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Shots in the dark: writing, revelation, and responsibility

Abstract:

A recent internet search of ‘creative writing and massacre’ located 237,000 sites. This seems an extraordinary result, even accounting for repetition. My search was provoked by a chance occurrence: reading, consecutively, three acclaimed novels concerned with school massacres that were published between 2003 and 2006. The novels might suggest a contemporary zeitgeist of fear and uncertainty—no-one is safe because inexplicable people do bad things any time and anywhere to innocent people. In April 2007, 32 people were shot dead by Virginia Tech student Seung-Hui Cho, a student of literature and creative writing. Cho’s creative writing assignments have been described as containing ‘clues’, as being ‘warning signals’ or ‘red flags’, and questions have been posed about teachers’ responsibilities where students produce disturbing writing. Not long after the Virginia Tech tragedy, an 18-year-old American high school student, Allen Lee, was charged with ‘disorderly conduct’ based on work he produced in response to a creative writing exercise that instructed students to write freely whatever came to mind and not to censor or judge. This paper will discuss some questions and debates resulting from these cases, and the possible implications for creative writing and composition theory, practice, and pedagogy. Arguments about the therapeutic potential of writing contained in works such as *Risky writing: Self-disclosure and self-transformation in the classroom* (2001) by Jeffrey Berman, *Signifying pain: Constructing and healing the self through writing* (2003) by Judith Harris and *Cutting and the pedagogy of self-disclosure* (2008) by Jeffrey Berman and Patricia Hatch Wallace will also be considered.

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A recent internet search of ‘creative writing and massacre’ brought up 237,000 sites. This seems an extraordinary result, even accounting for repetition. My search was provoked by a chance occurrence: reading, consecutively, three acclaimed novels concerned with school massacres published between 2003 and 2006: Lionel Shriver’s *We need to talk about Kevin* (2003), DBC Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* (2003), and Deborah Robertson’s *Careless* (2006), though *Careless* differs in that the murderer is a disaffected and enraged father who runs down a group of pre-school children and not a high school or college student who kills peers and teachers. The novels might suggest a contemporary zeitgeist of fear and uncertainty—no-one is safe because inexplicable people do bad things any time and anywhere to innocent people.

In April 2007, 32 people were shot dead and many injured by a 23-year-old student of literature and creative writing at Virginia Tech, Seung-Hui Cho, in the worst campus massacre in American history. Cho’s creative writing assignments have been described as containing ‘clues’, and as being ‘warning signals’ or ‘red flags’, and questions have been posed about teachers’ responsibilities where students produce disturbing writing. William O’Rourke, who teaches at the University of Notre Dame, suggests the 32 who died in the Virginia Tech massacre will haunt the consciences of all university teachers, but especially those of creative writing teachers: ‘It is a hard blow for all of us to be taught in this terrible way just how serious what we do is’ (Chronicle Writer 2007).

Not long after the Virginia Tech tragedy, an 18-year-old American school student, Allen Lee, was arrested for ‘disorderly conduct’ based on work he produced in response to a creative writing exercise that instructed students to write freely whatever came to mind and not to censor or judge. Most writing teachers will be familiar with ‘wild writing’ exercises of this type: they are used to tap the ‘unconscious’, overcome repression, and encourage creative exploration.

In February 2008, Steven Barber, a 23-year-old writing student of Wise College, University of Virginia, was committed to a psychiatric institution for a weekend and then expelled from college after producing a short story for a creative writing class that explored breakdown, suicide, and murder. The story alarmed his teacher and administrators and initiated a search of his car and dorm that uncovered three guns. Hospital psychiatrists determined that Barber was not a danger to himself or others; nonetheless, his appeal against expulsion from the college was unsuccessful (Bernstein 2008).

This paper considers some reactions and questions resulting from the above cases, and the possible implications for creative writing and composition theory, practice, and pedagogy. The effects of writing on writers and readers are often complex, various, and unpredictable, but, given that some forms of writing may be therapeutic and educative, they might be of value within educational contexts, as suggested by works including *Risky writing: Self-disclosure and self-transformation in the classroom* (2001) by Jeffrey Berman, *Signifying pain: Constructing and healing the self through writing* (2003) by Judith Harris, and *Cutting and the pedagogy of self-disclosure* (2007) by Berman and Patricia Hatch Wallace.

