Review Essays

Risky Writing:
Self-Disclosure and Healing through Writing

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Jeffrey Berman's Risky Writing, is also a meditation on risky teaching. If you ask your students to write about self-disclosure and to risk humiliation and disapproval, then you have to expect the classroom arena to become tense—not just occasionally, but often. Classroom self-disclosure has sparked intense debate in composition studies, with good reason. Generally, a composition instructor is not a therapist, even though the instructor may like to play one often in the classroom. Berman makes the case for exploring and advancing "emotional intelligence" in the writing classroom by having students write about topics that have affected them emotionally, such as binge-drinking, sexual assault, racial fears, and anxieties (10). As Berman suggests, "Many of the fears of writing are symptomatic of fears of emotion" (10). In confronting these fears, especially of shame, the writer presumably comes to some empowerment. The central question fueling Berman's case studies is whether trauma and suffering can be part of a course, both in terms of reading or writing. Teaching as therapy scares many educators, even when the goals are as benign as Berman's: "My model of teaching approaches a therapeutic one in affirming self-esteem and personal growth" or the "therapeutic benefits of self-expression" (48–49).

Berman attends respectfully and sincerely to his students and their papers, and one of the best parts of the book emerges in his interspersing of a great deal of secondary reading on trauma, writing studies, and

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critical theory in analyzing his own students' writing. Consider how Berman assesses student writing about sexual assault:

Lara's response essay confirms many of the insights of trauma theory. It was wrenching to describe the traumatic experience but psychologically helpful. A Judith Herman suggests in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), expressing a painful or shameful experience enables a person to integrate it into his or her life, transforming it into a less traumatic experience. (169)

Another example of his technique comes in his commentary on a student's paper about sexual disclosure:

An alarming number of students wrote about their anguish growing up with alcoholic parents. The students discovered the truth of Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's observation in their book *Testimony* (1992) that one must have a witness in order to recover from a traumatic experience. (201)

This juxtaposition proves his point about taking the pain of writing to heart: Berman takes his student writing with the same professional seriousness that he does academic and critical interpretation. I like the seamlessness of his transition from student prose to critical perspective. Berman's range and depth of reading is amazing; even more so is his ability to weave his students' writing into the intellectual history about psychology and social theory that he recounts: "Implicit in my approach to diversity—indeed, in my approach to all the subjects that I teach—is a commitment to the pedagogy of identification. Without ignoring the crucial differences that make each person unique, I emphasize the commonalities of human experience" (147). This is the assumption that drives Berman's compassionate approach to teaching about trauma, the ability to identify with his students without assuming a familiarity that washes out their differences.

While I sometimes doubted that any teacher could perform so valiantly in the face of students' pain as Berman describes, perhaps if anyone could it would be Berman, so convincing is his pedagogical approach. His project overall is to determine "how classroom experiences affect students" in order to make teaching more effective (13). In so doing, he points to one of the central concerns about teaching effectiveness: how do we measure the longterm effectiveness of classroom pedagogy—risky or otherwise? Berman ends this study with surveys taken by his students about his kind of teaching. But, as we all know, the
effects of teaching may not be known for some time, and so all teaching may indeed be “risky”; as Berman writes about his students’ essays on binge drinking, “Only time will tell whether the assignments have a lasting impact on students’ lives” (230).

As Berman remarks, key to the success of such courses is establishing an “empathic classroom” (29). Like calls for the dialogic or feminist classroom, this desideratum is rather too enigmatic, perhaps too dependent on the professor’s personality. I know colleagues who could never be empathic in the classroom, but are no less brilliant teachers for assuming more authoritative positions. So, is Berman’s risky teaching only for those trained, as he is, in psychoanalytic criticism? What else do you need to know to create an environment that encourages “students to anticipate how their classmates might feel” (34)? I’m not one of the “dubious” or “unreasonable” postmodern educators who Berman scolds for their doubt, but I am wondering how many teachers could pull this off (35). In many ways, Berman’s book reads more like one personal and individual success story than the blueprint for a pedagogy that many others could follow to the same brilliant effects. “A teacher’s warmth, genuineness, responsiveness, and acceptance” are crucial to the empathic classroom, and Berman is right to remind us that we are too chary with praise on student papers (36). Berman believes that “effective teaching is affective learning; intellectual and emotional development are complementary” (199). But, then, wouldn’t the classroom as a contact zone and the “case for conflict”—two stances that Berman rejects—be equally transformative because they are also parts of affective learning? Are only validating classrooms effective? Is the therapeutic classroom the only answer?

Berman’s is one of the most thoughtful, incisive meditations on teaching that I have read; he leads readers to question how much teachers ought to disclose as we ask students to disclose—in the course of their writing—even more. While the demands he puts on students may well be intrusive—especially seen from the perspective of a troubled student, a parent, an administrator, or even a journalist—Berman persuades that the end result of better engaged and responsive students is worth the many risks of such teaching practices. Most of all, he reveals how much the pedagogical is highly personal, while the best of our pedagogies might always be even idiosyncratic.

Judith Harris’s *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing* is a great companion book to Berman’s, given that Harris analyzes the depth and breadth of therapeutic or confessional writing in
primarily twentieth-century texts. They both draw on some of the same terms—empathy, compassion, and identification—to characterize their approaches to either student writing or literary history. Both believe that “sharing” the language of suffering—whether through publication or in the classroom—brings about healing and good teaching since both are created by an imagined “connectedness” to a community of readers or a community of peers (xiii). Both champion the “therapeutic effects of writing about pain” (5). Finally, both advocate “psychoanalytic pedagogy” as a way to advance our understanding of memory, the unconscious, and trauma.

