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Writing Under the Influence: The Scholarly Writer at Work

The deepest and eternal nature of man, upon whose evocation in his hearers the poet is accustomed to rely, lies in those impulses of the mind which have their roots in a childhood that has since become prehistoric.

—Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, p. 247)

Poets tend to think of themselves as stars because their deepest desire is to be an influence, rather than be influenced, but even in the strongest, whose desire is accomplished, the anxiety of having been formed by influence still persists.

—Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (1975, p. 12)

Freud is alluding to Homer in the passage above, as he does a number of times in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Using scenes from *The Odyssey* and examples of his own anxiety dreams, Freud is analyzing “feelings of being inhibited, of being glued to the spot, of not being able to get something done” (p. 238), the kind of anxiety that is also the subject of this paper, which explores an aspect of scholarly writing and publishing that paralyzes many authors. Here is what they say about their struggles to write under the influence of intellectual predecessors as well as of the ghosts of personal and familial histories: “It’s all been said before.” “I’m sure someone has already written about this.” “I have an idea, but I’m not even sure where I learned it.” “How do I get started on a list of references?” “Who am I to be writing about_____?” “Who wants to hear from me?” It sometimes seems to me—as a college professor of writing and literature, a psychoanalytic scholar, and a clinician who specializes in writing impasses—that I spend my entire day listening to this catalogue of crippling concerns and anxieties.

Because writers come to me for help not when their writing is going well, but when it isn’t, they have a lot to teach

other writers. Something, or someone, is holding them back, keeping them in place, muting their voices, but it isn't only the authors they have studied in school. When I ask these writers to tell me more about their fears, they recall the words of past teachers who have summed up, as if once and for all, writer and writing: "Messy and all over the place." "Disappointing." "Robotic and emotionless; it's like you don't care." "Unreadable." "This is your worst work," and this chilling suggestion, "Drop out." These memories—shared by freshmen preparing their first college research paper, graduate students completing dissertations, and professors who have been encouraged to transform a well-received conference presentation into a journal article—have taught me that writing inhibitions do not discriminate on the basis of age, experience, or discipline. This is why, in composing the opening to this paper, I sometimes found myself performing the subject of my inquiry.

As I sought to find a place in a conversation that dates back to ancient Greece, I turned to Harold Bloom, who uses Freud, one of the central "theorists of *influence*, of the giving that famishes the taker" (p. 11), to propose that poetry "comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead" (p. 9). Bloom and Freud leave a legacy of insights into the creative process and the unconscious dimensions of fiction-writing, but what about the intellectual and psychological challenges that writers of scholarly books and academic papers encounter? Is there useful insight for them in the shadows of this research and theorizing about literature? Yes and no. Because their rigorous training in critical thinking, research, and argument often omits the psychological obstacles and challenges they might encounter, academic and scholarly writers must wrestle with the usual trials of writing as well as challenges exacerbated by the competitive pressures of intellectual public discourse and publishing. Left to fend for themselves, many of these writers are confused when they struggle to begin, sustain, or complete projects, or when professors, conference organizers, and journal editors—the gatekeepers of the public spaces of specialized knowledge—seek evidence that their submissions demonstrate knowledge of previous histories of an argument as well as present-day publication trends. Pressures to defer to

traditions and comply with trends thus compete with expectations to speak up and stand out, leaving writers vulnerable to regressive pulls, fragmentation, conscious reluctance, unconscious resistance, and all manner of writing impasses.

Obstacles can occur at any stage of the writing process and for many different reasons, some unique to an author's personal history and psyche, others reflecting the larger social and political contexts of publishing and the recognition that comes from it. But the struggle to manage influence—of one's predecessors as well as of one's own original and perhaps disruptive thinking—often stops the writing process altogether. These impasses are not fleeting difficulties but sometimes entrenchments so debilitating that some writers end up sitting on the sidelines of public discourse indefinitely. This is a serious problem when writing is mandatory (think of the required essays of undergraduate education, doctoral dissertations, or the graduation papers candidates are required to complete before they are certified as analysts). When it comes to writing under the influence, the writers who inspire this paper are on the verge of giving up; they have intriguing ideas, but easily lose track of the value of their own thinking or ambition. Haunted, sometimes hounded, by critical voices, these writers feel diminished rather than supported by the weight of their ancestors, whose legacies can leave writers worried that they have little to add to the public spaces of their disciplines, or that they are developing nothing more than ideas borrowed from another. Because "acknowledgement of influence potentially diminishes the uniqueness and value of the writer's contributions" (Slochower, 1998, p. 334), the very writers we admire can cast big shadows, as if there were only room for one generation at a time. Thus, what expands our minds can also sometimes make us feel small, contingent, mere imitations of our forebears.

