

Bergler, E. (1948). The Relation of the Artist to Society: A Psychoanalyst's Comment on the Exchange of Letters Among V. S. Pritchett, Elizabeth Bowen an...



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## The Relation of the Artist to Society: A Psychoanalyst's Comment on the Exchange of Letters Among V. S. Pritchett, Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene

Edmund Bergler, M.D. 

*Partisan Review* in its November, 1948, issue published an exchange of letters among three distinguished writers. The writers were V. S. Pritchett, Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene. They approach their theme: "What, if any, is the artist's relation to society?" with intellectual honesty. There are no attempts to dodge the issue. There is no retreating into ivory towers. Each in turn wrestles with the dragon as he envisages the dragon. And yet to the psychoanalytic observer reading between the lines, the leitmotif "the artist's relation to society" is slowly but surely superseded by an unconscious one, an unspoken reproach: "You shouldn't have asked that question."

Here are three excerpts from the letters:

*V. S. Pritchett*: "Why do I write? ... Many years ago I wrote a story about the X-ray department of a hospital. Lately, a nurse wrote to me and praised me for exposing in this story one of the glaring evils of hospital life and the nursing profession. She said I had done a great public service ... My corresponding was not wrong: I had undoubtedly exposed an evil; but I had no idea when I wrote that I was doing so; it was not my motive. I recall that all my labor and indeed all my conscience was in the choice of the best words ... If any social passion entered into the story, it was of a diffused and personal kind. I have always disliked the way the State and the

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great institutions house themselves... All these personal idiosyncrasies derive from the fact that I went to a dozen different elementary schools in my childhood. To me the public libraries, the town halls, the hospitals, the court rooms are the elementary school over again. Mean, black, monotonous they were, in my day. In that story, I was writing out of the imaginative deposit left by these things in me by experience. How strange (and instrutive) that my non-purposeful story should have been thought good propaganda. Evidently a writer's work begins a life of its own after it leaves his hands... At some point the writer splits off from the people who surround him and he discovers the necessity of talking to himself and not to them. A monologue begins ... To write is to be naive, and one of the strange pleasures of solitary monologues is the discovery that one has said aloud what other people are saying silently."

*Elizabeth Bowen*: "What do I think? About the artist, or imaginative writer, and his or her relation to society ... When I am asked by an outside person, a non-writer, I do not seem to know what the question means. Or rather, I do see that it must mean something, but almost any answer I can put up or give remains almost totally meaningless to me: bluff or patter. The question—put by an outside person—makes a crook of me, and I resent that. I feel inclined to say: "Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies." ... In fact, I suppose there never has been a time (or has there!) when the public in general, at any rate the Anglo-Saxon public, has been kinder to the artist or more conscious of him. That's what intelligence is doing: breeding this clement air. The very last the artist can do is to come across and be less taciturn and farouche. At the same time, you don't think it possible that things these days may be almost too propitious? And that to let this propitiousness invade us mayn't make for a lowering of internal pressure? We must have something to push against. Oh well, one need not worry: we always shall have ... A healthy animal indifference to art probably

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is endemic in human nature. Perhaps one emotional reason why one may write is the need to work off, out of the system, the sense of being solitary and farouche. Solitary and farouche people don't have relationships: they are quite unrelatable. If you and I were capable of being altogether house-trained and made jolly, we should be nicer people, but not writers. If I feel irked and uneasy when asked about the nature of my (as a writer) relation to society, this is because I am being asked about the nature of something that does not, as far as I know exist. My writing, I am prepared to think, may be a substitute for something I have been born without—a so-called normal relation to society ... You make a society each time you write a story. In fact, you are in closer relation to the characters in the story than you will be to anyone in real life..."