In many ways, Berman is on safer ground in writing about his students’ prose than is Harris, who tackles multiple literary histories—British, American, Caribbean—in order to demonstrate the universals of writing through pain. Drawing mainly on psychoanalytic theory, Harris explores the writing cure as an expurgation of pain and generates a series of impressive close readings of the expression of pain as both reflective and refractive of the self. As she writes about “The Yellow Wallpaper”:

> Forced then into seclusion, in which she can do nothing but think aloud, the narrator... can be seen voicing one side of the psychoanalytic encounter. In such amanner, she attempts to follow the meandering pattern of the wallpaper, ultimately submitting to a monstrous self-projection. Like any patient in analysis, Gilman and her narrator are vulnerable to the blockages, inconsistencies or “talking” suicides incurred when something crucial to expression refuses to give itself up to consciousness. A writer, like a patient, often encounters a psychic block or barrier that halts the flow of images and words. (49)

But even in her masterful reading of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” I wished she had made some connection to the generation of critics who have come before her in their celebrations of Gilman’s triumph: whether in William Veeder’s panoramic reading of the heroine’s regressive fantasies or in Susan Lanser’s radical theory of Gilman’s historical context or in Diane Price Herndl’s path-breaking Invalid Women, on the tradition of illness in American women’s writing. In short, it is difficult to credit Harris’ given how so many feminist and psychoanalytic critics have treated the value of Gilman’s texts. Harris’ interpretations should be in dialogue with the variety of critical traditions—such as with Jacqueline Rose on Plath—that have emerged around the texts she analyzes. In short, I wanted her to engage with some critical tradition of reading confessional poetry, or the lyric, or American women’s writing that suggests that this
book is not some isolated approach, however empathic. One of the most compelling aspects of Berman's book is the blending of his critical acumen, pedagogical wisdom, and commitment to psychoanalytic approaches. Harris' book focuses almost exclusively on her own voice in dialogue with those under study, such as Walcott and Kenyon.

Regrettably, Harris' book is disengaged from literary scholarship, yet she is a brilliant reader of texts. Harris' best work is on women's confessional poetry, the subject of at least three of the chapters of *Signifying Pain*. She illustrates how overcoming silence is at the crux of confessional poetry. As she argues, "The background of confessionalism is one of a convergence of anxieties shared by the post-World War II generation and by the individual's dissociation from some of the values—religious, social, and moral—she once relied on for personal stability" (69). By working through these various losses and traumas, the poet can express her rage and confront the sources of her pain. So goes Harris' poetics of identification, one that she has adduced from her readings in particular of Plath's "Daddy" and Olds' "This Year." Or as she claims in her chapter on oedipal rage, "a writer may well surface with demons instead of angels," a claim borne out in Harris' analyses of Plath, Mary Shelley, and Ai (81). Many of her insights are eloquent, in particular as she writes about Keats' poetics of loss: "Blind faith in a fathomless sensual darkness is better than knowing what the light of reason tells us we can never fully possess" (135). Harris' identification with these writers about the triumph over pain carries this book—and its readers—along.

Her study is the kind of scholarship written out of conviction and devoted to opening up for her readers a literature that might aid healing. Harris' method is at its keenest when she brings trauma and psychoanalytic theory to bear on the history of post-Civil War America. In a move that advances her own psychoanalysis of loss, Harris interprets Michael Harper's poetry as reconstituting the enslaved American: "Harper understands that the body—especially of the obliterated body of the slave or victim of racial violence—is an apt and searing metaphor for America's amnesia about its past" (153.). Here she links the psychic pain she had been interpreting in the previous seven chapters to the social pain of slavery's legacy.

By the end of her study, Harris turns to explain the benefits of teaching creative writing based on the self-examination of identity. She advocates teaching confessional writing as a means to break through aesthetic and social boundaries, to marshal "figurative language [that]
helps liberate the unconscious” since “it is its own kind of censor” (183).
(In writing about composition classes, she relies heavily on Berman’s work in Risky Writing.)

Both Berman’s and Harris’ studies contribute powerfully to one of the new traditions in academic writing: the autobiographical, which blurs genres between personal and academic prose in order to create a link between writer and reader, as well as between text and interpreter. As Berman himself contends, one must take personal risks in teaching before asking students to put their trust in you and to accomplish something together that couldn’t be done without the community of the classroom as support. Both of these books explain these risks and encourage us to take them.

Finally, I don’t think I would take those risks. Reading these two books together made me anxious about the kinds of risks we take when we don’t teach history, or at least the self-in-history, or even the question of ethos in rhetorical situations, which is how I define the work of the classroom. No matter how much identification between teachers and their students goes on, it still doesn’t erase the grading practices, or the transference and countertransference, that also go on. Teachers do perform in the classroom (and their evaluations and raises and promotions depend on these performances), and I have to confess that I want students to perform as well: I want them to take literature more seriously, sometimes, than they take themselves. So, despite the best and often convincing cases that Berman and Harris make, I will continue to teach in a more historically grounded, ideologically committed way—waiting for some longterm evaluations that this sort of “teaching to transgress” is as viable as they claim.

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Works Cited