The development of my own thinking has been no exception. I conceived of this paper under the influence of a number of theorists, a process rendered transparent here in order to normalize the productive and disempowering effects of intellectual and familial influences. For example, while researching this paper, I remembered an essay by Neil Barwick (2003) that applies object relations theory to research into

undergraduate and graduate student writing anxieties. In an analysis I had very much admired when I first encountered it years ago, Barwick proposes that essay anxiety can be attributed in part to the psychological challenges of encountering texts and voices that fill us up but also make us feel small. After he acknowledges what he has learned from Ronald Britton, whose paper on “Publication Anxiety” (1994) discloses its debt to Bloom, Barwick admits:

My awareness of such a debt is a cause of both anxiety and consolations: consolation in that, having a good role model to draw on, I do not feel so out on a limb; anxiety because I find myself fearing the humiliation I may receive for seeking, by fair means or foul, to possess knowledge already possessed. (2003, p. 66)

Britton’s and Barwick’s papers not only apply Bloom’s paradigm but also reveal the side-effects of writing under his influence, something I also experienced when I conceived of the purpose of this paper, which seeks to contribute something of value to their conversations by applying psychoanalytic theories to writing about writing.¹ My title thus makes room for both of us by using Bloom’s ideas about poetic tradition to explain the conscious procedures and unconscious dimensions of scholarly writing, and by linking his theorizing to the voices of actual writers who have either found ways to overcome the weight of influences or have been done in by them.

This psychoanalytic examination of the influences of past intellectual legacies and traditions, as well as of familial memories and sometimes buried histories, is intended to speak to scholars and other academic writers so they are better able to understand why they may feel immobilized when they are completing the very kinds of writing tasks they were trained to execute.² In the first section, I look at psychoanalytic discussions of the psychology and politics of writing and publishing, using the methods of close textual analysis to identify the intellectual maneuvering that marks the theoretical genealogies of scholarship. Reading between the lines of this manifest level of scholarly writing reveals the deeper and more personal dimen-

sions of scholarship explored in part two of this paper, which examines case studies and histories of some of the writers I have interviewed, many of their narratives containing traces of earlier ghost stories that feature family members, teachers, journal editors, and childhood memories of competition and achievement, being special, having a voice, speaking out, speaking up, and being heard.

Finding a Place in the Conversations of Academic Discourse

Homer helped me begin to understand what it means to have a scholarly intellect that is nurtured, filled, contained, or deflated by figures from the past who cast big shadows. In Book 11 of *The Odyssey*, a weary Odysseus has been advised to visit the House of Death, where a heart-wrenching, sometimes terrifying parade of the “ghosts of the dead and gone” (lines 41–42) emerges —bereft lovers, embattled warriors, some still bleeding from their fatal wounds. All have tales of pain, grief, anger, regret, and also warnings which he must convert into wisdom that he will bring back to the world of the living. His questions answered, some mysteries solved, and unfinished business settled, Odysseus gets back on track, his assignment to research, listen, and learn from ghosts, an influence transmitted through my association to it, serving as both a metaphor and a performance of my subject matter,

Freud also wrote under the sway of Homer’s “wretched and forlorn” Greek warrior (1900, p. 246), his associations and theorizing about exhibition and inhibition often taking him back to the war hero, who has been sidelined and is unable to move forward until he has journeyed back into his past, assigned a “driven errand to bring back news to the self and subsequent generations” (Tillman, 2016, p. 548). Homer, epic poet and predecessor of all those who write, seems to offer a kind of intellectual and writerly home for Freud as he develops a theory central to psychoanalysis: the “wishes of the past which have been abandoned, overlaid and repressed” are “not dead in our sense of the word but only like the shades in the *Odyssey*, which awoke to some sort of life as soon as they had tasted

blood” (p. 249). It’s as if the same ghosts educating Odysseus are also communicating with Freud when he proposes that “unconscious wishes are always on the alert, ready at any time to find their way to expression when an opportunity arises for allying themselves with an impulse from the conscious” (p. 553). Reading *The Odyssey* confirms that consolidation, reintegration, and innovation can follow from disorienting regressions or reunions with the dead, and also might have mirrored back to Freud something about writing, that is, about how to read the past in order to write something that will be read in the future.

The connection between scholarly writing and Odysseus’s journey had initially seemed a bit tangential in my ruminations, but because I believe this kind of associative wandering and wondering often carries our most formative influences, I lingered on Freud’s intermingling of itinerant warriors turned back before they can get home, anxiety dreams, and psychoanalytic theorizing until I remembered that Hans Loewald (1980) also referenced Odysseus’s recognition that the mysterious dead who used to haunt him can become ancestors who sustain and support him: “Those who know ghosts tell us that they long to be released from their ghost life and laid to rest as ancestors,” Loewald leans on Homer to claim. “As ancestors they live forth in the present generation with their shadow life” (1980, p. 249). When Loewald describes the unconscious as “a crowd of ghosts” haunting the patient until, in “the daylight of analysis the ghosts of the unconscious are laid to rest as ancestors whose power is taken over and transformed into the newer intensity of present life” (p. 249), his paper performs what it theorizes. Loewald believes that in the “process of becoming and being an adult, significant emotional ties with parents are severed” (1979, p. 756), a psychological murder I suggest is related to scholarly writing and publishing. Interestingly, Loewald’s paper begins with a case illustration of a patient unable to complete his thesis, whose “originality” as well as the “murderous impulses and fantasies it aroused” left him feeling “responsible for a crime” (p.756). If analysis helped Loewald’s patient to complete the writing in time, his patient’s struggles with writer’s block may be said to have facilitated Loewald’s own thinking and writing, which finds in Odysseus’s encounter with the dead an explica-

tion of how adult life, relationships, and achievements depend on the presence of ancestors of all sorts.