*Graham Greene*: "When your letter came, I had just been reading Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, and this sentence from one of Charlotte Bronte's letters recurred to my mind. It certainly represents my view, and I think it represents yours as well: "You will see that Villette touches on no matter of public interest. I cannot write books handling the topics of the day; it is of no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral. Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme, though I honor philanthropy..." "We had better, however, agree on our terms, and as you have suggested no alternative to Pritchett's definition of society—'people bound together for an end, who are making a future'—let us accept that. Though I'm not quite happy about it. We are each, however anarchistically and individually, making a future, or else the future, as I prefer to think, is making us—the death we are each going to die controlling our activities now, like a sheep-dog, so that we may with least trouble be got through that gate. As for 'people bound together for an end,' the phrase does of course, accurately describe those unfortunate prisoners of the French Revolution of whom Swinburne wrote in *Les Noyades*: they were flung, you remember, naked into the

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Loire, but I don't think Pritchett had that incident consciously in mind. But are there any special duties I owe to my fellow victim bound for the Loire? I would like to imagine there are none, but I fear there are at least two duties the novelist owes—to tell the truth as he sees it and to accept no special privileges from the state.”

Plato stated in *The Republic*: “Poets utter great and wise things which they do not themselves understand.” Plato, in his day, considered the poet a vehicle of supernatural inspiration. Today, we (critics, writers as well as psychoanalysts) place the *primum movens* in the writer's unconscious. Although the locale of the inspiration has thus been changed from the outer world to the inner one, Plato's opinion about the discrepancy between the psychological depth of the artistic product and the writer's rationalization of what he has created still holds true.

There is still another Greek precept “know thyself”, (Cheilon's *gnothi seauton*) inscribed on the Temple of Delphi. This command is just as impossible for mortals today as it was a few thousand years ago. No one is capable of knowing oneself out of himself. It is just as impossible as it would be to survive under water for an appreciable length of time. And yet, with a diver's apparatus, the impossible becomes possible. Substitute for the diver's apparatus a specific psychiatric method for diving under the psychic surface (i.e., the help of a trained psychoanalyst) and one obtains the maximum of “self-knowledge” a person can achieve.

What can a writer state about his writing process? Assuming the maximum of honesty, he subdivides his labors into two departments:

- (a) The idea comes to him “from nowhere” (unconscious).
- (b) The idea is worked out: plot, situation, characters, atmosphere and mood (conscious).

No one denies that the secondary elaboration requires skill, technical knowledge and hard work. The writer is quite capable of informing us about that process. But as

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to the conception of the idea, the one that comes to him out of nowhere, he can say exactly nothing. In short we can expect many things from a writer, masterpieces included, but no information about the basic creative process. It is this inability—the fact that, in a way, he is an unwitting puppet of his own unconscious—which offends the writer's self-esteem. Many writers try to deny this dependence on the unconscious by stressing, to the exclusion of all else, the secondary process of elaboration, as in Edgar Allan Poe's attempt to explain the parthenogenesis of “The Raven” in his *Philosophy of Composition*. Poe's attempt was a complete psychological failure. By accepting such enigmatic facets as “the human thirst for self-torture” and “melancholy tone,” he ends where he begins, with nothing clarified and nothing revealed.

The problem of the relation of the artist to society is inexplicable without taking cognizance of the unconscious reasons for artistic productivity. At this point we are immediately confronted, and gleefully, with a quotation from Freud (now the master, if he can be used like a dagger against his own science); his famous statement in his essay on Dostoyevsky (1928): “Unfortunately, psychoanalysis must lay down its arms before the problem of the artist.”

But Freud believed in scientific progress; he never denied that future investigation could clarify the mystery. Quite the contrary, and proof positive in his statement, made two years later (1930) in *Civilization and Its Discontent*:

“Another technique of fighting mental pain uses shifts of libido which our psyche permits and which renders its functions so much more elastic. The problem to be solved consists in shifting aims of drives in such a way that these cannot be hit by the outer world. The sublimation of drives lends its help in that endeavor. One achieves the most if one is capable of sufficiently increasing the pleasure stemming from psychic and intellectual work. In this case, Fate does harm that person but little. Contentment of this type—like the pleasure of the artist in creation or in the personification

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of his fantasies, or that of the scientist in the solution of problems and finding the truth—carry with them a specific quality, which—one day—we shall surely be capable of characterizing metaphysically.”\*

Thus we see that Freud's pessimism about writers' productivity also contains a hint to the future, a note of tentativeness; he leaves the door open to further research. And to Freud's scientific mind future research could mean but one thing: *clinical analysis of living writers*.

