something in common with Boyle's *mermaid*: both are representations which *sum up* something of the memory of sexual abuse, and both are *eruptions* of the event of abuse into the present moment of experiencing (what B. calls the 'then and now') and exist as *artefacts* which connote the entirety of the experience. In the therapeutic context, when we read the photograph as a *metaphor* we see such a metaphor as deriving a significant part of its power from the fact that images, once rendered, are henceforth *available* to be worked with in therapy. This is the process both A. and B. describe of 'working with' metaphor for the duration of the therapy. What the image of the *sexy witch* also points to is the capacity 'creative expression'—that is, expression which is mediated through the construction of aesthetic forms—has to offer a *container* for material that is otherwise felt by the client to be too threatening or otherwise too *overwhelming* to be rendered more directly. This capacity to *make safe* therapeutic discourse related to traumatic experiences is considered in more depth in chapter two of this thesis.

Poetry as Therapy

At the beginning of this chapter I said it would look at how poetry may function as both an *expression* of and a *mitigation* of trauma. My conclusion at this point is that what is found to be *therapeutic* in creative forms of expression is not a simple 'discharge' of feelings; that is if we want to *feel better* it is not enough to somehow 'get it out there' in writing. What poetry—and other forms of creative *making*—offers is a more nuanced way of processing trauma: the *literal truth* and the *poetic truth* of an experience are not the same thing. As, typically, experiences of trauma resist *telling*—

because the subject of such experiences is afraid or ashamed, or unwilling to integrate *difficult knowledge* into otherwise positive personal narratives of a person or a life history—and thus the teller may be encouraged to take a more *oblique* route to the representation of experiences, as seen in the work of Dickinson. Further, this process of representation—of *telling*—is an iterative one where the essence of experience is something which is worked towards, and is a series of *attempts* at representation; going back to what Rogers has to say about the therapeutic process, we 'must return again and again' to experience, 'to discover a closer approximation to truth'[218]

When individuals *tell* about trauma approaching central events in an *oblique* way becomes a particularly powerful mode of engaging with the fullness of an experience of which elements will, by the very nature of such experiences, be somewhat beyond the reach of conscious awareness and resisting of direct expression. In these circumstances forms of expression which utilise figuration—metaphor, metonymy, simile, motif—become more complete vehicles for the *totality* of such experience as they take account of both what is *known* (specified or codified by conscious awareness) as well as what is *unknown*—that which is only intuited at the edge of awareness. So, poetry presents us with an apparent paradox: when we choose modes of expression which are *figurative*—that is, not *realistic* and concrete representations of events—what results is a type of representation which is *more real* in that it is more nuanced and in this way more *complete*. Taking the examples of Dickinson's *Autumn* and Frankie Boyle's *mermaid,* what imagistic representation offers is a deeper and more significant rendering of the trauma

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[218] Rogers, C. On Becoming a Person: a Therapists View of Psychotherapy (1961); British Ed. (London: Constable, 1967), pp. 23-4

experience—something which is more *direct* exactly because it is more *oblique.*

As I said in the introduction to this thesis, this chapter is titled 'On Naming' to reflect the idea that one of the key psychological drivers to writing poetically is to have our experience represented in an *accurate* way. What I have tried to show here is that the particular qualities which identify poetic language—metaphor, metonymy, symbol—facilitate a more profound type of *accuracy* which takes account of what is known and has been assimilated at the conscious level *as well as* that which remains liminal at the lived edge of experiencing. This is an important idea which runs throughout the thesis as a whole and one which I will return to in the concluding chapter.

Next Steps

In the next chapter I want to broaden the discussion of what language is and does in its poetic function—what follows is an exploration of the *narrative* function of language and an attempt to delineate the role narrative plays in our psychological process, and crucially *how* this function is played out with regard to what we know of language. Considering the role of narrative is interesting as it moves us away from thinking about what the *single* image can do in isolation to capture and mitigate the effects of experience—towards an understanding of how language functions in a more holistic way in the construction of stories about experience, which is essentially how we make meaning of the world. We look to extant narratives, or stories, to make connections with and between our own disparate experiences of the world; narrative also plays an important role in developing our sense of 'well-ness' and agency at an individual level and is thus another component in

understanding how and why language is crucial to us at a psychological level. In the following chapters I once again look at literary texts alongside interview material and also give an account of a personal experience of narrative. The point, as noted above, is to broaden the focus before—in the final chapter of the thesis—zooming back in to a consideration of the power of the image, and what this looks like at the limit where language is seen as truly transformative when it is used in its *ritual* function.

Chapter Five[219]

You Say You Want a Revolution: the role of narrative in maintaining psychological well-being

The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

As I lay asleep in Italy
There came a voice from over the Sea,
And with great power it forth led me
To walk in the visions of Poesy

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy*

In the previous chapter I looked at the ways in which images figure in therapy, and how imagery figures in the business of navigating trauma. In this chapter I want to look at the ways in which larger linguistic 'objects'—which is the way I am viewing extant narratives, both in literature and in culture—are used in a psychological sense by individuals to achieve and maintain psychological function and a coherent sense of self. This chapter also looks at the way individuals take and manipulate extant narratives to change how we feel about our experiences—particularly when these experiences are unwelcome or undermining, in a psychological sense.

This chapter is about the *narrative* function of poetry, or more accurately, the function of poetry in narrative: the ways in which poetic language interacts with the business of *storytelling.* The key idea I want to put forward here is that, when we consider narratives, we need to look beyond the *narrative*

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[219] This chapter contains a discussion of suicide

content itself (e.g. people, places, events) as something which is being expressed via language (written or spoken) in a simple way: rather, we need to see language as a material which exists independently of the individual who uses it, and we should consider what language itself—as an embodied and actively self-referential medium—brings to the process of storytelling. When we engage with language in the business of making stories we make a connection with all that resides *in language*: the weight of culture, meaning/s derived through usage and all the latent content of language itself which goes beyond any individual using words in a given moment of time. When we construct narratives we do so through an *interaction with* language—with the meanings and forms that *are already there.* In making *our story* we connect with all of the other stories which already reside in language along with the fabric of *signification* itself. While we may *use* language to express our experience, in that act of making we cannot *master* language; our particular meaning/s can never fully override the multiplicity of meanings at play in. So, in writing narrative we both use language to express something which is particular to us, whilst engaging with a fabric of meaning which extends far beyond ourselves. In this regard language becomes a *resource*, something we can simultaneously use and *explore* in the process of laying our own narrative threads *through* language. Thus the process of making narrative becomes a dialectical one, in which we see a *speaker* engaging with that which is *spoken* to make a 'third thing'—narrative; and it is this dialectic which brings our personal worlds (our *narratives*) into being.

I also introduce the idea that there is a fundamental tension between what we think of as being the *narrative function* and that which we think of as *poetic*: narrative is typically about the logical sequencing of events—*this* leading to *that*—and progresses linearly; whereas poetry involves uncertainty of

meaning and allusion which impedes a neat and linear representation of *what is* or *what has been.* Language in its poetic aspect is always *tangential* in that it is an attempt to represent that which is outside of language. However what I will argue below is that it is precisely because the *poetic* in language brings us into places of linguistic uncertainty where we must navigate by intuition, what results does not impede narrative construction and progression—but rather enriches the stories we tell and the role that they play for us.

As I was putting this chapter together I was lucky enough to be contacted by a therapist who is exploring using a method called *poetic inquiry* to explore his personal history. I include a lengthy section below in which he discusses his experience of working in this way as his account offer a very tangible example of how the *poetic function* can be harnessed to the service of forging workable psychological narratives—and what such an *encounter* with language looks like in practice. While I was writing—in the early Spring of 2018—another event took place which had an impact on my thinking about how narratives arise through language: this was the UCU strike much of which was played out on *Twitter*—where individual experiences coalesced around hash-tags and were picked up and developed into larger *stories*, changing in this way and assuming the momentum of a *narrative* progression. This too, it seems to me, is an example of the interaction of language and experience to produce *narrative*. This chapter also includes an account of a suicide, and the narratives which surround it: this was the death of the historian Laurinda Stryker, my close friend who was a lover and maker of narratives of her own—both in her academic writing and in her personal life. This was an unexpectedly difficult thing for me to write about; or rather, *that* it was difficult it not surprising—the degree to which it was difficult for me was a shock as I thought it was something I had 'worked through'. I am still

uncertain as to just what my *narrative* of Laurinda's death is, but I leave this section in the chapter as—at an intuitive level—I feel that it is *significant.*

Finally, I make the case for poetic narrative as a *revolutionary* act of making which takes in both narrative poetry dealing with revolutionary themes, *and* the opportunities endogenous to poetic language itself for a revolutionary re-making of the way in which we experience the world in its broadest sense. As with the process of making images—making narratives in language takes us into territories at the edges of our conscious awareness, and the arena with think of as 'our self', to a place in which we can be surprised by new insights which, at a personal and political level, may be said to be truly revolutionary in terms of how we see the world and how we function within it.

The Psychological Importance of Narrative

The concept of *narrative* is a crucial element in psychological functioning; the idea that our experiences form accounts made up of connected events, which are organized linearly and meaningfully is the foundation of our mental health. In a recent experimental study which collected autobiographical accounts from students of personally significant events[220] the authors found that, 'the ability to construct a coherent account of personal experience is reflective, or predictive, of psychological adjustment [and] that coherent accounts of identity are especially adaptive.' Failure to develop a, 'coherent account of identity across the adolescent and emerging adulthood period is thought to result in the loss of a sense of purpose and meaning in life, a feeling

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[220]Waters, T.E., Fivush, R. (2014) 'Relations Between Narrative Coherence, Identity, and Psychological Well-Being in Emerging Adulthood' *J Pers*; 83(4):441-51

of helplessness'[221]—and possibly even result in the inability/failure to develop positive intimate relationships[222].

Sometimes the narratives of our lives can rupture: something can happen (like a death or a divorce of the loss of a job) which leaves us with a *story* which is suddenly *broken* or *unfamiliar*—a *narrative* in which we no longer know how to function; similarly, information may come to light about events or characters in our personal stories which change narratives in fundamental ways. When we reach such a point, often this new information cannot be integrated into our narratives as they stand, and *narrative* requires modification. In many ways therapy is about the re-fashioning of narrative: when things turn out to be other than the way we thought they were, therapy can help us construct new stories which *work*. The alternative—a profound sense of fragmentation—can represent a type of *madness*: in this we are creatures of *story.*

In *Narrative Therapy: Making Meaning, Making Lives* the authors[223] set out an approach which involves clients 're-authoring identities'[224] through a re-evaluation of their skills and values set within an understanding of the dominant cultural and political *narratives* which they reside—for example, participants are asked to consider what it means to be female, or black, or working-class within the society in which they find themselves; in this way their *narratives* a socio-historical aspect and become *politicised*. Under these

[221] Erikson, E.H. *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1950)

[222] McAdams, D. P. *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self (*New York: William Morrow & Co, 1993; 2nd ed. 1996)

[223] Brown, C., Augusta-Scott , T. *Narrative Therapy: Making Meaning, Making Lives* (New York: Sage, 2007)

[224] ibid. p. 24

conditions narratives can serve to forge a bridge between exterior *outside* reality and the world—in terms of our feelings our identity and place within the world—as it is experienced from the inside; and so in this way narrative is marshalled in a way which offers a sense of being coherently *placed* within a particular cultural context. The authors conclude that it is in this sense of *placing* that our sense of meaning and purpose lies.

So, what do narratives that *work* look like? Largely they are characterised by a sense of logical structure which in turn generates a sense of *meaning*: for example, *this* happened because of *that* and as a consequence things are *like this*. When I reflection my own work as a therapist I am struck by the number of times the conversation has revolved around the client asking *why* this or that terrible thing happened to them; in particular this seems to be the case when the client is talking about experiences of sexual abuse—they express a profound need to know *why* they were the chosen victim (over perhaps a sibling or a friend) and what prompted the abuser to act. Oftentimes this is a major stumbling block to the client *moving on* and they experience a particular pain attached to the idea that there may be no reason, beyond the impulse of the abuser being directed toward them for no other reason than proximity or that they had access to them because they were vulnerable. Typically—in the first instance, at least—the idea that they may have been 'chosen' at random is something too hard to bear. The absence of a *why* leaves the client with only a frightening chaos of unstructured happenings, resulting in a fragmented and *unlivable* present moment; such clients find themselves in a situation without a clear narrative arc. Where such clients do 'move on' in therapy this is frequently through the construction of new stories (new *narratives*) which reorder and restructure the flow of experience

leading to the present moment; this may be through an understanding which integrates the fundamental randomness of the act (e.g. it wasn't their fault) or may include a clearer picture of the wider family dynamic, and the place of the abuser within this system. Nevertheless—one way or another—a story is formed to structure the chaos of their memories.

However, the process of refashioning narratives to make them psychologically *workable* for us involves more than ascribing *meaning* to a series of events: we also require our personal narratives to cast the world in a form which feels *good* – in which the world is not a terrible place where we are the passive recipients of events and information. Bass and Davies suggest that the reason victims of childhood abuse present with confusion regarding the *why* of their experiencing is that the explanation may involve confronting, and integrating, a difficult and destabilising explanation—which for the client may feel *worse* than blaming themselves for the abuse:

> Thinking that you were bad, that you had some influence on how you were treated, gave a sense of control, though illusory. And perceiving yourself as bad allowed for the future possibility that you could become good, and thus things could improve.

> In truth, nothing you did caused the abuse: nothing within your power could have stopped it…[and recognizing] that you were not to blame means accepting that people you loved did not have your best interests at heart.[225]

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[225] Bass, Ellen and Davis, Laura *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 104

Fortunately there is something helpful that the process of making narratives can offer us: when we engage in making narrative we assume agency—and it is this which presents us with an opportunity for refashioning our experience in more psychologically helpful ways. Milton speaks to this point in the quote included at the beginning of this chapter: when *Satan* is lying on the barren plain, having been cast out from Heaven, he realizes that the landscape itself can be remade through an act of *imagination* – through the action of *story*. Thus, what is *imagined* then *becomes.*

The Role of Language

As noted above, though, the chapter enquires into the ways in which the narrative *refashioning* which is a fundamental part of our psychological functioning is figured in writing – paying specific attention to what the *poetic* function of language (embodied in metaphor, metonymy and other mechanisms of semantic *shift*) contributes to the process. When I speak of the *poetic function*, I am referring not only what we might regard as *poetry* itself (e.g. lyrics, sonnets, ballads etc.), but rather to that quality of language which we might regard as poetic – which we also see in play in prose *if we choose to read* text in a way which pays close attention to the associations of words and images, as poetry commonly does. It is in this sense that I define language as being *poetic*, through a particular process of reading and working with words.

The way in which poetic language works to introduce narrative instability into storytelling also serves to offer the opportunities for a refashioning which meets our psychological need for order and meaning in our personal narratives to occur. It is an apparent paradox that while the way in which the *poetic function* works runs counter to the direction of narrative to be linear and to strive for clearly articulated meaning, it is the semantic fluidity of poetic language which can provide the mechanism for *better* and more psychologically *functional* narratives to emerge; that is, such fluidity offers the possibility for fractures in our stories to be healed. Language is *dynamic* and thus stories told *in language* are not singular and fixed obelisks; rather, through the movements of language and the dynamism therein, stories always have to potential to *change* in psychologically helpful ways.

Jacques Lacan has famously called language 'the chain of signification'[226]—which we come to reside in once language has been acquired, generally speaking in the first eighteen months of our life. Lacan sees this as a *taking up residence* in language because once we acquire words we also acquire their *meanings* – their significations. Henceforth, when we see this (fig. 1):

Fig.1[227]

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[226] Here I draw on Jacques Lacan's seminal essay 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud' collected in *Écrits* (trans. Alan Sheridan) (London: Routledge, 1977) pp. 146-178
[227] Royalty-free uncredited image

What comes to mind is the word 'tree', which is a different thing to the existential experience of what we have to call now the 'tree-thing' itself. The 'tree' becomes – as an experience – the recognition of the *signifier* 'tree'. What is key about moving from the existential pre-linguistic experience, to the state of being in which we engage in the recognition of signifiers is that words are not tied to *objects* (trees) in a simple and fixed way; rather, words are more closely tied to other words – and this is what Lacan calls *the chain of signification.* While the word 'tree' *may* call to mind a singular object (tree), it also (and perhaps more readily) calls to mind all other significations of the word – we might think of 'family tree', 'tree of knowledge', 'decision tree'. The key point to understand here is that when we interact with the environment, such interactions are always mediated by language; it is through this process of mediation that language itself stamps its mark of *what we experience* and *the stories we tell.* This is a simple account of Lacan and one which leaves out the nuance of his thought. However, for the purposes of this chapter it makes the point that making narrative and engaging with language as an *other* entity introduces possibilities for moving story beyond the limited intentional narrative of the *teller*. There is a dynamism in language which affects any *telling* in fundamental and inescapable ways.

In common with Freud, Lacan privileges the role of language in *talking therapy*; he posits that language is not only the medium and vehicle of therapeutic change but goes further than Freud to state explicitly that language is the *agent* which establishes the individual's reality and reality in general in the way described above; therefore, in constructing psychologically *workable* narratives we engage in a process in which we both refer to and modify the fabric of language—and in turn are modified by it. Central to the process is the idea that language exists independent of the individual (Lacan calls it *the big other*) and does not have a fixed and stable centre with regard to *meaning* because in the absence of language being *tethered* to a particular subject or object it is then free to be worked with in the service of the individual psyche. If, as Steven Pinker suggests, language is indeed *the stuff of thought*[228] then the opportunities for narrative remaking are woven into the fabric of language itself.

This chapter enquires into the ways in which this is embodied in writing. Wallace Stevens imagines writing as a dialectical process which *sings* the world into order. For Shelley the process of writing narrative is politicised, and the refashioning of story in language is achieved through the connection of contemporary events to a broader and older narrative fabric in an act which harnesses other struggles,

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[228] Pinker, Steven *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008)

other voices in language, to the poet's cause. Below, I also look at how a political narrative can emerge through multiple voices 'speaking' on social media and how such *fragments* come together to form a coherent discourse which articulate a series of narratives, which are constantly evolving with reference to what has been *written* before. Sometimes however, the narratives that we make move us to places where we cannot live—we write ourselves into a corner where the *signification* which has offered us a coherent space in which we can psychologically dwell turns that space into a prison which we cannot escape. I offer a personal story below which I have interpreted in this way. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that this is *only* an *interpretation*: it is the narrative I have made to allow me to understand what happened to my friend, undertaken within the limits of the *facts* of her life and death. Hélène Cixous tells us that absolute truths are unspeakable prior to the moment of our death, an in this sense all we ever have is a *process* and not a *product* or fixed narrative destination: we only the dialectic between speaker and language itself. The finished *book* is, 'the book without an author…the book written with us aboard, though not at the steering wheel'[229]. This is where *intuition* becomes involved in the process of narrative construction: the is the *edge* which Gendlin describes in *A Process Model*[230]he quality language has to be *dynamically independent* of individual experiences and their representation offers then an arena in which we are less instrumental in

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[229] Cixous, Heléne (trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers)*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 155
[230] Gendlin, Eugene T. *A Process Model* (Spring Valley: The Focusing Institute, 1997)

ascribing meaning to happenings, and thus somewhat more free in the encounter with language to develop narratives in ways which are unexpected and possibly, ultimately, more psychological *full*. Language, then, is the element of *possibility*.

Structure, Sign and Play

When Jacques Derrida questions the capacity of any textual 'narrative' to offer determinate meanings he speaks to the effect of a revolution in thinking on the psyche, which is characterized as an *anxiety* ('even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself')[231] predicated on the loss of the certainty of a central *meaning*. As an example of the loss of a sense of a determinate *center* in practice, he points to, 'the Freudian critique of self-presence…the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity and of self-proximity or self-possession'.[232] That is, the idea that at the centre of our experience is a stable and fully-accessible *self* which *consciously* has experiences and responds to them. In terms of the (traditional) function of *narrative* which imposes a logical order on events and allows us to live comfortably within a meaningful structuring of experience, Derrida's contribution introduces a fundamental tension between what we *see* as the functioning of narrative and that which actually *is.* For the clients that I have described above, such an absence of central determinate meaning/s (or points-of-view in the case of Freud) in their stories is clearly *unthinkable.* The presence or absence of meaning in is a key point of tension in the construction and reading of narrative, and one of the things this chapter will enquire into is how poetic narrative negotiates this space.

