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Poetry Editor's Note: A Missive to Our Selves

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Cover Page Footnote

N/A

Editorial

Poetry Editor's Note: A Missive to Our Selves

Steven B. Katz
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You may be mad. Perhaps mildly mad, perhaps really mad. Mad at my essay; mad at my arguments; mad at my conclusions; mad at me (or at least the “self” I originally constructed for the occasion of that essay I published years ago, an earlier draft of which is contained in this issue, and which this Poetry Editor’s Note introduces). You’re probably going to be mad because the theme, the discussion, and the tentative conclusions of “The Rhetoric of Confessional Poetry: Ethos, Myth, Therapy, and the Narrative Configuration of Self,” seem to run contrary to everything that *Survive and Thrive* stands for and believes as a community!

Rex Veeder, Editor-in-Chief of *Survive and Thrive*, found himself getting angry as, in the summer of 2015, he first read this essay, published in 1994, an earlier version of which is appended at the end of this issue. As a matter of fact, Rex’s “Introduction” in *Survive and Thrive* (Volume 2, September 2015) was in a part a response to my long-ago published essay. It also was Rex who suggested that I republish a manuscript version of the essay in these pages of *Survive and Thrive*, perhaps to provoke thought, discussion, debate. And he reaffirms these thoughts, feelings, and hopes for further response and discussion, in his new Editorial “End Note” that concludes this issue. Does ‘confessional’ poetry, writing, art, “heal”? Through a careful but accessible scholarly analysis, I came to the shocking conclusion that confessional poetry does *not* seem to heal!

The version of the essay which I present here in *S&T* is only a slightly revised, lightly edited, with subheads inserted for organization and your ease of reading. I debated and struggled with cutting the analysis and interpretation of specific poems—a cut that would have been visually indicated like this _ _ _ _ _ , the gaping wound left roughly sutured, the scars still visible. But after weeks of struggle, I decided that this surgery was too risky, that the patient might not live without the middle of its body, and so I sewed it back together and cleaned it up a bit but otherwise left it intact. I also resisted the incredibly strong temptation to *add* new material—so much has changed, and so rapidly—but once again I found myself rewriting the essay; and so again after weeks of struggle, I decided to leave the essay almost as it was. Thus, what you see here is something very close to the penultimate draft of the published essay. I will try to capture some of the new perspectives/scholarship in this headnote.

In fact, as the Associate/Poetry Editor of *Survive and Thrive: Journal of Medical Humanities and Narrative Medicine*, I suppose it now behooves me to make a statement, take a more moderate as well as “contemporary” stand. After all, the original, final essay was published in the mid-1990’s, and was thus begun several years before that; in this way and others, my essay is perhaps very much a

product of its time—a time when social psychology, such as that of George Herbert Mead, was hot. (Simply, based on the social-psychology of George Hebert Mead, our “selves” are composites of other personalities we meet that make enough of an impact for us to adopt and absorb fragments of them into our own holistic and hopefully healthy personalities. Narrative theory tries to account for the building of life stories that become believable identities according to their own criteria of fidelity and truthfulness; Aristotle’s concept of *ethos* tries to account for the persuasive credibility of character rhetorically created in the act of speaking or writing: both seemed to align well with Mead’s social psychology.)

Further, my essay was published in a *psychology series* in a book entitled *My Father was Shiva: A Family Tragedy in Poetry and Prose*, edited and introduced by Dr. Edward Tick, a psychoanalyst, poet, and rhetorician who went through the same doctoral program in Language, Literature, and Communication at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute as I did a few years later, and who believes in a strong relationship between psychology and rhetoric (his dissertation was an examination of schizophrenia as a *rhetorical illness*). These circumstances certainly influenced my approach to the writing of my essay for that particular volume.

Moreover, aside from the editor, and the poet Jim Flosdorf whose work was the focal point of all the essays in the book of which he was the titular author, I was the *only* rhetorician/poet in the volume; all the other writers in the book were psychiatrists, MDs, or psychologists; that certainly slanted my approach as well. The poetry and person of Jim Flosdorf, the object of the whole volume, told an incredibly tragic and horrific family tragedy that gave rise to the mythological narrative treatment of it in *My Father Was Shiva* (the Hindu god of creation, death, and destruction). Every psychologist and MD psychiatrist in the volume came to the same conclusion: Jim’s writing of these dark mythological sequences of confessional emotions about his family, and especially his relationship with his father, did not help Jim therapeutically in the treatment of his sometimes debilitating neurosis.

