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Creative Writing and Poetry in Post-Conflict and Displacement Settings

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WHERE TO START

"Behind every beautiful thing, there's some kind of pain," from the 1997 Bob Dylan song "Not Dark Yet" hints at a notion that artistic expression is often associated with suffering or may even be born from pain. American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou's (2011) observation that "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" seems to take this notion further: not articulating suffering increases the anguish. In this chapter, the role of creative writing in working with young people who have experienced conflict and displacement is examined. The aim is to demonstrate how getting them to write, in particular to write poetry with its freedoms and constraints, can be a useful means to articulate their experiences and, by shaping these into a literary form, may help the emerging writers to rethink and reexamine what they have lived through, ideally with the possible aim of coming to terms with their story or, perhaps more realistically, of exploring ways that may lead toward some form of closure.

The questions this chapter addresses ultimately have their origin in 1996, in a creative writing workshop run by British poet Roger McGough, whose work I had always admired. I had never thought of myself as a poet manqué, but I was intrigued by the notion that creative writing might be something that can be taught. Unsure of whether I would be able to rise to the occasion, I went in as a reluctant writer and emerged from the workshop hooked, both on poetry as a genre for creative writing and on exploring pedagogical strategies that lead to the creation of texts that, at best, can make refreshingly original and enjoyable reading but that, at the very least, avoid the kind of hackneyed and clichéd writing that seems to be the hallmark of the uninspired dabbler. In the following semester I set up an experimental creative writing workshop in our English department, which has since become a regular fixture among the courses offered. This led to teacher training seminars on the use of creative writing in English as a Foreign Language classrooms and to workshops for students in Switzerland and abroad. As of 2000 I attended a number of writers' and teachers' conferences in Britain and the US, which not only proved a very useful platform

for picking up tricks of the trade but also made me aware of issues such as the relationship between dealing with sometimes painful experiences and writing about them.

The years since then have done nothing to dampen my enthusiasm about poetry or at seeing budding, sometimes reluctant writers develop their skills, which has probably fostered my tendency to walk into workshop situations that at the time made me wonder if I was really equipped to deal with them. Four workshops are discussed here: one on two balmy summer afternoons in the safe haven of Berne, where in a British Council workshop Swiss grammar school students came together to write alongside asylum seekers and refugees; one in the airless hall of a building pockmarked with bullet holes on the Miljacka River in Sarajevo; one in the bunker-like classroom of a New York high school, less than two years after 9/11 and about six hundred meters from ground zero; and, most recently, one in a rooftop café overlooking burgeoning, booming Kigali. Each of these left lasting impressions: sometimes it was the excitement of seeing extraordinary writing unfold with powerful emotions finding expression in simple words, and sometimes it was the experiences which participants brought to a workshop that made me question the value of my "aestheticizing" suggestions to shape their texts. Nevertheless, I hope that seeing how their memories took shape in their writing was as rewarding for the workshop participants as it was instructive to me.

Against this backdrop of facilitating (mainly poetry-focused) creative writing workshops and of following discussions about the value and purpose of writing for the individual, both in general and in post-conflict and displacement settings, I have become aware of a number of recurring issues that have influenced my approach but that are also central to the discussion in this chapter. These can be formulated as four questions:

1. How feasible and practicable is teaching creativity/creative writing?
2. Is writing with literary ambitions, in particular writing poetry, not too demanding/daunting a task for novice writers?
3. Related to this, how can they be encouraged to avoid the mannered language often associated with literary style and the clichéd writing alluded to in the previous question?
4. Last, what could be the outcome of their writing and what is its purpose?

In the present chapter, these four questions are addressed in turn. To begin with, in the following, relatively general section, to what degree teaching creativity or creative writing is possible is briefly demonstrated, and then the chances, the challenges, and the limitations inherent in focusing on poetry as an outcome of creative writing workshops are considered. The next section is more practically oriented, looking at how the "raw material" of personal experiences can be approached, and some strategies that have proved successful in shaping them into a (poetic) format are presented. In the last section, outcomes and the purpose of creative writing in post-conflict and displacement situations are considered by discussing aspects of what could be summed up as "literary quality versus personal catharsis," an issue, in my experience, quite regularly raised in debates among creative writing facilitators.