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[231] Jacques Derrida, (1966) 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' translated and collected in Lodge, David (Ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (Harlow: Longman Group UK, 1988) p. 109
[232] ibid. p. 110

As I have also suggested above, one-way poetry deals with this is by embracing the notion of uncertainty: with regard to *meaning,* the *uncertainty* is built into the fabric of poetic language itself; poetry uses uncertain *signification* to reveal new meanings other narratives by navigating the 'play' of text. Derrida sets out the argument that in a *structuralist* model of text—one that supports the idea of a 'fixed' centre which anchors meaning—linguistic *substitutions* (e.g. metaphor, metonymy, symbol) are allowable as long as they do not challenge (or substitute) a central underlying meaning, which can be read as standing for a stable and coherent *self* generating the discourse. What *poststructuralism* offers (in Derrida's essay and in the work of Jacques Lacan) is a process wherein—in the absence of a fixed central 'meaning'—we are free to engage with the full *chain of signification* (to use Lacan's term). That is, while we cannot say that *a red car* or *a sword* always and only connotes *the phallus*[233]—what the chain of signification offers us is the idea that the car, the sword *and* the phallus are all involved in a chain of signification which connotes another *thing* (say, *masculinity*); but the process does not stop there, and the notion of *masculinity* leads us to another set of significations (say, *government*), which in turn leads us somewhere else, *ad infinitum.*

Lacan's contribution is an extension of Freud's model which describes the functioning of the psyche but sees this process as being played out

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[233] Lacan, Jacques 'The Signification of the Phallus' collected in *Écrits* (trans. Alan Sheridan) (London: Routledge, 1977) pp. 281-291

explicitly in language. What poetry brings to the table is an explicit engagement with the 'play' of meaning in the *signifying chain*; such 'play' is poetry's fundamental *operation.* In this way we can regard poetry as a 'liminal' space with its threshold located at the edge of *meaning;* by this I mean that poetry operates from a point of uncertainty with regard to perception and articulation—frequently poetry 'speaks' to see 'what is'. In terms of Gendlin's *process model* [234], what poetry strives towards is 'the implicit', the *felt sense* which is accessed when we 'think at the edge'[235] of our understanding. Such a process involves a continuous engagement with the 'substitutions' of language in which we try out which words *work,* and which do not; and this is an iterative and never-ending process as the *process* itself acknowledges that there is no stable central place to arrive at. When we 'read' poetry in this way, then, we see how poetic narratives are always *exploratory*: all poetic discourse has built within it the capacity to be overwritten with other discourses—other *narratives*.

So, while the lack of a central or definite *signification* we find in poetic language may present a challenge to our experiencing of the world as stable and *meaningful*, such a lack of determinate meaning also offers us the opportunity to construct narrative landscapes which respond to the ruptures and upheavals our lives are prone to; poetry is fertile with

[234] Gendlin, Eugene T., *A Process Model* (Spring Valley: The Focussing Institute, 1997)
[235] 'Thinking at the edge' (or TAE) is Gendlin's term

the *possibility* that we might, 'begin using language at the point where words fail'.[236]

How, then, does poetic language *work* in regard of narrative when there is no central and stable *I* to anchor and direct the organisation of events? The idea I want to put forward below is that narrative is the product of an *encounter* with language. That is, it is the result of a dialectical and dynamic process in which the *self*—however that self is defined—interacts with the fabric of language itself in a *series* of attempts at producing narrative coherence. It is significant that we see this as a *series* of attempts and something which is active and ongoing and not the production of a structure which is somehow *summative* and enduring; however the transitory nature of the process does not undermine the import of the outcome.

Narrative as *Dialectic*

Wallace Stevens addresses the *dialectic* in play between *the world* and the creative force of the imagination engaged in making art, in 'The Idea of Order at Key West'[237]: Jenkins describes the poem as, 'demonstrating the vain struggle of the imagination *to grasp what it beholds in a single version of it…*forming a textual crux that glosses over the apparent exposure of the fictionality of the poetic word'[238]; in

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[236] Heal, Olivia 'Interruption: A Maternal Reading' paper presented at *Critical Reinventions* UEA, 12 May 2018

[237] Stevens, Wallace *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) pp. 129-130

[238] Jenkins, Lee Margaret *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006) p.30

a similar vein, Harold Bloom says the poem, 'affirms a transcendental poetic spirit yet cannot locate it'.[239] The *narrative* of the poem is a simple one: he narrator and a friend watch as a woman *singing* on the sea shore; the woman's voice is compared to the ocean, and the narrator comments that her voice mimics the ocean's. When the woman leaves the narrator and his friend turn towards the nearby town and they are left with the impression of now seeing the world *differently*. What is more *complex* is the way in which the poem contemplates the function of art-making—rendered here as *singing*—and the relationship between *art* (by implication *poetry*), *perception* and the *real world.* This theme is most evident in the following stanza from the poem:

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.[240]

What the poem ultimately upholds is the idea that art offers a way of imposing *narrative coherence* where there may be none; that is we might say that *meaning* occurs where *logic* fails. Art brings the world into *being* ('she was the single artificer of the world'); further, in the process of the reception of that art the narrator is able to enter into a

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[239] Bloom, Harold *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) p.104
[240] Stevens, Wallace (1934) 'The Idea of Order at Key West' in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) pp. 129-130

state of *narrative* in which the world becomes infused with a heightened sense of *meaningfulness.* While the narrator questions the ultimate *reality* of this state, the effects of the process are nevertheless affirmed:

> Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
> Why, when the singing ended and we turned
> Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> As the night descended, tilting in the air,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.
>
> Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
> The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.[241]

The end of the poem puts forward the idea that it is 'the maker's rage to order' which is key to the function of art. Although, 'the conclusion of the poem may imply that words are much like Derrida's "trace" (only "ghostly demarcations," even de-marcations), the tone of this poem is one of unwavering faith in poetic/phallic dominance'[242]; that is, poetry can simultaneously accept the *play of signification* whist engaging in the process of marking out *coherent* existential narratives ('the maker's rage to order'). For Stevens, experiential *chaos* and narrative *coherence* are temporally co-existent—in such a way that one *implies* the other. In the lines above we see evidence of the *play* of signification embedded in the text itself: the 'fiery poles' are simultaneously the lit

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[241] ibid. p. 130

[242] Jenkins, Lee Margaret *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006) p.30

masts of fishing boats *and* the twin *poles* of the world as it exists and as it is transformed by the singer's song (which brings us back to the idea of a *dialectic*); what is *received* by the witnessing narrator of the poem is neither one nor the other. One might say that the singer herself *embodies* the dialectical process of poetic making: in singing she is never fully *the singer* or *the sea,* but rather almost a dialectical *process*—the tension between the *poles* that creates *being.*

This is an idea Stevens picks up again in 'The Man With the Blue Guitar'. This poem—which is loosely tied to Pablo Picasso's 1904 painting *The Old Guitarist*—is a long meditation on the relationship between *existence* and *making,* in which the *guitar* represents the transformative function of art:

> The man bent over his guitar,
> A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.
>
> They said, "You have a blue guitar,
> You do not play things as they are."
>
> The man replied, "Things as they are
> Are changed upon the blue guitar."
>
> And they said, "But play, you must,
> A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
>
> A tune upon the blue guitar
> Of things exactly as they are."[243]

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[243] Stevens, Wallace (1937) 'The Man With the Blue Guitar' in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) p. 165

Fig. 2[244]

The poem begins with some intertextual *play* with Picasso's painting (the day is 'green' and the guitar 'blue') and a dialogue between *the man* and *them* in which the charge is laid that art does not represent things *as they are*. This idea that the guitarist should play a tune which although *beyond us* is *yet ourselves* chimes with themes in 'The Idea of Order at Key West', where the singer's song (although an *artifice*) serves to make the observers present reality more vivid, more *real*. This speaks to a notion of art as allowing us to access a deeper level of *representation* and it is an idea which is picked up in stanza XXII of the 'The Man with the Blue Guitar':

> Poetry is the subject of the poem,
> From this the poem issues and

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[244] Picasso, Pablo (1903) *The Old Guitarist*, in the Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection *Art Institute of Chicago*

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are they separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

It's true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse.

The poem suggests that it is a dialogue between poles (*issue* and *return*) which has the potential to render the world in, 'it's true appearances'; that is, the function of poetry is to present things 'as they are' at a deeper or truer level of *being* through the 'universal intercourse' between art and the world of phenomena. Jenkins[245] sees Stevens as, 'demonstrating the vain struggle of the imagination to grasp what it beholds in a single version of it'. With this in mind we can see why the notion of meaning in art being a *dialectic* (a dynamic discourse between poles) is key in understanding what poetry does and what poetry can provide at a psychological level: the process of poetry both implies that narrative is transitory and uncertain, *and* offers a way forward in which the dynamic attempt to construct meaning replaces the need for a static destination for meaning itself. This dialectical process at the heart of poetry is imaged by Steven's in stanza XXIII:

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[245] Jenkins, Lee Margaret *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*. (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006) p.30

A few final solutions, like a duet
With the undertaker: a voice in the clouds,

Another on earth, the one a voice
Of ether, the other smelling of drink,

The voice of ether prevailing, the swell
Of the undertaker's song in the snow.

Apostrophizing wreaths, the voice
In the clouds serene and final, next

The grunted breath serene and final,
The imagined and the real, thought

And the truth, Dichtung und Wahreit, all
Confusion solved, as in a refrain

One keeps on playing year by year,
Concerning the nature of things as they are.[246]

It is no coincidence that 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' is a long poem in which each stanza is a *pass* at the same central question: what is the relationship between art and *things as they are*? What Stevens seems to suggest is that the answer lies in consistently engaging in the attempt to make meaning. In terms of understanding the world and our place within it, the *process* of making is the best that narrative can offer.

Poetry and Narrative

At its most basic, telling a story involves an arrangement of events into a meaningful and coherent order but as noted above as this happens in *language*, there is a tension here with language itself which is

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[246] Stevens, Wallace The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) p. 177

predicated on its *poetic* function: poetry foregrounds a play of meanings—semantic shifts—by employing metaphor and metonymy in the service of making meanings which are multiple and open to new interpretations and which *pull against* singular notions of narrative coherence. Poetry works at the edges of imagination where meanings may be unclear or intuited as a *felt sense* in the way Gendlin suggests[247]: literature is what Heléne Cixous calls, 'this risky country situated somewhere near the unconscious' which can be reached only, 'through the backdoor of the imagination'[248] which somewhat undermines the notion of the conscious organisation of events into a narrative.

So, while *narrative* works to present events in an ordered sequence, poetic *language* pulls text in an opposite direction: towards the opening up of other alternative paths which undermine narrative stability. This is the fundamental *tension* inherent in narrative poetry. Narrative poetry *works* because poets work with this tension, incorporating the play of signification within poetry. However, while such *play* can be involved in the functioning of the poem (worked with at a conscious level by poets), it can never be fully *contained*; that is, *meaning* cannot be absolutely defined within the structure of the narrative, but rather always extends beyond the margins of the text. Being concerned with the multiplicity of meaning (through metaphor and metonymy) poetry

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[247] see discussion in previous chapter

[248] Cixous, Heléne (trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers)*Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 114

always exists in a place of *uncertainty*. Poetry implies the absence a fundamentally cohesive narrative purely by virtue of the way in which poetry language *works*. This what Derrida calls 'the game': the play of signification which occurs when meanings are not anchored by the idea of texts having a stable centre, located with the *writer*.

Narrative Poetry

While most poetry may be said to have narrative elements, when we speak of *narrative poetry* it is usually with a specific type of poem in mind. Stated in its simplest form, the definition of a narrative poem is that it is a poem which tells a *story*. Generally speaking narrative poems are significantly longer than poems rendered in other forms (e.g. lyrics) and they often address *epic* or *romantic* themes. Narrative poetry as a form of storytelling pre-dates the novel (*Beowulf* being the earliest example in English) yet shares with the novel the idea of the *narrator* and the central importance of the relationship between narrator and reader. Perhaps the key difference between the narrative and lyric form is that while the lyric typically deals with a 'moment' of experiencing, the narrative includes an arrangement of *events in time.* In this way the narrative poem allows for the narrative unfolding which we can identify as *story*.

Although narrative poetry is an ancient form it is one which persists: Blake Morrison's *Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper* (1987) is a first-

person narrative account of the murders spoken by an unnamed

narrator, in dialect.

> Ower t'ills o Bingley
> stormclouds clap an drain
> like opened blood-black blisters
> leakin pus an pain.
> Ail teems down like stair-rods
> an swells canals an becks
> an fills up studmarked goalmouths
> an bursts on mind like sex.
> Cos sex is like a stormclap,
> a swelling in thi cells
> when lightning arrers through thi
> an tha knows there in't owt else.[249]

While the 'subject' of the poem is the murders of Peter Sutcliffe, a deeper reading of the piece reveals it to be a meditation on the theme of misogyny. Read in this way, the *events* of the murders become a vehicle for the discussion of broader elements at play in society. An interesting point to note—which speaks to the way we think about narrative poetry—is that *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper* caused widespread outrage at the time of its publication. The feeling reflected in the press was that the murders were too recent and too *present* for use in this way; Morrison was accused of breaching standards of public taste and decency. Although poetic narratives have frequently given accounts of grisly and gruesome murders, by-and-large they deal with events that have happened in the more distant past—or are themselves *historical artefacts* by virtue of having been written a long time ago.

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[249] Morrison, Blake *The Ballard of the Yorkshire Ripper* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987)

So, notions of *proximity* to both the events recounted and the moment of writing to the contemporary moment are implied in our definition of a *narrative poem.* This point is supported by the fact that in all other ways Morrison's piece adheres to the conventions of the narrative 'ballad' form, both in its subject matter and in its rendering. So, the criticism of the poem (as being distasteful) comes from its intersection with another *narrative* concerning how 'murder ballads' should be temporally positioned. I have a personal narrative about the reception of this piece. Blake Morrison came to the University of East Anglia to read the poem when I was an undergraduate student. This was in 1987, just prior to the poem being reviewed and the voicing of any criticism regarding its treatment of its subject. I remember the occasion quite vividly: the reading took place in a small seminar room in Arts, and about ten or fifteen students were there; as he read I remember the sky going quite dark with the beginnings of a storm. My response—and I think this was the response of the other students too—to the poem was to feel 'creeped out'; I too was surprised that Morrison had chosen to present such a contemporary (in 1987) subject in this form, but nevertheless felt that this 'worked' as a narrative ballad. In fact, I felt that the effect was heightened by the juxtaposition created by relaying the recent murders in this archaic form. The contrast between what was 'signified' by the ballad form (an *old tale*) and the proximity of the events had a profound impact. What I am getting at here is that what *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper* does in effect is to invoke

significations already at play in language, by applying them in a context in which we find them unfamiliar.

Angus Ross defines *narrative* as, 'the recounting of a series of facts or events and the establishing of some connection between them'[250]. This is the *simple* function of the narrative poem described above. Things become more complicated, however, when we introduce a cognisance that there is a fundamental *tension* between the structural (usually linear) ordering of events that takes place in a narrative poem and the *play of signification* which is endogenous to the language in which it is expressed: in the example of *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper*, the word 'ballad' carries associations with it—it has *signification*—wider than its use in this particular text; that is, Morrison is unable to pin down its meaning in this poem in such a way that it excludes a wider cultural signification—in fact, in this case Morrison uses these associations for their disconcerting effect. Language is an *unconstrained* element, despite the structural ordering of the telling of the story.

The Politics of Play

As in the case of *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper,* not all narrative which is of psychological significance is *personal*: political and cultural narratives which are *shared* are also involved in individual

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[250] Ross, A. in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (ed. Roger Fowler) (London: Routledge and Keegan, 1987) p. 156

psychological functioning. When political narratives are ruptured we may become *woke*[251] and begin to understand the world in a way which is cognisant of previously unseen structures of power which govern and shape our experiences. When this point is reached new narratives are formed which run counter to the 'official' line being delivered to us by the functions of government and the mainstream media. At the personal/political level, when the narratives we have been schooled in cease to be 'believable' new narratives serve the function of describing an alternative (coherent) account of experiencing and our place within it. Nevertheless, what the psychological and political function of narrative have in common is this sense of an integrated *story* of how we got *here* from *there*.

The musician and activist Eryka Badu uses the concept of being *woke* as a central trope in the track *Master-Teacher:*[252]

> I am known to stay awake
> (a beautiful world I'm trying to find)
> A beautiful world I'm trying to find
> (a beautiful world, I'm trying to find)
> I've been in search of myself

…

> What if it were no niggas

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[251] I use this term because it is a useful one, but I use it with caveats as it has been culturally appropriated in recent years. *Woke* is a term which belongs to the discourse of the American Black civil rights movement and its usage is seen as early as 1962 (William Melvin Kelley uses it in an article for the *New York Times*, 'if you're woke you dig it') but recently it has been adopted by popular culture and lost some of its original significance. More authentically, *woke* refers to a state in which you are politically conscious of the forces at play in the power structures of society—'To be woke is to be radically aware and justifiably paranoid. It is to be cognizant of the rot pervading the power structures' (David Brooks, 2017)

[252] Badu, Erykah *New Amerykah: Part One (4th World War)* (Island Records, 2008), track 8

Only master teachers?
I stay woke (dreams dreams)
…
I stay woke
I stay woke
I stay woke

Congregation nod they head
And say amen
The deacon fell asleep again and

I stay woke
But I stay woke
I stay woke
I stay woke

Both Badu and Shelley (quoted at the top of this chapter) use the trope of 'waking from a dream' to express the idea of the emergence of a new political consciousness. Badu presents us with an assertion that she (the speaker) is 'woke'; the metaphor is extended through the addition of the image of a sleeping 'deacon' and a congregation who passively acquiesce ('nod') to the *narrative* delivered from the pulpit. However, the repetition of the assertion 'I stay woke' somewhat undermines our confidence in phrase as a statement of *fact*: what the repetition lends to our (as readers) reception of the phrase is the suggestion that the state of being 'woke' is neither a stable nor enduring one. Rather, in order to maintain being 'woke' the speaker is brought to repeating the statement, like a mantra or charm invoked against *sleeping*; although it is *asserted,* through repetition the phrase is simultaneously rendered *tentative*. What Badu attempts is an appeal to the power of language itself in the repetition of 'woke'. The word itself carries power, and although the belief of the speaker in the state of *wokeness* (or rather of that state enduring) such repetition of 'woke' as

a signifier is a testament of belief in the potency of words to carry *signification.*

Shelly's poem 'The Masque of Anarchy'[253] is both a response *to* and an alternative narrative *of* the Peterloo massacre. The speaker of the poem weaves the inequalities and iniquities at play in society into an account which is delivered as a grotesque 'mytho-poetising' of contemporary events. In the much-quoted final stanza of the piece the speaker returns to the image of a dream, with an explicit image of *waking* which is a call to arms:

> Rise, like lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number!
> Shake your chains to earth like dew
> Which in sleep had fallen on you:
> Ye are many—they are few!

Both pieces are socio-political *narratives* in which *waking* stands for the introduction of a new narrative which is involved with questioning the dominant paradigm and striving for something better. What is *woke* is a new state of consciousness.

 A google search for Shelley's poem reveals that there are two versions of its title: *The* Masque *of Anarchy* and *The* Mask *of Anarchy*, with little distinction as to which is 'correct'. The first printed edition of the poem uses the former (*masque*) which connotes a courtly entertainment

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[253] Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1819) 'Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester', *The Masque of Anarchy : a Poem* (New York: AMS Press, 1975)

popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where players act out a kind of pantomime, involving elements of drama, music and other *spectacle*. This fits with the poem's subject matter where contemporary and mythic figures take fantastic roles in the narrative. However, the poem was not published during Shelley's lifetime[254] and in the original handwritten manuscript Shelley uses *mask* in the title. The first line of the second stanza makes it clear that both forms of the noun *fit*:

> I met Murder on the way -
> He had a mask like Castlereagh -
> Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
> Seven blood-hounds followed him

His characters are both 'literally' wearing *masks* and participating in the *masque* of the dramatic form. Throughout the play there are images of the three central 'characters' (*Murder, Fraud and Anarchy*) in the drama being *masked* in various ways by what they are wearing:

> Next came Fraud, and he had on,
> Like Eldon, an ermined gown;
> His big tears, for he wept well,
> Turned to mill-stones as they fell
> …
> Clothed with the Bible, as with light,
> And the shadows of the night,
> Like Sidmouth, next, Hypocrisy
> On a crocodile rode by.
>
> And many more Destructions played
> In this ghastly masquerade,
> All disguised, even to the eyes,
> Like Bishops, lawyers, peers, and spies.

