

On The Character of the Therapist

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This contribution began in the weeks before I started practising as a student psychotherapist. My intention was to proffer a record of my (evolving) values and expectations—as well as of my anxieties—during this very singular vocational phase. The piece was also an occasion to test how honestly I might write of myself without transgressing the standards of my new profession. How personal could I be? True to the etymology of the “essay,” the paper considers just these personal pressures by exploring the ways that selfishness and selflessness play out in the characters of the therapist and the writer. Framed (not tightly) by voices from a podcast that seemed to address every theme compelling me, it begins to consider the dizzying interactions of narcissism and empathy, enthusiasm and professionalism, inexperience and maturity, love and restraint.

J'ai commence à écrire cette contribution dans les semaines qui ont précédé le début de mon entrée en activité en tant que psychothérapeute. Je voulais dresser un état des lieux des valeurs (évolutives) et des attentes – ainsi que des angoisses – qui correspondaient chez moi à cette phase particulière de ma vocation. C'était aussi l'occasion de faire un test : jusqu'à quel point pouvais-je écrire honnêtement sur moi, sans transgresser les standards de ma nouvelle profession ? Jusqu'où pouvait aller mon implication personnelle ? Ceci est un « essai » au vrai sens du mot : j'y explore les tensions propres à ces questions en interrogeant, en particulier, les manières dont l'égoïsme et l'altruisme jouent leur rôle chez le thérapeute et chez l'écrivain. L'article est encadré (mais

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pas de trop près) par des voix provenant d'un podcast, celles-ci m'étant apparues comme traitant précisément des thèmes qui comptent pour moi. C'est ainsi que j'ai pu commencer à réfléchir aux vertigineuses interactions entre narcissisme et empathie, enthousiasme et professionnalisme, inexpérience et maturité, amour et mise à distance.

How old is George Saunders? I wonder to Google on a Sunday autumn morning, suddenly restless. I'm listening to the New Yorker Fiction Podcast¹ and preparing for my first client. Saunders is preparing to read aloud two stories by authors Grace Paley and Barry Hannah.² His lilt is gentle, his accent Chicagoan. When he says *human*, he skips fast past the 'h' to lean on the 'you' that's left.

Going on listening from my desk at home, I forget I searched anything and watch birds, framed by my window, swoop. It's a bay window and it embraces my oversized desk politely, meeting it at its front corners but missing its front edge by several inches.

I'm not preparing for the first client of my day, but of my career. No one has contacted me yet, so it's a chronic kind of preparation. I've only recently leased office space, paid my insurance, taken the password off my website. Compelled by some advice I heard once, I recorded and re-recorded my voicemail greeting. To find the right therapist: call several in the off hours and imagine the voices from their answering machines echoing yours back. Surmise how they'll listen from how they talk.

Saunders is speaking of the draw of written voices, saying that in a story "voice can be almost anything as long as there's a [h]uman being behind it."³ The author is acclaimed for his fiction (he's been a MacArthur Genius) and is also beloved for his virtue (his 2013 speech to graduating Syracuse students championed kindness and went viral). Through my speakers, his voice

¹ "Fiction Podcast: George Saunders Reads Grace Paley and Barry Hannah," *The*

² The stories in question are: Grace Paley, "Love," *The New Yorker* (October 8, 1979), 37; Barry Hannah, "The Wretched Seventies," *The New Yorker* (August 12, 1996), 69.

³ "Fiction Podcast: George Saunders Reads."

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remembers meeting authors Paley and Hannah, delights at the way their “actual personhood[s]”⁴ radiate in their texts.

He’ll go on to find several parallels between the fictions he reads and the lives of their authors. He’ll say that certain formal moves of Paley’s take “guts,”⁵ and later that having guts “takes some living.”⁶ Saunders will keep circling this: that even fiction is driven by personality, biography, and the confidence garnered by living enough. My colleagues would agree, about their own work, its chauffeurs.

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I study relational therapy, which has influenced most modes of psychotherapy practiced today. Because distresses emerge from experiences with others (asserts the theory), it’s with others that symptoms can be most effectively addressed and transformed. Therapy becomes foremost a space where introspection happens *with*; the individual is learnt collectively. The insight gleaned together is therapeutic, but so too is the fact of collaboration. For this to work, I must be my own distinct person, and clearly.