CREATIVITY, CREATIVE WRITING, AND THE CHALLENGES OF POETRY

One of the most basic questions, particularly outside the Anglo-Saxon world, where creative writing has no real tradition, is whether creativity can be taught at all. Clearly the answer has to be no: on cannot teach creativity as such, but it is possible to establish the conditions in which individuals can explore it (see Cameron 1995). In many cases, workshop participants may have started out, less than convinced, as I had been, that they would be able to rise to the challenge, but few occasions are as rewarding for a workshop moderator as seeing precisely those participants, given the right pedagogical conditions, discover their ability to juggle with words. It is similarly rewarding to witness that a writing workshop may be all that is needed for those lucky natural talents because it provides the opportunity and the freedom to explore their creative potential. Our work is therefore not so much about teaching students creativity as it is about establishing a setting favorable to writing creatively.

That notion that (literary) writing can be taught and improved through practice is borne out by the sizeable body of mainly English-language publications as well as existence of creative courses on all kinds of educational levels and for a wide range of audiences in English-speaking countries. In fact the wherewithal to write is one that many authors of writing manuals seem to view almost as a given. Mandy Coe and Jean Sprackland see it as "a birthright" that "belongs to everyone. By choosing to get involved in education work [writing teachers] are reaffirming what Alan Gibbons calls 'the notion of writing as an essentially democratic impulse, something that anyone can do and everybody should try' " (2005, 51).

This extends to the writing of poetry, a genre that is not entirely uncontentious: on one hand, most self-respecting teenagers have tried their hand at it at some stage; on the other hand, it is often considered the most demanding, concentrated, and complex form of writing. To examine this issue in detail would go beyond the scope of this chapter (for a more detailed discussion, see Andres Morrissey 2004, 2–4), but two quotes from different periods and backgrounds illustrate it quite aptly: eighteenth-century playwright and critic John Dennis's statement that "[p]oetry is the noblest of all Arts, and by consequence the most instructive and most beneficial to Mankind" (1704) and academic and teacher Helen Vendler's observation that because "poems

are short, they depend more on implication than longer works . . . do" and that consequently words in poetry have "to work harder" for their literary living (1997, 150). However, this need not deter anyone from trying his or her hand at poetry as the wealth of literature with advice about how to find inspiration for poems and insights into the composition of poetry shows (e.g., Brownjohn 1980; Wendt 1983; Whitworth 2001; Yates 1999).

One of the initial stumbling blocks, often addressed in these publications, may be that many potential writers are worried about being too conventional in their thinking and too limited in their imagination. Another obstacle may be finding a theme to write about. Many novice writers seem to associate poetry with important ideas and grand truths. This tends to lead to rather didactic and moralistic writing, sweeping in its themes. This demonstrates the need for a considered pedagogical approach to address such issues. For the first issue it is often useful to conduct warm-up activities that subvert conventional thinking and concepts and that create potentially nonsensical imagery to challenge the imagination. As far as finding a sensible theme or focus for a topic to write about is concerned, one of the most useful recommendations is by E. B. White (quoted in Bailey et al. 1998, 22): "Advice to young writers who want to get ahead without any annoying delays: don't write about Man, write about a man." This concept will be explored further in the following section.

What speaks for using poetry as a genre in workshops with a clear time limit is first and foremost that poems as texts are usually relatively short. Unlike a conventional-length short story (the exception being flash fiction), a poem, sometimes even more than one, can be completed within one session, at least in a fairly considered draft form. In addition, their conciseness also provides useful opportunity to dispel a notion which novice writers often tend to embrace, that what comes to you in a flash of creativity is an inspired, final product. The necessity to rework has been expressed famously by Horace: "If you want to write what's worth a second reading, / You must often reverse your stylus, and smooth the wax" (quoted in Kline 2005), and rather more drastically in "the first draft of anything is shit," usually attributed to Ernest Hemingway (see Sims 2009). Their relative brevity allows not only for composing one or several poems in one creative writing workshop session but also often leaves time to revise and redraft the initial text or texts. This may entail experimenting with different structures, sequences (or even selections) of ideas, text types and poetic forms to work towards the most effective text possible. All of this can happen within the same session.

