

The myth of catharsis

Craig Sherborne

Writers using their own life story for raw materials are going to be asked this question by readers: ‘Is it cathartic for you, your work?’

Many readers presume medicine and literature have become close allies. I don’t believe that writing is a hospital—the St Catharsis Infirmary—where we enter sick and come out well. It is not a psychiatric ward where our mental and emotional problems can be identified and burned out of us with the electric-shock treatment of making sentences.

Sylvia Plath was considered a cathartic poet. If so, it can’t have helped her much—she committed suicide.

Robert Lowell, America’s great confessional poet, was hardly cured of depression by spreading out before us on the page his psychological innards for all to see. He was miserably in and out of psychiatric institutions frequently during his writing life.

Perhaps novelist and autobiographer Janet Frame was as close as you might get to a success story when arguing the catharsis line. She was rescued from the bleak confines of a New Zealand asylum because one of her doctors read her work and concluded that she might not be mad after all, but just talented to the point of genius. From then on, asylums and characters with surrealistic insights into the world and its creatures and chattels featured prominently in her books.

She ended up living a relatively long life—into her seventies. She was a recluse; and though she lived in one of the quietest streets in one of New Zealand’s quietest rural towns, Levin, she hated noise so much that she double-glazed her house because the merest sound of a car starting, or a lawnmower farting to life, would send her into a rage, unable to write. Yet write she did, and there was no successful suicide attempt. At the back of her books, she smiles out from photographs like a kind aunty. Maybe it was writing that kept her from killing herself. Maybe it was lithium.

Graham Greene said that all writing is therapy. I can almost believe it in him, a Catholic convert, a sinner of the flesh, living in a morally bankrupt world that badly needs saving. He could feel better about himself if his books were a crusade of the soul. But I do not believe there is such a thing as a soul. I've never seen one, never had one described to me—its dimensions, shape and colour. No doctor has held up an x-ray of one before my eyes and pointed to where it is sited in the brain or lower down in the body.

Some psychiatrists have taken to encouraging patients to write about their lives as a means of rooting out the effects of trauma within: a family horror, a relationship gone bad. Perhaps the theory is that by re-imagining and even dramatising the event torturing them, and exhausting what powers of expression the patients have for describing that trauma, they empty out all memory of the dark and let in the light. That might be of use to someone new to the writing game. But all writers I know have spent their adult life in service of the 'craft or sullen art' as Dylan Thomas called literature, [and] are more likely to be aiming at creating a masterpiece than receiving a health-giving physic.

I have written two volumes of memoir and many an autobiographical poem collected into two volumes. These works amount to family portraiture. An insular family, an increasingly discordant trio, with my mother: a materialistic social climber, increasingly unstable emotionally, severe in her judgments of others but without a jot of serious self-reflection. My father, a bit the same with a manly charm about him. Me, by turns in the thrall of both of them, and smothered by them, wayward, pathetic. The books' themes are common themes: human vanity, pretension, greed, mean-spiritedness, cowardice, racism, the farce of material ambition and, of course, the strut of pride. People presume there is something really bugging me that I should have written unsentimentally about this family. Some have called my work cruel. That's when the catharsis question comes up.

But simply saying, 'No, there was no catharsis in writing these books' does not tell the full story. For there is a sensation that is not catharsis, but is distantly related to it. Let's call it consolation. Consolation that the experiences of my past, and the important people in it, have not been lost to time, but preserved on the page. Not that those experiences or people are all that remarkable. Quite banal, often. When life is being lived, it may

comprise a very ordinary series of events to the people living it. But when stages of it are rebuilt in prose form or in a poem, something happens, especially if the builder has taken care to create a style of written language that suits the story being told because it has the mimetic thrust that is true to [the] life of the people portrayed.