Before beginning the second story, Saunders advises us that he can’t read it in the “very genteel”⁷ way that Hannah (who was from Mississippi) would. He’s himself as he reads this other author. For the relational therapist, such authenticity is an explicit goal; one strives to be as much herself as is appropriate in the arena of others’ storytelling. So, I realize, it makes sense for me to idealize Saunders as I prepare to practise. He brings such perception to

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

his reading and such devotion to the possibilities of the medium. He reads in his own voice, then parses the texts with such care.

He admires with an enthusiasm I recognize from other writers reading. And while writers aren't the only people who marvel and take to reverse engineering with such glee, I pay special attention to them, paying attention. Attention is, in an important way, their medium. "Charm is a lot of the game," muses Saunders on good writing, "the charm of alertness and being open to the world."⁸

To read well is to bring that alertness and openness—enough for the world—to the text. I want to bring that to clients. But what is the therapist's equivalent of charm? The literature and my mentors insist that a therapist's voice can indeed be "almost anything as long as there's a human being behind it." What's most vital is that I'm myself. I get restless again.

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The training for this work has been profound. Theory is only a fraction of it; to prepare for this profession is intensely personal. A large portion of my coursework—an event called "process"—looks uncannily like group therapy. I'm also required to see my own therapist and, once I have clients, to see a supervisor who'll monitor my work and keep tabs on the biases I'll bring to it. The relentless soul-searching is revelatory and sometimes paralyzing. In the mock therapy sessions we use to rehearse our skills, I'm evaluated on the quality of my presence. When I perform less than ideally in any aspect of the program, I'm obligated to wonder what it means about me. It cuts deep often.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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The emotional traits that will make me a good therapist—empathy, patience, curiosity, grace when falling short—are ones I’d want anyway. And that many people, of many stripes and trades, strive also to practise, both at work and not. They’re moral standards, commonly held. Therapists hold no more monopoly on morality than writers do on words; it would be the height of both narcissism and naiveté to presume otherwise. But I do sometimes wonder whether I’ve signed up to be a Professional Good Person.

Addressing this concern as he synthesized Freud, the clinician and theorist Donald Winnicott noted that “[i]n the analytic situation the analyst is much more reliable than people are in ordinary life; on the whole punctual, free from temper tantrums, compulsive falling in love, etc.”⁹ He never says the therapist is *better* than people are in ordinary life. Reliability may be universally worth pursuing, but the features understood to comprise it are relative. It’s not wrong to fall compulsively in love—but it’s not right for the therapist practising. Winnicott’s essay is about the “analytic situation,” the therapeutic setting; it also highlights physical aspects of the office (“the room would certainly not be dark and it would be comfortably warm.”¹⁰)

It’s this deliberately designed difference between therapy and “ordinary life” that, by underscoring novelty and providing structure, makes change possible for the client. The same frame makes therapy sustainable for the therapist. While clients work to extrapolate me from my voicemail, I may throw tantrums, fall compulsively in love, arrive late. Sometimes.

⁹ D.W. Winnicott, “Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression Within the Psycho-Analytical Set-Up,” in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 36 (1) (January-February 1955): 16-26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The pitfalls Winnicott advises avoiding should happen in my own “ordinary life” as events and exceptions. If they’re habits or proclivities, I’ll have trouble. “The whole thing adds up to the fact that the analyst *behaves* himself or herself, and behaves without too much cost simply because of being a relatively mature person,”¹¹ Winnicott explains, as if with a shrug. A therapist is good enough without being a paragon of morality. She just needs relative maturity.

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What if I wrote, in my off hours? The activities of writing and practising therapy easily complement each other. The identities of writer and therapist are trickier. Both careers are such vocations, and vocations are considered such total phenomena; could one person commit to two? The culture tends to doubt the authenticity of divided attention. But if the writer-therapist could maintain her credibility in both fields, how would she be understood?

There’s a way the identities cancel each other out in the cultural imaginary. This is about no specific character trait as much as it is about the bare fact of character: The Writer is a character *par excellence*, while The Therapist is notoriously neutral, almost an anti-character. Popularly construed, the two roles parody the selfish and the selfless respectively. As the critic Hilton Als has lamented between clauses that never culminate in a question mark, “what is writing besides an I insisting on its point of view.”¹² What is writing besides the uninterrupted assertion of identity, the definition of self-centredness, tantrum in language.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Hilton Als, “Triste Tropiques,” in *White Girls* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2013), 65.

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It is many and nuanced things, but Als invokes an abiding stereotype: the narcissist writer, the Faustian bargainer who prizes his craft above his kindness, the temperamental artist who would rather be skilled than liked. I resent this stereotype and the dialectic it implies. I resent the latitude for violence that it grants the genius, and the reputational doubt it casts on the gifted who behave.

