HOT COGNITION:
EMOTIONS AND WRITING BEHAVIOR

Alice G. Brand

Although contemporary psychologists generally acknowledge the significance of affect in human experience, few attempts have been made to understand its role in cognitive processes (Zajonc, 1980). Important books on cognition (Anderson, 1976; Estes, 1975-1978; Neisser, 1967) barely mention the subject of emotion, feeling, or sentiment. Unlike the strictly cognitive and physiological psychologists, social psychologists are deeply concerned with affect. These psychologists contend that to consider people dispassionate, information processing systems is a poor if not badly inaccurate model of the human being (Izard, 1971; Plutchik & Kellerman, 1980; Tomkins, 1981). A positivistic psychology has been too "cold" to carry the entire motivational burden. What is needed is some way to heat up cognition—a theory that unites the cognitively blind but arousing system of affect with the subtle cognitive apparatus. In an otherwise cold-blooded tradition of cognitive science and flow chart intelligence, the idea of hot cognition (Abelson, 1963) became a major humanizing counterstatement during the mid 1960s and early 1970s.

Essentially what hot cognition means is cognition colored by feeling. To these theorists, practically all human experience implicates affect in some way. The meaning of events is governed by what we feel and the options available to us for its expression. Our language continually projects information about our opinions, preferences, and evaluations. Matters of life and death are not left to the slower working cognitive structures. People don't get married or divorced or lay down their lives for their country based on a detailed analysis of
the pros and cons of their actions. If we stop to consider how much the course of our lives is controlled by cognitive processes and how much is controlled by affective ones and how much each influences the other, we must admit that affective phenomena deserve far more attention than they have received by cognitive psychologists (Zajonc, 1980).

(So too by writing specialists.) Except for research on writing apprehension (Daly, 1983; Daly & Miller, 1975; Powers, Cook, & Meyer, 1979), systematic study of the participation of emotion in writing does not exist.

Although feeling is strongly implied in Emig’s (1971) construct of reflexive writing, Britton’s (1975) construct of expressive writing, Kinneavy’s (1971) expressive reality, and Elbow’s (1973) and Macrorie’s (1976) personal truth writing; the composing process has been over-rationalized. Discourse specialists emphasize writing as a conscious and intentional intellectual act which can be planned, tracked, analyzed, and predicted (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Gregg & Steinberg, 1980). It is viewed as a mental process that functions with sequential, deliberate, machine-like objectivity.

This is indeed curious. The same theorists who belong to these views turn for support to Polanyi (1958), Piaget & Inhelder (1969); Inhelder & Piaget (1958), and Langer (1967), none of whom was shy about enunciating the contribution of affect to intellectual development. Polanyi argued that knowledge is tacit and personal; Piaget, that emotion is the fuel of cognitive functions; Langer, that the intellect we associate with the human mind is a result of the evolution of human feeling. Langer particularly tries to show that "the entire psychological field—including human conception, responsible action, rationality, knowledge—is a vast and branching development of feeling" (p. 23).

We are currently learning about writing by applying to it knowledge from the field of cognitive psychology. It is an appropriate and important merger. But it is easy to lose sight of the impact of the emotions on the intellect since, in education and academic psychology alike, cognition has been narrowly interpreted as conscious and linear reasoning (Averill, 1974). And, of all activities, writing so exemplifies it. The fact is however that this view of thinking barely begins to account for the richness of our mental life during composing—our intuitions, insights, imagination, memory—and our feelings. Emotions influence not only what we write and how we write, but how we
view the process and how it shapes our thinking. So why aren't we studying the field of emotions psychology?

It should come as no surprise that any movement to examine the emotions of writers is without members and that emotions theory is without place in contemporary writing research. Since classical times people have favored the reasoned, modulated individual over the impassioned, sensitive one—the Apollonian over the Dionysian. Emotions happened to people and thus were out of their conscious control. These behaviors were animal-like and so considered lower in nature and more properly applied to negative than to positive states.