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[254] The poem was published in 1832 by Edward Moxon in London, with a preface by Leigh Hunt.

> Last came Anarchy : he rode
> On a white horse, splashed with blood ;
> He was pale even to the lips,
> Like Death in the Apocalypse.
>
> And he wore a kingly crown ;
> And in his grasp a sceptre shone ;
> On his brow this mark I saw—
> 'I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!'

Each is imaged as wearing the *mask* of a contemporary political figure whom Shelley sees as incriminated in the event of the massacre. If we read this as being *significant* and not just an accident of the delay in publication we can see Shelley as employing the *play* in meaning which is endogenous to language in the service of the meaning of the poem. At its most immediate, the purpose of 'masking' the mythic actors as politicians is to cast the latter as fundamentally evil 'grotesques', establishing their culpability and rallying readers for the call to arms in the final stanza, ('rise like lions'). Extending this analysis, however, a deeper meaning emerges; Shelley might also be seen as making a global comment on the nature of 'systemic' violence and the function of government: that is, that such events as Peterloo are not discrete and isolated, but rather *signifiers* of a struggle for power in which those that are weaker are violently oppressed by stronger *diabolical* forces seeking dominance. Extending the analysis further still, what we might see imaged here is an *epic* struggle between forces of *good* and *evil.* The language Shelley uses in the poem introduces a kind of atavistic rhythm to its events: contemporary events (Peterloo) are imagined in

the context of something more ancient or ancestral. This underlying struggle runs through the language of the poem like a tribal drum.

Taking this reading of the poem even further, we might introduce the idea of Hegel's *dialectic* which sees the struggle between forces in opposition as an eternal one of. For Hegel, consciousness itself is the product of the *dialectic:* simply put you can only *be* conscious if you are conscious of some *thing.* The dialectic struggle between *self* and some *other* creates consciousness. Marx develops the idea the *dialect* and applies it to socio-historical processes. For Marx the *dialectic* is a way of thinking about reality that reveals the transitory nature of a social systems; it sees the social world (like nature itself) as being in a constant state of *flux; capitalism* (which is essentially the broader theme of Shelley's poem) is seen as the product of human activity, emerges out of the material and natural world. Marx describes the dialectic in *Capital*:

> it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, it's inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary.[255]

Through the process of critical reading this single text (*The Mask of Anarchy*) opens itself to other discourse—to other ideas— and is in

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[255] Marx, Karl (1867) From *Capital, vol. 1*, Postface to the Second Edition

many ways *intertextual*, and crucially these interconnections occur within *language.*

In the context of *the dialectic* we can see how the poem works with the notion of its own transience to provide a *moment* of cultural critique. While Shelley was a rough contemporary of Hegel (about twenty years his junior) and well-versed in political thought, we need not say that *The Mask of Anarchy* in any way draws upon or responds to Hegel's work for the idea of the *dialectic* to be relevant to a reading of it. Rather, it is to say that when read, we (as readers) engage in a process of laying discourses side by side in a way which informs our response; that is, we *create* a narrative which is the result of the *play* of signification as it exists for us in our present moment.
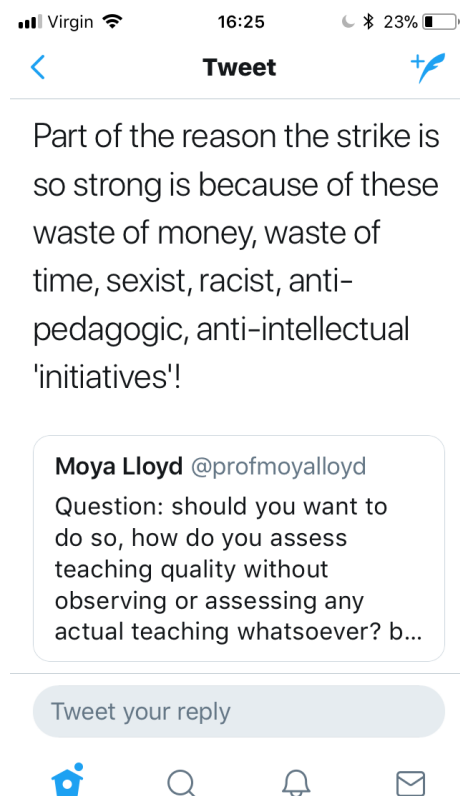
Dialogic Narrative

As I was preparing to write this chapter the UCU strike happened[256] and entered into my thinking about narrative. Ostensibly about protecting pensions, the strike quickly transformed into a more profound questioning of the form and functioning of higher education in the UK: conversations between colleagues on the picket lines were continued at a national level on *Twitter* and through these tweets narratives began to emerge. largely, to the dominant institutional narrative which foregrounded a 'business' model of education—in which lecturers put forward alternative narratives of higher education

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[256] UCU *Strike for Pensions* February-March 2018

as a public and moral good .Through *Twitter* individual comments and responses solidified into a coherent group narrative giving an *alternative* account of what a university *is*: in a sense, staff became *woke*.

What is interesting about *Twitter* in relation to the theme of narrative in language is that it is a continuously unfolding 'story' which lacks any sense of a stable centre: in this regard it is a poststructuralist field permissive of infinite linguistic play. Once a *tweet* is made it enters into an unregulated domain where all interpretations are possible (and indeed probable); the *Twittersphere* is a linguistic fabric which exists independently of its individual contributors—a kind of *group mind* in a perpetual state of flux. What I observed happening on *Twitter* during the strike was the emergence of *patterns* becoming *narratives*, arising and changing form each day. When a group of people put their fingers on a *planchette* it is impossible for any one individual to move the narrative in a particular direction; rather the direction of travel is a function of a 'group mind' without a centre, without a preordained destination: narrative arcs on *Twitter* are much the same. Here is an example of what I mean, visible in the screenshots of tweets below: in week two of the strike the discussion moved from pensions to the *research exercise framework*, insecure contracts and exploitative working conditions. The markers of narrative shifts and points of coherence are the *hashtags* (#) which bring threads of conversation to

gather into a narrative discourse. The sharing of personal stories cohered into the hashtags #nocapitulation and #takeback control; testaments of individual experiences became group narratives of identity and resistance. Links were made to broader issues and struggles (events in the US, the fundamental concept of a university) and in this way narrative evolved, expanded and shifted—in increments of points and counter-points tweeted by the 'group mind'.

ıll virgin 🛜 23:59 🌙 ✈ ✻ 100% ▬

< **Tweet** +🖊

⟲ Jeremy Noel-Tod Retweeted

Chris Millard ⌄
@ChrisMillard83

quiet voice What if we use this newfound solidarity in the face of being fucked over to say "no"?

12/03/2018, 19:38

51 Retweets **176** Likes

💬   ⟲   ♡   ⬆️

Annamaria Carusi @A... ·1h ⌄

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉️

ıll Virgin 🛜 16:25 🌙 ✻ 23% ▯

< **Tweet** +🖊

Part of the reason the strike is so strong is because of these waste of money, waste of time, sexist, racist, anti-pedagogic, anti-intellectual 'initiatives'!

Moya Lloyd @profmoyalloyd
Question: should you want to do so, how do you assess teaching quality without observing or assessing any actual teaching whatsoever? b...

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉️

ıl Virgin 🤖   18:05   🌙 ＊ 13% 🔋

‹   **Tweet**   ＋🖊

cfryar   ⌄
@jamaicandale

Just so we're clear: UUK is more committed to marketization and neoliberal reform than West Virginia Republicans.

13/03/2018, 17:11

4 Retweets **10** Likes

💬   ⤷   ♡   ⬆

Susan D. Amussen · 45m   ⌄

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉

ıl virgin 🤖   22:36   🌙 ＊ 91% 🔋

‹   **Tweet**   ＋🖊

⤷ Stephen Church is still on strike Retweeted

Sharii   ⌄
@Sharika_Alam

I hate it when Gyimah, certain VCs and UUK use the "we are concerned about students" line. Fuck off. You don't give a shit about us. #NoCapitulation #ussstrike

13/03/2018, 17:14

20 Retweets **80** Likes

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉

ıl virgin 🤖   06:38   🌙 ＊ 89% 🔋

‹   **Thread**   ＋🖊

Ruth Holliday   ⌄
@RuthHolliday1

Shall we club together and buy the universities and run them as co-operatives using academic expertise not management targets?

22/03/2018, 07:54

27 Retweets **127** Likes

💬   ⤷   ❤   ⬆

Ruth Holliday @Ruth... · 19h   ⌄

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉

ıl Virgin 🤖   15:21   🌙 ＊ 34% 🔋

‹   **Tweet**   ＋🖊

Let us never lose this renewed sense of who we are and what we are about: our own agency, the preciousness of education. We've rediscovered this together, across depts and institutions, and with our students. The landscape is forever changed now, whatever happens #Nocapitulation

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉

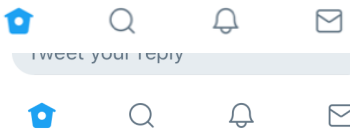
ᵐᵈ virgin 🗢   08:48   🌙 ✳ 97% ▬

‹   **Tweet**   ✝

Angeliki Balayannis   ⌄
@ABalayannis

#QueerEye for academics: 5
feminist scientists restructure
your work around an ethic of
care, unionise your
department, and teach you
how to wear bold prints at
conferences with confidence
#highered #phdchat

02/04/2018, 07:02

683 Retweets 2,755 Likes

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉

ᵐᵈ virgin 🗢   11:14   🌙 ➹ ⌢ 47% ▬

‹   **Thread**   ✝

@andykesson

Everyone is sharing REF
stories, so I think I am going
to share mine. It's pretty
emotional and I've never
spoken publicly about it.
Going to try to pick my words
with care. Solidarity to all
colleagues who have been
damaged by the REF.

01/04/2018, 16:46

130 Retweets 360 Likes

Tweet your reply

🏠   🔍   🔔   ✉

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Mikhail Bakhtin's model of the *dialogic* text is useful here as a way of thinking about *Twitter*. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*[257] Bakhtin puts forward the case for a *polyphonic* text: one in which characters express a variety of discourses spoken from varying positions, which ultimately function together to produce the novel. What is significant about this model for thinking about narrative is that it is a fundamental move away from a conception of the novel as being centred on a single, dominant *authorial* voice – and in this way pre-figures the approach of poststructuralist critics such as Derrida. In the essay 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse' he writes:

> The author participates in the novel (he is omnipresent in it) with *almost no direct language of his own.* The language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language.[258]

We might see *Twitter* in a similar way: as a coalescence of systems of *language/s* which come together to produce a collaborative 'unitary' text. However, Bakhtin does not go so far as to dispense with the idea of a singular authorial identity altogether; rather he sees the author as participating – entering in to – varieties of discourse which are not his own, in a process of *orchestration.* Whilst acknowledging the presence of discourses which are beyond or *other* to his [sic.] own, the author is still a presence in the text:

> The author represents this language, carries on a conversation with it, and the conversation penetrates into the interior of this language-image and dialogizes it from within. And all essentially novelistic images share this quality: they are internally dialogized images – of the languages,

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[257] Bakhtin, Mikhail (1929) *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)
[258] Bakhtin, Mikhail (1940) 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', collected in David Lodge (Ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 128

styles, and world views of another (all of which are inseparable from their concrete and stylistic linguistic embodiment).[259]

Having no single author, *Twitter* is in this sense more of a post-structural text and closer to the position Derrida sets out in 'Structure Sign and Play'. However, Bakhtin's dialogic is a useful concept in thinking about how *Twitter* operates to bring diverse trains of discourse together. Perhaps more apposite in this regard is Bakhtin's concept of the *carnivalesque* – an idea which he introduces in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and fully articulates in *Rabelais and His World*[260]. In a move on from the *dialogic* the *carnivalesque* posits a kind of text where voices have equal status and are free to express themselves without censure; the image of *carnival* is used to describe this arrangement of voices as the tradition of carnival includes a breaking down of the social hierarchies of everyday life allowing for a chaotic free-for-all to occur. Carnival is permissive of all voices, in is in this sense a type of *dialogic* – only without a central dominant organising force. Bakhtin describes the *carnivalesque* text as having four defining elements: *familiar and free* (interactions between people); *eccentric behaviour* (without consequence); *misalliance* (usually separate social groups interact); *sacrilegious* (without punishment). In this sense interactions on *Twitter* might be characterized as *carnivalesque*. With regard to the *sacrilegious* element – which behaviours go unpunished in the realm of carnival – it is interesting to note that many employers have now moved to regulate employee behaviour on social media platforms, with regard to individuals being able to be identified with a particular institution: in the main the line taken is *if you can be identified with our organisation, either through your bio or the references*

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[259] Ibid. p. 129
[260] Bakhtin, Mikhail (1965) *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Helene Iswolsky) (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984)

you make, then your content must not be critical of said organisation or any of its decisions. This 'guidance' is common across commercial institutions and academic ones and stands in testament to the idea that *language* (or discourse) is untethered and unpredictable – and in this way *carnivalesque.*

In making *narrative*, then, we interact with what exists in language (what *is spoken*) in order to tell our own stories—using the *play* which is endogenous to poetic language to facilitate the process. Julia Kristeva speaks to this point when she describes poetry as, 'a practice of the speaking subject…implying a dialectic within limits'[261]. For Kristeva such limits as are imposed by *signification* are less important than the power poetic language has to effect *change* and disrupt and/or rewrite histories—the dialectical function of poetic language offers the possibility of *revolution.* This is something we certainly see in Shelley. In therapy, *poetic inquiry* explicitly uses extant discourse as its limiting material: clients use the statements they have made in sessions to 'write' poems which re-explore or re-imagine their experiences. This is a very practical example of how *self* interacts with *language* in the process of evolving more *livable* personal narratives.

Lived Narratives

Before I go on to discuss the process of *poetic inquiry* I want to first look what happens when the narratives we construct in order to give our lives meaning and *coherence* start to work against us: how having a dominant narrative which functions to give order to our experiences can, sometimes, *write us into* psychological spaces in which it is difficult live. I am going to

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[261] Kristeva, Julia 'The Ethics of Linguistics', collected in Leon S. Roudiez (ed.) *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) p. 25

move sideways a little in this chapter now and give an example which is both *personal* to me and touches in a more theoretical sense on the ways in which narratives are *malleable* and *multiple*—both constructed and modified in relation to wider societal structures. What the events I am about to relay also speak to is the way in which there may be multiple and simultaneous narratives of the same *story* and how events can intersect—and even be driven by prior narratives constructed by the actors themselves.

The simplest narrative of this event is that a woman living in Seattle died young and her death was reported by the King County Medical Examiner's Office:

Laurinda S. Stryker (1961—2007)

Laurinda S. Stryker was born on August 11, 1961. She died on August 2, 2007 at 45 years old.

Further reporting of the event announced the death of a member of a specific academic community of Holocaust scholars:

> Dear colleagues of H-Albion/H-Holocaust:
>
> I am saddened to note that a young historian of modern Britain, Laurinda S. Stryker, has passed away this past week in Seattle. She did her undergraduate at Macalester College, in St Paul, her MA at Harvard in modern European history. She completed her doctoral work at Cambridge with a thesis: *The Language of Sacrifice and Suffering in England in the First World War* (1992), and then taught at my institution, St. Cloud State University, from 1998 until 2002. In that capacity, she was involved with issues of anti-Semitism in university life that received national prominence. Along the way she published a chapter, "Mental cases : British shellshock and the politics of interpretation," in the

collection edited by Gail Braybon, *Evidence, history, and the Great War : historians and the impact of 1914-18* (New York, Berghahn Press, 2005) and a further chapter from her dissertation in *Chrétiens dans la Première Guerre Mondiale: Actes des Journées tenues à Amiens et à Péronne* les 16 mai et 22 juillet 1992, ed. Nadine-Josette Chaline (Paris, Cerf 1993). She was also quite active in debate about teaching the Holocaust here in Minnesota, and she contributed several works in this field, including ³The Holocaust and liberal education,² in *The University in a Liberal State*, eds. Bob Brecher, Otakar Fleischmann and Jo Halliday (Aldershot, Brookfield USA, 1996) and most recently ³The Tensions of Teaching: Truth and Consequences,² in *Testimony,Tensions, and Tikkun: Teaching the Holocaust in Colleges and Universities*, eds. Myrna Goldenberg and Rochelle L. Millen (Seattle, Univ. of Washington Press, 2007).

Sincerely,

Dr. John Harvey
Assist. Professor, Modern Europe
Dept. of History, St. Cloud State University

The medical examiner's narrative is the simplest as it states only that someone called *Laurinda Stryker* has 'died'; the colleague narrative above which follows adds the euphemism 'passed away'—and that this is *sad* in the context of the lost potential intimated by the inclusion of an account of her academic achievements. Neither gives any clue to the circumstances of her dying.

At this point it seems useful for me to offer my *narrative* of the death of Laurinda Stryker:

I had a close friend for eighteen years who suffered from anxiety and depression—and she struggled with this for a long time, until finally circumstances conspired to mean life was no longer bearable for her and she killed herself, in August 2007. The specifics of her death (and I am being careful here to protect other actors in its events) were that she was arrested after becoming

involved in a domestic dispute; to 'cool' the situation, Seattle police took her back to the station and put her in the cells. As it happened, this was a Saturday night and the police were busy; the arresting officers took the decision that the easiest thing to do was to leave her in a shared holding cell; she spent the night there with a couple of prostitutes, with whom she chatted. She said that this in itself was not a particularly distressing experience and in many ways she found it 'interesting'—it was 'material'. The details of how she felt may or may not be correct, but this is how Laurinda told the story. Nevertheless, after this experience she became very fearful of going to prison—it was as if being locked up for the night had 'triggered' something. She began phoning me at work (she was in Seattle and I in Norwich during the week and London at the weekend) in a state of terror, talking very fast and emotionally about how they were going to 'take her'. No matter what I said—even when I put her in touch with a free law centre who told her the same thing—she would not believe that this was minor (in the original event she had just been upset and shouting) and she persisted in telling me that they were going to take her away. This continued for about three weeks until, very early one Sunday morning, she phoned me in London to 'say goodbye'; we talked for about forty minutes. Now, I was used to this behaviour from her. This wasn't the first time she had talked about suicide over the years, and I did not take it as seriously as I perhaps should have done. Having said that, she had moved into temporary accommodation and I had no idea where she was and no number to contact her or any of her family members on so I don't think there was much I could have done other than talk to her at this point in time. Anyway, what happened next was that one of her cats escaped from this unfamiliar flat as we were speaking; I told her to go and get it (I was concerned about the cat) and to phone me back. I also thought that this would give me time to get a coffee and gather my energies for what I thought would be a long call. She didn't call me, and I spent the next few weeks looking for signs of her on the internet—until I finally found a notice of death on the King County Court website. I contacted the editor of the journal she regularly published in, and he furnished me with the details: she had hung herself. He blamed the lack of free medical care. I don't agree. I think that the force of the 'executive' function of her intellect (her will) had concluded—based on a set of faulty assumptions provided by her unreliable feelings—that this was the appropriate action to take. I wish I could have persuaded her otherwise. I couldn't. She died.