The entire *quid pro quo* has a historical background which, if not taken into consideration, obscures the picture. In the first decades of its existence, psychoanalysis utilized writers as auxiliary material to prove its clinical statements. Attacked time and again by “disbelievers” psychoanalysts defended themselves by various means; one of the least important being the material of great writers of the past, for these writers expressed unconsciously in their work identical facts which analysts disclosed by “making the unconscious conscious” The point I am making is that very few living writers were actually analyzed at that time. Deductions were gathered by analogy. There was almost no clinical data.

Today, the writer himself has entered the clinical arena. A writer, being among other things a human being, may be plagued by all sorts of neurotic conflicts, a doubtful privilege he shares with two billion other people. Clinical experience proves that the writer seeks analytical help mainly for one reason: “writers' block.” Very often the writer as a patient is reluctant to admit this, cloaking his real reason

in complaints about hypochondria, alcoholism, homosexuality, etc. But behind this array of symptoms there is hidden, with the greatest regularity, the tragedy of non-productiveness, of literary sterility.

With slight exaggeration one could say that the sterile writer is the newest addition to the family of analytical patients. Our acquaintanceship with him is so recent, in

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fact, that clinical experiences are not even co-ordinated. The following, therefore, is not the generally accepted psychoanalytic opinion on writers (as yet such a uniformity does not exist), and represents simply my own clinical experiences gathered in intensive and extensive "couch-acquaintanceship" with thirty-six writers over a period of twenty years, the typical length of individual treatment being one-and-a-half to two years.\*

In my opinion, a writer is a person who tries to solve an inner conflict through the sublimatory medium of writing. Whether the writer is successful (in the worldly meaning of the word) is immaterial for psychological evaluation. Otherwise, the decision—who was a writer and who was not a writer—would rest with that incompetent due of judges: the commercial publisher, who gambles on so-called readers' markets instead of on the stock market; and the venomous critic who (if unproductive) is full of undisguised inner anger toward his less inhibited *confre* in the writing profession. The latter emotion is mainly camouflaged with "literary yardsticks" and "standards", conveniently interchangeable with each critic. The less productive a critic is as a writer, the more devastating his reviews. Benevolent and relatively objective critics are those who are at one and the same time productive writers.

Still—and the true artist is the first to call for it—some classification among people in the writing field is necessary. A blank head, a blank sheet of paper, connected by a typewriter and manipulated by shaky or determined fingers, do not automatically constitute that phenomenon—a writer. A distinction has to be made between a writer and a typewriter-operator. Otherwise, the hack (this typewriter" to

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\* I reported these experiences in a long series of studies; summary in "Psychoanalysis of Writers and of Literary Productivity." In "Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences" (ed. Dr. G. Roheim), New York, Int. Univ. Press, 1947. A cross-section of the analytic literature on the subject is included.

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hire) and the huckster (bright images of perfume bottles) fall into the same category as the real writer.

Paradoxically, the acid test is to be found in psychiatry. A real writer must be capable of describing human feelings in situations which (fictionalized, dramatized, lyricized, satirized) correspond in their *unconscious* implications to inner reactions of "real people," in other words, to a clinical case. The wrappings the writer uses may be poetic, his rationalizations for his completed work incorrect or even absurd, but the inner content of his work—reduced to the psychological basis—must consist of correct evaluations of unconscious human reactions.

