

*Fiona Hamilton*

## Words and thresholds

AN EXPLORATION OF WRITING PROCESS  
AND PRACTICE

Writers are often cautious about analysing their writing process. Poet Seamus Heaney commented that:

*[I]t is dangerous for a writer to become too self-conscious about his own processes: to name them too definitively may have the effect of confining them to what is named.*

Heaney goes on to say:

*Words themselves are doors: Janus is to a certain extent their deity, looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forward to a clarification of sense and meaning (Heaney, 1980).*

Indirectly, his metaphor says something about writing process: in engaging with words, the writer looks in different directions and across thresholds, perhaps steps across them. This observation has relevance for the therapeutic writing sessions in healthcare, community and educational settings that I facilitate, and in many other applications of

writing, where words can be portals at thresholds between different landscapes, inner and outer. The term ‘writing’ in these contexts can shed familiar identities and gain new ones. As well as being an art practised and honed by individuals for particular audiences, creative writing can be a collaborative process that enables participants to connect with others, make transitions, transform perceptions or actions, think ‘into’ and afresh about life experiences, move forward differently. Participants in writing sessions may not consider themselves ‘writers’ and their writings may be exploratory and unpolished. Therapeutic writing may enable a looking ‘inwards’ for the individual participant but it also looks ‘out’, enhancing awareness of the possibilities of language and social narratives and their interplay with personal narratives, and resourcing participants to become authors in contact with these. In this article I will draw on my experience as writer and facilitator to reflect on how therapeutic writing influences and challenges expectations of what writing is and what it can do.

## WRITERS ON WRITING

As Mark Robinson points out in his research involving interviews with people in healthcare-based writing groups and people who described themselves as writers (Robinson, 2000), there are pressures within literary culture to see ‘writing as therapy’ and ‘writing as art’ as distinct. Creative writing programmes offer abundant information on the art and craft of writing, guiding students to write better or become more effective writers. Many offer discursive spaces

where students can examine what ‘better’ writing might be, which usually focus on writing as ‘written product’. When writers and writing teachers comment on the process of writing, they tend to concentrate on how they shape material, develop characters, consider form and overcome challenges of plot, phrasing, language or perspective. It is less common for published writers to reflect on their associated thoughts, recollections, feelings, physical sensations, or adjustments of perception during writing. It is also less usual for them to comment on partial, unedited, incomplete, or provisional texts. Reasons for this reluctance may include inherited romantic notions of the writer as an inspired and struggling individual prone to bouts of inspiration that cannot, and should not, be analyzed. In a squeezed and rapidly changing publishing marketplace, there are arguably few incentives to expose or ruminate on writing process. The reluctance may also stem from a wish to distance the art of writing from writing as therapy, which is often caricatured as an introspective pursuit in which artistry and quality are subordinated to emotional catharsis.

However, when writers do comment on effects of writing process, their observations sometimes hint at experiences that might partially close the writing as art/therapy gap and allow connections to be made across this divide. For many, writing does influence ways of thinking and feeling. Joan Didion remarks: “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear” (2012) and Don de Lillo says: “I write to find out how much I know” (1991). Jonathan Rosen comments on “the painful paradox that to write about the world, you have to retreat from it” (2001)

but this reclusive writer does not so much exclude the ‘outside’ as bring it ‘within’ - he notes the curious inversions that occur: “Play is work; inside is outside; indolence is activity”. Other writers literally move into the outside world as part of their writing practice, requiring stimulation from physical interaction with environments to feed their writing. Joyce Carol Oates has explored how writing and running are complementary activities (1999) and Annie Proulx describes driving around in a truck without a particular destination in mind as part of her writing process: “what you see are signs, not direction signs but the others, the personal messages” (1999). Her depiction of herself, the writer, as a reader-of-landscapes, alert for nuances in the surrounding environment, eternally curious about things, people, objects, processes, resonates with characteristics of therapeutic writing, where attention to what is ‘out there’ (in the room, in a group, in past experience, in the environment, in the media, in literature) alternates with contemplative acts of writing and reflection, allowing new matrices of meaning to emerge.

## RHYTHMS OF WRITING

As long as ‘therapeutic’ is associated primarily with self-scrutiny, writers are perhaps wise to keep their distance. After all, why should an artist explain, demystify, or deconstruct their own artistic process? Heaney’s warning about the dangers is echoed by many writers including poet Don Paterson in his T S Eliot lecture in 2004:

*[T]he systematic interrogation of the unconscious, which is part of the serious practice of poetry, is the worst form of self-help you could possibly devise'... If you want to help yourself, read a poem - but don't write one (Paterson, 2004).*