I have Laurinda's own account of events in a series of emails she sent me, but I cannot include them here—although I am fairly certain she would have given me permission to do so, had things turned out differently—because

when a person dies ownership and control of their correspondence passes to the next of kin. That is, the control of *their narrative* is given to someone else. However there is another narrative in the public arena which I can include about what happened to Laurinda, and this is one which intersects with what I understand to be her own narrative of the events leading up to her death. In 2001 Laurinda joined with another colleague to take action against her university for alleged anti-Semitism. The upshot of the case was that the university agreed for a substantial financial settlement to be made out of court. The case made the national press, and in this *narrative* Laurinda was cast in the role of *activist* taking a stand against institutional discrimination. This is from *The Washington Post*[262]:

> *Laurinda Stryker, an assistant history professor, said she will file an EEOC complaint on Monday alleging that she is still being harassed because she supported two Jewish professors who filed anti-Semitism complaints. She said she is also being targeted because she aggressively sought to have Holocaust studies made a minor field of study in the curriculum.*
>
> *Stryker, who is not Jewish but who said she plans to convert to Judaism, noted that officials are urging she not be retained on the faculty and are investigating her over what she called a bogus charge of academic fraud. She said that when she applied to be put on the tenure track two years ago, she told officials she had a scholarly article coming out in an academic journal. But, she said, she was unable to finish the piece because her mother became seriously ill. "It's completely surreal. It's a kangaroo court," said Stryker, who has a doctorate from Cambridge University in Britain. She said the pressure on her intensified when she hired a lawyer and students began organizing petitions and rallies on her behalf.*

Without commenting on the specifics of the case, when *I* read this what I see is the ways in which Laurinda's engagement with her academic field of study was always—at least partially if not wholly—a way of enacting or *writing out* a more personal feeling of *trauma.* For me, it is not insignificant that she was

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[262] William Claiborne for *The Washington Post,* April 1 2001

a first-world war and holocaust scholar, specialising in trauma narratives; I read her academic narratives as being deeply embedded in *stuff* that was very personal for her. Although she had not experienced anything like the events she wrote about in a physical sense, they had a *psychological* resonance with her own experiences: such *survivor* narratives that she worked on (and she frequently spent hours at the library reading primary sources) I think expressed things that she felt herself, but for other reasons. Other colleagues told me the reason for her suicide was that she *was in a state of despondency* at not being able to get another academic job subsequent to the case—offering yet another narrative perspective; however, while the case and her employment situation do figure in my *narrative* about Laurinda's death, they are certainly not foregrounded.

So, which narrative is the *truth*? I would say that it depends on your perspective. Laurinda was certainly brave in standing up for what she saw as justice and she was consistent in her commitment to a cause; she was in this sense an *activist*. However, her drive to do this was—in my narrative—to ally her inner feeling of trauma and oppression to stories which were external to her: simply put, she felt at home in situations and places of *struggle*. She was also depressed because she was out of work following the court case, but I don't think this was the heart of the matter. Ultimately, though, each version of the story is *true*—as is Laurinda's own story which is different again but this is *excised* as her death has meant that she now no longer 'owns' it; each version is *true* insofar as it intersects with the *facts* of her death and each is *true* simultaneously: there is no 'stable centre' in the sense that her suicide has a single ineluctable reason. Rather, there is only the process of making meanings by engaging with the facts as we see them—around an absent centre—from our particular point-of-view.

What got me thinking about Laurinda in the context of writing this chapter was reading Wallace Stevens' *The Idea of Order at Key* West: it was her *favorite* [sic.] poem and she would often quote the line, 'Oh! Blessed rage for order' when she felt upset—and she was a great organiser of references as an antidote to anxiety. Her PhD thesis on shell shock in the first world war was called *The Language of Sacrifice and Suffering* and even in conversation what she said was frequently shot through with the language of her texts: teaching was 'going over the top' and the college refectory was 'the mess' (I once bumped into her going straight from a transatlantic flight to the library, explaining *I have to hit the ground running like a marine*). Her move into the field of Holocaust studies presented further opportunities for engaging with her academic work in *experiential* ways: she went to museums and war graves and memorials—a lot, we often went together—and her general approach was to immerse herself in the subject of study. She took steps to convert to Judaism before she died despite having quite 'traditional' Christian beliefs— I remember her saying to me once and only half-joking, *but what about the baby Jesus, can I be a good Jew if I like the baby Jesus?*—and through her academic work Laurinda gave voice to people who had been *taken away,* which was *the thing she herself was most terrified of.* In this way she allied herself with external narratives which fitted what she felt *inside* (fig. 3)*.*

Fig. 3
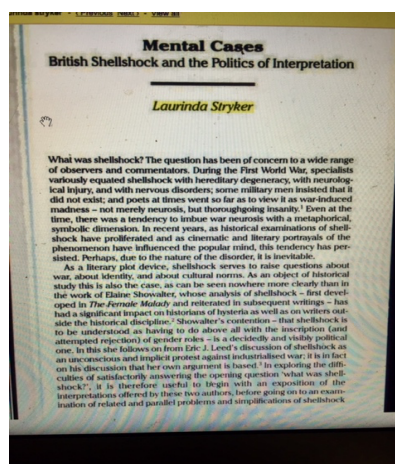
It is not difficult to construct a story to explain why Laurinda turned to war narratives. Growing up in the US in the 1960s and 1970s narratives of war were all around her: the Cold War and the nuclear threat from Russia meant that her elementary school had regular 'duck and cover' drills, when the children were told to hide under their desks; Vietnam meant that you did not ask boys what they wanted to do when they left school as the assumption was they would be drafted; threat was all about her in society—and being severely bullied, too, she found little respite. It is easy to see how a sensitive and highly intelligent childlike Laurinda might connect her personal anxieties to the anxieties of the age.

Writing in 1964 in the preface to the second edition of The Divided Self (1959) R.D. Laing says this:

> In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal. A man who prefers to be dead rather than Red is normal. A man who says he has lost his soul is mad…
> A little girl of seventeen in a mental hospital told me she was terrified because the Atom Bomb was inside her. The statesmen of the world who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous, and far more estranged from 'reality' than many of the people on whom the term 'psychotic' is affixed.'[263]

For Laing, the psychoses do not occur in a vacuum: rather they are narrative responses to the narratives at play in contemporary society (Laing also says that, 'schizophrenia cannot be understood without understanding despair') and attempts to redress what is experienced at the individual level as 'ontological insecurity'[264]

So, how does the poetic function in narrative figure here? Given that in poetic language the capacity for *play* is foregrounded, narrative poetry allows for an *a priori* re-fashioning of *what is*. In essence this is the point that Milton speaks to in the quote from *Paradise Lost*. However, Laurinda's narrative remodeling was of an altogether darker kind: I believe that she found a poetic *resonance* between her own feelings of anxiety and hopelessness and the first-person discourses of British soldiers of *the great war.* For a time this was sustaining as it gave her a wider narrative to project her personal narrative on to – in this sense moving her away from her *self* – whilst also providing her with a sense of *camaraderie* in trauma. When she moved on to working on

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[263] Laing, R.D. *The Divided Self* (1960) 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) p. 12
[264] Ibid. p. 17

accounts of Jewish victims of the holocaust this identification with *otherness*—which was also *the same*—began to plumb new depths.

In the experience of the individual caught in the machine of war she found a kind of *objective correlative* which gave her personal experience an extant discourse on which it could 'hitch a ride'. She liked Newnham College particularly because of the way in which the general environment (spartan metal beds and a lack of heating) [265] and structure of its days mirrored, in some regards, the military: when we queued up for dinner at six she liked the fact that we would be served food that was *ascribed* to us by the institution – *will it be white or brown food today?* was something she liked to say; in this way a *lack of agency* in a personal sense was transfigured into part of the war narratives in which she was immersed during the day. There was comfort in the lack of responsibility and denial of choice – we were, of course, free to eat elsewhere or to make our own dinner—and such rigid structure was something she sought out.

It was no accident that of all the Cambridge colleges Laurinda chose to go to Newnham: this was also Sylvia Plath's college, with whom she identified— the tall, blonde, brilliant American who killed herself; in common with Laurinda (also blonde, also brilliant), in her late work Plath similarly located herself in the position of a *Jew*:

I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

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[265] Newnham college took pride in its frugality ('we are a poor college'), which was raised to the level of an *aesthetic*— and juxtaposed its 'simple' approach to catering with the excesses of richer colleges. Virginia Woolf makes a similar observation about the food at Newnham, in her diaries. Also this, from M.G. Wallas' *A Newnham Anthology* 'It would be easy to pile up instances of icy rooms and inadequate meals' (1917).

> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
> I began to talk like a Jew.
> I think I may well be a Jew.[266]

I remember Laurinda telling me that she knew that like Plath she would commit suicide one day, but at the time it sounded like hubris; Laurinda however went further than Plath in enacting her identification with Jewishness, taking steps to convert. Although she did not live to complete the process in an official way now, psychologically, her *transformation* was complete; it was this identification—this *resonance*—which informed and shaped her experience of being *taken* and incarcerated by the police, and it was ultimately that (in my narrative at least) which sealed her fate. That is, it was the *poetic resonance* which her personal experiences wedded to which led to a *narrative* in which she was written into a corner she could not escape. A. A. Alvarez takes a similar position on the events leading up to Plath's actual suicide which he recounts in *The Savage God: a Study of Suicide*[267]—which is discussed in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis, which deals with the ritual element of poetry. As a coda to Laurinda's story as it figures in my personal narrative, my husband's elder brother also died in Seattle a few years later—at the same age as Laurinda—although taking a slower route to his suicide via alcohol. Similarly, we found out through the agency of the King County Medical Examiner's Office; and as a further point of connection it emerged (a fact unknown to me at the time) that my

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[266] Plath, Sylvia (1962) 'Daddy', *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 222-3

[267] Alvarez, A.A. *The Savage God: a Study of Suicide* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990)

brother-in-law's widow was working at the *Seattle Community Law Centre* when Laurinda turned up there in the midst of her despair. Whilst all this is mere coincidence, *to me* these events form a meaningful whole: I have no idea what their meaning *is*—however I feel them to be *significant* points of connection formed around a city I have never been to. They are elements in another story which is being authored by me.

Poetic Inquiry

In this section I look at a practical example of someone working explicitly *with* language to fashion a narrative that offers new insights into their experiences. The methodology used is known as *poetic inquiry.* Butler-Kisber says:

> I would define poetic inquiry as the process of using words from transcripts or field notes from our studies and transforming them into a form of poetry. This could be done as found poetry, where we use the actual words of the participant. It also can be done as generated poetry[268]

In this case, the *poetic inquiry* was undertaken by J was engaged in writing a dissertation in counselling studies; J contacted me because he had heard from his supervisor that I was interested in poetry as a form of therapy. Taking an auto-ethnographic approach, *poetic inquiry* was chosen as a method of tackling the dissertation by J as he felt it offered the opportunity to explore personal themes in a way—structured and

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[268] Lynn Butler-Kisber Defines Poetic Inquiry (Video) retrieved on August 11 2019 from http://methods.sagepub.com/video/lynn-butler-kisber-defines-poetic-inquiry

set in context of a wider literature. J's methodological approach was to type up the transcripts of 'therapeutic conversations' he had had with a therapist friend—in which he spoke about his experiences of childhood; he then used to provide the basis (frequently these poems use fragments of the transcripts verbatim as material) for poems which explored the relationship he had with his father—or specifically the *narrative* he had about that relationship.

I had two conversations with J about his work as he was in the process of writing it up: subsequent to the first of these, he sent me two poems he had written which were based on a discussion he had had about specific traumatic memories of his childhood:

Lombard Street

Yoshino cherry blossoms blanket
the front lawn of your house on Lombard street,
their sweet perfume mixing strangely
with white vinyl siding,
newly-clad and still off-gassing,

It is 1970, the year the Beatles break up.
Your father pulls the Pontiac
into the garage as you bolt
through the front door in pajamas
to greet him, screen door slamming behind you.

You approach from the driver's side,
cat-like, ready to pounce, engine
still running, radio blaring, as he fumbles
for the handle, cursing. The door flies
open with a force that startles you.

He nearly falls, catches himself with one hand
grasping at the wheel, heaves once,
twice, mouth wide open: vomit sprays
like water from a hose, splashing
the concrete floor, the plasterboard.

You jump back but it gets you, bits
of food sticking to your toes. He slumps over,
groaning, half-in and half out, while
Let it be echoes in the background.
You take a hard look at the face of this man

whom you both love and fear.
An uneasy feeling forms
in the pit of your gut:
pure joy mixed
with the smell of sick.

A Small Offering

Twenty-seven hundred miles you drove
with me crying in the back seat,
still in nappies, Mom five-months pregnant,
dropping us at aunt Pat's, another

twenty-seven hundred miles back
to Ft Benning, running off

with that woman from the laundromat.

Four years later you crawled

back, tail between your legs.
You could have been a boyfriend,
or a stepdad, breezing into the house,
insisting that I call you Daddy,

that I do as you say,
that I don't talk back.
I remember the smell of Old Spice
in the basement, behind

the creaky wooden staircase,
dropping my pants, bending
over, the crack of your black
leather belt against my bare skin.

Now, with children of my own,
I want to be done with you.
I thought I had wrapped you up
like a relic

in old newspaper,
stuffed you into a box
marked ~~Daddy~~,
shoved you into the attic,

my small offering to a petty god.
And yet, I can still feel you standing
behind me. I'm still grabbing my ankles,
awaiting that smack, that sharp sting.

In the first interview J was still therapeutically working through the

emotional effects of this writing, and his comments at this point were

tentative:

> J: The stuff I've written recently has become more narrative…one
> of the big learnings that I think I'm having is just the value of
> writing as a means of inquiring into oneself. And what's coming
> out of that, as a result of the narrative stuff I've written—probably
> more so, as there's quite a bit of it—um, these are the only two
> poems I've written as part of the inquiry—so it's been primarily a

narrative enquiry at the moment—but it's similar, it's *similar* in the approach in the sense that the experience I want to flush out…um…I'll write about it, and in the writing of it I'll find that…um…I really bringing it to the surface and making it *visible.* Some of the stuff that's coming up for me, I'm writing about and I'm kind of having to—like with my wife for example, there's been a few things that have been, like, *buried*—I haven't even spoken to *her* about—and so, in the *process,* of opening myself up to things I wanted to explore, I've had to kind of…um…offer this to her in order to write about it because she's involved in the process.

However, what is striking about these comments is the sense J has that this is a process of making *buried* experiences *visible*: there is a sense that in the process of *signifying* experience in language those experiences are *made manifest*, or *embodied*.

> J: *Testimony* is a word that comes to mind, *testimony…testimony?…*or…yeah, *testimony* or *testifying* or this sense of wanting to *speak* my experience…yeah…*all* of it. And feeling that I can speak all of it, and not having to have any bits that are buried because of *shame* or…whatever. And so that's a lot of what's been happening with the writing of it. *In* the writing of it I'm getting it out from those buried places.

Here we can see J engaging further with language in exploring his experience: he 'tries out' the work *testimony* to see if it is a *fit* with his experience of the process itself. *Testimony* is of course a word which is replete with signification: to *testify* is to speak something which is *true*, is has a significance in law, it connotes both a public act and a personal account; a *testimonial* is a formal statement about the character and qualities of someone or something. In using the word in this context, J is doing something more than *describing* his experience of the process of writing; rather, he is actively *harnessing* the weight

of signification carried by the word in the service of his particular narrative about his writing. This is a key point with regard to the argument put forward above that language has its own dynamic which extends beyond any *particular* use of a given word.

Here J also describes the process of writing the poems as one of digging up *bits that are buried*—which is an extended metaphor Adrienne Rich applies to the writing process in her poem 'Diving into the Wreck'[269]:

> *I came to explore the wreck.*
> *The words are purposes.*
> *The words are maps.*
> *I came to see the damage that was done*
> *and the treasures that prevail.*
> *...*
> *the thing I came for:*
> *the wreck and not the story of the wreck*
> *the thing itself and not the myth*

For Rich this is a process of returning to *events themselves*—which is something *other* than the 'story' or *narrative* of the 'wreck'—yet does not exclude the traces of experience figured in language. Although the narrator of the poem says she must leave the mediating effects of narrative behind ('the story of the wreck') nevertheless language remains an active player in the process ('the words are purposes'): poetry itself—*language* itself—is the vehicle. Language has *power* as the crucible of *all signification*: it is that which has already been

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[269] Rich, Adrienne Cecile *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems, 1971-1972* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 14-16

mapped (which we can read as proxy for narrative or *story*) and all that which is yet to *be* mapped or told. Language, then, can be simultaneously *bounded* (as narrative) and still replete with *possibility*; this in essence is the *poetic function* at work in narrative.

> J: So, it feels like as I unearth things, and they're sitting there—*right here* now, as opposed to *back there*—now I'm able to acknowledge that and *use it* I suppose…it makes me wonder *what else* is in there! I'm finding it much easier to *bring* [things] up than hold them *down*…you can't do anything with stuff that's *buried* cause you don't even know it's there.

In this stripping away of story—this return to the wreck of experience—what is dismantled is *one particular narrative pathway* through language: language remains available for the remaking of a new story. Here language-meanings (*signification*) can be used as both a space and vehicle for exploration, which brings the speaker/writer into a more intuitive state where experience can be looked at afresh.

> J: I'm *talking* about it to see what I have to say about…I record it and then I transcribe it, to see what I said when I *spoke* about it. I am also using *meditation* as a method in a way, I don't know…that's a bit, um…I'm not quite sure if that's an *intuitive* sort of an inquiry…

My second interview with J took place approximately four months later, at a point when he had finished the dissertation and was generous enough to share it with me. Three poems from the dissertation are included below, with J*'s* comments on them included:

[This is] a found poem…a seven-minute writing exercise completed in September 2017 to get my writing juices flowing. The aim was to write in a stream-of-consciousness style without any concern for spelling, grammar or content. The result was a long paragraph of mostly gibberish, but when I revisited this writing in January 2018, a few phrases jumped out at me and I decided to turn them into a found poem[270]

Chicken Scratch

This strange process,
translating thoughts and experiences
into symbols and marks
on a page, like
chicken scratch
.
Closing my eyes now,
typing words as they come,
not checking to see if
they land correctly
on the page,
knowing I've mistyped some,
continuing
anyway,
feeling liberated,
not writing for form but for flow.
Deep breath.
Sit up straight.
I will attempt to write poetry today –
first time in years.
I am afraid.
What if I can't do it?
I am committed to using
poetic inquiry
in my research,
but what if
I can't write poetry?
Wouldn't that be the shits?
Deep breath.
Eyes still closed.
Feeling completely embodied,
mind open and spacious.
Deep breath

Noticing the sensation
of air passing through my nostrils,
the rise of my belly

---

[270] J in conversation with Stephanie Aspin, 6 July 2018

as I breathe
into these words

.

Deep breath.
You can do this!

Poetic transcription (a type of found poetry) is a means of both representing and analysing the raw data of a research interview. Laurel Richardson was one of the first social science researchers to use poetic transcription to re(present) an interview transcript. In what she describes as a 'transgressive' act of writing. Richardson (1992) took the 36-page transcript from her interview with a participant named Louisa May and fashioned it into a three-page poem 'using only her words, her tone, and her diction but relying on poetic devices such as repetition, off-rhyme, meter and pauses to convey her narrative' (p. 126). What she ended up with was 'a transcript masquerading as a poem/a poem masquerading as a transcript' (p. 127).

While working on this dissertation, I was invited to be a participant in the research project of a colleague who was exploring the topic of estrangement. My participation involved speaking with my colleague about my estranged relationship with my father. I agreed to two audio-recorded sessions, the first of which was 45 minutes in duration and the second was 30 minutes. I also agreed to produce a short piece of writing after the first session to capture something of my experience from the interview. I audio- recorded the two sessions for my own research purposes, as I was just as interested as my colleague to hear what I would say about the topic of estrangement. It was hoped that what came out of the interviews might prove useful in my own self-inquiry.

Following the first interview, I went home and transcribed the audio-recording, which ended up being about nine pages of single-spaced text, and then I set the transcript aside for a week or two. When I revisited it later, I sat down with a yellow highlighter and slowly read through the transcript, highlighting key words and phrases which struck me as meaningful or evocative. I then rearranged those words into a poem, adding a word or two when necessary for purposes of clarity. What follows is an attempt at poetic transcription taken from that first interview. [271]

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[271] J. MA dissertation, submitted Summer 2018

Daddy

(a poetic transcription)

You left when I was 12 months old, yet no memories of you
being absent.
When you returned,

four years later,
you could have been a stepdad, coming into my life,
imposing discipline, authority, whipping me with your black belt in the
name of love.
I didn't know who you were, yet you insisted I call you Dad,
and that I don't talk back
and that I do as you say.
I was a good kid, out
of fear.

Remember the woodshed? Dropping my pants?
The two-by-four?
That was the turning point. That cemented it.

Years later, I would try
to be an equal,
to have my own power,
but that was too threatening. You still needed me

to bow down,
just a little,
but why would I do that?

At times I wonder
if I am missing something, an opportunity
for growth or healing,
by not turning around
and facing you,
by not accepting, allowing, loving you anyway,
not needing to be in a position of power over you.

If I box you up, put
you away in the attic,
am I cutting out that part of myself,

like a sacrifice?