These “diagnoses” of texts (some Freudian, which makes sense)—but more, the poems, and the situations described in them, too, affected not only my critique and interpretation of the aesthetic effectiveness of Jim’s poems, but also my conclusions about the (non)healing power of the poems, and based on the fate of many in the confessional school of poetry, my generalization about the failure of confessional poetry as therapy. Confessional poetry is *not* really therapeutic, at least not in a clinical sense, I concluded. Rather, in Jim’s poems (as in confessional poetry at large), the poet tells him (or her) self the same stories, reinforcing a narrative that solidifies into a hard block of rhetorical identity as a poet, something that might be “better” dissolved. Confessional poetry does not help us push past the obstructions and reach the “real” psychological problems to resolve them; rather, confessional poetry seems to trap us in the psychological problems, in which the narratives we construct through poetry (or prose, or art) may be or become part of the obstruction.

At least that was my conclusion *then*. But do I still believe what I wrote years ago, in what is now the last century? Rex’s “Introduction” was very careful to parse “confession,” “healing,” and to distinguish between “therapy” and “transformation,” with *transformation*, not therapy or

healing, as the goal of ‘confessional’ poetry and art. Certainly, as both a rhetorician and a poet, I believe in the transformative power of language. Yet “transformation” is such a romantic, transcendental, spiritual notion that the aging cynic in me starts to balk. . . .

But then the rhetorician in me takes over, and I think of rhetorical theory, such as Kenneth Burke’s idea of “language as symbolic action,” in which the power of words, style, art, can and *do* influence the very way we see ourselves and the world, can persuade and bring people (ourselves and others) together in community (or divide people and make them disagree in various degrees of bitter disunity, such as in the time we live now, under the Trump presidency). One surely sees, I tell myself, that that the shared reality achieved in either case is not only a consensus of argument, but also some kind of ‘transformation’ of perception and feeling, at least at subjective and social levels of reality. Burke, borrowing from religion, called this kind of communion that takes place through language “consubstantiation.” Going further out on the limb that doesn’t surface in your mind (even as the clichéd metaphor that it is) until I create it there, thus (excuse me!): the substance of language itself—as a physical, sensuous, aural, temporal, or even mystical medium, has the power to change not only social but also, respectively, material, felt, experienced, remembered, and even metaphysical reality for those who believe language, even its alphabet, has such power (see Katz, *Epistemic Music*; “Letter as Essence”). *Transformative indeed!*

But now dear writer-reader, I see you begin to wobble a little too. What did “he” say? That language has the power to change the physical reality? How about this desk; can we turn it into something else with a magic formula? How about the structure of heaven; can prayers alter it? How does language work in these processes, as physical action at a distance? How about changing G/d’s mind (see Metzger and Katz), whose *Name* Jews do not say or write to avoid the reality of taking the Name in vein? For those who believe in the potent properties of the Book, the alphabet and their numerical equivalents (the letters of the Name used in Creation itself) have this ‘transformative’ power. When I study and/or write about this belief, I feel on occasion as though I myself might begin to ascend through language, poetry, and art to a higher reality (cf. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*). And then I quickly fall back to earth, like so many before me, since Babel.

But how about language transforming “just” the feelings or psyche of such a lowly human being as a poet? So much writing and writing pedagogy and writing theory and theory-hope are based on this premise. But I am soon even cast out of this heaven of art and artifice, of language and rhetoric, by my own doubts in the stability of human emotions, the unreliability of the human senses and the human mind, and the limits of human consciousness itself—perhaps almost as much now as when I wrote the essay attached. I see the see-saw of my emotions teetering on the tipping point between romanticism and cynicism; I see the see-saw vertically sway up and down, rising and falling, from air to ground; I see the whole apparatus of the see-saw itself (a child’s whole world) tottering on the fulcrum of a pole of depression sunk deep into the mud of my own psychology, personal history, culture, gender, class. . . . Even as a writer—perhaps because I have written all my life, through the most painful parts and the best—I see that there are too many sides to this issue, too many arguments, too many faces, to assent and settle for any one of them.

The truth is “I” don’t know what the truth is.

Yes “you” do!

No “I” don’t.

“You” do!

What kind of statement is that: ‘The truth is “I” don’t know what the truth is’?

It’s the inverse of the old paradoxical Buddhist koan, ‘everything I say is alie.’

“You” are so esoteric!

“You” are so close-minded!

Well, “I” for one know that “*my*” emotions and beliefs are often in conflict with themselves and between each other.