I will argue that therapeutic writing does not so much invite 'interrogation of the unconscious' as offer reflective spaces where inner and outer landscapes of feeling, thought, experience and environment may be explored, ruminated on, shared, discovered, revisited and reconsidered, and acted in and out of. Writing in this context is a consciously social and collaborative act and can take many forms, in many settings. It might be a walk in a park during which natural objects are picked up, closely observed, gathered, and written about, then observations shared with others. It might be the making of a collaborative poem by people who share one type of experience but are diverse in other ways. It might be writing with the aim of solving a problem or envisaging the evolution of a project or organisation. Perhaps the 'reflective spaces' of therapeutic writing, as well as being thought of as physical and mental arenas, might also be conceived as 'reflective rhythms' or orchestrations of words and not-words, since a typical therapeutic writing session involves pacing activities to allow participants to move between absorption in writing and reflection on it. In the gaps between activities and in pauses in conversation or writing, an additional mode of thinking is engaged in. In this process there are opportunities to explore personal meanings and sense of self and situation. Brian Keenan, who was taken hostage for four and a half years in Beirut from 1986-90, writes eloquently of begin-

ning such a process in a prison cell in his head rather than with pen and paper:

*I would record the half-heard words in my head. I would record my feelings, never trying to work them into a structured language or comprehensible form*

What emerged was

*a rigmarole of confusing ideas, of abstract thinking, of religious mania, of longing, of grief for my family, so much of it incomprehensible to me but there in front of me, a witness to myself*

Eventually, a dim sense of coherence, mixed with continuing confusion, was discernible to him:

*Here in all this confusion some veins of life held everything together. I don't fully know what it was, yet remember feeling that in these strange pages was a whole human being (Keenan, 1993).*

The intrusive interrogative gaze belonged to those who were holding him captive, not to writing itself, or to his reflections on his writing. These offered a gentler way of looking at his situation. A barely perceptible sense of 'a whole human being' emerged. The interweaving of reading with writing in a repetitive process of revisiting is highlighted by poet John Burnside:

*[t]here are poems that, on repeated reading, have gradually revealed to me areas of my own experience that, for reasons both*

*personal and societal, I had lost sight of; and there are poems that I have read over and over again, knowing they contained some secret knowledge that I had yet to discover, but refused to give up on (Burnside, 2012).*

Oscillation between immersion in writing and a obtaining a chink of reflective distance from the writing is familiar to most writers, but desired outcomes determine whether the writer is mainly looking for insights into how to ‘write better’ or how to understand or feel or live better. In therapeutic writing this oscillation is encouraged: between a more ‘felt sense’ and a cognitive appreciation of what has been written; between identities as ‘writer’, ‘reader’, ‘person’ that keep in mind all of these, in the presence of an attentive other. In stepping back from the words to read them, the writer moves out of the landscape she is both inside and creating, to a position where she can survey that landscape and consider it afresh. The ‘looking around’ may happen in conversation with others in a group, with a facilitator, in further writing, or in forms of repetition that expose varieties of readings within a single text. Celia Hunt identifies these different modes using the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’, where the latter involves being

*[A]ble to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving oneself up to the experience of ‘self as other’ while also retaining a grounding in one’s familiar sense of self (Hunt, 2004).*

The oscillating states, deliberately attended to within the writing process, have been identified in other therapeutic

domains as a movement “between absorption in the flow of experience and the capacity to ‘step back’ and reflect upon it” (Bondi, 2013). The interplay between different modes of thinking might be broadly characterised as ‘affective/imaginative/imagery-rich’ and ‘conceptual’. Researchers with diverse interests have much to offer practitioners who seek to understand this better and while many will be familiar with Jung’s (1961) ideas on active imagination it would be fascinating to explore different domains such as the mathematics and philosophy of Gilles Chatelet (2000) in cross-disciplinary inquiry. This interplay of writing and reflection modes can bring about a tentative, gradual movement towards new meanings in therapeutic writing sessions, whose approach owes much to poetics as described by writer and practitioner Graham Hartill, where

*[t]he stress is on process as much as on outcome. For us the term implies an engagement with the work that has no predefined formal outcome (Rapport & Hartill, 2010,32).*

In repeatedly and deliberately engaging in this process, participants experience firsthand how they both influence and are influenced by their narratives, and then go on to ‘re-read’ these narratives from a slightly adjusted position, in the presence of others who may also contribute to fresh readings. Far from being plunged into excessive scrutiny of inner worlds, or expecting to find ‘neat and tidy’ renditions of experience or coherent forms or ‘answers’, participants are encouraged to stay with a process in which new perspectives and forms unfold through participation, and where ‘unfinished’ or partially coherent utterances are val-



ued and attended to. This is particularly important when working with people in health and social care settings. Anne Whitehead's discussion of pathography (Whitehead, 2013) highlights how people's experiences of illness can be disorientating and chaotic. Narratives may not only be devices for imposing control or mastery, but modes that can themselves reflect chaotic and contingent experience. Whitehead argues for more diverse literary forms and styles "encompassing more fragmentary or mixed-media narrative modes", making the creative space accommodating of both mystery and new insights. I believe that writing sessions can accommodate what is not written, pauses, blank spaces, hesitation, and not knowing - and that acknowledging that these too can be a significant part of a person's or group's narrative can itself be therapeutic. Writing thus provides in microcosm an experience of living, in which each grasped experience is also part of a flux. Therapeutic writing allows participants to attend to moments and their own responses in their own time. When the intention is not to edit and redraft writing for an audience outside the room or distant in time, there is an attention to the here-and-now and potential for reflexive approaches to self:

*The wonderful thing about writing is that it forces you to confront yourself in a way you don't usually have to. (Rosen, 2001.)*

The physical contexts for writing may be rooms in hospitals, prisons, residential homes, schools, homes, outdoor settings, and more. The mental-spatial contexts are infinite imagined spaces, discursive and communicative forums,

opportunities to consider and reconsider, and to play. All of these influence creative process and perceptions of writing and invite the important question raised by Alan Bleakley in his investigation into creativities in higher education (Bleakley, 2004): “Why is one kind of environment considered ‘creative’ and another not?”

## WRITING AS A MEDIUM FOR REFLECTION

In research with international students at a British university it was noted that “through writing, protagonists have access to a powerful medium for reflection on who they are within the world they find themselves in” (Lago, 2004,100). The study identified three main helpful effects of writing: as a psychological ‘container’; as a source of enhancing personal understanding; and as having an interpersonal value’. In this study, students’ responses indicated that they found writing helpful in dealing with challenges to personal identity as they adjusted to living in a different country. Writing was also a medium for reflection on how expression in a mother tongue, in dialects, and in the host country’s language, influenced sense of identity and meaning. Similar findings emerged in a survey of feedback from forty participants who attended sessions I facilitated in a hospital and a primary healthcare centre between 2007 and 2011. Their responses to what they found useful or valuable showed six main themes:

- Opportunity to reflect on or revise personal narratives

- Opportunity and ways to express feelings and thoughts
- Positive change in emotions and confidence
- Artistic pleasure, distraction
- Being listened to/sharing with others
- Developing resources for self-care (Hamilton, 2013).

‘Therapeutic writing’ is a broad term and one that can have many different emphases. I will briefly outline some of these before going on to explore how writing can be a powerful medium for reflection. The term ‘therapeutic writing’ is regularly used to encompass aspects of ‘expressive writing’ as coined and implemented by James Pennebaker (Pennebaker, 2004), ‘poetry therapy’ (Mazza, 2003), ‘bibliotherapy’ (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994/2012), ‘writing for wellbeing’ (Lepore & Smyth, 2002), ‘reflective writing’ (Bolton, 2010) and ‘journal therapy’ (Thompson, 2010). A variety of disciplines have engaged in research or writing on the applications and effects of writing, for example Medical Humanities (Hamilton, 2013), Social Sciences, Psychology, Narrative Studies (Bruner, 1991), Medicine (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 2000; Charon, 2007), Holistic Healthcare (Hamilton, 2012). According to Hartill, creative writing for therapeutic purposes includes:

*[s]ongs and incantations, fairy tales and conversations, testimony, poetry and stories; and that is not the prerogative of any one gender, caste, race or age-group. This is an expansive apprehension that includes, but is in no way confined to, the literary as it is commonly understood; in fact, it can be said to present a different paradigm as to what ‘creative writing’ means. Cre-*

*ative writing for therapeutic purposes is both singular and collaborative; it speaks from and to the individual and the social group; it can be text and performance. It can be an agency of truth and growth (Hartill, 2013).*

Therapeutic writing facilitators in the UK are increasingly part of the arts in health movement which is growing in response to government and other concerns about health and wellbeing, illness prevention, self care and the needs of an ageing population. In the UK writing facilitators acquire skills and qualifications via a variety of pathways as there is no current professional accreditation procedure. Lapidus ([www.lapidus.org.uk](http://www.lapidus.org.uk)), the national organisation for writing for wellbeing, provides an ethical code and information on core competencies for practitioners (French, 2011; Flint et al, 2004) which emphasize ethics, safety, self-care, offering choice to participants, and knowing when to refer to other professionals. Metanoia Institute, Ty Newydd Writer's Centre and Orchard Foundation provide tuition and resources for future practitioners. The accreditation model of the US, where poetry- and biblio-therapists are trained and accredited via the National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy, has been posited by some in the UK as a way to promote professional recognition and maintain standards for literary arts practitioners (as well as people with therapeutic qualifications who wish to incorporate writing into their practice). In discussions about accreditation, interpretations of terms 'therapeutic' and 'therapy' are important. The word 'therapeutic' in relation to writing activities does not imply that writing itself is modeling itself as a therapy in the mode of existing therapies. It is true that 'therapeu-

tic' effects of writing are frequently described in terms of effects on individual 'inner life':

*The word 'therapeutic' here denotes beneficial psychological change, which might include inner freedom, greater psychic flexibility, a clearer or stronger sense of personal identity, and an increased freedom to engage in creative pursuits (Hunt, 2000: 12–13).*