Drenched

I got in there   dug around   really engaged

with this whole 'estrangement thing'
rolling up my sleeves   getting

dirty with it   messing around
with images   experiences
memories   this idea of boxing him up

putting him away   I worked with that

image   trying to capture what

that felt like   then it came

to me   *there* is no box   there is
no putting him away   there is no
putting him anywhere   I might
ignore him   but he is standing

right behind me   right here   now

I am already soaked clean through   there

is no boxing him up   he permeates me

Now   I'm more aware of how I react

to my girls   those angry outbursts
I don't want to claim   in a way

that's him   there in those

moments   his living presence
he's not boxed up   he's still
with me   I want to be more present
to that   rather than boxing him up
and closing him off   or seeing him as

some spiritual test   you know   spiritual

growth through forgiveness   because

that's another way of boxing him up
isn't it?   but there isn't any getting
rid of him   he's right here   I am

already drenched   and I want
to learn how to be with that.

Dead Thistle

I have been thinking about

estrangement,
and how relationships

with parents

are like the bounty
of the gardener's
labour. The seedlings
he planted and nurtured –

that's what is presently blooming, or not blooming,

whether

a beautiful rose
or a weed – it is what it is,

and it's not our doing. We

had no say in it. We

simply experience
the aftermath
of that process,
and if it's shitty,

if it's a dead
thistle – that's not

our thing, you know.

If the ground
is bare, if there
isn't anything
there, that's
not got any-
thing to do
with
us.

It is particularly interesting to note the development of a set of images and a theme which occurs between the three poems above. The first ('Daddy') is closest to the narrative of the transcript, and as such has less of the features we might commonly think of as *poetic* (metaphor, linearity etc.)*;* rather it remains more concerned with the narrative aspects of the memory, and in providing details of the recollection (e.g. the father's departure, the *wood shed*, current feelings). However, in the latter part of this piece two images are introduced, which are subsequently picked up and developed as

metaphors in the other two pieces. The first is the image of 'boxing up' the memory of the father—which in 'Daddy' appears as a fairly incidental line; in 'Drenched' this becomes a repeated *refrain* and is the central concern of the speaker—the consequences of 'boxing up' memory is explored here. The second image is that of 'growth': in 'Daddy' this is introduced as a comment about 'spiritual growth' coming through forgiveness; in the third poem ('Dead Thistle') however, the image of *growth* is explicitly connected to growth in nature, and the nurturing of plants. In fact, the connection to nature is established in the opening of poem two ('Drenched') in the line, 'I got in there   dug around   really engaged'. Superficially this is simply a metaphor for the process of therapeutic talk which delves in ('digs around') to memory. However, by poem three ('Dead Thistle') *growth* in nature and the metaphor of *gardening* as a proxy for the process of therapy is engaged with explicitly, with *natural growth* developed as a motif.

What we see here is the process through which the *pull* of language is engaged with to engender a different *narrative* than the one which it springs from. What we see is how language itself—through the process of working with an extant narrative that is the transcription—can further the process of *making meaning* of story itself. In poem two ('Drenched') we might describe this as an *intuitive engagement* with language—'boxed up' is repeated, in a rather staccato way, but not fully *poetically* owned as a metaphor. In poem three, however, the second image (of growth) is fully articulated and explored as an extended metaphor—in a characteristically *poetic* way.

My second interview with J was conducted after he had finished writing the dissertation—during the process of editing it—at a point where his thinking about using *poetic inquiry* was more developed. I asked him about a remark he had made previously regarding the first 'therapeutic conversation' (the basis of the transcripts used in the *inquiry*) containing a lot of 'rehearsed material': this is a key idea in therapy, and refers to situations where a client *tells* the therapist 'stories' about their past which have been told many times before; in this sense the material is *rehearsed*—it has been honed into a kind of *script* through repeated tellings and has therefore lost its sense of *immediacy* for the client, and is at *a distance.* This presents a hurdle to any therapeutic progress through *talk* being made. Below J makes the point that exploring narrative which is *extant* —in that it has been transcribed—allows for a *refashioning* to take place in a way which is more located in the present moment, and therefore more therapeutic.

> J: [Talking about my childhood at that point] felt rehearsed…it felt like it was stuff that was just in there and I was just repeating it—stories that I've told myself over and over.

> S: I wondered what it added, having it in a tangible form in the transcripts, what was new about that…

> J: Um…I think what happened in that second interview—because I had spent time wrestling with the language in the poems—and getting in there—it was almost that it shuffled things up a bit…it created the possibility for a new story I suppose. Or a new language to come out of something that had been felt old in a way. And so, when we sat down for that second interview something else emerged out of that, and I'm trying to think what that was…gosh, it's only been about a month and its already old—what! that was ages ago [laughter]. No, something did come out of that second conversation which was because, I think, of the material in it. I can't remember what that was—I can't—that insight…

> …

> Yeah, that's how it felt, yeah. It felt like just getting in there and messing around—almost being creative with it in a way that, um…I think that what that does—or what it seemed to do—is kind of point to the idea that it's not all fixed in one way, you know. It's not just a thing that happened this way…you know, the experience of it is malleable almost. I can kinda get in there and re-think about it, re-orient yourself to it. And just

changing the words—you know, the description of it—you get a different feel for the experience, or a different relationship to it, I don't know…There was a story. And then there was an experience. And having to go back into it with a poetic sort of sensibility, you almost have to re-work the experience, or—you know—re-create the experience in order to capture the feeling you're trying to convey. It's not just a linear telling of what happened: it's going into the experience of it, and how it feels now—trying to describe that—which is different to a story…or even adding things. You might be thinking, OK I need something to convey something that isn't part of the story … but you pull it in and it actually captures that… there's a kind of fictional element to it—using part of the experience of it that weren't actually part of the actual event, but put together they convey something of the experience of it…um…that maybe you haven't…how it *felt*

When J talks about the 'poetic sensibility' in the extract above, what he seems to be referring to is a process in which he *moves away* from the narrative of the experience *as it was*, and into *language*—which paradoxically offers an opportunity to make the experience *more real* ('how it *felt*'): that is the multiplicity of meaning which becomes available to the speaker when language is approach *poetically*—in terms of metaphor, of image—may offer up a path which contributes to the *authenticity* of the telling because it foregrounds the process of *signification* and necessitates that the speaker think more carefully about the story they are constructing as they look for *the words to say it.* This is what J calls 'going into the experience of it'; in this conscious act of engagement with the *play* of signification in language, in the attempt to mould and match utterance to experience, new insights and deeper *truths* become manifest. It is in this *dialectic* between what we might think of as *the plain fact of things* and the *fabric of language* which is conscripted to the process of *narrative telling*—and may involve, 'and even adding things'—that *better* more *accurate* narratives take form. There is an implication here that the *play* within language can surprise us. This, of course, is the mechanism (and the *point*) of Freudian free-association. However what poetic inquiry brings to the table—consonant with a poststructuralist

understanding of language—is an understanding of language as a shared cultural resource, which while it can be used to construct discourse at the individual level, always carries with it a broader *communal* resonance which is inherent in the structure of language itself.

> S: I had a really weird experience yesterday. I got into a conversation with my husband about…you know that Ishiguro book Never Let Me Go? Anyway we were talking about that and we got on to my mum dying, and, I was sort of talking about [the novel] is about loss and having to impose structure and meaning on life…anyway…and my husband said to me—it was a really off-the-cuff comment—he said to me, err…your mother was *worthless* to you. And it made me—it's just that word [worthless] and I don't know why—it made me physically sick. And I haven't processed it yet because this was last night…um, but it was really weird and I don't know what was in that, and I kind of—when I was reading your chapter…that sort of resonated with me…and I don't know why that word…
>
> J: Right, something about…
>
> S: it hit me…
>
> J: Something about hearing that word…?
>
> S: But it's moved me—you know, I had thoughts like you can't say that, you know, that's horrible and I feel guilty—but there is stuff in there as well…
>
> J: I'm thinking of the focusing thing—about finding the handle, the sense. It was almost like that was the handle and you hadn't found it yet…
>
> S: Yes. Exactly.
>
> J: …until it was offered to you…
>
> S: Yes. And I actually threw up. I'm actually rubbish at focusing—I've never got that thing—but it was something in that word…that I think I can explore. But it really struck me when I was reading your [chapter]
>
> J: Because presumably that isn't a word you've been able to use to talk about how you think about your…
>
> S: No! I would feel so guilty! But there's something in it—not as a person, but as a parent…you know, I can't just reject it—but I certainly can't accept it. It was really…striking to me, but as you say, it was at that edge, that focusing edge. But I've never had that experience before, so it was weird, also reading your chapter—and writing this thing [thesis]—at the moment, there was a kind of synchronicity..

…

J: I was just thinking that the stories we tell ourselves—especially if it's a narrative we run without really thinking about it—can feel so powerful and we so identify with it. Whereas when you stop and actually write about it—or try to put it into words—it forces you to see that…it doesn't have any…it's almost that it challenges you. I mean it forces you to recognize that it's not a coherent thing. You try to say it, you try to write about it—then you come up against that sense that it's just a story—and it's malleable and it's changeable—it's not this thing that exists as a real…I don't know…something…

S: I think that can be a really scary place as well. If you get to a place where you think this is all a story you think where the fuck does that leave me…

J: Yeah, especially if your sense of self is tied to it—is wrapped up in the story—and you challenge that, and you challenge who you are—your sense of self—and that's what's really…destabilizing, I suppose.

…

J: I mean, therapy is about helping people make sense of their story—at least, that's the way I'm working with it, I suppose.

The last statement J makes here cuts to the core of how narrative functions therapeutically, and why it is an important component of therapeutic practice. When we *make sense* of our stories we simultaneously strengthen our sense that our experiences—and by extension the world—have coherence. They are not a disparate and random collection of sense-impressions—but rather a linearly ordered sequence of events which delineate a central experiencing *I*.

The Contribution of Narrative

In this chapter I have covered a lot of ground and in the process I have introduced multiple ways of thinking about the relationship between narrative and therapy; nevertheless, it is possible to pin down the contribution of the idea of narrative to the therapeutic process to a few key points: in the first place, engaging in narrative-making allows individuals to achieve a sense of *coherence* regarding life-experiences which seems to be a fundamental element in psychological well-being—connected to a need for the world to *make sense.* Secondly, narrative allows for the manipulation of experiences in ways in which stories which are psychologically helpful to us may emerge; narrative approaches to therapy ask clients to engage explicitly in acts of re-making regarding their personal stories—giving the client both a sense of agency (as the author of their lives) and the power to change the outcomes of experience, in ways which make them feel more empowered and change the feelings connected with experience which can then be reintegrated into a *better* sense of the-self-in-life. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in relation to the broader themes of this thesis, narrative engages the individual with the network and residue of story which exists in language in culture— something which allows for the individual to *go beyond* the parameters of individual experience and connect to narrative threads which run across culture and through time. In this sense narrative allows not only for the remaking of the *interior world* of the individual but carries with it also the potential to significantly alter shared understandings of what the world is and what events *are*. Wallace Steven's figures this process in the playing of the *blue guitar* in which the world is made and then remade through the auspices of art; Shelley enacts it in *The Masque of Anarchy.* Hélène Cixous speaks to the *shared* quality of the linguistic endeavour and says that authors of

narrative, 'always have the belief and the illusion that we are the ones writing'[272]—suggesting that writing is always something more than an individual act of self-expression. In working with narrative, then, we are engaging with the structure: we both shape the structure of our own experience *and* participate in the dialectical process of interacting with language which has this wider resonance and implication for reality itself.

Next Steps

This chapter has explored the ways in which extant narrative/s (or story) can provide a psychological resource for the individual seeking to make sense of, support or change their personal experience of the world by identifying with elements of extant narrative which are then woven into novel personal stories. In the next and final chapter of this thesis I turn to look at what the implications for language and reality are when the idea of language as a structure—replete with its own dynamics independent of the individual writing—is pushed to the limit. In this chapter I have given what might be described as a *secular* account of how language operates—the poststructuralist position—in terms of the influence of its cultural content as a fabric of meaning; in the chapter following I will move towards a more *arcane* position in which language itself is ascribed powers of action, transformation and agency which extend beyond the agency of the writer. This is poetry in its *ritual* aspect.

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[272] Cixous, H. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia, 1993) p. 20

Chapter 6

The Isle is Full of Noises: exploring poetry as psychological ritual

The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease for ever to be able to do it

—J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*[273]

Books are a uniquely portable magic

—Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*[274]

In the previous chapter I looked at the ways in which individuals use narrative (or story) in ways which are affective in a psychological sense; in this way the previous chapter mainly attended to *practices* of story-making and its consequences for mental health. The subject of this chapter is broader, however, in that it digs into what I see as the fundamental contribution of poetry to psychological functioning or *change*: that is the ability sometimes ascribed to poetry to wrought *change* in *magical* ways. In this chapter I will argue that the *magic* of poetry—what I am calling its *ritual* function—lies in individuals working with images in liminal ways, through sensing what is significant in terms of symbolization and making forms and actions which play out and support the power which we sense.

In the introduction to this thesis I suggested that when we consider *ritual* we see poetry operating at the limits of language: that is, through an association

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[273] Barrie, J.M. *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow up* (1904) (London: Collins, 2015) p. 42
[274] King, S. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Pocket Books, 2012) p. 76

with ritual writing enters a frontier country which is a liminal space somewhere between the edge of consciousness and articulation. Like Prospero's island the poetry of ritual is replete with sounds half-heard. This chapter explores that idea.

What is Ritual?

The definition of *ritual* is manifold and varies according to context, with certain elements persisting around which definitions coalesce that is: a ritual may be said to be a sequence of activities—which may involve words, gestures, objects—performed in the absence of a *practical* purpose or goal. Beyond this, understandings of what a ritual is and does diverge: in the sub-discipline of anthropology know as 'ritual studies' a ritual is a manifestation of a cultural push towards social cohesion or community strength, 'a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures'[275]. In this sense we may say that ritual has an *interpersonal* function. In psychology, however, it is the *interpersonal* role of ritual, which is foregrounded, with the ritual act (or behaviour) seen as having a pay-off at the individual level—for example, the ritualistic behaviours connected to a diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder may be regarded in a psychiatric sense as an attempt to impose order upon the chaos of experience through repetition[276]. In both definitions however what is common is that the *ritual act* is severed from having a practical or immediate effect on the environment:

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[275] Bell, Catherine *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 7

[276] Zor, R., Keren, H., Hermesh, H., Szechtman, H., Mort, J., Eilam, D., (2009) 'Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: A Disorder of Pessimal (non-functional) Motor Behavior
Acta Psychiatr Scand. 120(4): pp. 288-98.

that is ritual is 'cast as action in opposition to thought and theory'[277]. Rather ritual is a *belief* in the efficacy of certain actions and behaviours to effect given means and ends. So, ritual is located in the arena of meaning; in the absence of tangible affects it is the significance that the ritual has in terms of its semantic resonance—whether personal or social—which is brought to the fore. Geertz (cited by Catherine Bell in her seminal study *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*) suggests that, 'it is in some sort of ceremonial form—even if that form be hardly more than the re- citation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle, or the decoration of a grave—that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another…in ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world'[278].

What ritual does that is common to both anthropological (social) and psychological (personal) explanations of the phenomenon is to fundamentally place action in an arena of faith in the power of the symbolic; from here it is a short step to see how language may play a central role in why and how ritual practices matter: when we engage in ritual acts we move to the edge of what is *known* about the tangible world of cause and effect and into a liminal space where a causal *capacity* becomes attributed to words: in effect, we move into the realm of *magic*.

> It has been argued that in ritual words themselves are deeds that accomplish things. This position was pioneered by men like Frazer and Malinowski, who understood most ritual as magic because it assumed an identify between the word and the thing. More recently, Tambiah argued that the notion of ritual language as magical in a causal sense can be retired

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[277] Bell, Catherine *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 7
[278] ibid. p. 123

without losing the importance of words to ritual activity. From his perspective, the distinctive communications of ritual language are not some secondary dimension to the work of ritual but are central to what ritual is[279]

For a more prosaic account of how language may *do* or *effect* practical *change* we should consider Austin's idea of the *illocutionary act* at this point in the discussion: Austin[280] points to the quality which certain types of utterance have to bring new states of the world into being—examples being when a priest or other official says 'I now pronounce you man and wife' the result is a legally binding contract and a new facial relationship; when a judge utters the word 'guilty' a citizen becomes a convict. Such utterances *make things* so.

In her analysis Bell makes a link between the status and function of language in ritual to structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of language—specifically with regard to notions of *signification*:

> "signifying practices," a term coined by the *Tel Quel* circle in Paris, not only opposes "the prevailing notion of a transparent relation between sign and referent, signification and reality," but also emphasizes the creativity over and above the mere reproductivity of practice. Language, art, and style, as examples of signifying practices, have been analyzed as active forces that create or transform reality[281]

Thus, when we take a view of language in which the *signifier* is fundamentally severed from the *signified* —as in Lacan—then language itself becomes the stuff of reality, given it is the only reality open to us; moreover what is set in motion is the *possibility* for reality to be more malleable, more susceptible to the forces of ritual practice, and therefore a space replete with

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279 ibid. p. 111
280 Austin, J. L. *How to do Things with Words.* Urmson, J. O., Sbisà, Marina. (2nd ed.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975)
281 Bell, Catherine *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 75-6

the potential to be *transformed*: this is a version, 'of ritual as the strategic deployment of a metaphor'[282].

To return to the poststructuralist model of language, discussed in previous chapters, where the word-to-word relationship is emphasised (necessarily, perhaps, because this is what we experience of what is *real* via the prism of language) what is also included in Lacan's model but is less often foregrounded is that the *real* is indivisible from the *imaginary* and *symbolic* domains; that is ,what is *real* is embedded in language. In Lacan this is figured in the image of three interlocking rings (fig. 1)

Fig. 1.
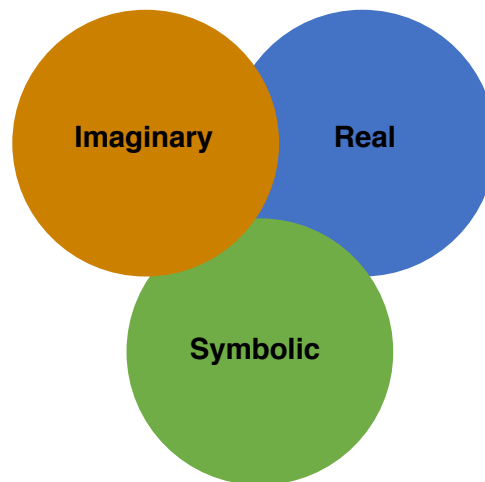
Whilst the *real* (experience which is unmediated by language) may resist symbolisation—or embodiment—it is not therefore negated, but rather it persists. What I would like to suggest is that ritual is an attempt to work with the *real* via the fabric of language; and to put forward the idea that it is this which gives language, when approached in the symbolic manner which is

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[282] ibid. p. 44

particular to ritual, a privileged place in the function and intent of ritual practice. Language then is both the edge of the *known* and the doorway to that which is *unknown* and arcane.

To return to the question *what is ritual?* a potential answer which straddles both the anthropological social (interpersonal) and psychological individual (intrapersonal) understandings of ritual is that a ritual is an attempt to effect action through symbolic means. Such action may be an affirmation of the identity of the group, a successful harvest or a decrease in individual anxiety; nevertheless the means through which this takes place are the same: symbols, whether they be words or gestures or sacral objects, are conduits of *power*. So, ritual may be summarised as a symbolic act done with intent to effect that which is *real*; for as Geertz puts it, in ritual, 'the world as lived, and the world as imagined…turns out to be the same world'[283].

At a more prosaic level, features common to much if not most practice characterised as *ritual* is a highly formalised use of language and other imagery—frequently repeated either within the structure of the ritual itself or through subsequent enactments of the same ritual over time. Elements which make up a ritual are generally fixed and provide an enduring framework within which the intention for the ritual is played out. Commonly occurring intentions include rituals for *transformation* (of a situation or thing), for *affirmation* (of a group or individual belief or identity), and *banishment* (of an entity or energy)—a link between the various types of intentions for ritual is that ritual is always an attempt to produce an *effect* on the tangible

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[283] Cited in ibid. pp. 112-3

environment via symbolic means. For this reason symbol itself holds the central place in all ritual practice.