The stereotype infiltrates anyway. It made me question whether writerly reading is an appropriate model for therapists; isn't that a selfish way to approach others? Or at least too enthusiastic for a trade so swirled around suffering? But then, how would we approach others, if not with our selves, deeply invested?

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Empathy, highly prized by relational therapy, is a movement of the self, but not an eclipse. Essayist Leslie Jamieson explains empathy as travel: "you enter another person's pain as you'd enter another country."¹³ She realizes that this is inherently intrusive. And a few pages later, she confesses confusion about what to bring back from the journey: "When bad things happened to other people, I imagined them happening to me. I didn't know if this was empathy or theft."¹⁴

The direction imagination moves matters. Empathy is imagining out of oneself—"em (into) and *pathos* (feeling),"¹⁵ as Jamieson notes. Into the feeling

¹³ Leslie Jamieson, "The Empathy Exams," in *The Empathy Exams* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

of someone else. Anne Carson documents that John Keats wrote into the margins of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667): "one of the most mysterious of semi-speculations is... that of one mind imagining into another."¹⁶ On this reading, writers—those who are truly imaginative—become guides in venturing out. A writer becomes an I insisting on other points of view.

Novelist Iris Murdoch certainly saw in the practise of inventing characters a kind of ethical leadership that would model "loving toleration of, indeed delight in, manifold different modes of being."¹⁷ She understood great fiction as the effect of respecting difference deeply: "a great novelist... displays a real apprehension of persons other than the author as having a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves."¹⁸ So the narcissistic writer has a foil in the writer whose living focuses on realizing a world beyond herself.

This version of the writer is valued as a mentor. Understood as insightful about character, he has been honoured lately by invitations to speak publicly. Saunders is only one of many contemporary writers whose recent speeches to graduating students implored them to treat others well. The same spring Saunders spoke of kindness, Jonathan Safran Foer delivered a moving address that considered isolation and intervention, and advised using compassion to navigate between the poles.¹⁹

¹⁶ Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 21.

¹⁷ Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," *The Yale Review* 49 (1959-1960): 263.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁹ Over a decade earlier, author Dave Eggers took a similar tack in an address to Yale students: he urged his audience to "not be critics," and lamented the times when he'd spoken critically, "with a voice that was all rage and envy." In December 2013, the sentiments Eggers expressed in 2000 were resurrected by *Gawker* editor Tom Scocca in an essay that critiqued the literary community's relentless positivity. Scocca called Eggers "the true prophetic voice of anti-negativity," and identified a modified transcript of the speech as the "defining document of literary smarm." For the essay

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Like *Letters to A Young Poet* (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1929), these addresses sent authorial wisdom across a generational gap.²⁰ But unlike *Letters*, they were conspicuously generalist: their audiences were comprised of more youth than just poets. Neither author made mention of his craft, but each sourced advice from his living, broadly construed: Safran Foer called empathy and attentiveness “the work of life.”²¹ We’re all perpetual amateurs at that work, if some have more experience than others.

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I look up *amateur* to clarify its relation to *immature*, suspecting mature amateurism might be a contradiction in terms even as it seems to describe my vocation; the therapist must be relatively mature, but her work is so personal.²² I learn that, at its roots, *amateur* has nothing to do with age or professional growth. *Amateurism* comes out of love: *amor*. And if this seems an intense orientation for a therapist, the stories Saunders reads can help us—as stories do—nuance the issue, by reminding us that love is complex and its

(which includes excerpts from Eggers), see: Tom Scocca, “On Smarm,” *Gawker* (December 5, 2013) <http://gawker.com/on-smarm-1476594977> (accessed March 20, 2015). Notably, Scocca’s critique focused on Eggers’s work as a speaker and activist, and did not address Eggers’s fiction. The Eggers story to which I refer at the end of this essay (“Quiet”, see footnote 33) showcases the kind of nuance and moral realism that Scocca found so lacking in Eggers’s public statements.