Well, “*I*” only ‘know’ what “I” feel for brief nano seconds. Beliefs last longer.

It’s true! Feelings fleet so much faster than beliefs! So much for transformative experiences.

There are just too *many* “I”s in here.

How many?

At least three.

Too many if you ask “me.”

To “me,” this instability of emotion, at different levels, never mind constantly shifting times and places to which the ‘self’ must adapt, calls into question the whole notion of a single, stable personality, which would be at the center of any transformation, being the thing transformed.

But ‘self’ *is* how “*we*” experience the interior of “our” lives, “our” thoughts, sentience, and consciousness!

And the exterior of “our” selves, too, as embodied consciousnesses, as skin and bone, space and time.

It wasn’t always this way.

Historically, mythologically, psychologically, epistemologically, there may at one time have been no barrier between ‘self’ and ‘world.’

A part of “me” believes in a stable, unique ‘self,’ in the singularity of ‘personality’ that is more than the sum of its ‘parts’, an individual with a will and the freedom to use it.

“You” know the Latin root word, *persona*, means ‘mask’?

“My” personality is a mask?!?

“We” are all many masks, which “we” don at socially appropriate times.

“I” don’t believe you.

This is too much for “me” too.

There’s even more for “us” to at least begin to consider.

Oh no, “I” can’t wait to hear this!

The fragmentation of self reflects and is a reflection not of only the fragmentation of modernism in the 20th-century, but also the relativity and indeterminism of the Copenhagen school of new physics in the same space-time. Perhaps even more, in the ‘speculative turn’ {Bryant, et al.} towards posthuman-consciousness {Wolfe} of objects as solipsistic ‘actants’ {Harman} which exist in social and technological networks {Latour} in a not too distant ‘ecology without nature’ {Morton} that we find in posthumanism {Braidotti}, objects and events just merge and emerge and submerge in only somewhat remote predictability, as in a new materialism {Coole and Frost}.

Just the high-brow theoretical lecture “we” have come to expect “you” to sputter!

How are “we” personalities subject to transformation in *this* new world order?

“We” are object too. We have agency, but in this philosophy “we” are also complemented and/or supplemented and/or replaced by all other objects.

In the post-modernism that preceded posthumanism, and the object-oriented philosophy and actor-network theory that grew out of or in reaction to it, the same thing happened.

“You” mean where language as text became reality, and the predominate focus of study, whereby those rhetorics *as writing* supplanted not only “our” self but also the world.

Yes.

No 'self'?

No, not really.

No writer?

Already written. In Postmodernism everything is already written. The author is a nexus of language, of forces, of events, which "we" merely articulate, express.

This is an almost akin to Platonic notion of the poet as empty vessel through which the gods speak.

Get it through your head: 'The author is dead.'

Resurrection rather than transformation then is what's required.

Why do "I" even bother writing then?

Really: the end of our species predicated in the 'Anthropocene,' the short tragic era of *Homosapiens*.

Why bother to write, then?

Really: in 5 billion years, when the sun will go supernova, and the solar system explode or fall apart.

Why bother?

And then there's the heat death of "our" universe . . .

Who is going to decide who is rescued?

When the earth is dead?

In 11 billion years, when the sun burns out?

When the universe collapses?

Unless there is another planet "we" can live on.

Another sun "we" can orbit.

Another universe "we" can't travel to (as Stephen Hawking has proposed)?

As Holden Caulfield asks, what's the point???

Not much comfort there, never mind transformative experience, except the mutation into another species that might be able to survive in the harsh environment of space, or on a totally different, perhaps inhospitable planet.

The point is that “I” still *need* to write to move toward affective transformation, to create!

“You” do?

Don’t “you”?

What is this need “we” talk about?

“I” actually get anxious and agitated if “I” don’t write, even for just a few days.

“I” get depressed. “I” don’t. Unless writing is therapeutic or transformative, what a waste of time!

What else would “you” do with “*your*” life?

Make money.

Spend time with “my” family and friends, rather than with all of “*you*”!

“I” do it for “my” *self*. Writing makes “me” feel warm and whole inside, at least while “I” write... In that sense, it *is* transformative!

But “you” give up so much ‘outside’ “*your*” *self* to write! —So much normalcy sacrificed.

“You” may feel whole when “*you*” write, but *are* “you”? Are “you” “you”? Am “I” “you”?

Writing is “my” whole identity; it is who “I” am.

“I” thought “we” disproved that.

“We” haven’t proven or disproven anything!

So, if “you” are whole when you write, “you” don’t need anyone else?