In the wake of the Virginia Tech massacre, many articles published on the Internet query the role of English and writing teachers in identifying and responding to students with emotional and psychological problems. Elizabeth Redden suggests that the case raises ‘uncomfortable questions for creative writing faculty everywhere who, by nature of the craft they teach, almost inevitably end up with periodic glimpses into the destructive—or, as is more often the case, self-destructive—attitudes that their students may hold.’ Redden wonders how teachers can ‘walk the fine line’, so that they encourage expression while looking out for the student, and his or her peers’, best interests’ (Redden 2007). Eric Randall observes that because Cho and some other shooters may have ‘foreshadowed their rampages in creative writing assignments’, English teachers across America are ‘being asked to fulfil a new, often uncomfortable role: campus sentinel’. This role is complicated, he asserts, because creative writing students write about ‘everything from self-mutilation to mass murder. Depressive and suicidal themes are common’ (Randal 2007).

Blake Morrison, professor of creative writing at Goldsmiths College in London, expressed dismay that Cho was an English major, but then observed that ‘if creative writing programmes excluded students with personality disorders, they would all have to close down’ (Morrison 2007). Australian author and former academic Kerryn Goldsworthy claims: ‘Classes in creative writing do, in fact, bring nutters out of the woodwork. There has been at least one person in every writing class I have ever taught who was either in need of, or already getting, professional help’ (Chronicle Writer 2007). Such sentiments will be familiar to many writing teachers, but it seems to me that those receiving professional help are not the ones we need to worry about: Cho was referred to psychiatric and counselling services by university staff and police at various times, but he resisted it. One might ask: Was Cho, whose family immigrated to the US from South Korea when he was eight, feared and unfairly targeted by teachers, students, and administrators because he was ‘alien’, unhappy, and socially inept? Or, if Cho was clearly disturbed and potentially a danger, why was he permitted to continue his studies?

In the spring in which Cho committed mass murder, he was taking a playwriting class with Ed Falco. Following the massacre, Falco emailed his students to tell them they were not responsible. He wrote: ‘There was violence in Cho’s writing—but there is a huge difference between writing about violence and behaving violently. We could not have known what he would do’ (Chronicle Writer 2007).

Violence is a part of our world and our culture. Many people responding to Internet articles about the massacre, a number of them writing teachers, point to violence in films and literature, historical and contemporary, to suggest there are plentiful models for writing students. Religious narratives are a prime culprit; perhaps none is more disturbing than Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2: 16-18). How is a teacher to know if student depictions are metaphors, or fantasies they hope to live out, or simply poor imitations and distortions of stories they have consumed? Writing teachers would surely agree with Deborah Landau, director of the creative writing program at New York University, when she claims that many great works of literature are ‘deep and dark and disturbing’, and also that distinguishing student work that pushes the boundaries from that which contains ‘frightening warning signs’ will be terribly difficult (Richards 2007).

Should writing teachers receive training to help them recognise ‘warning signs’ and, if so, how might such attention to student writing affect the writers? Would they counter such moves by avoiding writing courses or by self-censorship, thereby compromising the creative process as well as the possibility of ‘detection’? Where do a writing teacher’s responsibilities begin and end? Should all universities develop guidelines to help staff identify and respond to disturbing writing, as the Department of English at Virginia Tech has done? (Virginia Tech 2007). Australian staff and students may be at less risk than their American counterparts because of our different gun laws, but questions of student and staff risk and responsibility still need to be addressed. The issue is important for creative writing teachers and those who believe personal writing has a place in the composition workshop and that writing about disturbing or traumatic experiences is potentially educative, recuperative, and empowering. It is also important for any writer or writer-teacher whose work contains dark or disturbing content. Some writer-teachers may feel reluctant to confront a student about disturbing work because they do not wish to suppress or censor their students’ imaginations; if their own writing contains violence or other disturbing elements, they might also fear such action would constitute double standards and expose unequal student-teacher power relations: to certain students it could seem a case of the pot calling the kettle black and aggravate feelings of rejection, subjection, and frustration.