A second advantage of poetry is that it affords a poet considerable freedoms, for instance, in terms of language, of sequences of ideas or events and of textual accessibility. This is not to say that these freedoms do not exist in other genres, but it could be argued that they are more pronounced in poetry. Thus, in a poem we are free to suspend or at least to bend rules of syntax with relative impunity, for example, if this benefits the impact of the text, writing an entire poem without verbs. In a prose text such a strategy can appear rather mannered. In the same way, to make a poem more effective, lines or stanzas can be shifted experimentally and with potentially greater freedom than tends to be possible with events in a narrative. And last, a poet can choose whether to make a poem relatively cryptic or unadornedly accessible. As Cliff Yates puts it "[t]he very elusiveness [of a poem] can be a pleasure" (1999, 42). I find clarity in a poem preferable, but opacity has its attractions: the subject matter might be less immediately distressing for a potential reader, but, more importantly, it might allow a writer to deal with a traumatic experience without necessarily opening old wounds. These freedoms, admittedly also open to writers of narratives or of dramatic texts, are perhaps more readily seen as genre conventions of poetry.

However, poetry is a well-suited form of writing in workshops not only because of these freedoms, but it also offers considerable leeway in the choice of focus. Given the conciseness of form, it needs to limit itself thematically. In keeping with the White quote earlier, an effective poem may use as its subject matter a single, stark element rather than trying to deal with the grand scheme of things. Often a poem is considerably more powerful if it concentrates on a possibly minute but telling detail rather than a more expansive presentation of the big issues, which may be more informative but tends to be less striking. Apart from the fact that in any genre the big picture is more difficult to present, if it is to do justice to the big issues in question, breadth may quite possibly dull a reader's perception where an effectively worked out, small aspect of the same big picture in the succinctness of a short poem quite possibly sharpens it.

Another important advantage of poetry is that it usually adheres to a certain form, even when a poem is apparently in free meter. There are ways in which rhetorical devices, rhythms, and intonations shape a poem, which can be a great help in developing its composition. This shaping of a poem works on at least two levels, firstly, in terms of the elements that would be highlighted, for instance by being repeated or by being prefaced with a recurring phrase. William Logan (1994) shows how the repetition of a concept or lexical item can be used to advantage in his classroom exploration of Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers," in particular the verb *sleep* in lines 14 through 26. A syntactic pattern recurring at the beginning of stanzas or lines, on the other hand, if chosen for its insistent, rhetorical or rhythmic quality may well help to structure a poem (Andres Morrissey 2001, 28), and act as a link for ideas that have arisen during a brain storming phase, for instance, on a mind map. Clearly, repetitions of key phrases often work very well in an unrhymed poem or in a speech (for instance, Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech), whereas in a written prose text, they can come across as stodgily monotonous and clumsy.

The reason why repetition tends to work well in poems and as a rhetoric device in speeches is, of course, that both are oral genres (even though poetry is usually encountered in written form). Sound is an essential feature

in poetry, be it in the form of meter, of alliteration, of assonance, of rhyme, and so on. Getting participants in a poetry workshop to read out their drafts (Coe and Sprackland 2005, 76), something perhaps not done often enough, can be a great help in composing or editing a poem, for instance, in choosing the wording. The focus on sound is also what links poetry to other, more overtly performance-oriented genres that work well for topics in post-conflict or displacement contexts, for instance, slam poetry and rap as well as songs, among others. In this sense poetry can work as a bridge between creative writing and performance, which in turn provides opportunities to publicize such post-conflict and displacement issues.

The freedoms that the genre entails reinforce the point made about the need to use the choices these freedoms afford to the best effect: the need for editing drafts. This makes the exercise of writing poetry an important tool in approaching the consequences of conflict and displacement experiences. Editing, for whatever purpose, always requires rethinking the subject matter; in the case of a text dealing with a problematic issue, such rethinking may well result in a more in-depth reflection of that issue. In this sense, writing and editing could conceivably also help the writer with coming to terms with an experience or at least a clearer understanding of it (see, e.g., Bolton et al. 2004; Schiffrin et al. 2010; Scurfield and Platori 2013). The issue of therapeutic writing is discussed in more detail in the section dealing with quality versus catharsis.