The early Western thinking that placed the rational soul in the head and lined the base cravings with the noncognitive "soul" endured through beyond Descartes who considered emotion externally initiated and relegated it to lower bodily structures. As physiological psychology became scientifically respectable, empirical approaches to the study of its nature came into currency. However, despite Darwin's (1894) audacious theory of emotion which formed the cornerstone for an entire tradition of inferring human affect from facial expression, thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century still contended that "natural" intellectual associations were sabotaged by emotion. The maladaptive perspective maintained its continuity in the 20th century through the psychoanalytic model. Early personality theorists (Murphy, 1947; Young, 1943) also perpetuated the idea of emotion as a disturbed human condition. Emotional responses innervated the autonomic system, disorganized behavior, and interfered with normal human enterprise. While later work softened this stand (Leeper, 1948; Young, 1967), the legacy still stood—to the extent that even long range, adaptive responses were preceded by a temporary loss of normally integrated affect. It is no wonder that the idea of the emotions have come to us in language and literature education with such a bad name.

For the better part of this century, the New Criticism has dominated literary thinking in America. Accordingly, pure text was declared the proper focus of analysis. Literature was to be examined with exclusive attention to the facts of the work undistorted by the reader's personal encounter with it. Subjectivity, much less emotional engagement, was proscribed except as it illuminated theme or structure of the language.

But far from casting emotions language from the critical vocabulary, scholars have exploited it as a way of rendering a literary
work understandable. One mines for emotions in biographical re­
searches of authors to explain a work or uses the emotions expressed in a work to explain the author. Or reads into a work the emotions necessary to explain both—and in so doing effectively confuse attribution with interpretation. Explicating a work through its emotional properties has gradually come to mean emotions experienced by authors, irrespective of biographical fact. Over the years as authors and students of literature who came under the influence of the New Criticism gravitated to careers in teaching or interpretation, they have passed along the formalism they themselves learned. It is often difficult to distinguish the critic in them from the writer and both from the human being.

Some scholars took exception to this practice. Rosenblatt's (1938/1976) transactional theory of reading, Shrodes' (et al., 1943) bibliotherapeutic perspective, and more recently, Purves and Beach's (1972) reader response hierarchy, Holland's (1975) application of psychodynamics to literary response, and Bleich's (1978) subjective criticism have all appealed to emotion—the core of reader response. But the prevailing sentiment still severed from involvement with literature the emotions of the reader, the critic, and by extension the writer. After all this, it would be a wonder if authors felt anything at all while writing.

But that is precisely what exists. Primary sources amply docu­
ment the presence of emotions surrounding the composing process. What follows is neither a systematic nor representative sampling of writers' emotions but a small labor to convince myself that the coinci­dence of emotions and writing was a reality larger than my own.

When positive emotions have been cited during composing these are expressed as joy, heightened awareness, and inspiration (E. Barrett, cited in Moers, 1976; A. Wilson, 1965; & Wordsworth 1798/1959). More common in the literature are the emotions of interest and excitement, often singled out as the overarching precondition for composing (Broun, cited in Berger & Berger, 1957; Bradbury, 1973; Gunther, 1961; Mitford, 1979; W. C. Williams, 1958). Nonfiction and fiction writers alike credit their productivity to what seems to be an extreme form of interest: what Saul Bellow (1982) calls a hardness of intention, what Anais Nin (1975) called unusual stubbornness, what Harriet Beecher Stowe (Moers, 1976) called her deadly determination to write. Where excitement or interest and arousal intersect, emo­tional intensity and writing fuse (Bellow, 1982; Eiseley, 1975). If
positive emotions catalyze writing or accompany it, negative emotions outrank the positive in both these respects. Writers are driven to writing by depression, despair, and loneliness (Beauvoir, 1960; Byron, G. Sand, and Woolf, cited in Dunaway & Evans, 1957; S. Tolstoy, cited in Moffat & Painter, 1974; Caruth, cited in Turner, 1977). The emotions of anger and frustration also stand out (Milosz, cited in Hoffman, 1982; Mitford, 1979; Gass, cited in Plimpton, 1981). For every occasion of frustration with life or with writing in particular, there are equal numbers of occasions where writing has been enlisted to work out problems—both with writing as well as with the day-to-day living. The cathartic qualities of the written word are legendary and cited by many of the same authors noted above (Brand, 1980, 1982).

What may be the most apt description of writers' emotional experiences is not one negative emotion eclipsing another or one positive emotion eclipsing another or even one set of emotions eclipsing some other but a strength drawn from emotional antitheses. There seems to be a tension, a collision that arises when positive and negative feelings are juxtaposed. Writers have described in remarkably compatible terms seemingly incompatible feelings like euphoric despair, exhilarated desperation, and wild happiness (Kafka, cited in Dunaway & Evans, 1957; D. Hall, cited in Friebert & Young, 1980; Maupassant, cited in Murray, 1968).