For me, there is a certain moment of realisation that my entire existence has been justified because I'm convinced I have created a particular paragraph, or line, or phrase that has caught perfectly in the language's light a moment of personal history, a description of a person or animal I have loved or hated, a windy landscape or fleck of the foam in the sea. It is satisfying to the ego. It perhaps amounted to little more than a morning's work at my desk, but the pleasure of it, the sense of achievement is disproportionately immense. A sort of fellowship with timelessness is experienced in the very act of writing. It has put order, delight and sense of purpose into the day.

But let's not forget the downside of that fellowship. When the day's writing is a poor effort and no perfect light has come, the feeling of failure, of disappointment, is crushing to the will and one's measure of self-worth. All other activities, all friends and any lover must be ignored until better writing is done, and the delight of the fellowship is experienced once again. I recently wrote in an essay for the journalists' trade publication, *The Walkley Magazine*,

Nothing shrinks you away from the world like memoir. All the world is you. There is only the history of yourself. A history book is a blank bit of stone about unimportant others. The future is of no consequence. It will contain what it always has—taxation, interest rates, podgy criminals, bombs, disasters. The future is not you. You and it have no connection.

Self-obsessive? Yes. And, I'm sure, quite repulsive in a grown man. In the *Walkley* essay, I explained myself this way: 'I've simply felt more curious to keep delving, detailing and paying grudging homage to the farce of folk aspiring to fit into, and glean status from, the society they inhabit.' Why I choose me and my family as the examples to explore my themes is to me obvious: expediency. It's the one group of people I most intimately and

complicatedly know. ‘An inexhaustible number of narratives, images, conceits, conflict right there inside your skin.’

But there is the risk of recriminations. Not from my father. He was dead before the books were published. My mother was far gone with Alzheimer’s. Reading, never an interest for her, was now completely beyond her. But recriminations from readers who think I should have more respect for the ideal that some things are better left unsaid. Why concentrate on the negative or off-putting characteristics of people, of life itself, especially when enlisting my own kin in the work?

Would I have published my series of autobiographical works had my parents been up to reading them? Yes. Would I have had some explaining to do? I expect so. I would have told them pretty much what I’ve just outlined from that magazine piece, and a little more besides to justify myself and win them over.

I would have told them about a gay man who once was my friend who got me to read his new novel. In it, characters at one point have gay sex. ‘What did you think of it?’ he asked me, desperate for praise. I carefully explained that I thought the book had good bits (a lie to spare his feelings) but that the sex part was so twee and unexplicit, why bother to have it at all: lots of heavy panting and soft-porn allusions to moist manhood in an act of pleasure.

‘I don’t want to upset my mum,’ he said, defensively.

Surely he could have beseeched his mother, ‘You wouldn’t want me being coy, would you? You’d want me to have some gumption and tell it like it is, whether it offends you or anyone else?’ What grown-up allows their mother to be chief censor!

It would have certainly crossed my parents’ minds that I had committed a betrayal of them having exposed them to the literary light. Not a sweet thought to be considered a betrayer of your loved ones. Not an easy thing to convince them, or anyone else, that you can write dispassionately about your loved ones—‘cast a cold eye’, as Yeats put it—and still hold them to your heart as loved ones.

Maybe I have broken faith with my loved ones, transgressed. I have ceased being troubled by the notion. The idea of the importance of family is elevated in our culture to such a priority of what it is to be human, it becomes just another form of authoritarianism. We are measured as a good or bad person by how much we nurture the sanctity of family and that extended family called friends. But this measure can be the velvet bully that manipulates and controls our emotions, our thoughts, the direction of our life.

Usually it's the Church or the State out to censor people. In our culture, it is the feelings of others. Regard for someone's feelings are our church, our people's republic. Family members are our emperors and presidents, our popes and archbishops curbing our appetites and instincts. The family home is our proud nation to be quarantined from criticism at all costs. A writer in our culture is expected to promote family, do public relations for this regime called life.

Quite intimidating, all this, when you come to [put] pen to paper. No wonder people write fiction.