However, there are also pitfalls in using poetry as a potential outcome of a creative writing workshop. Poetry is often associated with rather specific expectations on the part of potential readership which often lead to what one could call "poeticisms." These manifest themselves mainly in two ways: one is what many novice writers consider the need for refined language, which almost inevitably sounds stilted. The other is a strong focus on elements seen as typical of poetry. Among these are random line breaks in free-meter poetry, perhaps meant to render a text more meaningful, or, one of the classic problems in my experience, the obsession with what British poet and director of NAWE (the National Association of Writers and Education) Paul Munden has described as "mindless rhyming" (personal communication). This can become a particular problem for second-language writers: what may sound to them like a perfectly good couplet often turns out to be either the timeworn rhyme of a shoddy pop song or in order to find a rhyme, the writer falls prey to going for rhyme rather than reason. In Michael Bugeja's terms, "a novice poet . . . spend[s] energy concentrating on the invention of rhyme instead of on the invention of a poem. That's like trying to remember how to spell every word in the first draft of an essay instead of focusing on the *ideas* you want to convey" (1994, 205, emphasis in original).

What the discussion in this section illustrates is the need for good pedagogical practice, clearly, but not only, for writers tackling poetry. In the following, some concrete examples of such practice in connection with the settings mentioned in the introduction are presented. They prepare the

ground for the final question in this chapter, the outcome of creative writing in the context of conflict and displacement and what these outcomes are meant to achieve.

APPROACHES TO CREATIVE WRITING IN POST-CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT SETTINGS

Engaging in creative writing with young people who have experienced conflict and displacement means that there is no way around their experiences and the way they remember them, irrespective of how reliably and subjectively they may do so. Their memories, apart from potentially being the only possession from an earlier period in their lives, as will be seen in the following, represent important raw material, and to work successfully with this raw material benefits from the approaches suggested for memoir writing. Lois Daniel suggests that "it is vital that we write our memories because history books talk only in grand sweeps. They don't tell the real story of historical events because the real story can be told only in the lives of the people who lived through them" (1991, 69). Jill Kerr Conway, exploring memory and memoir, states that recording one's memories is not just for those who "have to have climbed to some position of power or eminence in society" but when she concludes that "anyone's story is as good as the telling" (1998, 152), the implication is that memory, also as testimony to conflict and displacement, requires effective presentation. Bringing these two views together, the point made earlier is reinforced: working with a telling, stark element of a memory, an image, an object featuring prominently in the situation, a sensuous detail, may make more of an impact on the potential audience, a readership of a piece of work or a story than the sweeping overall (historical) perspective.

However, although the memories will be present in a writing workshop of this kind, they need not inevitably be the focus of a writing activity. Such memories may be too distressing for the workshop participant, making a more general approach preferable. In at least one instance this approach proved beneficial, during the creative workshop in Sarajevo, which took place in a rather austere room of the British Council offices at a time when the atrocities of the four-year siege were still painfully visible. The organizers had brought together students from the secular Sarajevo State University, the Islamic University and, a first as well as the source of my anxiety at the time, a group from a university in the Republika Srpska, the Serbian part of the severely segregated Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The activity used works in almost any setting and helps to sharpen the participant's perception and writing technique. The task is to focus on a person who plays an important part in the life of the writer and means a lot to him or her. During a brainstorming phase that person's physical features, emotions he or she evokes, character traits, and habits, among others, are

listed or placed on a mind map; then all elements that are not unique to the person are crossed out, leaving sometimes no more than one or two elements, which are clearly distinctive. These are written up as a very short formal poem, for example, a tanka, a single or a short sequence of haikus, a cinquain, or alternatively an acrostic with the person's name or a free-verse poem with a simple constraint on the writing. (Such constraints are useful in general because they require careful consideration of the subject and the ways in which such considerations are to be articulated.) The resulting poem is almost always a very poignant, often very vivid portrait of the person concerned. This proved true at the end of the Sarajevo workshop during the "read-around phase," when one of the students from the Islamic University read her poem, a tribute to her boyfriend. The moment of silence that followed was broken by one of the young Serb women. "He sounds really amazing," she said. "You should meet him," the Muslim student replied with a smile. Short as the exchange had been, there was a palpable change in the atmosphere, from polite, but restrained, acceptance to the recognition of shared emotions and of similarities in everyday life, a change that persisted through the socializing post-workshop get-together.