Not when “I” write.

Sounds self-centered or lonely, rather than transformative. What about “*your*” family and friends?

“They” understand (sort of), and wait for “me” to ‘return’.

Bet they love that. And readers? Do your family and friends read what “you” write, and help “you” by providing ears, or critiquing “*your*” work to make it stronger?

Sometimes. But if “they” read everything “I” wrote, that’s all “they” would be doing. “They” have a life too!

As a writer, “I” only need a couple of readers.

Liar. “I” don’t believe you.

Well, maybe a few more. And the occasional publication in a journal (such as this one “we” are in here) to keep “me” going.

Liar.

OK, maybe a few more journals—and a book . . . or two . . .

“I” “my” self write for future audiences.

Arrogant, isn’t “he”?

What if “you” had *no* readers? Even Emily Dickinson had a couple of readers, published a couple poems in “her” sheltered lifetime.

If “I” know “him” (and “I” do, intimately!), “he” would stop writing.

Timothy Clark in *A Theory of Inspiration* thinks that these idealized, future audiences are the source of the feeling “we” call ‘inspiration’.

Is that a source of transformation too?

“I” suppose. Writing to future audiences at least gives “me” hope as a writer.

And this from the cynic!

“I” am not the cynic; “you” are.

No “you” are!

“He” is the cynic.

Writing, even to a future audience, brings “me” comfort.

But Walter Ong said: “A writer’s audience is always a fiction.”

“You” are the fiction.

So are “you”!

Maybe it's not the content of writing, but the 'telling', the expressing of it, that is transformative. . .

Even when there is no one to hear?

Then "we" are *all* in BIG trouble!

Yes, when "I" stop writing, "I" feel the hurt and cold again.

The transformation of 'self' doesn't seem to last long.

And writing is exhausting, so "you" can't sustain the writing all the time.

Writing does make "me" forget for a while.

Writing takes "me" to another place in my mind.

But does writing put the past to rest for "you"?

Looking back, "I" have to admit it doesn't seem to.

But "we" *want* writing to redeem the past; "we" *need* art to make "our" pain and suffering *valuable*.

At least then "you" are doing something with the past, turning pain into art!

That is transformative. But to "me," writing has become like breathing.

It's just something "you" just do—all the time!

To kill time until time kills "you"?

If writing just killed time, "you" wouldn't do it. It must have some purpose or transformative powers.

Writing is time consuming (like right now!).

"I" have often said that 'writing breeds irresponsibility.'

Copyright that.

"I" have. But "I" don't want to talk about issues of ownership in relation to transformation!

Whether it's transformation or therapy or just stealing what other people say, "I" write down everything "I" hear, see, think, say, before the wording is lost.

Perhaps once "we" are in an adult groove "we" keep writing out of habit. . .

Or out of boredom because there's nothing else to do!

Nothing else to do???

Nothing worth doing.

Writing makes me feel guilty because "I" am neglecting everything else "I" should be doing.

And when "I" don't write "I" feel guilty because "I" am doing everything except writing.

What a mess "you" two are. This is not writing to transform or heal, but to make "you" miserable!

And "you"?

To "me," the act of writing itself has become a form of torture, mental, physical, and emotional—especially revision!! (It took "me" four months + a year to write this.)

That could be the romantic image of the suffering poet too.

It also could be the beginning of a disease like Alzheimer's.

Well, "I" don't even think about 'identity-art' anymore.

You might with dementia, until you couldn't anymore.

So much of the image of the writer as suffering artist who transforms misery into art is prefab.

"You" think so?

No. But no more turtle necks for "me"!

But "I" seem to remember (because "I" was right there with "you") cultivating the image as a writer when "we" were young.

"We" did, it's true, in "our" youth, when "we" were hurt and lost and unpublished and unknown...

"I" think the young need the image. There's so little reward otherwise, in the early stages, other than being cool.

What about as an adult? Does poetry become a crutch?

"I" would think *real* poets grow out of that stage!

Why didn't "you"?

“I” did; did “you”?

Maybe. Writing poetry gave “us” a warm glow when the cold night depressed the snow and “I” walked the windy streets of Boston in my full-length P-coat my father finally bought “me,” but left “me” alone on Christmas Eve, scarf flying. “I” couldn’t even write then. “I” just walked and walked and walked and . . .

“I” also remember “us,” in better times, waiting for a bus in the snow, with a big sifter of warm brandy in hand, reciting out loud, by heart, Dylan Thomas’ ‘Fern Hill’!