²⁰ Delivered by writers, the speeches also saw print in a book (George Saunders, *Congratulations, By the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness* [New York: Random House, 2014]) and in an op-ed (Jonathan Safran Foer, “How Not To Be Alone,” *The New York Times* [June 9, 2013], SR12).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² In the summer I attended Pedro Reyes’s relational art installation *Sanatorium* (The Power Plant, Toronto, August 2014). Committed to the possibilities of amateurism, Reyes flash-trained volunteers into therapists in the weeks before the exhibit; they were well intentioned, but inattentive in ways I’d consider negligent in the context of a practice.

span vast. Paley, for example, describes “true love”²³ in a friendship and renders a married couple in what Saunders calls a “mature, functional”²⁴ love wherein each party sees the other clearly.²⁵

Insofar as the therapist’s work involves love, it’s a restrained, mature kind of love that’s neither compulsive nor intrusive, a love characterized by reserve and best imaged in popular culture—fairly or not—by middle-aged romance.²⁶ Deborah Treisman, the New Yorker Fiction Editor, notices how both of Saunders’ chosen stories “are about love and...emotion that’s recollected from a place of tranquility, from this position where you’ve got two pairs of slippers.”²⁷ This position of remote observation is shared by both writer and therapist, those notorious satellites.

The stance is not innate, but achieved over time. Summing up the trajectory of the protagonist in Hanna’s story, Treisman explains:

He’s gone from being someone who was out there in the world to someone who sits at his table with binoculars, spying...who, in a way

²³ Paley, “Love,” 37.

²⁴ “Fiction Podcast: George Saunders Reads.”

²⁵ Saunders locates the couple’s maturity in the refusal of each to “fictionalize” the other. His statement implies a fiction that is inherently selfish, invoking a model of an imagination that moves inwards rather than outwards. This stands against Murdoch’s notion of fiction as a kind of rehearsal for respecting others in their difference, and complicates Als’s comments on the narcissism of the non-fictional ‘I’; ultimately, it seems, variations in writing’s self-centredness cannot be derived from differences in genre.

²⁶ To wit, when the psychoanalyst James Hollis defines love as “the capacity to imagine the experience of the Other so vividly that we can affirm that being,” he is ostensibly advising the therapist about the challenges she may help couples navigate in middle age; his description seems also to describe an ideal therapeutic relationship. For citation, see: James Hollis, “The Turn Within,” in *From Misery to Meaning in Midlife* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1993), 52.

²⁷ “Fiction Podcast: George Saunders Reads.”

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has become a writer: he's sitting at his front window, looking with binoculars at the world and noting it down.²⁸

Saunders interjects, at the second mention of gazing through binoculars: "that's one of the job requirements!"²⁹ However mandatory this remove, however necessary for the work and the fulfillment of professional standards, Treisman calls the withdrawal (as if after Winnicott) "morally ambivalent."³⁰

Saunders agrees, and emphasizes that the gains and losses will never quite settle, either: every true "transformation narrative"³¹ is incomplete. Saunders with his trademark eloquence and humility goes on to pronounce that the character has "seen the light, but the light has only hit part of him—something like that?"³² This helps, to remember character as three-dimensional, and that light can't fall everywhere at once. Shadows will persist and are not all bad. The reminder feels important for someone entering the business of helping others change, who must herself change to do so. Who, still a ways from middle age, sometimes wonders how much living is enough to start. "Some living," said Saunders.

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In a Dave Eggers story called *Quiet* (2004), the moon is a character and a structural device, the conscience of the narrative, but non-interventionist. He tells the protagonist something that resonates with me especially now that clients have started appearing in my office with whole lives to catch me up on

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Paley, "Love," 37.

³⁰ "Fiction Podcast: George Saunders Reads."

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

and chronologies that jump. “I feel time like you dream. Your dreams are jumbled...when you recall them, the memories bend...It’s all in puddles and ripples. That’s what time is for me.”³³

I love how the moon, watching everything and pulling tides, is not beyond confusion. I marvel at how natural it must be for him to reflect light in increments. If he’s not, properly speaking, human, his position feels very real to me. I make him another narrator to emulate, and imagine seeing clients as he sees characters.

In or through the puddles, the moon sees distress: “It looks *awfully* messy. It looks impossible to survive, to tell you the truth. The pain of it all.”³⁴ But the moon is willing to go into the pain: he’s curious, even eager. “I often think of coming down to live among you,” he confesses, “to make a big mess of it all.”³⁵ He holds his post, though, only coming down insofar as he speaks from a reflection in a lake, a “nickly shimmer,”³⁶ which is enough.

From his perspective outside linear time, the moon talks infrequently. His is “a singer’s voice, though”³⁷—presumably pleasant, and well controlled. Confirming that a voice can be almost anything—and that there’s humanity in strange places—the moon’s “knowingness”³⁸ is belied by a tone “not as deep as you might expect.”³⁹ I think of this moon as I set out to see the first clients of my day, preparing for the light to hit the sides of me I’ll turn towards them.

³³ Dave Eggers, “Quiet,” in *How We Are Hungry* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2004), 87.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

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