Another activity which may be as general as the previous one, but can also address personal experiences of conflict or displacement directly has proved quite effective in a variety of settings and with participants of different levels of English. Participants are asked to imagine what may be happening anywhere in the world in the next ten minutes. The openness of the choice of events allows participants either to focus on their own environment or on some imagined reality anywhere in the world. Each event or occurrence is to be recorded on separate strips of paper, ideally using the same sentence structure and the same verb inflection (either present continuous to indicate co-occurrence or present simple to emphasize factuality). The brainstorming lasts ten minutes to fit in with the focus of the task. Then the participants are asked to arrange their strips into what would make the most powerful sequence, editing their strips or adding to them when necessary.

The most dramatic outcome of this exercise I witnessed in 2003 in an English class at Murry Bergtraum High School in Manhattan, less than a kilometer from ground zero. The workshop was organized by New York's Teachers & Writers Collaborative and brought two English poets and me into a class composed mainly of Puerto Rican and Korean students. The activity led to a number of intriguing poems, but the most powerful one was a very short poem written by a rather shy Hispanic girl of fourteen. It was six lines in all, in which she compared what was happening in her own home at this time of the morning and contrasted each domestic event with a scene with similar protagonists, women and children, set in a conflict zone. We—class, teacher, and visitors—sat in silence as the girl read, increasingly emotionally, and with two lines to go burst into tears. I did not know how to react but was saved by the teacher: she called out the girl's name, then asked her to read the last lines,

which she did to rapturous applause from classmates and adults. There was a sense of pride, not only about her work but also about having read it and dealt with the emotion, in her demeanor as she returned to her seat. Similarly emotional scenes can be found in Opal Palmer Adisa's account of a class with African American children using a Countee Cullen poem about a childhood encounter with racism. Palmer Adisa stresses the importance of allowing for strong emotions in writing and presentation which gives her "hope that the opportunity to write about such traumas helped these young people to put some closure to their memories" (1998, 8).

Whereas the activities presented so far can but do not have to deal with personal experiences of conflict and displacement, the following ones are aimed at encouraging workshop participants to present what has happened to them, in other words, to write about parts of their life story in the form of a poem. This is potentially very difficult, not only because the events in question can be quite dramatic, but because mining one's memory and then writing about the results may be quite challenging in itself. In this context it pays to recourse to memoir writing techniques in order to access memories and to re-create important moments of personal history. Daniel, in reference to L. P. Hartley's ([1953] 2002, 17) well-known phrase "The past is a foreign country," emphasizes "the responsibility of those . . . who write about the past to make sure our readers understand that country" (1991, 73), thus establishing the need to explore ways in which this country can be made accessible to a potential reader.

Three activities using such memoir writing strategies can be quite productive. The first contrasts two stages of an experience, a kind of "before versus after": in a brainstorming phase two lists of crucial elements are compiled, the first list defining a situation or experience in the past and the second focusing on a later point in time or on the present. These two lists can be used in a variety of ways, two of which are discussed in the following. The first is to attempt to write up a very simple, syntactically clearly structured account of the most significant elements of the first list, then to try and use the same structures and as far as possible the same vocabulary to represent the elements of the second. With careful editing this can result in a very poignant comparison between the two experiences, with a focus on the small but pivotal differences between them. Another approach is to try to isolate the crucial moment between the two experiences that represents the trigger point at which the first state inexorably changes and results in the second experience. The final poem could present the three parts—original situation, trigger moment, and result—in the order that proves most effective; formally it could use the same poetic or syntactic constraints as the before-versus-after poem earlier. Alternatively, the poem could focus only on the trigger moment, using the types of formal poetry discussed in the first activity. In the workshop, both approaches can be tried out at the same time, leaving the decision as to what the final product will be like to

the participants. The central consideration will have to be what renders the poem most effective.