The intellectual heritage of Homer taken up by Freud and Loewald exemplifies what Thomas Ogden (2006) characterizes as the “fundamental human tasks entailed in growing up, growing old, and in between the two, managing to make something of one’s own that succeeding generations might make use of to create something unique of their own” (p. 651). This is how legacies of all sorts are passed on, as Ogden dramatizes when he identifies Loewald’s reconceptualization of Freud’s theory as a major contribution to the history of psychoanalytic thinking. Reading Loewald reminds Ogden that “no generation has the right to claim absolute originality for its creations” (p. 653). Just as “what we do manage to create that bears our own mark will enter the pool of collective knowledge,” so those who inherit knowledge can become ancestors to succeeding generations (Ogden, 2006, p. 654). Freud honors Homer, and Ogden rereads Loewald; the arc of influence is always being altered so that new authors can exert their own influence in turn. And as I hope to show in this section, with the help of writers who think and write about their writing, the capacity to lift and transmit intellectual legacies can be enabled or disabled by the weight of early familial influences.

Journal orientations and readership represent potential membership or exclusion; publication platforms audiences are important, and this means that theoretical affiliations must be chosen and managed by the writer and made clear to readers. As many of the papers I examine in this section show, when schools of thought and paradigms become a kind of family, the straightforward procedures of scholarly writing can awaken early childhood memories and messages. Scholars working assiduously to identify their thinking with a particular orientation, fitting in with one group while standing outside of another, find their own individual and familial histories intersecting with the broader dynamics of cultural movements and theoretical trends. As Britton argues, the clinical or scholarly author will inevitably feel divided between the “urge to communicate a novel idea to a receptive audience, thus winning their allegiance,” and the opposing “wish to say something to

bind the author to his affiliates and ancestors” (1994, p. 1215). Riccardo Steiner (1999) also employs the language of family to argue that the creative personality has a “need to choose his own heroic parents,” parents, teachers, mentors or scholars who help develop a “heroic self.” In order to surpass those who shaped them, children introject, without feeling intimidated by, the parents they idealize, who in turn idealize their progeny’s talents, so that they can later take in the heroes of a particular culture or set of traditions. As an example, Steiner relates how he “consciously, or even less consciously, borrows, absorbs, con-forms to, trans-forms, or de-forms, the words” (p. 711) of Hannah Segal, one of his cultural heroes.

Slochower (1998) draws upon object relations theory to explain the psychic mechanisms of these affiliations. In order to calm the kinds of anxieties of influence I am considering in this paper, writers retreat to a protective self-state that makes it possible to establish an enabling rather than debilitating relationship to what Slochower terms “a powerful psychoanalytic parent who bolsters and strengthens the writer’s own voice” (p. 342); these “idealized theoretical ‘parents’” later facilitate access to supervisors or writing groups. Like so many of the authors I reference here, Slochower also uses her own writing process to illustrate, revealing how she nurtured “an illusion of certainty about my own work [...] whereby I was able to feel out the edges of my own thoughts more fully because I temporarily excluded self-doubt and uncertainty” (p. 343). By imagining herself as the equal of an admired or idealized predecessor like D. W. Winnicott, Slochower gains access to a temporary experience of grandiosity that cushions against “the unconsciously wished-for *and* feared destruction of, or challenge to, the parental object or sibling” (p. 336). Leaning on Winnicott’s theoretical support helps Slochower not only to discover the edge or boundary between her thinking and his but also provides something of value to her readers who seek ways to join the conversation Slochower continues.

The sublimated elegance of Slochower’s differentiation and boundary-setting can feel inspiring or intimidating for writers having difficulties finding a place for their insights in the intergenerational histories of academic discourse. It’s hard

for inexperienced or conflicted writers to know what conversations to enter and how, and who is being addressed, debated, or displaced, which is one reason why the writing process can fall apart just when writers must make a case for what's new and why it is worthy of joining what has been said before. When scholars like Steiner or Britton quote or parse a major voice or theorist, they are doing what they are expected to do: offering evidence of deep and wide knowledge of a discipline, and this requires, as anyone who has written a doctoral thesis will recall, consuming massive amounts of literature without becoming consumed by everything read. Those who have struggled to complete the research phase of a dissertation, the literature review section of a journal article, or their own opening paragraphs which must convince readers of the value of their intellectual contribution might more easily recognize themselves in Lewis Aron's admission that "when writing a paper, I need to spend time thinking through the topic as if I were going to rethink all of psychoanalysis. I need to allow myself the phantasy that I can play with the entire system of psychoanalysis and not just with the isolated piece of it" (1995, p. 196). Aron's grandiose phantasy temporarily inflates self and project, and enables him to begin thinking, theorizing, and writing. As Aron makes clear, writing requires audacity; and by sharing with readers how he experiences the weight of his many influences, Aron leaves traces of the battles that preceded, and perhaps facilitated, his thinking, his thesis, his authority to re-shape the discourse.

"Why would anyone begin a psychoanalytic paper with a disclaimer renouncing claims for originality?" (p. 653), Ogden (2006) asks in his re-assessment of Loewald, who seems initially to counter Aron's big claims by admitting many "views expressed in this paper have been stated previously by others" (1980, p. 222). Since some of Freud's "classical formulations" no longer "reflect our present understanding" and require "a fresh look" (pp. 222-3), Loewald will not only revise Freud's formulations about transference but also leave traces of a story about Loewald reading his precursor as a way to demurely re-write Freud at the same time he writes himself into the discourse. Every time Loewald situates his innovations in the context of Freud's work, which is often quoted extensively—as if the pas-

sages from Freud's various papers literally provide a holding environment for Loewald's own developing ideas—the ghost of Freud, transformed into a supportive ancestor, makes way for Loewald's new analysis, which goes to the deepest unconscious dimensions of formative influences: the mother-infant relationship. Just as the environment begins to take shape in the experience of the infant, so the infant gains shape within the context of that environment, a lifelong process of development and unfolding that, I am suggesting, is a blueprint for later adult experiences of the containing and generative functions of intellectual precursors.