Victoria Field observes that ‘[w]riting has been compared to fire—it can release energy, lead to catharsis and healing; it can be warming and comforting but it is also possible to be burned or even destroyed by it’ (Bolton et al 2006: 18). Plato called writing *pharmakon*—both remedy and poison—in recognition of its disturbing duality and potential for good or ill. According to Derrida, Plato maintained ‘*both* the exteriority of writing *and* its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside’ (Derrida 1981: 110). Clearly the view that writing can be potent, that it might affect or infect the one who writes, as well as the reader or listener, still resonates in the discourse today, along with Aristotle’s more optimistic view that one might be immunised rather than infected by writing, where it allows excessive or disturbing emotions or thoughts to be usefully purged or cleansed.

Might different kinds of writing and different approaches to student writers help lower the risk of disaffection, illness, or violence among students? Is it time for teachers with an aversion to ‘personal’ or ‘self-expressive’ writing to examine their prejudice and consider whether such writing might, in some pedagogical situations, be valuable? There is now considerable and broad-ranging qualitative and quantitative evidence, as well as individual testimony, to support arguments that some creative and expressive writing can be therapeutic (see Murphy & Neilsen 2008). Although researchers have not clearly determined why this is so, and instead suggest there is no single cause for such a complex phenomenon (Pennebaker & Chung 2007: 21-22), theories crediting acts of disclosure or confession have been overtaken by those suggesting that health benefits relate to a combination of disclosure, cognitive processing, and creation of coherent explanatory narratives. Writing that has been improved through drafting is linked to improved health outcomes. This research supports those teachers who advocate a ‘pedagogy of self-disclosure’ (Berman & Wallace). Judith Harris argues that both:

creative writing and composition pedagogy should be allied in their concern for the positive effects that personal expression (which is also, emphatically, connected to a social context) can have and in acknowledging psychoanalytic theory's usefulness in understanding student writing. Introspective writing, in fact, helps students to be more self-critical and therefore more tolerant of others within a social context such as the classroom. (Harris 2003: 205)

Kenneth Westhues, a professor of sociology at the University of Waterloo, has sought to explain the Virginia Tech murders by pointing to four contributory factors that highlight the interplay between who Cho was and how others treated him. He argues that different responses to Cho's flawed character might have prevented the massacre: Cho 'aspired to become a writer' but was bullied in his student housing and also in the English Department, where he was constantly humiliated, and then he was left alone 'to fantasize about revenge'. His humiliation occurred most evidently by his exclusion from a creative writing class in 2005. His teacher, renowned black American poet Nikki Giovanni, thought Cho menacing and evil and she played out a conflict with him in 'full view of the class'. She demanded he remove his sunglasses and participate as others did. He did not and eventually Giovanni demanded of her department that he be removed from the class or she would resign. Cho was consequently taught the unit on a one-to-one basis by the head of the area, Lucinda Roy. Cho had problems with other teachers, but it seems none has become as public as his clash with Giovanni. Westhues comments that she 'could have left Cho alone. No policy obliged her to challenge him, nor to threaten to quit her job...' (Westhues 2007).¹

Interestingly, Westhues also suggests that Cho received 'lessons in violence' from the courses he took for his degree'. Cho was 'heavily exposed' in coursework to 'literary depictions of extreme violence' and then 'afforded opportunities to write such depictions himself, for academic credit'. He points out that Nikki Giovanni is 'well known for the violence in her earlier poetry' and quotes lines from one poem: 'Can you kill/Can you piss on a blond head/Can you cut it off/Can you kill/A ni**er can die/We ain't got to prove we can die/We got to prove we can kill' (Westhues 2007). Other lines from the poem include: 'Can you shoot straight and/Fire for good measure/Can you splatter their brains in the street/Can you kill them'. It seems unfair to isolate lyrics of one poem from a poet's vast oeuvre (as many disgruntled bloggers have done on the Internet) but, on face value, the words appear shocking. Of course, few people who produce or are exposed to violent literature will act violently as a consequence, and many readers appreciate Giovanni's political purpose (hence her illustrious career); however, an unbalanced person with multiple grievances might not detect anything but provocation.