Surely tapping the affective universe of writers is a thankless if not a pointless task. To be sure, every emotion could conceivably be represented, and the array of possible combinations of emotion and text countless. But that is hardly enough reason to ignore the issue. We know that even the simpliest composing is a highly complex mental task. We know how fragile the process is. It may be delayed, interrupted, or abandoned at any time for any and all reasons. We also know that the impulse to write may be heavily imbued with emotion or empty of it. But for many who write under no obvious pressure to do so, we cannot but agree that certain emotional states accompany writing and have the power to sustain writers through laborious revision. Which to my mind means that there is something important to be learned here.

*****

Affect may be defined as qualitatively distinct feeling states
that have physiological and behavioral properties. Research on response to writing is a field of inquiry into how writers relate affectively to the text they write. We commonly call them feelings or emotions. While its subjective quality constitutes its central feature, many theorists agree that emotions are most easily recognized by what people do and so bracket emotion with behavior. Common sense and personal experience tell us that feeling angry and feeling sad reflect different emotional conditions which by and large lead to different courses of action (Spielberger, 1972). In writing, a similar thing happens. Feeling angry and feeling sad generally lead to different writing events. What we observe of ourselves or others when we write is behavior (actual as well as its verbal surrogates) and we can track it over time. This kind of thinking should be handled by an emotions model of writing.

It is certainly too early to construct a model of the various ways affect interacts with cold cognition. Just about all the important pieces of information are missing. To start, if we are using a stage model, we need to show the interaction of affect with cognition at three points: before, during, and after writing. The "Before" affects it going and so are anticipatory or motivational. The "During" affects keep writing going and work toward closure. The "After" affects are the outcome emotions with which we end writing and achieve closure and which feed back into the next writing episode. Since this is a process model, we would also need to know how it works—how affect and cognition collaborate in getting writers from one point in the process to another. Once into the actual composing, the model should show the continual exchange between the information processing elements and the emotional strands that go with it. I am referring to the properties of value or sign, intensity, and direction of change of emotion during writing.

Going on at the same time is the selection of content, an organizing plan, tone, or merely a word. However shallow this view, we can show that even coarse discriminations about what we like or we don't like in simple lexical and syntactic matters are affective phenomena (Zajonc, 1984). Every time we make a choice, we are acting from a basic emotional bi-polarity of good or bad—a different order of emotion from the motivational ones. It is easy to see that emotions operate along a continuum from the most elemental to hair-splitting levels of sophistication and subtlety. Constructs of affective and cognitive processes should ultimately be sensitive enough to depict both ends.
Any new knowledge about affect will not simplify our understanding of writing. Emotions are complicated and often invisible. But we must understand that such processes take place. They are important and can be made clear and useful to us as well as to our students. They should know what emotions can and cannot do during composing. Our students need to be familiar with both the emotional and intellectual cues they experience that tell them they are ready to write, ready to stop, and ready to do a number of things in between. What in fact does happen affectively between receiving an assignment or having an idea for writing and beginning a first draft? How do students read their own writing and envision potential choice? How do their emotions vary with audience, purpose, topic, and time constraints? These task constraints invariably involve motivation and preference, both affective in origin.

Such research should also enable us to understand why some problems occur during writing and how we can solve them. One way to demonstrate the utility of emotion when writing is by studying the affective involvement of students who write when they don't have to. This information can help writing instructors teach students who do not write easily to recognize and use those emotions. These groups may be able to enjoy new opportunities to improve at a wide range of writing tasks if they are able to appreciate and marshal certain emotions at crucial points in the process, for how such emotions operate during composing may well distinguish skilled from unskilled writers.

Finally, by describing the major influences of thought and emotion on writing, a model of affect should account for causal links. For now, I cannot argue causality in either direction. Cognitive factors are powerful determiners of language. However, cognition should not be so construed as to define emotion out of existence. Nor should emotion be treated as unalterably postcognitive. Its distinctive freedom from attentive control, its speed, the range and depth of writing that it can recruit suggest something special about its influence on language. To study the affective as well as cognitive content of composing is to acknowledge their true interpenetration.

University of Missouri
St. Louis, Missouri
References