How effective such a poem will be depends on whether it brings the experience to life for a potential reader and how it translates an experience into language that allows the reader at least to imagine it. A useful strategy is to appeal to the senses, an approach that is quite effective for all the activities presented so far. An exercise inspired by Norman McCaig's poems "Aunt Julia" (n.d.a) and "Uncle Roderick" (n.d.b) may demonstrate how this can be achieved. In both poems the subject is an older relative—in the case of "Aunt Julia," one who is dead—who are representative for an earlier stage in the poet's life. In both poems, and this makes them relevant for the discussion here, there is a wealth of sensual imagery, of sound, of vision, of texture, and, in "Uncle Roderick," of taste. The idea the is to get the workshop participants to attempt to concentrate on an "Aunt Julia" or an "Uncle Roderick" and to find sensual images to describe the features of or memories associated with that person (see also Swanson [1998], who describes a very similar approach). An additional element that adds poignancy is if there is an unresolved issue between the speaker and the subject, perhaps one that can no longer be addressed. In the case of "Aunt Julia," this is the speaker's initial inability to communicate with her because she only spoke Gaelic, an issue that can no longer be resolved because

> By the time I had learned
> a little, she lay
> silenced in the absolute black
> of a sandy grave
> at Luskentyre.
> (McCaig, n.d.a)

That closure is no longer an option adds to the poignancy and thus the effectiveness of the poem.

Encouraging workshop participants to use sensual imagery is a good starting point for an activity which Afghani British writer and creative writing teacher Nushin Arbadzadah-Green used during the Write Identities workshop in Berne mentioned at the outset. She asked the participants to list "what I remember" and "what I don't remember." Most participants find it easy to compile the list of things they remember, whereas the second task may seem somewhat counterintuitive; how can you remember what you don't remember? However, it is precisely being asked to make that effort that encourages participants to reexamine their memories, reconciling what is/was with what they may have displaced, consciously or unconsciously. One of the participants at the Write Identities workshop, John Ebong Koko, wrote two very moving, related poems about his childhood and his family in the Central African Republic, called, respectively, "What I Remember" and "What I Do Not Remember," the latter ending with the lines "but I do / remember / Mum / never lies / to me" (2004) and thus alluding to the memories that he no longer has but that his mother has kept for him, memories that may have been too painful to hang on to.

What the discussion of example activities has made clear is that as creative writing facilitators, we can and need to make use of techniques to avoid some of the pitfalls inherent in any writing workshop. Considerable sensitivity is needed in working with participants affected by conflict and displacement and with their memories, as this will require of them to confront or revisit painful, possibly traumatic experiences. In the next section I reconsider this issue and related questions in more detail.

OUTCOMES: QUALITY VERSUS CATHARSIS

In the early 2000s I attended several Associated Writing Programs conferences in the US, large-scale events that bring together writers who also teach. Their teaching settings vary greatly, ranging from schools, universities, evening classes, and community centers, on one hand, to prisons, young offenders', and mental health institutions, on the other. The kind of creative writing practiced and its aims vary accordingly: writers/teachers in educational settings tend to see their task as promoting the writing techniques and the creative abilities of budding writers, whereas the objective for workshop moderators in what could be called institutional environments is to help participants come to terms with their situation; the purpose of writing here is mainly therapeutic. It seemed to me as a relative newcomer to the scene that there was a gulf between the two positions, of quality versus personal catharsis, and that the positions were difficult if not impossible to reconcile.

In the context of creative writing in post-conflict and displacement situations the same question arises: should the outcome of creative writing workshops be to enable participants to express themselves in a way that stands up to literary scrutiny or should the focus be on coming to terms with their (hi)story. There is a belief that the two notions may not be as far apart as the discourse suggests and that there is an inherent salutary power in creative writing. As Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux postulate, "[w]e all have powerful creative energies locked inside" and that the power of writing is a way for the individual to achieve an inner balance because "to deny [these powerful creative energies] is to deny the possibility of wholeness" (1997, 56).