Without access to the full range of Cho's writings over several years, it is impossible to determine whether we would find them especially 'disturbing' or conclude that they contain 'clues' to the massacre. As far as I can tell, only a few explicit warnings have come to light. When Cho was in grade eight in 1999 and fascinated by the Columbine massacre in which 13 people were shot dead by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold before they killed themselves, he wrote a paper for his English class that 'threatened both suicide and homicide and stated that "he wanted to repeat Columbine"' (Randal 2007). In 2006, according to the Massingill Report on the massacre referred to by Westhues, Cho wrote a story for his fiction class featuring a

character who vows to ‘kill every god damn person in this damn school’ (Westhues 2007; see also Howitz 2007).

This might be compared to Allen Lee’s statement in a free-writing assignment that the teacher who set the exercise might inspire the first Cary-Grove school shooting. His threatening prose was reported by the teacher, administrators and police were concerned by it, and he was subsequently charged with disorderly conduct. Lee’s rambling paragraph is available on the Internet (Poulsen 2007)—or at least a reconstruction of it, attended by Lee’s exegetical attempt to explain and justify its content. Several phrases, he says, are taken from songs or movies (e.g. Green Day and *Men in Black*) or refer to video games, which suggests the strong influence of popular culture (though such allusions or borrowings may not be immediately evident to those with different tastes), and of school massacres themselves—which seems hardly surprising in a writing exercise that asks for whatever comes immediately to mind.

Steven Barber argued that the short story which precipitated his hospitalisation and then expulsion from the University of Virginia was a creative response to the Virginia Tech massacre, rather than warning of another. Although the Vice-Chancellor would not agree to re-admit Barber, he posed a troubling question: ‘How long would Edgar Allan Poe, who [also] attended the University of Virginia, have lasted with his writings?’ (Bernstein 2008). Indeed. What would we think if a student wrote a story like ‘The tell-tale heart’, where one man slaughters another because he finds his cloudy eye maddening, and then hides the body parts under floorboards? Or what if a budding Sophocles wrote about a man who murders his father, has sex with his mother, and then savagely gouges out his own eyes, in an act linking self-mutilation with redemption?

Cho submitted disturbing work to his writing classes at Virginia Tech, and two examples, ‘Mr Brownstone’ and ‘Richard McBeef’, soon became available on the Internet courtesy of a former class member. In both plays revenge is threatened by disaffected youth against middle-aged authority figures (a teacher and a stepfather respectively), who are accused of molesting, bullying, cheating, and betraying them. Both plays contain violent actions and language, and they are offensively ageist, as if older people are inherently repugnant and barbarous and have no right to live. Yet, in the ‘real’ world, Cho’s victims were mostly students, young like himself.

In ‘Richard McBeef’, a stepfather is accused by his stepson of murdering his father so he can get into his mother’s pants. The Oedipal or Shakespearean or Freudian reference is not fresh, subtle, or clever, and nor is the titular reference to McDonald’s, but would a writing teacher be seriously disturbed by a student’s clumsy use of intertextuality?

‘Mr Brownstone’ relies for its title and a good portion of its content on hard rock band Guns N’ Roses’ song about heroin that appears on their album *Appetite for Destruction* (1987). It would be easy enough to suggest Guns N’ Roses was a bad influence, especially where such a view fits personal experience: my own daughter became perversely obsessed by the band a few years ago and it did her no good. But Michael Moore’s documentary about Columbine showed the way Marilyn Manson became implicated in the shootings, as if Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s liking for

Manson's music made him partially responsible for their actions: it also exposed the weakness of such an argument. Most devotees do not commit crimes or murder.

Writers, too, have sometimes been thought responsible for the actions or feelings of their readers—or if not responsible, then at least *implicated*. This may seem unfair, given the unpredictability and complexity of influence, but it also seems inevitable: music, film, and literature are not disconnected from life, containable, and easily put aside. They might ignite passion and obsession, and even offer the 'answers' to existence one is searching for.