Taking this idea further, we may say then that all ritual requires an identification of *those images in which power resides* as a first step to constructing a ritual practice. Jung points towards this process in his theory of *archetypes* being the underpinning images of *myth,* and by extension, ritual, with certain images as appearing and persisting across cultures:

> Myth is the primordial language natural to…psychic processes, and no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery. Such processes are concerned with the primordial images, and these are best and most succinctly reproduced by figurative language.[284]

Contrary to popular belief, all embodiments of archetypes in Jung are provisional acts of the creative imagination/psyche and thus occur at the individual level; despite Jung's holding that such images have roots in a collective unconscious which runs across cultures and through time, the archetype as *essence* remains dis-embodied and beyond any discrete or fixed symbolisation—in this sense, Jung has much in common with Lacan's model (fig. 1). When we understand that the embodiment of an archetype is a creative act undertaken at the individual level—which includes an acceptance of the social role of archetype in ritual—we can see Jung as providing a link between what is undertaken in ritual practice and the functioning of poetry: 'for every act of dawning consciousness is a creative act, and it is from this psychological experience that all our…symbols are derived'[285]. In the same work, Jung goes on to make a further connection between the creative act of

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[284] Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy* (2nd Ed., Trans. R.F.C.Hull), (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 24
[285] ibid. p. 25

'symbol making' (the fundamental operation of poetry) and mental health; the creative act is also that which can make us 'well' in a psychological sense as it allows, 'the patient…to find out what it is that supports him when he can no longer support himself'[286]. In broad terms, this statement summarises the position that I have taken throughout this thesis in regard to the power writing poetry has to refashion the world at a personal level in ways which make it *livable* for us; in a narrower sense, this statement also makes the case for the psychological power of ritual—and provides a bridge between what is understood by ritual in the context of both anthropology and the study of mental health: all rituals, then, are creative endeavours involving the deployment of images in the pursuit of a state *other* to the one we currently find ourselves in—even when the attempt is to shore up a status-quo in the face of the threat of *change*.

Poetry and Ritual

So, if all poetry has the *potential* to be seen as a type of ritual practice, what then are the features of poems we might deem to be especially *ritualistic*? Following from what I have said about ritual above, clearly the types of images used may identify a poem as being more or less ritualistic: images that have clear cultural or psychological resonance such as those frequently used by Ted Hughes, where animals are figured as mythical embodiments of primal and universal *force* (the apotheosis being Hughes' C*row*), are particularly good candidates in this regard. For Hughes the enterprise of the poem is, 'something like the Freudian idea of trying to bring the subconscious into consciousness, but Hughes believes far less in the power of reason to control the non-rational than Freud did. Hughes believes in the power of

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[286] ibid. p. 44

magic, and poetry is his magic.'[287] Another feature of poetry which might lead us to label it *ritualistic* is the quality of prosody. Certain qualities of rhythm and stress which emphasise the 'spoken' quality of language (as in an incantation or spell) bring ritual to mind: 'because poetry is rhythmic, metaphorical and highly structured it is the most powerful ritual we have'.[288] Repetition—of key images, or as a refrain or mantra—also figure in poems which are ritualistic and signal words themselves as being the carriers of *power*. A third feature—which relates to the notion of the poem as a *rite*—is the role the poet ascribes to themselves or to speaker of the poem—which may or may not be the same thing. In this regard the poet assumes the mantle of a priest or shaman. We find evidence of all of these features in the late work of Sylvia Plath.

Firstly, it is important to state that the *attitude* taken to both the status and function of poetry adopted by Plath is shared to an extent with Hughes: the poets were married and both had a professed interest in the occult and arcane—Hughes more than Plath, perhaps[289], although images of the arcane run throughout both and in Plath's late work the figure of the writer as poet-priestess becomes and explicit trope. In 'Edge', Plath's last poem, which was written six days before her suicide, has the poet-as-priestess as its central

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[287] Law, P. 'Poetry as Ritual: Ted Hughes', *Sydney English Studies Vol. 2 (1976),* p. 77

[288] ibid

[289] A.A. Alvarez in an article for *The Observer* newspaper says, 'Over the years, he kept the line open through a weird mishmash of astrology, black magic, Jungian psychology, Celtic myth and pagan superstition, and he encouraged Sylvia to do the same. Her sensibility was different from his—more urban and intellectual, more nerves than instincts—so a belief in shamans, Ouija boards and the baleful influence of the stars didn't come naturally to her. But she was a fast learner and high achiever; anything he could do, she could do better. She was also determined to break through, as he had done, to the inner demons that would make her write the poems she knew she had in her. But when she did, the ghouls she released were malign. They helped her write great poetry, but they destroyed her marriage, then they destroyed her.' (4 January 2004)

image. It is a bleak yet compelling beautiful piece. It is interesting when read

as *ritual* to notice that the central figure is static ('dead') yet the way in which

the poem lays out its litany of images suggests movement: as though the

speaker were going through a ritual process of arranging 'objects' into a

composite image of great significance. We are told the woman 'is perfected'

and there is a sense of *perfection*—as of just the right thing put in just the right

place—which pervades. Without detracting from the artistry of the poem it is

not much of a leap to say that here Plath is playing out the ritual of her own

suicide which would take place less than a week later; 'the speaker projects a

morbid image of herself into the future [depersonalizing] herself by not using

the first-person "I."'[290]

> The woman is perfected.
> Her dead
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> The illusion of a Greek necessity
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
> Her bare
> Feet seem to be saying:
> We have come so far, it is over.
> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.
> She has folded
> Them back into her body as petals
> Of a rose close when the garden
> Stiffens and odors bleed
> From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.
> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag.

The poem achieves its hypnotic and curiously formal auditory effects through

the adept use of assonance. Assonance—a opposed to rhyme—sets up a

tension between speaker and ritual structure: because of the more colloquial

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[290] Jaros, J 'Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Suicide' *Plath Profiles: an Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia* (2008)

register which assonance makes possible the speaker remains central to the events of the poem, as speaker and actor of its rites; the language maintains a quite rigid form without allowing for the place of the narrator/actor to be overwhelmed. Through assonance both rite and priestess are constructed and held in a highly boundaried piece which is both dynamic and timeless. The images Plath assembles here are *ritualistic* in tone in that they frequently assume forms which coincide with what Jung describes as the *archetypal*: we have the figure of 'mother' as the central player in what the speaker imagines to be a Greek tragedy (the image invokes Medea who, in Euripede's play, kills her children as an act of vengeance for the infidelity of her husband Jason); the children are 'serpents'—powerful Jungian symbols, 'an adversary…but also a wise bridge that connects right and left through longing, much needed by our life'[291]. Here, the mother takes the children back into herself and in this way returns to wholeness—to *perfection.* The image of the moon closes the poem, carrying associations of the essential feminine, among other things. In this way 'Edge' is a deeply ritualistic poem and a good example of the form. Further, 'Edge' speaks to one of the essential functions of *ritual*: it plays out a set of real events—in this case suicide—at one remove, symbolically, as an attempt at exorcising *something.* In *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*[292] the critic and poet Al Alvarez describes Plath in the last days of her life as explicitly engaging in a symbolic death-ritual in her late works.

> …in that strange, upsetting poem 'The Bee Meeting', the detailed, doubtless accurate description of a gathering of local bee-keepers in her Devon village gradually becomes an evocation of some deadly ritual in which she is the sacrificial virgin whose coffin, finally, waits in the sacred grove. Why this should happen becomes, perhaps, slightly less mysterious when you remember that her father was an authority on bees; so her bee-

[291] Jung, Carl R. *The Red Book* (New York: Norton and Company, 2009), p. 247
[292] Alvarez, A. *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1st ed. 1971), *(*New York: Norton and Company, 2002)

keeping becomes a way of symbolically allying herself to him, and reclaiming him from the dead'[293]

In his last meeting with Plath—on the Christmas Eve preceding her suicide on the 11 of February—Alvarez sees her as, 'a priestess':

> Her hair, which she wore in a tight school-mistressy bun, was loose. It hung straight to her waist like a tent, giving her pale face and gaunt figure a curiously desolate, rapt air, like a priestess emptied out by the rites of her cult. When she walked in front of me down the hall passage and up the stairs of her apartment—she had the top two floors of the house—her hair gave off a strong smell, sharp as an animal's[294]

For Alvarez, Plath's whole enterprise in writing these late poems is to summon her 'demons' in order to work them through in writing. He cites her comments about the poem 'Daddy' made in introductory notes for the BBC as evidence, making the connection between the role of ritual in poetry and in psychic functioning extant: 'she [the narrator of the poem] has to act out the awful little allegory before she is free of it'. The allegory depicted in the poem is one in which the narrator plays out an imagined internal struggle between a 'fantasy Nazi father and a Jewish mother'[295] the resolution of which is the daughter's murder of the father figure, leading to the famous final stanza of the poem:

> There's a stake in your fat black heart
> And the villagers never liked you.
> They are dancing and stamping on you.
> They always *knew* it was you.
> Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through[296]

The 'Father' the 'Nazi' the implied *vampire* and Plath's father-complex (to use a Jungian term) in which the dominant and unfaithful Hughes makes his presence felt in the emotional margins of the poem, are laid out side-by-side

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[293] ibid. p. 45
[294] ibid. p. 45
[295] ibid p. 64
[296] Plath, S *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) p. 56

in a chain of signification (to use one from Lacan) to depict the struggle of the narrator to come 'through' the psycho-drama. One aspect identifying the ritual poem, then, is its power to *enact* such transformations. Alvarez believed that Plath wrote a proxy for action; for him her suicide is then a failure of the ritual to 'work out' its intended purpose. Returning to Lacan, we see similar phenomenon of 'playing out' via imagery—via *the chain of signification*—observed in his clinical studies; in particular, the case of Papin sisters, whose ritual murder of their employers horrified France, and about which Lacan wrote a piece, a few months after the murders, for the surrealist magazine *Minotaure* in 1933: Lacan concluded that the acts (in which the sisters gouged out the eyes of their victims) was a *non-dit*—a feeling that could not express, or *speak*, itself in any other way. Reading the ritual function in this way, symbolism in poetry becomes that which articulates that which is *unspeakable.* Through the meticulous structuring of carefully chosen images (as seen in 'Edge') something may be *summoned* and *figured* which is only available when we work with the symbolic function of language. In essence, this is the *alchemy* of psychology which Jung describes: the ability of archetype and image to capture and bring to birth something that cannot be accessed in any other way.

One more thing Alvarez tells us in this memoir of Plath is that she was insistent that these late poems were read out loud. The significance of this is that it relates poetry to the *performative* element of ritual; the notion of the poem as performance undertaken according to a strict structuring of images is, I would say, another marker what is *ritual* in poetry. The language of rituals, rites, spells and incantations always makes its appeal to the *ear*—as in religious ceremony, this type of language is *public* and designed to be spoken with a sense of authority. The latent power of the language is enacted in this

way. This brings us onto another feature which is foregrounded in poetic language more generally: that is, the use of set rhythms and rhymes which are more commonly absent (or rather less likely to *signify*) in prose. Poems which display a ritual *turn* often display.

Dylan Thomas is a good candidate for an exploration of what we might term the *oratory aspect* of ritual language. Thomas frequently assumes a voice in his poetry which is declamatory or *powerful* in some other way: the imagery of a Thomas poem is orientated around a nexus of *voice* in a way which presents us with a version of the world which is *conjured* through the power of language. We see this most clearly in the poem 'Especially When the October Wind'[297]:

> Especially when the October wind
> With frosty fingers punishes my hair,
> Caught by the crabbing sun I walk on fire
> And cast a shadow crab upon the land,
> By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds,
> Hearing the raven cough in winter sticks,
> My busy heart who shudders as she talks
> Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words.
>
> Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark
> On the horizon walking like the trees
> The wordy shapes of women, and the rows
> Of the star-gestured children in the park.
> Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,
> Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
> Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,
> Some let me make you of the water's speeches.
>
> Behind a pot of ferns the wagging clock
> Tells me the hour's word, the neural meaning
> Flies on the shafted disk, declaims the morning
> And tells the windy weather in the cock.
> Some let me make you of the meadow's signs;
> The signal grass that tells me all I know
> Breaks with the wormy winter through the eye.
> Some let me tell you of the raven's sins.

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[297] Thomas, Dylan (edited John Goodby) *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014) pp. 67-8

> Especially when the October wind
> (Some let me make you of autumnal spells,
> The spider-tongued, and the loud hill of Wales)
> With fists of turnips punishes the land,
> Some let me make you of the heartless words.
> The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry
> Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury.
> By the sea's side hear the dark-vowelled birds.

Here Thomas is explicit—in his use of phrases such as, 'some let me make you' (which moves towards becoming a refrain), 'wordy shapes of women', and 'dark-vowelled birds'—that this world is rendered in language, at all points. Thus the landscape is presented as nothing other than a function of the power of *voice.*

Another Thomas poem which I see as being particularly *ritualistic* in nature is 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night', a piece written as a response to the death of the poet's father. In many senses we can read this poem as being meant as a binding-spell against death—a linguistic ritual attempt to hold back the inevitability of his father's dying. The key ritual element here is the poem's use of *form* which is orientated towards the repetition of the 'do not go gentle…' phrase. The poem is a *villanelle*, that is it has nineteen lines and adheres to a strict verse form with two repeating rhymes and two refrains; the effect of *villanelle* is give the poem an *obsessive* feel. In the case of 'Do Not Go Gentle…' the repetitions assume a *commanding* quality which again links to the idea of poem as a ritual act designed to effect *real change*:

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
> Because their words had forked no lightning they
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
>
> Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
> Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.[298]

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[298] ibid. p. 193

So, when we consider poetry in the context of *ritual* several signature elements of poems which we might deem to be *ritualistic* become apparent. Firstly, there is something about the quality and type of images used: these tend to have culturally derived associations of power and frequently something that might be described as an *archetypal quality*. Images of this type abound throughout Thomas' writing ('the sea' is a key example) and these are fitted together in rhythmic structures which point most often to a sense of the *voice* speaking—the role of poet being analogous to the priestly or shamanic role in ritual practice. Secondly, poems which are *ritualistic* frequently make use of repetition. Repetition is important to *ritual* in its broadest sense; the highly structured receptions seen in poetry (as an amplification of elements of prosody) puts the onus on the *saying* of the words to effect ritual change and makes it clear that these are *words of power*. That is such phrases become vehicles of ritualistic power. This type of poetry finds its apotheosis in Thomas. The final element in poetry which can be said to be *ritualistic* is that it has a quality of *performance* or being *acted out*. In Plath we see this in a central figure moving through the writing in a series of *actions*; in Thomas this is more predicated upon the central figure of the poet/speaker issuing the words. In total then, the *ritual poem* seeks to identify and assemble a set of images into a fixed form which when read in sequence effect a certain experience. We might say that in its ritual function the poem then becomes a little *magical* linguistic machine—for effecting *change*, exorcising or banishing, or bringing something into being.

A Ritual Workshop

As noted above, the notion of ritual has been used widely as a therapeutic tool—most notably as an intervention to resolve *grief.* Used in this way ritual is essentially an *enactment* of letting go, moving on or simply marking a *loss.* As an example, the children's charity *Nelson's Journey* who support children through the death of a parent or caregiver, have children participate in a day in which they mark their loss and say *goodbye* through the releasing of a balloon. In this way the process of *saying goodbye* is ritually marked by the *letting* go of a physical object. Other examples of the use of ritual as enactment in grief therapy are the burning of personal effects of the lost loved one (this is used in adult therapy), putting mementoes or other images in a box which is sealed and saved, or transforming a symbol of grief (e.g. a photograph) into something positive and life-affirming (e.g. by placing flowers around the image). Indeed, *grief rituals* such as the laying of flowers are part-and-parcel of our everyday cultural practices and thus have deep roots in our collective psyche. In the case of my own mother's funeral something I found particularly affecting—as my mother had had to leave London when she became ill and moving her out of the family home was a very upsetting event for both of us—was when her coffin was brought into our parish Church and the priest said, 'here is Jean come to mass as she always did': for me, this was a powerful symbol of *homecoming* and something which marked the end of her illness as a chapter which had happened *elsewhere;* in that moment she was returned from dementia and returned *home.*

With this in mind I wanted to see how a group would work with the notion of *ritual* in a practical sense and as part of the process of writing this chapter I facilitated a day-long workshop around the theme of the *inner critic.* The aim

of this workshop (in terms of the research) was to move on from framing the therapeutic benefits of *ritual* as simple *enactment*—powerful as it might be— and also to think about how the imagery fundamental to *ritual practice* functions to give rituals their significance and transformative *power*. In particularly I was interested in Lacan's idea of the *non-dit*: the *thing* that can be spoken no other way, the thing that resists *signification* in language. My aim then was to see whether *ritual* might offer a way of expressing the *inexpressible* through a harnessing of imagery. In this planning the workshop my thinking was also informed by Jung's discussions of *archetypes* and *alchemy*: could the ritual deploy imagery such that a *transformation* of feeling and being would occur?

Fig. 2

The workshop itself took place on Saturday 20th of April 2019 at the University of East Anglia. The venue chosen was the art room in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning. The reason I chose this room is that I

wanted a space which would facilitate a sense of creative 'freedom' in the participants; the art room is reminiscent (in terms of the way it looks and smells) of a primary school classroom and in this way I hoped it would remind the participants of a time in which they were less inhibited and more willing to experiment with making art. The performance of a *personal ritual* is something that most people will feel inhibited about in prospect—I hoped the setting would have a mitigating effect on this. I recruited four participants for the day, all of whom knew each other as they had recently taken part in a four-week course where they learned Gendlin's *focusing* technique. The fact that they were familiar with *focusing* was useful in itself as they were already skilled at discriminating between and finding representations in language for feelings—what Gendlin calls *finding a handle.* This meant I did not have to spend time getting them comfortable with engaging with this kind of *inner work* on the day. As the workshop was on *the inner critic* I felt it was important that care was given to constructing a *safe space* for personal exploratory work to take place: when we consider the *inner critic* we enter the arena of a sub-personality whose fundamentally operation is to undermine us, and thus it can be strong and challenging work; to take account of this, two therapists were present on the day (myself and one of my supervisors[299]) so one of us was always available to support participants in the event of them feeling upset. In the event, this was not necessary and the group—possibly as a consequence of them working together before—supported each other in negotiating more difficult aspects of *feeling.* Although the group were familiar with doing *inner work*, I thought they might have less experience of working with images in a *poetic* way; to address this, I structured the day into a series of image-focussed exercises which culminated with the making of a

[299] Dr. Judy Moore

ritual in the afternoon. The idea was that images would be 'collected' throughout the day and thus be available for inclusion in the eventual ritual— in this way no one would start putting their ritual together with a *blank page.* It is also worth noting here that art materials and tangible images were made available to participants throughout the day: in the form of paint, masks, stickers, feathers and coloured papers, plastic figurines (connoting archetypes) and a set of Jungian archetype cards. Further image-collection took place over lunch when participants were asked to walk around the *Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art* which was very handily near the art room. Many of the objects housed here have *ritual significance*—such as masks and goddess figures; although now stripped of their cultural context in favour of their status as *art*, I nevertheless hoped that viewing them would stimulate further thinking about *what ritual images are* and what they can convey.

One of the early exercises in the morning was about identifying and connecting with *images of personal power*: my thinking here was that these would be a useful in developing a ritual for *tackling* the inner critic later in the day. This exercise elicited a variety of responses. One participant connected with a 'global' image of self-strength linked to nature and natural forces—in particular *the sea,* with very extant *archetypal* connotations (fig. 3):

Fig. 3
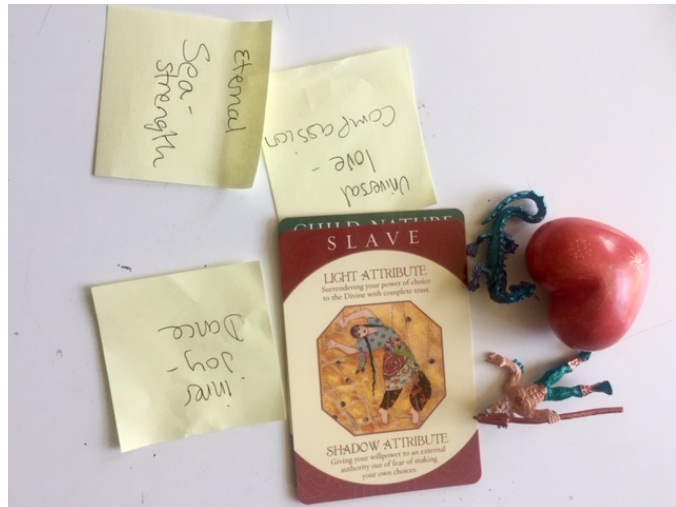
This participant chose the *child of nature* (hidden here) along with *the slave* (for its picture), a stone heart (symbolising 'universal love and compassion') and figures of Poseidon and The Kraken (representing 'eternal sea strength'). In this configuration the images present a powerful *symbolic* sense of rootedness in a sense of the *eternal* and *global* seen as running through *self*.