The references to "creative energies" that would need unlocking and "the possibility of wholeness" that this unlocking would allow indicate that both artistic expression and personal healing are important. There can be no question that expressing in words what was experienced as traumatic is an accepted way of dealing with pain or with psychological problems (see, e.g., Bolton et al. 2004; Scurfield and Platori 2013), but the question what the role is of literary or aesthetic qualities of such writing remains, particularly

for those creative writing facilitators who see this as a primary concern. This is justified in my opinion because if an account reads awkwardly, the writing may well distract from the topic and impair the perception of a potential audience. To put it another way, how an account is worded is an important fact that clearly merits attention in a creative writing workshop in the context under discussion.

David Surface (2013) recounts an interesting situation in which F., a participant in a workshop, addresses a particularly distressing experience as a military policeman of finding a little boy who had crawled into a cooler and died and his unsuccessful attempt to revive the child. Leading up to presenting F.'s account of the experience, Surface makes two points: first is that F.'s "counselor had encouraged him to join the writing workshop . . . 'She says it'll be good for me,' [F.] said, shrugging"; the second point is that Surface never pushed F. to write about his experience or to read what he had written because "[t]his was not, as I'd explained, a 'writing therapy' group—this was a writing workshop, and our goal was to create the very best stories we could write." This illustrates the perceived mismatch between literary achievement, "the best stories we could write," and the notion expressed by the counselor that writing would somehow "be good for" the traumatized F.

The argument that telling your story, representing your experience in the framework of creative writing can be beneficial, is supported by the fact that finding a form and the formulations to present that experience often allow an individual to structure her or his world with the use of language. "We travel through life guided by an inner life plot," as Conway points out, which is "part the creation of family, part the internalization of broader social norms, part the function of our imaginations and our own capacity for insight into ourselves, part from our groping to understand the universe in which the planet we inhabit is a speck" (1998, 176). Writing, then, whether it is a prose memoir or a poem mining memory as discussed earlier, when it uses imagination and the "insight into ourselves," can give an individual a degree of control, not so much over the events but over the way in which he or she perceives and figures in them. This in itself may or may not alleviate suffering or pain, but it gives a writer the means to shape with language what has happened. Surface (2013) points out that "it's not the experience itself that causes us suffering—it's the story we tell ourselves about the experience afterward, what we think it means about the world and about ourselves."

The importance of one's own story, especially for conflict survivors and displaced people, can probably not be overestimated (see also Frank 2010, 82–85). In the run-up to the British Council Act2 conference (see Archer 2010) I met C., a young Rwandan who had lost his entire family during the genocide in 1994 and who grew up in an orphanage with a number of boys with very similar biographies. I was first exposed to C.'s experience when, during the preparatory seminar to the conference at the Red Cross/

Red Crescent Museum in Geneva on September 20, 2010, he recounted the events he witnessed at Nyamata church in Kigali. C. has since become a close friend, and so we visited him in Kigali in the winter of 2011–12. It was there that we met many of the boys he grew up with in the orphanage and who are still his closest friends. They all have composed their stories of the horrendous events, some as mainly oral accounts, others have actually written them down. Having read some of the accounts, which I found harrowing in content as well as often somewhat awkward in terms of language, I offered to discuss how the experiences of C. and his friends could perhaps be shaped for a wider readership, in other words, to go beyond the therapeutic need of telling the stories to a point where they might be considered for publication. The initial reaction to the offer was a polite but firm refusal, which stemmed from the fact that several Western journalists had attempted to get hold of genocide survivor stories, had published some of them, and, thus, as these young people perceived it, deprived the survivors of one of the only things they could call their own, that is, their stories. The group eventually agreed to a meeting, but only after C. had made it emphatically clear that I respected their ownership and that my aim was exclusively to make suggestions about how to present their accounts. We got together in a rooftop café late one afternoon in January 2012.