However, introspection is not the only focus of therapeutic writing. Its techniques can be applied in outward-looking ways such as shared storytelling, teamwork, problem solving and deconstruction of habitual shared narratives (Gersie, 1997; Parkinson 2009; Bolton 2010). They may explicitly attend to the wellbeing or otherwise of groups, organisations and societies as well as that of individuals, and will recognise the interdependence of these. Therapeutically-oriented writers are interested in writing that might, according to John Dewey

*[g]enerate a new relation between a human being and her environment - her life, community, world - one that 'makes possible a new way of dealing with them, and thus eventually creates a new kind of experienced object, not more read than those which preceded but more significant, and less overwhelming and oppressive' (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).*

Facilitators bring literary knowledge, skills as writers, groupwork skills, and awareness of therapeutic dimensions and adapt these to attempt a variety of aims in different settings, for example (a small selection):

- Writing with people experiencing chronic or life-changing illness who wish to explore aspects of identity, body or relationship through writing, The Heart Felt Project in Bristol created a ‘virtual community’ by inviting people to make a representation of a heart that evoked a significant moment in their life and to write the story of the moment to attach to it. Participants included groups in GP surgery settings. A book and exhibition arose out of the project.
- Writing with prisoners seeking an outlet for creativity and to enhance expressive skills through reflecting on life experiences, or to write stories for their children from whom they are separated through the Storybook Dads/Mums scheme with the Writers in Prison Foundation.
- Writing with medical students seeking to understand and work with patient groups such as adolescents or older people, or complex conditions such as eating disorders or dementia, by engaging with patients’ writing and creative artefacts and being encouraged to be reflective and creative themselves in response. This can link with parts of the medical curriculum where scenarios have to be assessed and choices of professional action taken.
- Writing with employees in organisations or professional groups such as sports players seeking to envisage how they can evolve and improve their practice by finding metaphors to express aims, core values and roles and access a felt sense of the shared endeavour.

Facilitators of therapeutic writing aim to put themselves at the service of the participants and create a sense of parity of interaction and co-discovery in which the worth of each human being's stories is acknowledged. Researchers working at the interface between social science and literature such as Sparkes (2002) and Siddique (2011) highlight the delicacy required when engaging with complex personal stories, and facilitators can learn from their insights. Toll-ich (2010) offers valuable guidance on ethical considerations for researchers working with others' stories, and raises questions about ownership of stories which is pertinent. Siddique describes work as researcher employing ethnography and autoethnography in the field of counselling and psychotherapy (2011) and her account provides useful indications of the delicacy, awkwardness and transformative potential of occupying an 'in between' position and attending to different levels of narrative while being also listener, observer, co-creator, and reflective writer. Facilitators need to be aware of the pitfalls as well as rewards of writing as highlighted by researchers in medical education (Salmon & Young, 2011) and work ethically.

In sessions, the experience of authoring can be undertaken experimentally, playfully or seriously. This experience, particularly for marginalised or disadvantaged groups, is itself potentially therapeutic. It can disrupt uncomfortable past experiences of 'not being good enough' to write which many experience at school, or conditions that inhibit people from speaking authentically and being heard. This space may resemble Winnicott's 'potential space', a threshold or intermediary space between 'inner' and 'outer' phenomena (Winnicott, 1974) and where the act of en-

gaging with both may influence the potential space itself. One ‘therapeutic’ effect may be to reveal the interconnect-  
edness of social and individual stories to participants.

I will now describe some writing activities in sessions to give some examples of therapeutic writing techniques in practice and suggest how we might use work in related fields to understand some of the effects of this type of writing.

### REVISITING, RUMINATION, REPETITION

In therapeutic writing sessions there may be repetition, revisiting themes, or shifting from ‘jottings’ and scribbles to more coherent accounts or forms which are structured to encourage participants to discover elements of thought and feeling that were not previously fully evident to them.

An exercise I regularly use involves giving ‘starter words’ which participants use to write a list. The starter words are ones that have been used in conversation and have some ‘live’ relevance for the person. I ask them to write these at the beginning of each new line, repeating them over and over. Often, participants become more adventurous or later with their ideas as the list progresses. There may be a sense of liberation as simple nouns give way to verbal constructions, more abstract associations, and metaphors. Sometimes ‘nonsensical’ statements are introduced. In one session I brought a bowl of objects and the participant chose to pick out a key. He then wrote a short description of it by observing it closely. Next, I invited him to write in the list form. Here is an extract:



*A key opens a door  
A key can be ordinary  
A key can be made of brass  
A key can be for your front door or your garage door  
A key has small teeth in a pattern so you can open your door  
A key is hard to tell from another key  
A key will be recognised by its lock instantly*

The ensuing conversation allowed themes of being ‘just like others’ and ‘being recognised’ to be aired. The repetition had encouraged the writer to stay with the topic. Recently I tried this type of exercise myself with the starting point ‘writing is’. My first line was ‘writing is marks on the page’, and this led on to:

*writing is a pictogram  
it can swerve  
curl  
curve  
be straight  
loop  
double take  
dot  
underline  
it can leave a trace  
it can leave a trance  
it can dream  
it can imagine*

I gave myself five minutes to write and ended up with nearly three pages of short lines. Reading the words through afterwards, I noted some themes: the sounds of words; the

ability of writing to make one feel either powerful or insecure; writing's combination of mobility and fixity. I felt that if I had been asked simply to speak about writing I would have been unlikely to come up with many of these observations. I did a preliminary thematic analysis of my list and identified the following themes:

*marks and traces*  
*physicality and dynamism of mark-making and marks*  
*trance, dream, imagining*  
*surrender*  
*control*  
*sounds*  
*collaboration and connection*  
*paradoxes*  
*freeing*  
*weaving*

In reflecting further, I made connections between these words and metaphors of skating and of knitting that held significance for me. I had previously used these in poems I had written about family stories and people. I recognised that both metaphors related to the act of writing. Skating evoked etching lines on a horizontal surface, with other layers of earth/history below. Knitting was an activity of a group of storytelling women whose 'scooping up' of snippets of life story resembled the way a knitter scoops up a stitch and links it into a new one in repeating sequence. Already, my reflections were opening up many dimensions and connecting them to the here and now.

In another exercise, participants were invited to write

about a significant but not traumatic recent experience in four bouts of five minutes, with a gap in between each. Their observations afterwards showed how their feelings about the experience changed as they repeatedly wrote - some became bored and then more experimental in their writing, others noted how they felt differently as they explored different facets of the original experience. The exercise was used partly to introduce the work of James Pennebaker, as this exercise bears some relation to his protocol for expressive writing, which has generated much valuable research into writing's effects (Lepore & Smyth 2002). Pennebaker was interested initially in the idea that expressive writing can be beneficial in preventing stressful inhibition of difficult emotion. His later investigations were into new understandings of emotional events; how familiarization with trauma can render it less troubling; and the importance of converting experience into language for psychological health.

Firsthand accounts of writing following trauma describe how initial shock and feelings of chaos can change as writing and reflection progress (Etherington, 2003; Bolton 2010: 77; Lingle Ryan, 2009). Psychologists and narrative therapists have described ways of working with grief and loss which focus on first person accounts and invite elaboration and 'thickening' of stories (Neimeyer, 2001; White & Epston 1990). These techniques include writing alongside talking, exploration of language and metaphors, visualization and revisiting narratives.

## RECONSTRUCTION AND RE-CREATION

Writing may enhance awareness of memory processes and bring reactions of surprise or wonder ('I didn't know I was thinking about that', 'I haven't thought of that for ages'), fascination, discovery ('this is really interesting - it relates to what I've been concerned about recently') or altered perspectives ('it seems different when I think of it like this'). Close observation of a nearby object can bring about not only different ways of seeing but different ways of looking. I invited a group to look at their hands and write words that came to mind for three minutes. The length of time means the writer has to write in an associative, non-directed way for longer than the time it takes to record their initial observations. Here is one participant's list:

*touch*  
*warmth*  
*piano*  
*formal*  
*light*  
*bird*  
*flutter*  
*bump*  
*bone*  
*vessels*  
*channels*  
*knock*  
*baby*  
*mark*  
*touch*

*knuckle*  
*pucker*  
*skin*  
*fold*  
*loose*  
*shape*

The participant observed afterwards how the words ranged from the tangible and nearby to associations such as ‘bird, flutter’ that evoked other times and places, and that the act of relating to her hand in this way was new to her. Another exercise invites participants to move around the room and write about ‘items not normally noticed’. One participant wrote:

*[C]rumb, wooden stirrer, plastic lid, torn paper sugar sachet, dust, specks on window, sound system we haven't played music on, fourth raindrop from the left, puddle that will be here for one day only, sound of van's engine, the way a gull rotates its wings doesn't just flap up and down, twenty fifth raindrop on that bit of pavement, door jam (but I did notice it), my feeling about this room, the lack of a word for that feeling.*

There are many ways the facilitator can invite refreshed looking or perceiving. Writing from a line in a poem invites a new reading of that poem. Writing about a person one sees around but doesn't know well, and then from that person's perspective, involves making connections between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Researchers in social sciences have explored how writing can be a way of ‘thinking differently’, for example Laurel Richardson, who suggests some ways of

‘using writing as a method of knowing’ including swapping tired familiar metaphors (such as ‘theory as a building’) for strange and different ones (‘theory as a tapestry’, ‘theory as an illness’, theory as story’, or ‘theory as social action’(Richardson & St Pierre 2005, 973).