How ‘romantic.’ “You” really *were* depressed!

Very. “I” thought about death and suicide all the time. (To tell “you” the truth, “I” still do.)

So, underneath all that academic finery and scholarly-logic, stretches not only a vast dark past, but also a still deeper layer of need in front of “you”?

Nice imagery.

Did writing poetry transform “you,” save “you”?

Probably, but maybe more being a poet—pain was “my” identity.

Will the poetry ever fill the infinite hole in “me/you/us”?

“I” don’t know. Remember, this was the 1990s, when people believed in poetry and rhetoric as *human* endeavors.

And believed in such ‘quaint’ notions and emotions as ‘authenticity’, ‘sincerity’, ‘self’, as well as ‘individuals’ with ‘inalienable rights’, ‘agency’, ‘free will’.

Ah, the good old days.

These 18th century Enlightenment values were sorely tested and found severely lacking in the middle of the 20th century.

Writing, like art and music, did not prevent the Holocaust (Steiner).

A fortiori, could it stop one person from harming themselves, or others?

Ah, the rhetorician speaks!

Grow up!

Limiting “our” discussion to the human species as it has evolved so far!—poetry is writing, and writing helps “you” feel better, works by giving “you” a higher purpose.

And ulcers.

Poetry works!

When it works.

No it doesn’t!

Yes it *does*!

And rhetoric too!

No way!!

Have “you” read Tamika Carey’s book, *Rhetorical Healing*?

No, it’s too new.

Well there “you” go. Teaching writing can be used to teach healing, as well as build community.

How about Heidegger’s ‘What is a Poet’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*?

Too hard to read.

Too difficult poetically, “you” mean. But poetry is a way to *Dasein*, to exploring through poetic language true *Being*—which is free of living death, nature as standing-reserve, all the apparatuses of existence as utility, in a relation of user and used. As a higher *Weg* or path of being, poetry for Heidegger is transformative in the most basic as well as metaphysical sense.

What hogwash. “I” don’t believe it.

“I” do.

“*You*” are a transcendentalist!

“*You*” are a romantic!

“*I*” am a ‘sophist’: “I” do and “I” do not believe this. “I” can see both “your” positions.

This is the *Dissoi Logoi*, opposing ideas/words, taught to students in ancient Greece and Rome.

Yes, in this pedagogy, students of rhetoric were taught to argue all sides of any issue.

Great for understanding an issue thoroughly, as well as improving argumentative skills . . .

“We” could use some of that *Dissoi* here!

Aren’t ‘opposing words’ *contraries*, so that if one premise is true, the other is false?

Can “you” stop being a rhetorician for a second, and put the sophists and Aristotelian *topoi* down?

The rhetorician in “me” can’t be turned on and off; it does not stop talking; it is who “I” *am*!

“I” thought you were a *persona*? Away with “you already!

Then “you” will all come with “me”—because “you” are “me,” essentially—or rather, psychologically and socially.

At this moment, talking with “you,” “I” am more cynical now than ever about the capabilities of poetry or rhetoric to transform. “I” don’t believe anything anymore!

But “you” believe that “you” don’t believe anything anymore, right?

Yes.

Then “you” believe something!

Who are “you,” Socrates now?

Does ‘Reality’ exist?

‘Nothing exists’, says Gorgias, by which “he” could mean a lot of things.

“I” now think apathy is best; then “I” don’t have to care about believing in anything anymore.

But apathy makes writing hard for the same reason: “you” don’t care about anything anymore.

No, no transformation to be found in apathy. “I” find apathy a hard attitude to maintain without feeling guilty!

If “you” feel guilt, “you” are not apathetic enough!

That does sound very cynical.

“I” am beyond the naïve romanticism of the spring of youth.

“I” am beyond the autumnal skepticism of middle age.

“I” am beyond the bent winter cynicism of old age.

Great! Now what do “we” do?

If cynicism is the last refuge of the romantic, what is the last refuge of the cynic?

Post-Romantic Cynicism?

Posthuman Cynicism? “I” am a posthuman cynic.

Posthumanism again.

“Post,” as in postmodernism, with its skepticism of reality and belief in language; and posthumanism, with its skepticism of humanity—and all the ambiguity, indeterminism, and ambience of events and objects (including people) that are always imminent at every moment but unpredictable and only partially knowable, since “we” are of “them.”

“We” have been “transformed” in this way too.

Now, in the 21st century, “my” old essay seems somewhat quaint and dated.

“My” old essay is carefully argued and rhetorically developed.