To illustrate, we can look at how Freud's thinking is the setting for Loewald's own intellectual unfolding, seen in his editorial choices about quoting and paraphrasing. In an effort to explain how an analyst works with transference distortions, for example, Loewald paraphrases Freud's paraphrase of Leonardo da Vinci's distinction between sculpting and painting, that is, between taking away to reveal a form and adding paint to create one. Just as the analyst keeps the "true form" of the patient in mind, "holding it in safe keeping" (1980, p. 226) so mothers do for their infants. Freud's thinking has become the raw material out of which Loewald sculpts or shapes his own intellectual creations. The content of Loewald's paper, which is about how we rely on the receptivity and containment of a mature other as we develop, mirrors the processes of constructing the paper. And what Loewald does to and for Freud, other scholars have done to and for Loewald, whose influence dramatizes one of the paradoxes of scholarly authority; though we do not give birth to ourselves, we must find our own ways to authorize ourselves to think and write.

To show how writing depends upon both demolishing and revising or resurrecting our progenitors, I will examine two papers that perpetuate Loewald's branch of thinking. Both are explicit in their intentions to maintain Loewald's status in the field of psychoanalytic theory, their choices to self-disclose demystifying what is really required of the scholarly writer at work. Stephen Mitchell's (1998) "reader's guide" to the "power and breadth" of Loewald's important but challenging writing begins with two revealing stories about origins. In the first, Mitchell

explains how the Big Bang exploded the “primal density” of the universe into its “differentiated and bounded entities” (p. 825). In the second, Mitchell recounts how Loewald, whose father died when his mother was pregnant with him, was “born into his mother’s grief,” which, like the Beethoven sonatas she played to calm her mourning, served as a primordial unity from which the infant Hans had to begin to separate. These two narratives also dramatize the intention of Mitchell’s essay, which sets out to explicate Loewald’s challenging, often misunderstood, and therefore, sometimes ignored theories. Because Loewald used the dense language of psychoanalysis, it is difficult, Mitchell acknowledges, for modern readers to appreciate the “radical nature” (p. 828) of his thinking, and the very real ways that Loewald revised Freud. By re-reading Loewald in a way that differentiates him from Freud, Mitchell makes sure Loewald’s influence endures.

Loewald’s readers often mistake him for being more Freudian than he actually is, a misreading Mitchell hopes to correct by pointing out Loewald’s distinctions between pre-verbal and verbal stages of development. The mother’s words, Mitchell quotes Loewald to clarify, bathe the infant in sounds and feelings that remain linked to later more mature secondary processes. To illustrate, Mitchell turns to something his one-year old daughter said when he was reading Loewald. Rather than translate her sounds into adult-sounding words, Mitchell, with Loewald’s help, started “to mimic her way of talking” in order to affirm her “vitality and sensuous playfulness” (1998, p. 833). In this moment in Mitchell’s paper, Loewald’s ideas provide a supportive holding environment for Mitchell’s fathering so that he can provide the same to his daughter. This father-daughter story about maintaining a “life-enriching link between past and present” (p. 834) and between adult and infantile experiences is also evidence of Mitchell’s own vital link to his psychoanalytic precursor. By including a brief story about becoming a better father in an essay in which its author is being the good son to his intellectual father, Mitchell maps two overlapping intellectual and familial legacies, a theoretical son of Loewald becoming a parent who fathers a published essay. Rather than find new words to convey new insights, Mitchell notes how

Loewald “nestles his innovations carefully within the old words, giving birth to new meanings while attempting to preserve resonances with a deep past” (p. 837). Once again, the words and ideas of both progenitor and progeny combine to form a sustaining environment out of which something new is born. When Mitchell quotes Loewald’s allusion to Odysseus’s visit to the kingdom of the dead (p. 849), Mitchell evokes the spirits of both Freud and Homer, and thus exemplifies the profound connection between the dead and indebtedness, a reminder of what we owe to those who come before us.

Nancy Chodorow (2003) also focuses on the consequences of failing to acknowledge one’s theoretical influences in a paper that seems driven by oedipal conflicts. According to Chodorow, there are many Loewaldians who may not even know it. To correct this kind of historical amnesia, Chodorow explicates some of Loewald’s key contributions, thus gently schooling a new generation of readers and clinicians about the dangers of erasing the contributions of one’s heritage. Chodorow believes that autonomy comes from a psychic murder of the parents, “an oedipal emancipation necessary to individuation” (p. 908). “The crime of internal parricide generates guilt, and, in turn, a central part of agency is atoning for the damage we have done in separating and creating our own lives” (p. 909). Like Slochower, Chodorow unveils the mechanisms of scholarly writing and publishing as if to uncover the kind of guilt driving processes of generating theories, writing, and publishing. Writing her paper was a “personal project” growing out of “a private passion,” whose “undifferentiated, magical-evocative, primary-process form” had to be transformed into the “public secondary-process reasoning” (p. 899). As Chodorow’s reader, I am left to imagine that Loewald’s is not the only ghost she encounters in the intrapsychic realm that gives birth to thought, knowledge, self-expression, and self-promotion.