Apparently simple writing exercises can provide experiential opportunities to think differently and make new connections. Geri Chavis explores how in writing sessions creative juxtapositions can engender connections between seemingly disparate and disconnected objects, things, words, experiences or people so that

*[w]e show our courage to face the ambiguity and complexity that constitute human existence and open the door to new possibilities for increased understanding (Chavis, 2013, 161).*

Heaney’s metaphor of doors and thresholds seems apposite. Therapeutic writing practitioners help to design alternative writing spaces with ‘an attitude of knowing that other possibilities, interpretations, and ways of explaining things are possible’ for the individual in a network of relationships. Clandinin and Rosiek’s discussion of ‘Borderland Spaces and Tensions’ points to how institutions and groups can be ‘fraught with power struggles over whose voices are worth listening to’ (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, 46). Therapeutic writing sessions may open doors in and out of these spaces. Writing techniques are encouraged in some spheres of medical education: Greenhalgh and Hurwitz propose a number of beneficial effects of paying close attention to narratives, or patients’ stories: in patient-doc-

tor consultations they can ‘allow construction of meaning’; in the education of patients and professionals they may ‘enforce reflection’; in research they may ‘set a patient-centered agenda’, ‘challenge received wisdom’ and ‘generate new hypotheses’ (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 2000, 7).

Making meaningful connections across ‘thresholds’ in expressive writing can be seen as ‘acting, an experiment through the ‘cloud of unknowing’ (Ihanus, 2005). The process also accommodates and acknowledges states that are not comfortable or resolved. The way in which ‘counter-narratives’ in our lives can “surge into reflection, infusing one’s history with new meaning, complexity and depth” (Adams, 2002, 5) can be unsettling as well as lead to greater integration. Writing may involve not writing. The important thing is that therapeutic writing offers space to ‘take the space’, including the pause between words, the moment of quiet in a dialogue, the empty page. Writing may not merely be pen on page, or even words alone. I use pen and paper, and also from time to time use clay, pictures, collage, wire, objects, a walk in city or countryside, natural phenomena, movement and music.

## WRITING AS PERFORMANCE

‘Performance’ can be as simple as reading out a piece of writing to an attentive other. It can be a more elaborate group performance. Nicholas Mazza’s poetry therapy model proposes a Symbolic/Ceremonial stage which attends to performative dimensions such as storytelling and expansion of metaphors (Mazza, 2003). For David White,

performance, and witnessing of writing, is seen as an integral part of ‘shaping lives and relationships’, not merely a description of what is happening or has happened, nor indeed as artefact per se. (White & Epston, 1990, 12). These modes suggest how writing with a therapeutic aspect can be about addressing shared or conflicting group stories and re-reading or re-writing cultural narratives that influence the individual.

Poet Gillian Clarke recounts how when she was giving a workshop in a mental healthcare setting, a man who had been traumatised and had not spoken for years suddenly started reciting Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’. Her poem ‘Miracle on St David’s Day’ describes the moment:

*Like slow  
movement of spring water or the first bird  
of the year in the breaking darkness,  
the labourer’s voice recites The Daffodils’. (Clarke, 1985)*

In the poem the listening nurses are ‘frozen, alert’ on hearing the man speaking. It is as if the actual daffodils outside have become temporarily stilled in response, awed, receptive and momentarily dumb themselves, implying the converse, that flowers actually ‘speak’. The poem evokes a sense of profound connection arising from the moment of unexpected, feared, yet welcome utterance from a previously silent person, which both stills and eventually generates new writing. It evokes a number of interwoven readings and writings clustering around a transformative moment. Dewey described ‘a changing stream that is characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with our per-



sonal, social, and material environment' (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) and this can be prominent in therapeutic writing process.

The voicing of words can be significant: the writer reads out, is heard, hears themselves read. Novelist Jane Smiley describes how she discovered this to be helpful in writing her novel 'The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton':

*Through this I came to see novel writing as more like running water through a hose than putting objects into a box. Because I spoke the novel as it came out, I was also more aware of how it went in: of the questions I asked people and their answers, of the things I observed and used, of what I eavesdropped upon and read and cooked together into the day's offering (Smiley, 1999).*

Reading aloud to another became part of her creative process of discovery, a performance of a kind, before the story reached its reading audience. Voicing words is a way of embodying them involving breath and vocal chords, and eardrums' vibrations and movements in the air between speaker and listener. In therapeutic writing sessions I often invite participants to read silently first and then give opportunities for reading aloud. The sense of connection within a group can be greatly enhanced through writing, then reading out, a group piece, particularly if the group co-creates a chorus that is spoken in unison. Personal narratives are thus situated in wider contexts and networks in a kind of 'balancing act' that 'works to hold self and culture together' and that 'creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change' (Holman Jones, 2013). As facili-

tator I can highlight varieties of readings of texts and texts' connections to other narratives, noting without necessarily making this explicit that each text can be, as Holman Jones says 'an ensemble piece. It asks that you read it with other texts, in other contexts, and with others. It asks for a performance'.