“My” old essay is an easy read on the psychological value of poetry in the narrative configuration of ‘self’ and its many ‘discontents’.

“You” have to accept George Herbert Mead’s premise that “we” construct “I” via the people “we” meet in order to believe “our” essay as written.

And Aristotle’s concept of *ethos* as constructed in language.

No ‘true self’ to be authentic to?

No. Or at least not entirely.

Where are “we” then?

“We” are here, imminent, emerging, submerging, somewhat randomly, but perhaps with agency if not freewill.

In posthumanism, then, poetry as a form of therapy or transformation cannot be considered as anything but a metaphor for a random process, state?

From the point of view of posthumanism, elements of ‘personality’ may be imminent but are never knowable as part of a whole.

Something must exist, be stable, a core, “I”.

Platonic essences?

Neurological scans?

Genomics?

The posthuman personality. Who would have thought it!

And Transformation? What is a posthuman transformation?

Cyborgs. Machines. Transhumanism.

That frightens “me.”

It is the ‘*humanistic* dream of disembodiment’ that “we” fear, not a posthuman one, says Wolfe.

So, is transformation disembodiment? Can confessional poetry explore this?

Yes, of course. “We” are doing that “our” selves here, but in an old-fashioned, literary way.

Given how “we” experience “our” selves’, holistically, as embodied consciousnesses with unique and personal stories, confessional poetry might could work to some degree to ameliorate the suffering of life, to aesthetically render ugliness beautiful, horror art, disembodiment illusion (or delusion).

Nice double modal-auxiliary verb, rhetor! “Yaw!” from the South?’

To “me,” poetry as transformation works even in posthumanism, although its agency remains as mysterious as ever.

“We” don’t discriminate here. All forms of experience are allowed.

Do “we” know if suffering is necessary for transformative art?

Suffering is inevitable in a life in which death is always imminent. In fact, it makes *Dasein* meaningful.

“My” essay questions whether suffering is necessary for art.

“My” essay shows it doesn’t work well when in poetry “you” talk only to “your” self. . . .

And, “we” might add, to some ideal, fictional audience in the future!!! { see Ong; Clark }.

Contrary to “his” belief in Ideal Forms *for philosophers*, Plato stated that poets are ‘touched’ by a special kind of madness—‘divine’ madness.

Aristotle treats poetics rationally, as an art form whose purpose is ‘catharsis.’

The transcendentalists held that poetry is the ‘genius of nature.’

What nice ‘sentiments’! Apologies! Defenses!

Yes, life would be a divine comedy, a practical joke, a damn laughing matter, if “we” were not beings (human, animal, and maybe nonhuman) who are sentient, aware, feel pain.

“I” think “*my*” essay shows rhetorically that poetry does not heal aesthetically!

Do “you” also mean that the rhetoric of poetry—prosody—doesn’t lead to transformation?

“I” believe that the best poetry is a form of self-expression shaped in the hands of the disciplined poet who wields it.

Another ideal.

“I” believe discipline is a question of meter and form, which ‘real poets’ know and use.

“I” believe the question of quality is more important, no matter what the form.

Are either, or both, transformational?

Most confessional poetry is written in free verse.

No wonder it doesn’t work . . .

That’s “your” opinion. Keep it to “your” self.

“I” can’t, because “you” are “me.”

“I” believe the issue of ‘authenticity,’ of ‘sincerity,’ of ‘purity,’ is most important in confessional poetry.

Authenticity, sincerity, purity, *to what?*

It is hard to believe in these qualities if the ‘self’ is a spirit, a fragment of an object (the rest submerged), a machine, or non-existent!

Too often poets eschew theory and art—philosophy and rhetoric—in favor of ‘self.’

Academic, “you” are, yes! Eschew on this!

Writers can always write poems—even transformative poems—in their diaries, rather than publish it.

And an *elitist* to boot!!!

No “I” am not. “I” believe this is, to use Robert Frost’s phrase, like playing tennis without a net—and in some cases, without tennis balls!

But poetry written in meter and form sounds so mechanical. How can that be transformative?

Cicero said rhetoric requires natural talent, but also art and practice.

Aesthetically or psychologically, the results are usually not very good—clichéd rhymes, awkward meters, antiquated phrasing.

Is it like learning to swing a tennis racquet until it’s ‘natural’?

Once it is, it’s heaven, ‘the zone’.

But professional tennis players take an entire childhood to reach that level, to transform!