Chodorow learned from Loewald that there is “a lifelong oscillation between undifferentiated, oedipal and post-oedipal, secondary-process, ego-autonomous forms of existence and thought, and merged, pre-oedipal, primary-process, non-linguistic forms” (2003, p. 905). This oscillation also marks her paper, which explicates and dramatizes Loewald’s notion

that the past can nourish and enliven the present. Chodorow also cites Loewald's "famous analogy" (p. 906) about ghosts becoming ancestors, but I want to call attention to her writerly choices about her paraphrasing Loewald's most challenging quotations. Chodorow reverses the order of progenitor and offspring by mingling her words with Loewald's in a way that sets in motion a re-birth of Loewald's theories, whose importance is reinforced by what she admits are her "extensive quotes" (p. 911), which imply that Loewald lives on in part because of Chodorow. The choice to paraphrase rather than quote is not a simple or concrete decision, but rather, becomes one means by which an author registers and re-constructs his or her relationship to the past (something true of my paper as well, which reviewers noted does not paraphrase enough). Chodorow's choices contain clues about not only *what* Chodorow is saying about psychoanalytic theory but also *how* she is acting upon that history. A quotation privileges the precursor's words, as I was trained to do as a literary critic, while a paraphrase might be read as a sign that she has subordinated Loewald's ideas to her own, a relationship reinforced by Chodorow's decision to begin her paper with a quotation not from Loewald's writing but from her own *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989), a reminder of her own position in the larger conversations of psychoanalytic theory.

Mitchell and Chodorow exemplify what Ogden concludes about reading Loewald: the "reader has to do a good deal of thinking for himself in order to make something of his own with the ideas Loewald is presenting" (2006, p. 654). Chodorow's paper is evidence of this kind of labor, which she elected to make transparent, her processes of assimilation and identification providing in turn her readers with a language and vocabulary for her rhetorical strategies and judgements. Chodorow's intermingling of the words of Loewald as father with the newer thinking of a daughter is one example of how a writer's receptivity to influence must eventually develop into an authority to exert influence in turn. Slochower claims there is an "act of parricide" (1998, p. 336) at the heart of all scholarship, but this branch of the family tree of Loewald's legacy looks less like the scene of a crime and more like a veneration and

memorialization of the dead that generates new thinking and writing. Loewald's legacy is "never destroyed or demolished," but rather, "unsettles everything it touches in a vitalizing way" (Ogden, 2006, p. 654).

David Tuckett (1995) complicates some of the challenges Mitchell and Chodorow navigate when he proposes that scholars must not only chart a course through weighty and diverse intellectual legacies but they must also do so without losing sight of relationships with colleagues and institutional affiliations. Also perhaps echoing *The Odyssey*, Tuckett posits "two principal dangers through which, like the navigator faced with Scylla and Charybdis, our psychoanalytic discourse must travel" (p. 653): the Scylla of "authoritarianism and absolutism" that seeks evidence of "religious" devotion to "schools of thought and dogmatic reliance on ancestors and texts" (p. 654) and the Charybdis of "relativism and 'anything goes'" (p. 654) that leads to a loosening of editorial standards and scientific rigor. Though Tuckett is addressing psychoanalytic publishing, I believe his argument about the kinds of tensions—between originality and innovation and a commitment to "solidify group feeling" through references to "sacred" texts and a "dogmatic reliance on ancestors" (p. 654) applies to scholars of other disciplines and methods. Rigorous peer review procedures enforcing methodology and argument, Tuckett argues, can generate "informed consensus" (p. 654), a scholarly procedure and ideal represented in the different ways that writers like Loewald, Ogden, Mitchell, and Chodorow reconcile deep and wide knowledge of previous intellectual traditions with a willingness to go out on a limb with one's thinking.

But has tracing this branch of the psychoanalytic family tree of theorizing taken us too far afield from the writers' voices with which I began this paper, writers who do not yet feel up to the obstacles Tuckett names, who are more unsettled than they are invigorated by their influences? These writers want to excel, but they often are wrestling with familial legacies and personal histories that make it difficult for them to take on, with confidence and intellectual clarity, the powerful authorities and foundational thinkers in their disciplines. Any examination of the unconscious obstacles to scholarly writing and publishing needs to include their voices. Freud, Loewald, Ogden,

and others unveil the unconscious work that goes into good scholarship, but these authors have found ways of identifying familial messages without subjecting themselves to them, thus converting their ghosts into ancestors.