My departure point regarding their accounts was in keeping with Robert Schindel's view that the objective of the writing should be the most effective account for a reading audience. As he put it in the context of the Shoa,

> Wenn ich ein Interesse daran habe, dass die Menschen wissen, was der Fall war . . ., dann muss ich es so transportieren, dass sie es auch verstehen. Also muss ich ästhetisch so verfahren, dass mein Werk angenommen wird. Die Eins-zu-Eins-Problematik, quasi so war es und so beschreibe ich es, ohne ästhetische Bearbeitung, wirkt dann wie eine Lüge, ein Klischee, obwohl es wahr ist. (If I have an interest in people knowing what the story was . . ., then I have to convey it in such a way that they understand it. Thus I need to proceed aesthetically in such a way that my work is accepted. The one-to-one issue, that's how it was, so to speak, and that's how I present it, without any aesthetic treatment, then seems dishonest and clichéd despite being true).
>
> (Schindel 2001, translated by the author)

My approach was to take that telling sensual detail as a departure point. As the evening proceeded we explored whether that approach might work and how effective it might be, but I could not help feeling that, in the face of the horrors that these young people had experienced as small children, such aesthetic considerations appeared (and appear) oddly irrelevant; as Addonizio and Laux put it, "[w]riting a poem in such times may feel like fiddling while Rome burns" (1997, 64). It has to be said, however, that the sensual image C. picked was the silvery edge of a freshly sharpened machete, an image that

has stayed with me to this day. This is perhaps an indication that the strategy works aesthetically, even if it seems irrelevant or frivolous in view of the horrendous experiences it conveys to a readership or an audience.

My deep-seated unease and the feeling of the irrelevance of aesthetic elements in these accounts are probably related to my biography as a workshop moderator and as a Western academic with a, thankfully, comfortable life almost entirely free from cruel strokes of fate. The fact that many of the participants in the Write Identities workshop in Berne, particularly those with a migration background, were able to produce both aesthetically well-conceived as well as explicitly autobiographical poems may well stem from the fact that the workshop moderator, Nushin Arbadzadah-Green (2003), has a comparable background and was thus able to work on the aesthetic/creative angle from the point of view of a writer who may have had similar experiences as those the participants are expected to write about.

To conclude, it is probably fair to say that in the present framework the issue of quality versus catharsis cannot be settled conclusively, if at all. This is partly because I have left the question open whether a writing workshop should aim for a poem that explicitly deals with the participants' biographies and their traumatic experiences or whether the choice of topic should be left to the individual and can therefore avoid precisely that experience. Choosing a topic or a focus for a poem (or a narrative account for that matter) in itself does not directly have an impact on the quality of the writing. In those terms the essential consideration has been formulated succinctly by Addonizio and Laux when they say "[s]ubject matter is not the issue; depth of imagination, and its articulation in language, is" (1997, 66).

This was evident in the Sarajevo workshop, which did not explicitly address the trauma in itself but showed the values of aesthetic/creative treatment of a life experience and its impact; the poem that came out of it, without addressing it explicitly, undoubtedly derived some of its poignancy from that experience. By contrast, a workshop moderator, addressing it directly, may well be confronted with a situation in which such treatments seem all but irrelevant; as Bertolt Brecht so poignantly formulated,

> Was sind das für Zeiten
> wo ein Gedicht über Bäume
> fast ein Verbrechen ist
> weil es das Verschweigen
> über so viele Untaten miteinschließt
> (Quoted in Schindel 2001).

> What kind of times are these
> when a poem about trees
> is almost a crime
> because it entails the silence
> about so many evil deeds
> (Translated by the author).

Nevertheless, the fact that the silvery edge of a freshly sharpened billhook in our garden shed still invariably conjures up the church in Nyamata with its low benches piled high with bloodied rags and the two piteously small wooden boxes containing the bones of C.'s parents may testify to the effectiveness of an aesthetic/creative approach. But whether it does more justice to what happened than C.'s oral account, an elegy, which I last heard him recount this summer for a group of Swiss grammar school students in his low voice and his very own African English, his own unadorned vocabulary, is very much a matter of debate. It also calls into question whether the two objectives of literary quality and personal catharsis are really as irreconcilable as the rhetoric amongst writing facilitators might suggest.

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