Using archetypes, mimicking styles, and variously borrowing from and responding to the form and content of other texts are accepted literary practices—and recommended methods for learning how to write. But might they also be potential markers of worrying forms of 'contagion'? In *Cutting and the pedagogy of self-disclosure*, Berman and Wallace point out that many empirical studies 'document the existence of emotional contagion, and unfortunately negative emotions are more "contagious" than positive ones' (Berman & Wallace 2007: xxiii). They refer to a large and authoritative investigation of student populations by Whitlock, Eckenrode, and Silverman published in 2006, which sought to determine the prevalence of self-injurious behaviour (xx). It found that 17 per cent of the students engaged in self-injurious behaviour and that there is definitely a contagion effect. Berman and Wallace conclude on the basis of such research and their own teaching and learning experiences that 'reading, talking, or writing about an issue like cutting can be dangerous to others' (xxii).

It is already well known that suicide might inspire copycat behaviour, which is why media reportage of incidents is circumscribed. Such contagion has been dubbed 'the Werther effect', based on the protagonist of Goethe's autobiographical novel *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, published in 1774. Werther suicides on account of unrequited love. Several young male readers followed suit, some apparently dying with a copy of the novel in their coats. 'Writing the novel proved cathartic to Goethe, but reading the novel proved fatal to many readers', Berman and Wallace observe (xxii). Many claim literature is capable of expanding and elevating the mind and heart; it seems just as many fear its capacity to corrupt. We cannot know which real or fictional character or situation might provide the inspiration, context, and rationale for tragic or diabolical events in the 'real world'.

In *We need to talk about Kevin*, novelist Lionel Shriver exposes an insidious side of mimicry and one-upmanship by creating a link between teenage Kevin's meticulously planned murder and the notoriety of previous school shooters. According to the novel's narrator, Kevin's mother Eva, Kevin had attempted to 'best the competition in fatalities—clearly one of his driving ambitions' (Shriver 2003: 421). Kevin chooses an unconventional weapon—the crossbow—to kill seven students, the school janitor (collateral damage), and his English teacher.

Kevin's fictional massacre joins a long list of real massacres—but perhaps it does more. Is it possible a novel might give a disaffected reader violent ideas? Interestingly, this is hinted at by Shriver's novel itself, since a ten-year-old Kevin who has hitherto refused stories, takes to *Robin Hood and his merry men* with a vengeance when ill, reads it repeatedly and then, when well again, requests his first bow and

arrow set. Six years later he will lock his selected victims in the school gym and unleash his archaic artillery. Could it be that Cho read Shriver's novel and decided that he, like the clever, fictional Kevin, would put chains on doors to entrap his victims? After all, a young man who had aspirations to kill might be attracted to a novel about a school massacre, even if he were not an avid reader.

Kevin's school had been vigilant in monitoring student behaviour and writing in an effort to prevent any violent event taking place on its grounds. Shriver's narrator is keen to point out that preventative measures, underpinned by increasing paranoia in the US, including searches for 'warning signs' in student essays and creative writing, are themselves potentially dangerous. Kevin 'clearly regarded the school's precautions as farcical. "They keep this up," he remarked once, and on this point he was astute, "they just gonna give kids *ideas*"'. After the students are subjected to a "lockdown" in their classrooms so that police with sniffer dogs can search their lockers, Kevin's mother asks if they were looking for drugs: he responds, 'Or *poems*' (375).

Kevin's English teacher, though wiser than others about his nature, does not imagine him capable of murder. At the end of a parent-teacher meeting, Eva asks her casually whether she thinks a massacre could happen at Gladstone, and she responds:

Of course it could happen here. Among a big enough group of people, of any age, somebody's going to have a screw loose. But honestly, my turning violent poetry into the office only makes my students mad. In fact, it should make them mad. Madder, even. So many kids take all this censorship, these locker searchers ... Well, so many of them take it lying down like sheep. They're just told it's for 'their own protection,' and for the most part they just—buy it ... *I* think it's good for them to get their hostilities out on paper. It's harmless, and a release valve. But that's become a minority view. (392-393)