However polished the marks of influence are in the published papers above, the personal disclosures of Mitchell and Chodorow hint that they too are engaging in what Madelon Sprengnether (1993) characterizes as “Ghost Writing,” a phrase she explains by looking back on her personal history and academic training to discover that her scholarly writing had been “haunted or shadowed from the moment of its creation by a kind of ghost” (pp. 87–8). Though graduate school facilitated the completion of her dissertation, Sprengnether encountered “severe writing problems” (p. 89) soon afterward. As a result of these struggles, she began to notice connections between “the works I chose to write about” and “issues with which I was wrestling personally” (p. 90). Sprengnether overcame her impasse; however, many of the writers who seek my help find this difficult to do—especially when they encounter the elegant prose and deft theoretical negotiations of scholars such as Ogden or Chodorow, negotiations so subtle they might be missed, the work that goes into constructing them idealized and thus mystified. This is why some writers end up feeling excluded rather than invited in by the larger-than-life voices in their fields. A freshman writing his or her first college-level research essay might feel understandably and perhaps appropriately humbled and immobilized when encountering what they experience as the giants of academic discourse. But I work with adult writers and seasoned professionals who, though they have promising ideas they want to bring to the public spaces of their fields, are still fighting to convert their ghosts into generative ancestors. As I will show below, when it comes to academic publishing, it seems there is no escaping family, and this can be good or bad news.

Familial Ghosts and Influences

The personal histories in this section dramatize the kinds of shadows cast by unrealized parental ambitions, unmourned

loss, and other anxieties related to competition and rivalry. Blurred boundaries between old and new, tradition and innovation, parent and child, past and present, in turn, make it difficult for writers to disentangle voices from their familial past from those of later teachers, intellectual mentors, and journal editors. Some of the family histories that follow were reported in the context of published scholarly papers, by authors who have not only found ways to step outside of the shadows cast by experts in their fields but who have also named and thus muted the disabling voices from their own families. Other examples come from my interviews with writers who feel held back by the histories they shared with me, as if they are still living out “being nominated to carry and represent an anxiety on the parents’ behalf” (Fromm, 2012, p. xvii). Someone’s ambition or agenda is being served, but if it succeeds in stopping the writing process, it might hint at what Maurice Apprey identifies as an unconscious mission to execute “*a parental project that has already happened but was only lying in wait for its messenger(s)*” who are assigned a “*pluperfect errand of the unconscious in transgenerational haunting*” (2014).³ It’s as if a scholar’s solitary self-states of reverie and rumination can arouse intellectual or familial ghosts, who, like Odysseus’s family and colleagues in the underworld, are seeking opportunities to be heard and placated.

Some childhood experiences are formative without becoming disabling; early interpersonal dynamics come to shape a scholar’s discipline, methodology, or research topics. Sprengnether recalls her adolescent passion for Henry James, whose protagonists were “immersed in an ambiguous and confusing linguistic environment, requiring heroic efforts at interpretation,” a “familiar” world that “felt like my family, in which indirect discourse was the norm. I was used to translating what was said into what was meant” (1993, p. 94). A budding psychoanalytic literary critic is being cultivated in a context of deciphering underlining messages. In contrast, as Claire Kahane (2005) relates in a paper about the writer’s block she experienced while working on her doctoral dissertation on Flannery O’Connor, she choose to study “an author relatively few people in the academy knew at the time,” someone who wouldn’t “require years of research” (p. 441). Kahane’s plan

backfired. Thinking she had escaped from home by attending graduate school, she soon discovered she had “taken home with me—in all its tooth and claw” (p. 456), the overlapping narratives of O’Connor’s characters and Kahane’s childhood temporarily blocking completion of the program that would differentiate her from her family. Similarly, M. Gerard Fromm (2012) recalls listening to his mother hum a sorrowful melody, and recognizing her unspoken grief for the baby who died at two weeks of age, 18 months before his birth. Fromm realizes he “was given a mission born of trauma: my pre-natal identity,” one he fulfilled by “thriving” in all ways, including his “easy confidence that, for example, the Muse will show up in time for me to meet my writing deadlines” (2012, p. xvi).

Unresolved mourning also sometimes disrupts the writing process. Annie Sweetnam (2010) is stalled while drafting a paper that explored how “the struggle for new forms of aliveness necessitates continuously killing off our parents, but in so doing giving them new forms of life within us” (p. 1032). Wondering if her writing difficulties were related to the death of her father, she pauses her drafting and re-reads some of his writing, recalling watching him as a girl, “chortling to himself as he sat at his desk, scribbling away,” a supportive, encouraging image inspiring in her “a new identification with him as a writer” (p. 1038) whose words are actually quoted in her paper. When Stephen Bernstein (2008) notices that his writing “was becoming uncharacteristically slow and tortuous,” he initially blames fears “that the words of more senior analysts would drown my words out and that my ideas would not be heard” (p. 463). Feeling “pressured to complete my article before it was ready,” Bernstein eventually connects his block to his sadness about the impending death of his mother. Because she “had taught me to love and value words,” he recognizes he was struggling “to say everything, perhaps too many things. Maybe I was using the article as a goodbye gift” (p. 462). Writing and mourning have also become entangled in my own work. Raised by a mother who rooted for me but also envied my achievements, I was wrestling with the ending to a paper several years after her death. Once I could acknowledge how my own grieving process had shaped my thinking about literary theory and

mourning, I was able to finish the paper by mentioning the woman who never had the opportunity to go to college, thus memorializing her on the final page of a scholarly journal.