Another participant said that he could not summon any *personal* feeling of connectedness to an image, so opted instead for choosing 'standard' masculine images of power: the Minotaur ('warrior energy') (fig. 3), the Judge and the King (fig. 2).

Fig. 4
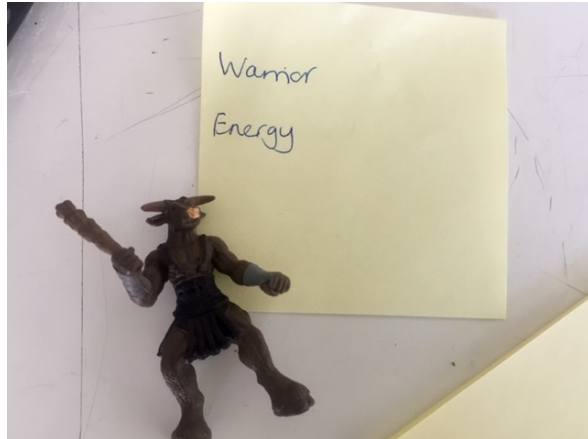
While these images were not 'personal', nevertheless they did become *significant* at an individual level and were drawn upon by this participant in the construction of his ritual—as I discuss below.

For the second extended exercise of the morning, which was again a preparation for *ritual*, participants were asked to 'get in touch with' their inner critic—to listen to the *messages* the critic relays. Once this was achieved participants were put in pairs to work with this material. The following instructions were given:

1. Take the *stance* of your critic. Stand in a way which embodies how your critic *feels* to you.
2. **Speak** the words your critic says to you. Your partner will write these down.
3. **Find** an image to represent yourself. Surround this with your images of power.
4. **As** your partner reads the messages from your critic back to you, answer them drawing on this feeling of power.
5. **Swap** roles and repeat.

The aim of this exercise was to *make the critic visible*. One participant noticed how many messages her critic sent her—what was written down by her

partner looked like a litany—and this was so marked that there was not time to read the full list. Another began the task of answering the critic back with a stance which looked uncertain (eyes averted, body half turned away) which quickly changed to something much more *powerful* (head up, shoulders back, feet firmly planted) once she began using her *images of power* to inform her answers; what this indicated to me (and I checked this out with her and her partner) was a qualitative shift in *confidence* in facing down the critical voice.

The morning finished with participants going to the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts to 'collect' more images. The most notable of these were a 'bull's head' and the face of a woman taken from a Francis Bacon painting—both of which were transformed into masks (pictures are included in discussion of *ritual* 1, below) used in the ritual in the afternoon.

I asked the participants to work in pairs to prepare and perform the ritual itself. I thought this would likely decrease the 'embarrassment factor' of working in this unfamiliar way. Before beginning, we talked through the process and then each participant was given a list of 'questions to think about' to inform the planning process:

1. How do I want to feel when I have finished this ritual?
2. What do I want this ritual to achieve? (e.g. to comfort/get rid of/transform the critic)
3. What images will I use to symbolise my inner critic?
4. What images will I use to symbolise the transformation I want to happen?
5. Do I want to make/use any props or other symbolic objects?
6. What movements or gestures do I want to make?
7. What words to I want to say/have said to me?
8. How will the ritual end?
9. Is there anything else I want to include in this ritual?

The instruction given was that both participants' answers to these questions should be represented in a single, composite ritual. Participants were given 90 minutes to plan. Participants' notes are included below.

Ritual 1 (W. and X.)— The stated aim for this ritual was, 'to comfort the inner critic…to turn the inner critic into a friend'. The ritual began with the laying-out of two masks on a table to represent *the critic* of each participant:

   (W)   (X)

Other items are laid out; an *archetype* card to represent *self*, and images of 'oppression' which each wants to be rid of:

(W)

(X)

X. and Y.:   Do you have a face?

[Both done a mask of *the critic*. W. puts on *the harsh white face* and X. *the bull*.]

X.: I am here.

Y.: You shouldn't be. Nobody wants to hear you speak, you're making a fool of yourself.

Y.: I am here.
X.: You shouldn't be. You disgust me. Nobody likes you.

X.: I have a heart big enough to hold you and your criticisms. I have the sea and I am part of the human race. I am connected and I am part of you as you are part of me.

Y.: [Swaying] I can dance to my own rhythms. I can dance, I can dance with you. I know you are sad and scared. Dance with me.

Then, rhythmic speech invoking a sense of each participant's *personal power*:
W.: *Inside of me I have the sea and everything in it.*
    I throw away the images that weigh me down.

[one by one, W. picks up images representing that which she wants to rid herself of and throws them aside]

X.: *Inside of me I have the joy and the rhythm.*
    I throw away the images that weigh me down.

[X. similarly throws her images aside]

X.: You shouldn't be here
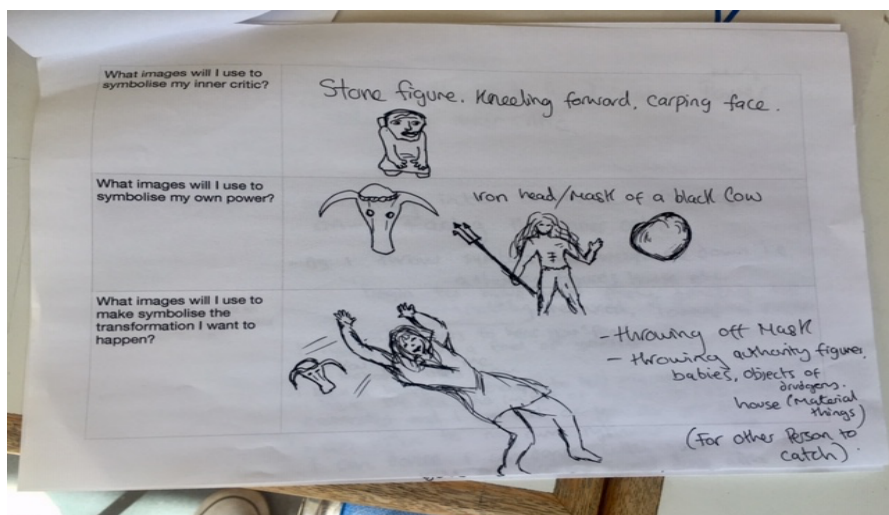*W.: I am here*
W.: You shouldn't be here
Y.: I am here
[these words are repeated, at first alternating, and then *I am here* is spoken over the words of the *critic* drowning them out]
W. and X.: [taking off masks and throwing them down, speaking with increasing volume] I am here, I am here, I am here, I am here, I am here…
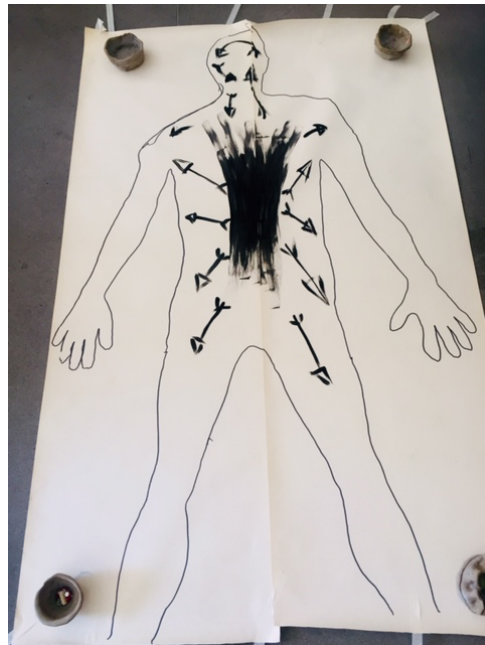[End of ritual]

Fig. 5 (Planning notes for ritual 1)

Ritual 2 (Y. and Z.)—The stated aim of this ritual was to *effect a transformation* of *the critic*. The ritual began with the two participants standing above a pre-prepared outline of a human figure which was laid out on the floor (fig. 6):

Fig. 6

The black marks on the figure were made to symbolise the 'negative messages' of *the critic*, invading the *self*. Y. and Z. *crown* each other with paper crowns—which is done with a ceremonial air—and Y. drapes herself

in a garland of fabric flowers. Then both don masks, all items shown below

(figs. 7, 8 and 9):

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Y. [Stamping violently and shaking fists at the figure on the floor]
Aaarrgghh!!
Y. and Z.: We do not accept these criticisms. These words deflate us. You
are the voice of past

ghosts. I am worthy and I am liked. I have energy and potential. We want to live and love.
We ask you to recognise our strengths and what we've achieved.

Both participants then knelt down, one at either side of the figure, and proceeded to paint over the figure—with stylised motions—images of flowers and hearts, in bright colours contrasting and overlaying the black (fig. 10)

Fig. 10

The ritual closed with each participant laying one hand on top of the hand of the figure, in a gesture of connection and reconciliation.

What was notably about the performance of both rituals was how affecting they were to witness. Given the task was unfamiliar and somewhat challenging (all participants reported feeling self-conscious at the prospect) the level of genuine emotion evoked in both participants and audience was

very marked; it was as if *going through the motions* of the ritual was enough to generate deeper levels of feeling. The participant (Z.) who reported in the morning that he had chosen *standard* images of masculine power because he could not connect with any that were more *personal* nevertheless utilised these images—the image of the *crown* being derived from the image of the *king*—effectively in the final ritual. This speaks to the ability of images to carry the power of *connotation* in the absence of a personal context. Giving feedback after the session, Z. said,

> The image of the king helped me to deal better with the inner critic, in that the authority a king assumes is like the authority I should assume over how I feel and how I think, rather than letting my thoughts be subject to the words of the inner critic. I should be in a position of authority over the inner critic, so that I can confidently interact with it (rather than feeling subordinate to it). Making a crown for the afternoon's ritual echoed this…
> I was surprised that I felt the act of ritual had a greater positive impact on me than simply reading the words silently and thinking about how sensible the words were. I didn't expect the physical act to be that much more effective than reading.

There is something about the image of power being *extant*—in the physical form of the *crown*—which brings the power it connotes into *being*; similarly, the *enactment* in which Z. assumes the power of the *king* (putting on the *crown*) brings forth a sense of empowerment which is surprising to Z. In terms of Lacan, the king/crown is are *signifiers*—part of a *chain of signification* which intersects with the ideation of *power*; for Jung, they are manifestations of an *archetype*: both versions, however, are centred upon something *other* or *larger* being brought into being via the agency of the image—an agency which is accessed via ritual by Z.

Y. made the following comments about her experience of the workshop:

> I found it very helpful to work with archetypal images and objects symbolising myself in the moment on the day, my inner critic, and my inner power. More than just symbolising my sense of my inner power, I

found that focussing on the object helped me to stay in touch with the qualities of inner strength and power. I found it very interesting that whilst embodying these qualities (helped by the images/objects) the accusations from my inner critic sounded quite ridiculous and completely untrue. I have kept hold of this and am incorporating it within my work as a counsellor.

[In particular] the three-headed beast was a powerful symbol for my inner critic because it accurately symbolised the sense of my critic as being quite harsh and attacking me relentlessly.

The phoenix was a powerful symbol for my inner power / strength. It connected in a felt sense way to something real inside me. I found that in one of the exercises where my partner read out the accusations of my critic, if I kept this connection (by looking at the phoenix), I could maintain my felt sense of inner strength […] I feel that having been introduced to the idea I could benefit further from it by doing it privately in my own space and time, and on my own or with a therapist, where I can make it more personal.

What comes across very clearly from the comments of both Y. and Z. is that a fundamental part of ritual is—as I suggested above—the *identification of images in which power resides.* In the therapeutic context (the *intrapersonal*) this remains as much the case as it does in ritual performed for social (*interpersonal*) reasons. Again, the implication is that there is something *extant* in symbols which—whilst we may not be able to fully articulate what this is or what this means for us—nevertheless can be accessed and harnessed in service of the *act.* In this the function of the symbol in ritual echoes Lacan's idea of the *non-dit*—that *thing* than cannot be *spoken* in any other way.

In terms of the function of ritual in this context, there are a number of things common to both: both rituals confer *agency*—in *ritual 1* this is most noticeable in the repetition (with increasing volume) of the phrase *I am here*, which moves from being attached to the voice of the *critic* to the voice of the participant engaging in *ritual;* we also see clear evidence of the *transformative* aspect of ritual—particularly in *ritual 2* with the painting of colourful hearts and flowers over the blackness located in the outlined figure; we also see how language itself plays its part, through the *repetition* of key

phrases in a mannered and ceremonial way. Through such a symbolic *playing out* of the interaction with the *inner critic* in both rituals some form of *resolution* is achieved.

Discussion

In a recent television drama, when a crisis situation had become untenable and the protagonists seemed to be facing certain death, one of the characters described their plight as, 'a *Hail Mary* moment'—indicating that there was nothing to do but to fall back on the *ritual* of prayer. As any Catholic—practising or lapsed—will recognise, what is being invoked here is the implicit power which resides in the recitation of a fixed form of words, which has little to do with what might be described as *practical action* and nothing to do with the *communicative* function of language: rather, the *Hail Mary* is an appeal to the *magic* of words. Whether we construe that *magic* as an invocation for divine intervention or not is a matter of *faith*; either way the point nevertheless stands that what is *significant* about the *Hail Mary* is that it is a fixed form of words which is designed to be *repeated* (as seen in *The Rosary* and *The Angelus* prayer) with the recitation being unrelated to the speaker or the context, with the focus being on a simple *saying* of the words themselves. As an example the split between prayer and setting, *The Angelus* is still broadcast in Ireland before the six o'clock news; in this context it has interpersonal *ritual* function as a kind of social reminder of Catholic identity which is woven into the fabric of *Irishness.* For those unfamiliar with the *Hail Mary,* the prayer goes as follows:

> Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee.
> Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
> Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen.

In Catholicism the *Hail Mary* is the ubiquitous prayer and when it is said, either out loud or in the head, the words have a curious *rolling* quality, a kind of *circularity* which evokes nothing but the sense of *ritual.* Its role in religion is *performative*: it exists to be *said* rather than reflected upon—in terms of Austin's model[300] the *Hail Mary* pushes the idea of the *illocutionary act* to its limit.

So, what has this to do with the material considered in this chapter? What light does the phenomenon of the *Hail Mary* cast upon the relationship of language—of poetry—to *ritual*? Central to the connection is that the power of the prayer is predicated upon its repetition: specifically the repetition of the prayer as a set form of words with a familiar cadence. It is interesting to note that the *Hail Mary* is also frequently said or sung in Latin (*Ave Maria*) which both heightens its ritual function without significantly changing the way in which the *voice* interacts with the *text*; that is, the fixity of the utterance and cadence remains that which is *foregrounded* above meaning in both the English and Latin forms. One might go further to assert that the *fixed repetition* is in fact the *meaning* of the prayer. When we compare this to Dylan Thomas' use of the villanelle, discussed above, we see a similar *appeal to the power of language* being made through repetition. When W. and X. repeat the words *I am here* in ritual 1. we see a parallel process at work. Repetition, then, becomes an appeal to the latent power of language in situations where the individual speaker finds themselves to be *powerless*—as Thomas is in the face of the death of his father.

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[300] Austin, J. L. *How to do Things with Words.* Urmson, J. O., Sbisà, Marina. (2nd ed.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975)

When we consider poetry as a form of *ritual* certain markers emerge which are a cue indicating that language has shifted from its *practical* function as a conduit for communication or *expression* to a place in which its role becomes both *evocative* in *in-vocative* of a deeper and more *mysterious* type of signification. In the case of the *Hail Mary* this place is the arena of *faith*; for poetry we might describe this shift as an expression of faith in the power of language itself.

Although this chapter has identified certain 'markers' by which a *ritualistic* poem may be identified, in a sense all poetry may be read as *ritual*: that is, all language which is ascribed to be 'poetic' involves the severing of word/image from a simple communicative function; and when we consider prosody— which is signal in the reading of poetic texts—the role of repeated forms (in rhyme, rhythm, alliteration) assumes the foreground. When we read or write poetry what is in our eye-line is not the simple communicative function which says *this or that happened and it looked like this*—poetry is not *descriptive* in this way: instead what we attend to is the weight of association that language carries—the word-to-word connections, and the cultural and personal *networks* in which images reside. In this way when we use the word 'crown' we conjure a 'king'—or *kingliness*, or *power*, or whatever else comes from that associative process. Poetry *foregrounds* this, however, all language has the potential to assume the *ritual function*.

When we engage explicitly with notions of ritual in writing the associative function of language is not only foregrounded, it is let loose: now language becomes capable of performing the *transformative act* which is central to notions of ritual practice. For example, when we *say* a black line is a *flower* it becomes so: that which is *dark* (heavy, threatening, death-oriented)

becomes changed to that which is *bright* (vivid, beautiful, life-orientated) and self-affirming. Or, when Thomas says 'death shall have no dominion' an article of faith is wielded in the face of death itself, and the experienced is transformed for the speaker who has the newly-found power of *agency* conferred through a mechanism of assertion. To use Austin's terminology, such are *illocutionary acts* characterised as *assertions:* particular types of declaratives which bring some *thing* (or state) into being. Repetition of declaration is the *act* of faith in language to stand firm against that which threatens: metaphor (and metonymy) is the *arena* in which transformations occur, but it is in repetition that we find the mechanism.

In chapter two of this thesis one of the poets I interviewed said that one way to see her poetry is as *wunderkammer*: small boxes in which collections of images are held together in relationships of dynamic tension. We can also regard the *ritual function* of poetry in this way—as systematised relationships between images which become conduits for *power* which extends beyond their extant form in text. *How* such texts function is, however, somewhat arcane: ritual poetry makes an appeal to latent qualities which reside within images—often intuited rather than arrived at through a more conscious decision-making process—and *repeats* these in fixed forms. We see this in both the poetry discussed above and in the work of the participants engaging in therapeutic ritual-ritual-making in the workshop. The poem becomes an act of faith, an appeal to something we feel the presence of but do not fully discern. Where this takes us is to the *edge* of language where the psyche navigates the fabric of words by *feel* alone. This is the frontier-country mentioned in the introduction to this chapter.

As a postscript, when I was in the process of completing this chapter I received a comment from X. reflecting on her experience of the day.

> I was only able to vocalise [the words] of my inner critic until asked to explore…the images in The Sainsbury Centre exhibition, and there she was, depicted in a Francis Bacon painting (fig. 11)

Fig. 11[301]

What this comment captures is the sense of working intuitively with ritual—of *recognising* that which speaks our experience rather than constructing a version of experience through more conscious means: the image therefore is not an process of approximating that which one feels, but rather one of identifying *what is there* and harnessing that content. What is particularly striking about X.'s comment is the powerful quality such an identification brings with it—at the felt level—conveyed in the phrase *there she was.* In terms of Lacan, identifying such an image is the apprehension of the *non-dit*: the authentic experience of the inner critic which cannot be articulated in any other way.

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[301] Bacon, Francis (1956) *Lisa* in the collection of *The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts*, University of East Anglia

Next Steps

In the next and final chapter of this thesis I will explore how all of these ways of looking at and working with images and words come together in a composite discussion of *poetry as therapy.* As a result of the research conducted for this thesis—and I am thinking of both the textual enquiry and interviews and workshops included here—what the final chapter will put forward is the key idea, which is implicit throughout the scope of the entire thesis, that language does not have a transparent relationship of 'representation' with regard to the 'real world': as poststructuralism asserts, there is no direct linear relation between 'sign' (word/image) and 'referent' (experience/object-in-the-world) but rather language is an active force which creates or transforms reality. With regard to the therapeutic value of poetry this last point is key because it carries with it the potential for therapeutic *change.*

Conclusion

Writing at the Edge: what are the key therapeutic elements of poetry?