Shriver points here to those persistent, hoary questions: is writing potentially purgative and recuperative? How can we recognise when a writer is letting off steam as opposed to crying for help or sending out warning signs? Shriver's epistolary novel itself questions the notion of writing as therapy, but the jury is out as to whether the mass of letters Eva writes to her deceased husband helps her feel cleansed or otherwise address her trauma, just as it is out on whether Eva is answerable for the failings of her son, whom she has not loved. Readers may vacillate and, in the last letter, Eva herself remains ambivalent:

Throughout writing these letters to you—I have come full circle, making a journey much like Kevin's own. In asking petulantly whether *Thursday* was my fault, I have had to go backward, to deconstruct. It is possible that I am asking the wrong question. In any event, by thrashing between exoneration and excoriation, I have only tired myself out. I don't know. At the end of the day, I have no idea, and that pure, serene ignorance has become, itself, a funny kind of solace. (Shriver 2003: 467)

In an interview, Shriver admits that her novel's subject matter is potentially dangerous, and that her agent was worried it might inspire 'copycat' crimes. She rejects self-

ensorship, however, insisting that she took a morally responsible approach: violence is not glorified in the novel, and even the perpetrator comes to see ‘his trite high school massacre as pathetic’ (Lawless 2005: 1). Shriver states:

If you don’t allow yourself to write characters who do disagreeable things—if you only allow yourself to write about what you would be glad for your readers to imitate in real life—then you’re pretty much constrained to characters who help little old ladies across the street and rescue cats from trees...You’d never write *Crime and Punishment*, lest arrogant young men take axes to miserly crones. (Lawless 2005)

The point is valid. Nevertheless, the issue of copycat behaviour—or ‘contagion’—needs to be taken seriously by writers and teachers. Also, while some effects of writing or listening to disturbing or depressing work in a creative writing class may be immediately evident, some might also be hidden from peers and teachers.

This problem is raised by Gaylene Perry in her thoughtful discussion of the risks of taking part in a creative writing workshop on campus or online. Perry alludes to a ‘teaching and learning’ situation described by Alice Sebold in her memoir *Lucky* (2002). In a writing workshop, and on her instructor Tess Gallagher’s direction, Sebold read a poem that referred to her experience of rape on the campus of Syracuse University in her first year of study. The class was told that they must share their responses. Sebold writes: ‘Most of the students were shy. They buried their response in words like brave, or important, or bold. One or two were angry that they had to respond, felt the poem, combined with Gallagher’s admonition that they react, was an act of aggression on her part and mine’ (Perry 2007: 2).

It would be problem enough if the story ended there: however, as Perry explains, there were further consequences. A young woman in the workshop, Maria, did not speak; instead, she left the classroom. A few pages later Sebold tells readers that Maria ‘fell from a window’. She visited Maria in hospital and discovered that her poem had ‘brought it all back’, that is, caused Maria to relive the trauma of being raped throughout her childhood by the father and brothers who had moments earlier left her bedside. It seems that Sebold was again, if inadvertently, occupying the place of the rapists. Perry asks: ‘Were Tess Gallagher’s actions ethical? Reasonable? Inspired? What about Sebold’s actions in allowing the poem to be workshopped?’ (Perry 2007: 3). Of course, this raises another question: what if Maria’s suicide attempt had been ‘successful’?

Berman argues that ‘risky’ personal writing—or a ‘pedagogy of self-disclosure’—should be encouraged in the university classroom: for many years he has experimented with the method and found that although some educators disapprove, his students respond positively, improve their writing skills, become more personally and culturally aware, and develop empathy. Despite his strong advocacy of personal writing, though, he remains concerned:

I seldom think twice about a student leaving early in a literature course, but I am more concerned when a student leaves a writing class before it is over. Was he or she upset? Was the student infected by a classmate’s essay? Has a

student become at risk as a result of my class? (Berman & Wallace 2007: 192-193)

Teaching ‘risky writing’ is emotionally demanding. Berman suggests it is ‘never easy to see a student crying or weeping in class’ and nor is it easy when teachers cry in class. But he believes tears ‘can be as appropriate in a classroom as are smiles’ Berman’s views are appealing: they open the way for a teacher to ‘become less of a teacher and more of a “person”’ to students (Berman & Wallace 2007: 193). However, as Sebold’s experience suggests, the approach is potentially dangerous. Berman knows this and asks:

What would happen ... if one of my students committed suicide? This is a psychotherapist’s worst nightmare—and mine, too. Or suppose one of my students suffered a breakdown and attributed it to the course writings or readings. Or suppose other teachers who experiment with the pedagogy of self-disclosure find these chilling scenarios coming true. Would my faith in the process of self-disclosure remain unshaken? I cannot answer these questions. That these problems have not arisen in the past is no guarantee that they will not arise in the future. (Berman & Wallace 2007: 193)

Where one subscribes to a ‘pedagogy of self-disclosure’, there is a risk of ‘emotional contagion’: Might students (and teachers) become infected by listening to the ‘dark emotions’ in another person’s writing? Do students’ own dark writings put them at risk? (Berman & Wallace 2007: 245) Judith Harris, in *Signifying pain: Constructing and healing the self through writing* (2003: 2), asks why some writers persist in examining their pain, thus continually risking heartbreak? Some writing may be painful to do and then lead the writer to be rejected, criticised, or shamed, if shared with a readership that is not empathetic.

Clearly self-disclosure occurs in various ways in creative writing workshops as well as composition classes that engage in ‘risky writing’. However, it may be that where a pedagogy of self-disclosure is made explicit, warnings and safeguards are more readily put in place and accepted.

An inevitable question is posed by Berman & Wallace: ‘Why read, speak, or write about inherently provocative topics, particularly when the risk of “contamination” is ever present?’ (xxv). Their answer is ‘self-education’, and also education of other students: for example, ‘students who cut themselves can educate everyone in the classroom—including themselves—about a serious problem that has personal, psychological, cultural, and educational significance’ (xxv). Harris suggests ‘writing about personal experience translates the physical world into the world of language where there is interplay between disorder and order, wounding and repair’ (2003: 2).

In 2008, we introduced at Edith Cowan University a unit entitled Writing Therapy, to explore psychoanalytic, literary and scientific discourse on the therapeutic potential of writing and engage students in writing personal essays, poetry, autobiography, journaling, and letter therapy. A number of workshop safeguards familiar to creative writing teachers are put in place, along with some additional ground rules espoused by Field in *Writing works: A resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities* (Bolton et al 2006). Issues of empathy, care, respect, and confidentiality are

discussed at some length, because the role of the reader or listener is crucial in therapeutic or testimonial contexts: an empathetic response may reduce the possibility of 'contagion' or (re)traumatisation. The pitfalls of self-delusion, self-justification, and evasion in the writing process are necessarily canvassed.

It seems that Cho's 'Mr Brownstone' and 'Richard McBeef' simultaneously veil and reveal anger, fear, and prejudice, even as their style and genre work to obstruct serious appraisal. They are silly, derivative, juvenile pieces. They may not be representative of his work, but various peer and teacher comments on the Internet suggest his penchant for violent and lewd fantasy.

A question: might it have helped to encourage Cho to engage in therapeutic forms of writing rather than draw heavily on and mimic popular and literary culture? Might such an approach have allowed him to 'go backward, to deconstruct' events and feelings, and might teachers and peers then have been better placed to offer empathetic responses? Blake Morrison asserts that analysing Cho's writings for clues to the massacre is a pointless exercise, because his 'literary experiments neither caused his psychosis nor purged him of it' (Morrison 2007). Perhaps Cho was doing the wrong kind of writing. And perhaps he had the wrong kind of readers. Perhaps.

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¹ Westhues is perhaps unfairly critical of Giovanni. A different perspective is offered by Beth Macy whose article ‘Nikki Giovanni: Unlikely ambassador’ discusses the elegy written by Giovanni for the university community following the massacre and Giovanni’s continual questioning of what might have been done differently. Giovanni told Macy that in the wake of the massacre campus staff—especially in the English department—were tense and ‘some professors’ lives were threatened in the wake of the shootings’. Giovanni herself was under police watch for nearly three months. (Macy 2007)