In rhetoric, that’s what Isocrates and Cicero and Quintilian debated. *It is too hot in here!*

Katz has taken to writing rhetoric in literary form. But when the form, like meter, is good, the meter in the verse is aurally invisible, so you hear the rhythm, not the bass drum. But it’s there, underneath, providing the beat that makes rhythmic variations possible (*Epistemic Music of Rhetoric*).

Go play tennis with “your” drum kit while “I” write.

“I” would never deny free verse is a form, and in fact encourage it, if it is good, well-constructed, and the product of practiced minds, hands, and hearts.

But in a posthuman world, how can “we” even believe in discipline, which itself requires a stable source of agency, inspiration, self, if not fixed, aesthetic ideals?

Or an imagined audience that may or may not include the gods speaking through you!!!

“I” don’t know, but right now “you” are stepping on “my” foot!

Sorry! The Muse does that all the time, whenever she wants, day or night . . .

And “you” open the door.

Anything for inspiration, and the possibility of transformation.

“I” still say the even the free verse poet should probably know how use meter and form—to have it in their repertoire.

Oh, “you Formalist! So anti-democratic!!

Is free verse political, then?

It is in America!

Is free verse politically transformative?

Perhaps poets should turn outward, and deal with material conditions—social, political, economic—conditions in which people live other lives of desperation, rather than obsessing about their own!

Confessional poetry, and socially aware poetry, like poets themselves, are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one can grow from the other, coexist with each other, feed off each other, both in form and passion, content and style.

Again the binary blurs break down.

Yes, but like form, free verse is something “you” have to learn to do well. “I” have; “you” haven’t.

‘Free verse is Freedom’!

“I” think the form should be organic, grow out of the content.

But where are the standards? Where is the net?

“I” believe in ‘natural’ writing, ‘automatic’ writing, and now the stream of unconscious writing . . .

Again, this kind of disembodiment is a modern if not postmodern concept; it requires stability, authenticity, even a strange kind of objectivity . . .

So what if “they” found Apollinaire’s and Kerouac’s *revised* manuscripts . . .

Changing the subject, “I” write on anything at hand. Including “my” hand.

“I” still write on yellow legal pads, in long hand, and then type them later.

“I” write first drafts on the computer now. “We” are being written that way right now.

Word processing has increased both the speed and the quantity of what “we” can write.

“I” have the opposite experience. Word processing is efficient for capturing thoughts if you can type fast enough; but the color coding and the tracking and boxed comments to “my” one reader—“my” future self—really slows “me” down.

This technology is good when “I” return to write: it reminds “me” where the problems are, what “I” was thinking, what “I” was going to do, when “I” return to revise—weeks, months, years, sometimes even decades later—and helps “me” focus not only on what to revise, but if “I” am lucky kick-starts inspiration, when writing feels like a transformative process again.

Revision requires time, reflection, and re-envisioning. It needs a stable self.

Hey, does the ‘self’ get revised as well? Which is another way of asking about transformation again.

Does it involve re-seeing, re-imagining not only the piece, but the self too—writing, changing it, rethought if not entirely new?

Perhaps in the context of a real community, history and mythology and epistemology in the material context of pressing social, economic, and political issues. Otherwise the transmutation of substance into style, of self, may go wholly unnoticed . . .

To commute a writer’s ‘sentence’ to isolation and loneliness . . .

To provide a poetic blueprint, an architecture of identity, a real façade for living . . .

Poetry did provide “me” with some comfort after “my” mother died.

But it was so painful for “me.”

All that internalized suffering, agonistic repression, and a badly bleeding ulcer. Poetry didn’t help “me” physically much at all; it just gave “me” a way of justifying—rationalizing—and coping psychologically with illness and death—with the grave already dug in “my” chest.

“I” am glad “I” didn’t have to experience all of that. But in the end “we” all die, together and alone, like “she” did.

So much for agency.

So much for art.

What are “we” to believe then?

Poetry (and the need to write it—what seems to be a real need for the young) is both the source and the salve of pain?

Yet another myth of creativity, another Ideal source, another narrative. Pain of a different sort, source. But writing poetry is like breathing to “me” now.

No it’s not.

Yes it is. “I” don’t have to think of “my” self as a poet. “I” don’t have to wear a mask. “I” just do it.

Bullshit.

Well, to “me,” the discipline of writing is everything! But “you” have to be disciplined enough to write everything down when “you” hear it, see it, or think it, or “you” forget too much, lose the punch of language.

“I” will punch you if “you” don’t shut up!

“I” write all the time, although “we” are relatively unknown in poetry worlds.

“I” am a recluse.