There is no conclusion to be found in writing[302]

—Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*

"Telemachus,'
the bright-eyed goddess Athena reassured him,
"some of the words you'll find within yourself,
the rest some power will inspire you to say.
You least of all—I know—
were born and reared without the gods' good will."[303]

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

In this thesis I have endeavored to put forward an argument that says language is something much more than a vehicle for the expression of experiences but is rather a medium or *fabric*—with a *being* which extends beyond the limits of our own *beingness*—with which we engage in a dialectical process of working towards a *sense of expression* at the individual level. The significance of this distinction between language as a *vehicle* and language as a *fabric* is that when we see language as having a substance of its own— which we interact with in expressing ourselves—then it becomes not only a *carrier* of our individual and context-specific *meaning,* but rather becomes a *contributor* to the evolution of what is *meant* (or signified) at the individual level, as it carries along with it a weight of cultural associations and other contexts which extend beyond the individual speaking, and these are brought to *bear.* The effect on individual narratives—and this is essentially what might be said to be the *therapeutic* effect—is that expression now becomes

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[302] Cixous, Hélène *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 156
[303] Homer *The Odyssey* (trans. Robert Fagles) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) p. 108

an *exploration* of meaning at the level of language which offers new possibilities for thinking about experience. What I mean when I say this is that in regarding language as a *fabric*, in the process of expressing *ourselves* multiple contexts and opportunities for *making meaning* come into play.

Consonant with the poststructuralist model, in the process of working with language in expressive writing (this is a process that occurs whenever we work with language but here I am focussing on the writing of poetry) we are brought into an encounter with the structure of language itself which is formed of an infinite and infinitely malleable set of meaning-relationships; yet it is a structure without a fixed centre and is in this way dynamic—to use Derrida's term it is in a perpetual state of *play*. Jacques Lacan describes language as a *fabric of signification* in which, paradoxically, signification is always *deferred*: that is our words—try as we might—can never point to *objects* but rather point only to other *words*. So, the quest for *expression* at the individual level (defining *expression* as the representation of experience in language) is always ongoing; expression is always a *process* and never a *destination*—a place we can reach and say *now I have said what it is*. Part of the problem of expression is that, as Lacan points out, what is *external* to language—what we might call the *real world*—cannot have a presence for us outside of what is *symbolic*, or within language. In a psychological sense we are creatures of language: complex mental systems of symbolisation— connected to the shared cultural capital of language—which form individual identities and *minds*. We are highly developed meaning-making machines and it is this aspect of being human which creates a difficulty with being-in-the-world—that is, being outside of the fabric of language or what Lacan calls this *chain of signification.*

However, we should not read this being-in-language as a *limit* in a psychological sense; rather we should see our relationship with the fabric of language as one which is replete with *opportunity*. If we take Lacan's position and accept that what we know and experience of the world is essentially made of (or at least mediated by to a degree where experientially it is the same thing) language, then it is in language itself where lies the opportunity to re-make experience and by a process of extension re-fashion the world itself; if the world which we experience is nothing more than what is *symbolised* then symbolisation takes on a key role. Of course, I am not suggesting that there is no *real world* or that events external to our psyche do not *happen*; rather what I am saying is that what is important to our experience in a psychological sense is the *meaning* that we ascribe to what is *a priori* a random set of happenings, because this is the level at which we are experientially *conscious.* This is the work of therapy: making sense of experience and representing experiences in forms we can *live with.* And we do this by making use of our *language.* So, given that we cannot see *beyond* language what we meet at the outmost edges of our consciousness is language itself—the fabric of signification within which our consciousness resides. Taking this view of language—as an infinitely malleable structure which extends beyond ourselves in every direction—language now becomes a *resource*: a place in which the meaning/s of experience can be explored, experienced and refashioned. This process is what this thesis has attempted to explore.

Why Poetry?

In this thesis I make a case for poetic language as having a pivotal role in the therapeutic process because poetry exhibits a type of expression in which the *representation* of that which is *real* (our experience of the world outside of language) both integrates and foregrounds the idea that the articulation of

what is *true* is best achieved through constructions which are *fictive*: through metaphor and metonymy we can achieve deeper and paradoxically *more true* renderings of experience by the setting-up of symbols which can stand in for *things*. With regard to notions of *truth* we might term this tendency as taking *poetic license*—of which the poet and literary scholar Anne Cluysenaar says this:

> As Roman Jakobson put it, "the function of poetry is to point out that the sign is not identical to its referent." On this view, the kind of "licence" we ought to grant should cover neither technical incompetence nor novelty for its own sake, but only deviations which bring about a keener sense of inner and outer realities [emphasis added][304]

While prose may let us *get away with* thinking of language as a literal representation of that which is in-the-world, poetry makes it evident that all representation is *figurative*—that is, that there is a fundamental schism between all signs and their referents.

So, why is this important, in a psychological sense—and how can writing poetry influence what we experience of the world? The answer in part is that when we use language in a way which is cognisant of its figurative nature— that is when we engage in writing poetry—we become more aware of and open *to* what the fabric of language itself can contribute to an understanding of ourselves and the world.

The key point in understanding why poetry makes a crucial contribution to the therapeutic process is to understand that when we use language in its poetic form we are acknowledging the essential *simultaneity* of meaning/s

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[304] Cluysenaar, A. in (Ed. Roger Fowler) *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (2nd Ed.) (London: Routledge, 1987) p. 193

that poetry allows: poetry allows us to bring together lots of contexts and meanings simultaneously—in a way that prose does not—because poetry defies the logical, linear progression which ties expression to a single idea (or at least, one idea at a time) which is fundamental to prose. Poetry exhibits the *play* in the structure of language-meanings which allows us to explore experiences with a sense of freedom—to be *intrepid* in defying logic; conversely, prose is a kind of Victorian father which encourages the process of our own repression.

What is *significant* for therapy about poetry that is this quality of *simultaneity*: that all of these meanings are present together, for it is this very characteristic that allows us in poetry to explore much more of our experiencing than we can through the logical progression of prose in which thoughts progress logically to end-points. In contrast, poetry is always *dynamic.* The final thing to say on this point is that *it is the things that we cannot piece together by logic—by prose acts—are those things that in therapy we need to piece together.* To use an analogy, we might think of prose as a series of mirrors placed in a row—we can look in each in turn and gather some information in this way; by contrast, we can see poetry as a circle of mirrors surrounding you—such an arrangement gives you an infinite array of meaning. For this reason poetry is a much more *appropriate* tool for looking at our experience and for looking at meaning than is prose.

So, whilst taking Cixous' point that all conclusions are only temporary—pauses as opposed to stopping-places—one conclusion I have drawn as a result of conducting this research is that the construction of meaning is a dialectic between language and the individual speaking or writing; the

implications of seeing expression as a dialectic between two *forms* which both have *substance* (these forms being the speaking subject and language itself) is that language does itself contribute to the process of representing and making meaning of experiences simultaneous with the individual acting upon language in order to find *expression.* That is, what is ultimately *expressed* is a combination of what both speaker and language itself bring to the table. This is a step on—psychologically speaking—from simply saying *what is* or what we think *is.* Such a view makes all meanings liminal and as such our view of things remains dynamic—constantly in a state of coming-into-being. This is psychologically significant because approaching *expression* in such a way means we are continually open to the flows of experiencing which occur at the edges of consciousness—when meanings are not fixed, we are open to the possibility of *change.* Being open to change is one of the fundaments of therapy.

We find a concrete example of what taking a poetic view of language brings to the table in the work of Emily Dickinson—discussed in chapter four of this thesis in the context of considering *the image* in writing. Dickinson is considered to be an opaque and coded commentator of her own experiences with much criticism of her work being oriented towards identifying the *real* events underlying her writing. I read Dickinson slightly differently in this regard: rather than seeing the difficulty of tying her poetry down to a concrete set of *referents* instead I see her as working with language to evolve images which run *parallel* (as opposed to a type of vertical integration) with experiences; when she speaks of *Autumn* as being bloody both the visual effect of red leaves on the trees and the allusion to sexual abuse, trauma, femininity—the whole chain of signification—remains present or active in her work. In this way the *image* becomes something more than a *metaphor*:

rather it becomes an intuiting of what Cixous calls an *affinity* between language and experiencing—not a yoking of *word* to *thing.* The result is writing which may be said to be *therapeutic* in that it is constantly in motion—it is *set around* that which she wishes to express, without ever fully tying either *that thing* or language itself down. Writing becomes a process of enquiry.

The Therapeutic Significance of Taking a Poetic Approach

Stepping aside for a moment from what has been an essentially theoretical discourse on the significance of poetry for therapy, what then is the tangible evidence for poetry turned up by the research conducted for this thesis? In the case of the student writing groups included in chapter one the main *outcome* of writing for these participants was that in exploring different ways of representing experiences in language—through opening themselves to an explicitly *figurative* way of thinking about self-expression—they were able to find new ways of representing experience which in turn wrought new ways of thinking about the things that had happened to them. A case in point is the participant who *re-wrote* her response to her brother's suicide: she first identified her feelings of being shut-off and guarded from her grief with a wall of anger in the image of herself as being heavily armoured; this view was gradually ameliorated—figuratively *deconstructed*—through a series of poems in which that armour was removed and the image of self became *softened*, culminating in a final image in which she figured herself as having *soft* angel wings on her back where the *hard* armour had once been, allowing her to tenderly bear her brother on her back. In the group talk following this process of writing this participant indicated that as a result of developing her *figurative* representation of her experiences her *actual* feelings about the suicide (and her brother) had undergone *change.*

As noted above, poetry foregrounds the notion of language as a fabric of images—a lateral chain of signifiers as opposed to a set of vertical references to referents—and has further significance for therapy which is apparent in the group context. One of the things I noticed that groups do in practice with language—through talk—is to explore and evolve the representation of individual experiences: this was seen in both the student therapy groups and the counsellor group, the tendency for one participant to express an experience using a certain set of words/images—only to find that form of expression begin to evolve and develop in response to someone else *picking it up* and setting it in regard to their own experience, *giving it back* to the original speaker with certain changes in meaning wrought, for the original speaker to pick it up again and change it some more—and in this way *move on.* Using language figuratively in the group context sets a chain of language operations in motion in which individual actors *throwing images into* the group gradually refine their modes of expression and simultaneously find their awareness of or relation to experiences *change*. This is achieved through the negotiation of the *fabric* that occurs via a process of *trying out* and *evaluating* linguistic representations of experience through the to-and-fro of talk. Such an evolution is made possible by taking a figurative (poetic) view of language in which the reference-referent dyad is not fixed, but rather tentative and therefore mutable. It is in this quality of mutability that the potential for therapy—for psychological change—resides.

When we take a view of language—which is fundamentally a *poetic* one—that expression is not a uncomplicated process of *matching* an internal experience or thought with a word or a series of words, but rather that

expression is fundamentally a *negotiation* between what is felt and what is contained in terms of meaning within language itself (the process of intuiting *affinities* between experience and language) then becomes a dynamic one *on both sides*: language responds to the *self* as the self responds to language; this is the *dialectic* of therapy. Further, when we assimilate the idea that nothing *may signify* outside of signification itself (the Lacanian view) then we see that all discourse (including expressive writing as a form of discourse) has nowhere—outside of language—to *get back to*; in these circumstances we use language for the potential it offers to *move us on.* We work *with* language and not *through* it. This is the essential quality of language that poetry foregrounds. The corollary is that we come to see that experience is also not *fixed* but rather is available and amenable to the possibility of therapeutic change.

We see a concrete example of the process of working in dialectic with writing at an individual level in chapter five of this thesis—in the discussion of the participant using *poetic inquiry* as a therapeutic approach. In this approach the participant worked with transcripts of therapy sessions (in which he was the client) in which he had spoken about difficult memories of childhood; these were then 'cut-up' and developed into poems. Essentially what we see here is how language itself—through the process of working with an extant narrative that is the transcription—can further the process of making meaning of story itself, which is in turn more deeply *therapeutic.* The participant confirmed that the process of writing the poems allowed him to get to a much deeper understanding of his lived experiences than did the therapy sessions alone.

Exploring *text*—which can mean thinking about either the words we say or those we write—allows for those *other* meanings which are located in the fabric of language to be heard. We begin to make *connection* not only between elements of our own 'story' but with all of the potential *other* meanings of the words we use to express it; thus the process of constructing a therapeutic discourse becomes *alive* and open to new insights. In the section included in chapter four in which the two therapists discuss their experience of clients using metaphors in sessions a sense of how this kind of *to-and-fro* with language in working towards the expression of experiences can lead to very rich therapeutic outcomes. As a side-note (and I pick this point up again below) I think that there is further work to do on looking at the way clients work with imagery as it seems to me to speak to something which is fundamental to the therapeutic process as a whole.

Another way of looking at language is to see it as a *colony* of meanings—using the analogy of a colony of bees. While the colony is composed of individual actors—and we might regard words in this way—what is significant is the whole, which signifies because it is the *whole* which we experience in terms of our interactions it: it is the *colony* which acts in the production of honey or the structure of the hive in the same way that it is the interrelations of individual words to language which is significant in terms of its effect at the individual level. Thus, poetry is significant to therapy because it focusses us on the whole—on the *colony* of language which is represented by the complex sets of interrelations between words which form language as a *fabric* of meaning. This is because poetry foregrounds the quality of *simultaneity* meaning which is discussed above. I believe that this is the idea William Blake is driving towards when he writes of seeing, 'the world in a

grain of sand'; he is essentially speaking of the fundamental connection of the individual to the whole and how this signifies in poetry. Blake is pertinent to the discussion of poetry and its value in therapy for other reasons, too: in his writing Blake typically seeks a connection to the *divine* through a harnessing of what is *arcane* in language. More simply put, Blake uses images which largely remain *unexplained* and *unexplainable* in a prosaic way. The implication of this approach is to once again foreground the sense that language has an existence which extends beyond any individual usage; it suggests that language has an interiority which remains mysterious in the face of any individual using it for the purpose of self-expression. This again has important implications for therapy, which I largely discuss in chapter six of this thesis.

One implication is that the individual can *find* images in language which confer a sense of power—individuals can *connect* to a power residing in language via certain images: for example in the discussion of the workshop on ritual presented in chapter six we see one participant—who has hitherto struggled to find any images to represent his experience—finding a sense of personal power from making the image of a crown and putting it on his head. In this simple act he connects in an imagistic way with a *feeling* of dignity, of *kingliness*—with all of the meanings associated with the image of the crown which exist in language, and reports feeling an enhanced sense of confidence as a therapeutic outcome. This is an example of him *harnessing* that which is within language. In the same chapter I discuss how this phenomenon can be extended (taken to the limit) when we consider the ritual function of language which ascribes *literal* as opposed to figurative power to language itself: in ritual language is believed to have a tangible power to effect change. A key example of this is *transubstantiation*: the Catholic belief that through the

saying of a form of words ordinary bread *actually* becomes the flesh of Jesus Christ. Such an example—and there are many similar examples evident across cultures and across time—bears testimony to the power we feel *might* reside in the *word*.

Writing at the Edge

One of the participants I interviewed for chapter two of this thesis has a line in his poetry which says *identity is not in the head*. What is meant by this statement is the implication that any sense of personal identity is only possible through and engagement with the *whole* which is represented by language; that is without language we remain *unspoken*. Wallace Stevens makes the same point, I think, when he says that *there are no ideas but in things*: without language, thoughts remain formless; through language thoughts take on form. Language, then, might be regarded as an *edge*—or perhaps a membrane— which exists between the individual and the world. Further, language marks the edge between what is *known* and what is *unknown*—because what lies beyond language in either direction is fundamentally *unknowable* as it is without form. Thus in the interaction with language we bring the world and ourselves into a state of being. Lacan has said that we do not *speak* but rather we are spoken. In some senses this is true in that when we speak what speaks through us is the fabric of signification which is language which extends far beyond any individual *I*. However, for me there is something a little over-deterministic about Lacan's formulation which privileges the cultural meanings of language: instead I would emphasise that we—as individuals— *are spoken* despite the fact that we need to use a shared (non-individualised) resource to attain an individual sense of articulation. Beyond the determinism of language there is in this process a profound sense of *agency* and something which is deeply therapeutic. In his model of the interlocking rings (shown in

chapter six) Lacan himself sees the *imaginary* and the *symbolic* as being indivisible from what is *real*; that is to say, even though we cannot experience what is real without the intercession of language this acknowledgement does not mean that what is real can be erased.

What language is then is a resource or medium or an arena where we can have encounters with our experience and construct versions of what we might describe as *selves.* Language is the edge of what we are conscious of and also what is unknown. We can explore our experiences through language, and we can use it as a material with which to *scry*. If we define psychotherapy as a process of working towards personal insights via the medium of language then viewed in this way—as a fabric—it is easy to see why language assumes such a central role in the endeavour for psychological health.

Further Research

As indicated above, one area for future research implied by the findings of this thesis is that there is more work to be done on looking at the specifics of how individuals use imagery—metaphor, metonymy, motif—to achieve therapeutic outcomes. Specifically I am interested in undertaking further work with therapeutic writing groups. One piece of research I am considering conducting in the next academic year is a collaboration with a colleague who works in speech and language therapy with clients who have intellectual disabilities. In her work with these clients she has noted a tendency to approach language with a sense of enjoyment and playfulness—which she feels could be harnessed and enhanced through introducing expressive writing to sessions. I am keen to do this as I think it would give insight into the processes through which self-expressive figurative writing evolves.

A second project—which I am undertaking with my supervisor Dr Judy Moore—is already underway. We have recruited six postgraduate research students to take part in a four-week enquiry into whether teaching Gendlin's *focusing* in the context of looking at works of art and taking part in arts-based activities enhances the experience of *focusing*. We will be using an instrument—the *focusing manner scale*—developed in Japan as the basis for evaluating this intervention. We hope to produce a short paper intended for publication in the coming academic year.

Finally, I have an as yet very sketchy and as yet unformulated interest in looking at a more extreme form of individual identification with an image which is exhibited by people diagnosed with the psychiatric condition *objectum sexuality* (OS)—which causes them to fall in love with and even to marry physical objects. I became interested in this aspect of image-identification recently, as a result of watching the documentary film *Only Human* (2018). In the film a group of women diagnosed with OS discuss what it is that attracted them to their particularly object—for one woman it is a fairground ride, for another the Eiffel Tower—and what the qualities they perceive the object to contain or personify *give them* as a result of them having established a relationship with it. Although this might seem something of a departure and as having a rather tangential relationship with the research conducted for this thesis, I feel there is an connection between the relationship which is made between individual and image as a mode of self-expression through writing and what is seen in OS—with the latter being a version of such and identification which is realised at a more *literal* level. This would be an ambitious undertaking as much work would need to be done to gain access to these women and their experiences—ideally I would like to conduct interviews; nevertheless I think that the phenomenon of OS in itself speaks to

something in the relationship between self and language and is in this sense an interesting direction for further research. Indeed, it could be said that this psychological phenomenon speaks to what Eliot has called the *objective correlative*—possibly we could regard this as a playing-out of the *objective correlative* in a tangible way.

Concluding Thoughts

In the introduction to this thesis I said that I embarked upon the project as an act of personal therapy undertaken in response to the death of my mother. As I am writing these concluding remarks I am reflecting on the fact that today— the 28th of May 2019—would have been my mother's eighty-seventh birthday. I have also just realised that it is almost twenty years to the day that I completed my first PhD and got married to my husband, Liam. These coincidences seem to have *significance.*

What presents itself now is the question, in what ways has writing this thesis been a therapeutic act? At face value—these concluding remarks aside—what I have presented here has been a very *academic* and somewhat abstract exercise which is quite far removed from any sense of my personal experience or process. However, in engaging with the project what I have achieved at a *personal* level is to reconnect in a deep way with something which I have always turned to for a sense of *wellness*: that is, I have turned to a consideration of imagery—I have returned to *poetry*. I have always had the intuition that there is something in the poetry that is inherently healing for me. What I might say of this project in conclusion is that what it represents is an extended metaphor for the healing process itself, in which poetry itself is the composite key *image.* What I have also achieved in the writing of this

thesis is to enquire more deeply and to take some first steps in identifying and codifying the mechanisms through which poetry as a form of *therapy works.* What is on my mind now is a line from Racine—which I will not comment on, but just let be here. They stand for many of the things I have written in this thesis and by presenting them without explanation they also stand for the mystery of poetry and as a testimony to the capacity poetic language has to express those things that cannot be expressed in any other way:

In the depths of the forest, your image pursues me[305]

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[305] Racine, J. *Phédra* (1677) (trans. Ted Hughes) (London: Faber and Faber, 1998)

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