Inspired by what I was learning about the early development of scholars, several years ago I developed an informal writing exercise that invites undergraduates or members of my writing groups to re-create the typical family dinner table of their childhood. The scenes they narrate say a great deal about the heft of personal and cultural histories. As some of the examples suggest, powerful, formative, often unconscious messages are communicated in countless ways throughout childhood, perhaps so routine they go unnoticed, though they are easily awakened years later when writers seek to enter the intellectual conversations of academic discourse. Some recall spending their childhood quietly listening to dominating parents or older siblings, the divisions between speaker and audience often reinforcing gender lines or sibling roles (the achiever or the social one). In many families, the television is turned on during meals in the living room, countless opportunities lost to rehearse what will later evolve into the kinds of skills in discussion and debate so relevant to writing. Other writers tell me they took their seat at silent tables, even small talk stifled by the depression or exhaustion of parents. For some writers growing up, the conversations were political, the tone heated; family aggressions were displaced, but that meant there were often winners and losers in the public spaces of family life. When I first began assigning and reviewing these writing exercises, I was convinced of their importance, but I initially struggled (perhaps because of my own personal ghosts) to connect them to the kinds of writing impasses I was examining, and to ways children trained to sit silently and listen to the louder voices at the dinner table might unwittingly become authors of promising but unfinished writing. And since I am speaking of influence in this paper, it seems fitting that I acknowledge a salutary influence on my theorizing.

I developed parts of this paper as an Erikson Institute Visiting Scholar at the Austen Riggs Center in Massachusetts, an interlude of learning that deepened my thinking about the ghost stories I was so often hearing from students and scholars. A

psychiatric training hospital providing intensive psychotherapy, Riggs gathers extensive family histories to discover the “unfolding generational narrative” of patients’ symptoms (Fromm, 2012, p. xv), uncovering intergenerational family narratives that dramatize how “what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable – falls out of social discourse, but very often onto the next generation,” who might be “sent on an unconscious mission assigned by the preceding generation” (Fromm, 2012, p. xvi). While at Riggs, I attended many case conferences, which influenced how I understand the heavy burdens many writers find themselves carrying, leading me to speculate that familial messages about self-expression, and being heard and understood might also haunt and undermine those who need and want to produce scholarship. And though I am not suggesting that the struggles of writers are as dire or as debilitating as those of the patients at Riggs, the stories writers tell about their sometimes crippling efforts to write under inspiring or enervating influences of familial and educational histories signal the pervasive presence of the unconscious—always on the edges of our awareness, on the tips of our tongues, shaping interactions with mentors, teachers, and editors, and sometimes tipping the solitary states of reverie, ruminating, and composing into regression.

Reading theories about intergenerational transmissions of trauma brought into sharper focus how the parents of many of my students, perhaps unconscious of their own shame, traumas, or anxieties around being special or standing out, loom large in the recollections of writers schooled in grim predictions about their potentials or life scripts. Many parents, starting when their children are young and continuing even through their college years, take on competing roles of editor, teacher, and critic, subjecting the developing writer to obsessive, controlling surveillance, which one of my students eventually came to recognize impaired his capacity to get feedback from his college professors. Students of immigrants talk about age-inappropriate, unrealistic pressures to be perfect in all ways, including writing, each essay assignment perceived as a test that could not be passed of future talents and areas of specialization. Those who succeed sometimes feel they are paying for

their achievement in guilt. One academic writer I interviewed recalled her struggle to overcome guilt for being the “intellectual” in a family of hardworking “immigrants who were not highly educated,” while other writers feel guilty knowing that their parents do not have the education to understand their publications. They write and publish with intense ambivalence because they are more educated or accomplished than their parents, and this leaves them writing papers their fathers and mothers will never read or understand. Others feel they have won a secret battle in producing writing too complex to be understood by once-critical parents.

By the time someone leaves for college, families have conveyed countless messages about just how one’s time should be spent, often promoting the value of income over the rewards of being published in a prestigious journal. Messages about class aspirations or what gets defined as practical equate time spent with income earned, and can force the English major who loves to write to pursue the more practical, lucrative sciences. Many of the writers I have interviewed were raised by professional, intellectual, accomplished parents; however, sons and daughters of college professors or successful authors sometimes feel nearly paralyzed by a conviction that the generation that precedes them will never make room for new voices. One writer I interviewed, who writes about depression and trauma in her scholarship, grew up listening to her father, a professor with bitter stories about publishing and fame. This writer struggled to imagine a different outcome for her own writing, a feeling of futility confirmed by her experience that she has found her own ideas referenced by former teachers or mentors not in the body of their papers but buried deep in footnotes no one will read. Rather than feel acknowledged as a source of intellectual inspiration, this writer feels demoted to the basement of someone’s work, her father’s sour life-lessons proven right.

Academic institutions and other professional settings reinforce and even profit from these unconscious influences. Although college professors are pressured to publish at the same time they are expected to teach and serve on committees, writing and publishing can feel like narcissistic pursuits rather than altruistic contributions to one’s peers, field, or future readers. Academics who were taught the value of the

dollar by their working-class parents are willing to donate hours to their students or to committees on which they serve, but are unable to make time for what they fear is the selfishness or self-absorption of writing. For many of my academic colleagues, teaching, as long as it takes place in the classroom or during office hours, is valued in a way that leaves out how a well-researched, well-written journal article educates many minds. Teachers who offer extra office hours or take on the responsibilities of committee work, and clinicians who carry huge caseloads that leave no time for writing may be living out decades later old conflicts that leave them fantasizing about summer breaks or sabbaticals.