### (EXTRA) ORDINARY STORIES

The constructivist view of storying human lives that underpins the work of narrative therapists David White and Michael Epston proposes that psychological health relies on the creation and maintenance of meaningful narratives:

*[i]n order to make sense out of our lived lives and to express ourselves, experience must be "storied" and it is this storying that determines the meaning ascribed to experience (White & Epston, 1990, 9–10).*

Narrative inquiry research has paid attention to the rich stories in 'ordinary life':

*Narrative inquiries (are)...not only a valorizing of individuals' experience but also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted - but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, 42).*

Therapeutic writing facilitators have privileged access to participants' responses to the process. To understand these processes and effects in detail requires expertise from various domains – from psychologists, literary specialists, narratologists, social scientists, neuroscientists and neuropsychologists, therapeutic writing practitioners and writing participants themselves. Novelist George Saunders commented in his acceptance speech for the Folio literary prize for English-language fiction 2014 on how fiction and literature can remind people, in spite of much public discourse to the contrary, that 'we're not separate, we're connected' and described how the act of writing involved a process of 'softening the borders' between himself and other people. Discourses about mindfulness, whole person healthcare and writing as ecological process are gaining prominence, while long-standing organisations such as PEN and Survivors' Poetry afford marginalised groups opportunities to express themselves and be heard. Whether the therapeutic element consists of individuals experiencing connection with others in a group, or of their noticing 'roots' back in time, or 'clarity' about future direction, the shared experience can, as Brady (2005, 998) suggests "move the discourse to what defines us all - what we share as humans". Writers, whatever their context, however they identify, are in some sense saboteurs of the familiar and habitual, explorers in language intent on "rescuing truth from the over-familiar, to make it fresh and strange, to revivify language and narrative" (Rapport & Hartill, 2010). Doubts about therapeutic effects of writing that stem from an interpretation of therapeutic that is closely allied with popular 'self-help' do not sufficiently take account of the details of this writing practice and its

contexts. The process of writing and reflection as described can expand awareness of how stories, narratives, telling and receiving, are social acts and co-constructions of meaning, and that they can be dismantled as well as created. It can make more available a sense of choice about revising or re-vivifying narratives, not only within individual lives, but in communities, and to people for whom the identity 'writer' is not a given. Writing in this way is not only about 'turning inwards' but also about 'looking out'. It is experienced as a process that perpetually resists attempts to enclose it in a static form, reminding participants that all narratives, whether seemingly ordinary or exuberantly extraordinary, can occupy a space both provisional and meaningful.

*Fiona Hamilton is a writer, tutor of Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes with Metanoia Institute, London and Bristol UK, director of Orchard Foundation ([www.orchardfoundation.co.uk](http://www.orchardfoundation.co.uk)) and therapeutic writing practitioner in healthcare and education settings. She was Chair of Lapidus UK 2010-13. Her story in verse 'Bite Sized' is forthcoming (September 2014) with Vala Publishing.  
[hamiltonfi@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:hamiltonfi@yahoo.co.uk)*

## REFERENCES

- Adams, M. (2002) "Introduction: Counter-narratives and the Power to Oppose" in *Narrative Inquiry* 12(1) (pp.1-6). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bleakley, A. (2004) "Your creativity or mine?: a typology of creativities in higher education and the value of a pluralistic approach" in *Teaching in Higher Education* 9:4 (pp. 463-475). Taylor Francis Online.
- Bolton, G. (2010) *Reflective Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Bondi, L (2013) "Research and therapy: generating meaning and feeling gaps" in *Qualitative Inquiry* 19 (1) (pp.9-19).
- Brady, I. (2005) "Poetics for A Planet: Discourse on Some Problems of Being-in-Place" in N.K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp.979-1067). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Bruner, J. (1991) "The Narrative Constructoin of Reality" in *Critical Inquiry* (18:1) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burnside, J.(2012) How poetry can change lives. (Accessed 28 August 2014). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/poetryand-playbookreviews/9020436/How-poetry-can-change-lives.html>.
- Charon, R. (2007) "What to do with Stories" in *Canadian Family Physician* 53(8): 1265-1267.
- Chatelet, G. (2000) *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics*. Trans. Robert Shaw and Muriel Zaghera. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Chavis, G.G. (2013) "Looking out and looking in: Journeys to self-awareness and empathy through creative juxtapositions" in *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 26: 3 (pp.159-167). Philadelphia: Taylor Francis.
- Clandinin, D.J and Rosiek, J (2007) "Mapping a Landscape of Narrative Inquiry: Borderland Spaces and Tensions" in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (pp. 35-75). Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage.