Another romantic image?

OK, the hard-edge, ice cold, and somewhat incestuously rigged ‘poetry industry’; but that’s a topic for another day. “I” write for a future audience. “I” leave the verdict to history.

“We” ‘have taken the path less traveled by,’ says Frost, and it has made all the difference’, for better or worse.

Yeah, thanks a lot! That hurts “my” standing in the poetry world, where everybody talks to “their” selves, “them” self!

What’s the point of writing then? Life would be some much easier, normal, if “we” didn’t do it!

Habit?

Purpose?

Pain?

When you’re young . . .

What do “you” have to write about except “your” self?

But as an adult—the pain, the discipline, the sacrifice. . .

Why not live ‘the myth’? It seems to work for some. . .

“I” find it doesn’t work for “me” anymore.

To leave something behind?

To not be forgotten?

As Marianne Moore said, ‘I too dislike it.’

But she didn’t mean it.

Writing can be genuine.

Writing can be generative.

Writing can be self-discovery.

Writing can be torture as “I” grow older!

Writing can be quite physical as well as mental.

That Cartesian duality, at least, is frayed!

“I” have spent so much of “my” life writing, have given up so much to write and finish things, which takes longer and longer, becomes harder and harder.

But if not transformation, what pleasure (and possible recognition) it brings!

“My” wife and son have sacrificed so much for “me” to indulge in this ‘naturalized’ occupation.

Yes, writing, art, is incredibly selfish.

In this ‘self’ ishness “we” seek meaning.

In this ‘self’ ishness “we” seek transformation

As those who study composition told “us,” ‘writing is a process’ . . .

Along process!

Writing is a journey?

Does the journey lead to transformation?

‘It’s the journey, not the destination’, that matters.

That's good, because "we" will never get there.

"We" never really go anywhere!

"I" was once asked by a literature professor if "I" liked reading, or having read? The process, or the finished product? Do "you" like writing, or having written?

Neither.

Both.

"I" love writing!

"I" hate writing!

Such contradictory ideas! "I" don't know what to believe!

Maybe "we" are not to believe in anything?

Maybe "we" are to believe in everything?

Maybe "we" are to believe in the very contraries, contradictions, paradoxes, and conflicts that define "our" life, from which writing springs?

Is that a transformation, or an oxymoron?

"You" are an oxy moron!

F. Scott Fitzgerald said somewhere that genius was the ability to hold contrary (or contradictory) ideas in "your" head and believe both (or all) of them at the same time.

The *Dissoi Logoi* again.

Are "you" a rhetorician or a poet?

Both. And more.

'Do "I" contradict myself?' Walt Whitman asks in *Leaves of Grass*; 'well then, "I" contradict myself. I contain multitudes!'

Was 'he' the first postmodernist?

Posthumanist, with all the grass stuff and atoms being and showing up everywhere, including under your boot heel.

Now *that* is transformative!

But is it *true*?

“I” don’t know.

“I” don’t believe “you.”

“I” don’t care.

Can poetry heal?

“I” don’t know, but it feels good when the writing is going well.

And it feels horrible when it isn’t.

So let “us”—all of “us”—revisit this rhetorical essay on confessional poetry and the narrative construction of the psychological self, to which “our” discussion is a preamble, update, and response.

With a minimum of revision, so that everyone can see what “we” were talking about, here and then, back and now . . .

With some trepidation, given its themes and conclusions . . .

As another way of thinking about and exploring the relation between writing and healing . . .

With confidence and uncertainty . . .

With self-esteem and insecurity . . .

Hey, speak for “your” self. “I” agree with the original argument.

But “I” don’t know if “I” agree with “you.”

“I” think some parts of “me” do?

Parts of “you”? “You” mean there are more parts?

Yes, more “me’s,” and more interpretations . . .

Well, “I” think some parts of “me” do not agree with “you”!

But “I” don’t agree with “him.”

Maybes? All in play

“We” have taken enough of “your” time with this brief conversation with “my” selves. Read this wonderful issue featuring two other rhetorician-poets—Barry Brummett, and David Beard.

There are other rhetoricians here too (in addition to the editors), as well as excellent pieces from writers and poets from other ‘walks’ and ‘stages’ of life.

And if “you” have time, desire, inclination, fortitude, “you” are welcome to read “my” original essay at the end of this issue.

Emote.

Enjoy.

Write.

Create.

Survive.

Thrive.

Transform.

Heal.

Beware.

Be well

Good bye from all of “us.”

—**Steven B. Katz**

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