In my experience speaking with authors of all ages, these familial roles and values are often discounted, their connection to the writer's struggles minimized or missed altogether. Writers prefer to concretize their problems ("I've never been good at editing," "I am too repetitive") or to personalize their difficulties, blaming lack of talent or discipline for the obstacles they encounter. It is as if they would rather criticize themselves than understand who or what in their past histories might be standing in the way of the recognition that comes from publishing. Temporary roadblocks become permanent disabilities, change that comes from learning new writing skills seems impossible, and effort futile. Many of the stories I hear from writers are recalled in vivid detail, as if they had happened just days rather than decades ago. The son informed by his father that he couldn't write and would never learn how still speaks of that memory years later. These familial messages are reinforced later by high school teachers and college professors, whose seemingly omniscient foretelling shape life-changing decisions about college majors and later career paths. When college freshmen confess to me their wish to major in the liberal arts, I find myself in the middle, advocating ambitions rooted in desires that violate explicit parental prohibitions.

Although academic training in critical thinking, research methods, and argument might convince writers that familial influences and other unconscious messages about speaking up and standing out have no place in successful writing and publishing, those who study writing pedagogy and procedures are beginning to recognize how susceptible scholarly writers

are to preverbal, unconscious disruptions. As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, the containing effects of assignments, deadlines, requirements, and assessment-standards do not always inoculate scholars against the deepest dimensions of thinking, self-expression, and ambition. Writers engaged in the straightforward work of scholarship—identifying relevant research, choosing and annotating quotations, framing debates—may find it challenging to remain composed, confident, clear-headed. And as I hear so often from the writers who seek my help, wrestling with authority figures without losing one's own voice does not end with the research or annotation stages of a project, but rather, continues during the later stages of review, revision, and publication, which offer yet more occasions for regressed self-states that undermine the boundaries of self and authority. Criticism from those who wield authority over their writing echoes with forgotten messages from childhood, predictions and proscriptions about who gets to speak and whose sole job it is to listen quietly. How many writers are able to armor themselves against fears of being eaten alive by rejection letters, drowned in whirlpools of criticism from colleagues and readers, or attacked by journal reviewers? Writers who have learned to detect the presence of ghosts are better able to manage times when they find themselves flummoxed, slowed down, or arrested altogether. Those who cannot get their bearings during these impasses might find themselves failing to complete, revise, or even submit the important writing assignments upon which their academic or professional development depends, a serious problem when writing is not optional. Many of these writers end up blaming themselves or questioning the value of their own intellectual ambitions, leaving me to wonder whether the voices, perspectives, and perhaps field-shifting ideas of these incomplete projects will ever find public forums.

Conclusion

Psychoanalysis teaches by example; reading case studies provides “navigational aids” that help clinicians “help the patient to cease sailing in circles” (Schlesinger,1994, p.10),

something also true for writers, who benefit from the normalizing that comes from knowing how others experience the challenges of writing and publishing. I hope this paper will be useful in similar ways to anyone who works with writers or who wrestles with his or her own ambitions to be published. Authors willing to expose these intergenerational struggles in their writing are giving a gift to future scholars who can learn what it means—in theory and in practice—to be writing under the influence of those who come before us. Reports from actual writers about what really happens when they compose, revise, and submit not only suggest important links between writing—impasses and personal or familial legacies but also lift the veil that usually covers intensely private, hidden, mysterious, often shameful writing experiences and processes. Every writer's familial narrative is distinctive, and thus uniquely empowers or impairs his or her ambitions to have a voice in the public spaces of their disciplines, which is why I made sure to include in this paper such accomplished writers as Loewald, Ogden, and Chodorow, as well as the voices of those who read and emulate them but who also fear they will never measure up to them, as if consigned to remain ever the son or daughter and never the progenitor of new ideas.

“What happens,” Bloom (1975) asks, “if one tries to write, or to teach, or to think, or even to read without the sense of a tradition? Why, nothing happens, just nothing” (p. 32). But while intergenerational battles sometimes rigidify filial structures, making it difficult for new voices and thinking to sit alongside what came before them, figures from our pasts also enrich and invigorate. Thus, to Bloom's arguments about tradition, legacy, and its transmissions we must add Loewald's insights into the ways that our progenitors can haunt and daunt but also encourage and enable us. Achieved with early help from Homer and Freud, my synthesis of Bloom and Loewald, even the sentences constructed to convey it, represent my own hard-won contribution to our understanding of the conscious procedures and unconscious dimensions of scholarly knowledge. I believe I owe this self-disclosure to readers of this paper, to my students, and to the scholarly authors who seek my help, and who teach me so much in the process: A writer's psyche can often become less like a quiet space for deep thinking and

more like a war zone. One must be aware that ancient voices, bitter ancestors, and hungry ghosts will compete for attention with intimidating editors, envious colleagues, and supportive mentors invested in successes; otherwise, the kind of productivity that supports professional development and diverse public spaces for academic discourse will suffer.

Notes

1. For later iterations of Bloom's influence see Smith's "Creative Misreading: Why We Talk Past Each Other" (1997) *The Muse: Psychoanalytic Explorations of Creative Inspiration* (2017), and Annette Kolodny's "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts" (1980).
2. This paper is part of a larger research project that uses the voices of writers to explore when, how, and why the writing process breaks down at different stages of scholarly writing and publishing.
3. See for example Diane M. Hunter's "The Spanish Tragedy Redux" (2018) for a compelling account of how unconscious knowledge of murders in her family history came to shape her work as a scholar.

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