- Clarke, G. (1985) *Miracle on St David's Day* in *Collected Poems*. London: Carcanet.
- DeLillo, D. (1991) in Leith, W. "Terrorism and the Art of Fiction" in *The Independent* 18 Aug 1991.
- Didion, J. (2012) "15 famous authors on why they write" (Accessed 28 August 2014). <http://flavorwire.com/303590/15-famous-authors-on-why-they-write/>
- Etherington, K. (2003) *Trauma, the Body and Transformation*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Flint, R., Hamilton, F., Williamson, C. (2004) Core competencies for working with the literary arts for personal development, health and well-being. (Accessed 30 August 2014). <http://www.orchard-foundation.co.uk/New-Page-3.htm>
- French, W. (2011) *Getting Started as a Writer in Health and Social Care Settings*. (Accessed 30 August 2014). <http://www.orchard-foundation.co.uk/New-Page-3.htm>
- Gersie, A. (1997) *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Greenhalgh, T. and Hurwitz, B. (2000) *Narrative based medicine*. London: BMJ Books.
- Hamilton, F. (2012) "Language, story and health" in *Journal of Holistic Healthcare* 9[2] 17-21.
- Hamilton, F. (2013) "The Heart of the Matter: Creating Meaning in Health and Medicine Through Writing" (pp156-157) in *Medicine, Health and the Arts*. London: Routledge.
- Hartill, G. (2013). Unpublished.
- Heaney S (1980) "Feeling Into Words" in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968 – 78*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Holman Jones, S. (2013) "Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political" in N.K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp.763-791). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Hunt, C. (2000) *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hunt, C. (2004) "Writing and Reflexivity" in *Creative Writing in*

- Health and Social Care ed F. Sampson. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hynes, A. M. & Hynes-Berry, M. (1994/2012) *Biblio/poetry therapy: The Interactive Process: A Handbook*. Clearwater, MN: North Star Press of St. Cloud.
- Ihanus, J. (2005) "Touching stories in biblio-poetry therapy and personal development" in *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 18:2 (pp.71-84) Philadelphia: Taylor Francis.
- Jung, C. (1961) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. London: Random House.
- Keenan, B. (1993) *An Evil Cradling*. London: Vintage.
- Lago C.O. (2004) "When I Write, I Think: Personal Uses of Writing By International Students" (pp 95-105) in Bolton, Howlett, Lago & Wright (eds) *Writing Cures: An Introductory Handbook of Writing in Counselling and Therapy*. London, Brunner Routledge.
- Lepore S. J. and Smyth J. M. (2002) *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-being*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Lingle Ryan, J. (2009) "Reweaving the self: creative writing in response to tragedy" in *The Psychoanalytic Review* 96:3. New York: Guilford Press.
- Mazza, N. (2003) *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Neimeyer, R.A. (2001) "The language of loss: Grief therapy as a process of meaning reconstruction" in R. A. Neimeyer (ed) *Meaning reconstruction & the experience of loss* (pp. 261-292). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.
- Oates, J.C.(1999) "Writers on writing" in *New York Times*. (Accessed 28 August 2014.) <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/071999oates-writing.html>
- Parkinson, R. (2009) *Transforming Tales*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Paterson, D. (2004) "The Dark Art of Poetry, T S Eliot Lecture". <http://www.poetrylibrary.org.uk/news/poetryscene/?id=20>.(accessed 28 August 2014).

- Pennebaker J (2004), *Writing to Heal*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.
- Proulx, A. (1999) "Writers on writing" in *New York Times*. (Accessed 28. August 2014). <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/051099proulx-writing.html>
- Rapport, F. & Hartill, G. (2010) "Poetics of Memory: In Defence of Literary Experimentation with Holocaust Survivor Testimony." *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 35, Issue 1, pp 20–37. Wiley Online Library: American Anthropological Association.
- Richardson, L. & St Pierre, E. (2005) "Writing: A Method of Inquiry" in N.K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp.763-791). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Robinson, M. (2000) "Writing well: health and the power to make images" in *Journal of Med Ethics: Medical Humanities* 26 (pp.79–84). London: BMJ.
- Rosen, J.(2001) "Writers on writing" in *New York Times*. (Accessed 28 August 2014). <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/07/arts/07ROSE.html>
- Salmon, P. & Young B. (2011) "Creativity in clinical communication: from communication skills to skilled communication" in *Medical Education* 45 (pp.217–226).
- Siddique, S. (2011) "Being in-between: The relevance of ethnography and auto-ethnography for psychotherapy research" in *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 11(4) (pp.310-316). London: Taylor Francis.
- Smiley, J. (1999) "Writers on writing" in *New York Times*. (Accessed 28 August 2014). <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/042699smiley-writing.html>
- Sparkes, A.C. (2002) "Autoethnography: self-indulgence or something more?" in A. Bochner & C. Ellis (eds) *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature and Aesthetics*. US: AltaMira Press.
- Thompson, K. (2010) *Therapeutic Journal Writing*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Tolich, M. (2010) "A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Founda-



tional Guidelines for Autoethnographers” in *Qualitative Health Research*. (Accessed 28 August 2014). <http://qhr.sagepub.com/content/20/12/1599>

White, M. & Epston, D.(1990) *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre.

Whitehead, A. (2013) “The Medical Humanities: A Literary Perspective” (pp107-127) in *Medicine, Health and the Arts*. London: Routledge.

Winnicott D. W. (1974) *Playing and Reality*. Harmondsworth. Penguin