The writer's basic *inner* conflict pertains with amazing monotony to the psychic masochist's solution of his relation to the mother-image. By mother-image we do not mean his relation to the real mother, or even the oedipal mother of his infancy, but to the misconceptions he built up in relation to that giant ogre of the nursery, the pre-oedipal mother. To this misconception of that "cruel, sadistic" mother, he (the child in the writer) became masochistically attached. This, in adulthood, makes the writer a perpetual defendant indicted before the tribunal of unconscious conscience. To counteract that indictment an alibi is instituted—the artistic creation. The inner alibi goes like this: "I am not masochistically attached to mother; mother does not even exist." Thus in the process of productivity, the writer acts *both* roles: that of the "giving" mother and the "recipient" child: he gives himself, out of himself, beautiful ideas and words, thereby establishing autarchy. Whereas any other infantile conflict needs *two* protagonists for unconscious repetitiveness, duplicating the infantile prototype, in the strange psychic economy of the writer's solution he needs but *one* person. The typical neurotic must pay psychiatric fees for his cure, but the writer, if successful, even gets paid for his "self-cure."

Having established his first alibi by achieving autarchy, the writer busily formulates his second abibi. This second alibi is an attack. Accused by his inner conscience of masochistic

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submission, he counters with—aggression. This accounts for the seemingly constant rebellion of the writer, or to use Elizabeth Bowen's own words: "We must have something to push against."

The third alibi, also unconsciously provided in this battle of the conscience, is a shifting of guilt; guilt rightfully pertaining to the psychic masochism is "fraudulently" entered on the balance sheet of defensive aggression.

A French writer, a patient, described once, in one of his unpublished novels, a man who, after breaking off a relation with a girl, wonders about the reasons. He cannot blame the girl, he just feels suddenly that he is "through" with her. No feeling is left, just a great emptiness, indifference, and the conviction that he must leave the girl. In a flash of insight, the man understands that he is incapable of real love. The next instant, however, he represses his understanding and begins pursuing another woman. The reader is left with the impression

that the neurotic hero will endlessly repeat the same pattern of falling in pseudo-love, being disappointed without obvious reasons, and so forth.

During the preparation of that novel my patient found himself faced with the following conflict: His wife, the victim of a chronic incurable malady, had just suffered a new relapse. Although he desired to leave her, he found this plan unacceptable under the tragic circumstances. The marital conflict, however, was in no way connected with his wife's relapses, since the family doctor informed him on the demand of his wife's correct family before the marriage of the girl's illness. The patient showed me the entry in his diary on the day on which the discussion with the physician took place. It reported the facts and the patient's decision: "I decided to gamble with destiny." This wish to overtrump destiny was a masochistic action of the patient's unconscious, and had exactly the results, inwardly intended: Every time his wife had to enter a sanitarium for many months—and this happened with regularity—he complained bitterly about the injustice she had done to him. That he unconsciously provoked the whole situation (by marrying

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her) was, of course, not conscious to the patient. This complaining about self-created ill-luck was supplemented by self-commiseration.

The patient did not understand, as can be imagined, his real conflict. He believed that he stuck to his wife *despite* the suffering she inflicted on him. In unconscious reality, he was sticking to her *because* of this unconsciously self-created and inwardly sought for unhappiness. Psychic masochists just love this type of situations.

The hero in the patient's novel leaves a woman without any reason. This is exactly the patient's alibi: "If there are men who leave their wives without adequate reasons, I certainly can do it, for I have every justification."

Hence the neurotic hero of the story played the part of *appeaser of my patient's conscience*. This also explains why a less important part of his neurosis—his inability to love—is permitted to become conscious, although typically repressed. Actually, the patient's main conflict is induced by the opposite wish, which was to remain with his wife, despite logical reasons to the contrary, because she gratified his neurotic-masochistic tendencies. His conflict is seemingly an aggressive one—to leave or not to leave his wife—and against this reproach of the conscience, defenses and alibis are produced. The pseudo-aggressive conflict covers, however, the dynamic decisive one: the masochistic wish to suffer. Similarly, the guilt is shifted from the masochistic to the pseudo-aggressive problem.

Another subterfuge can be noted, namely the flash of insight that he is incapable of love, hence neurotically ill. The fact that no explanation is given for his inability to love is significant. It denotes an alibi, too. The unexplainable means for the patient: "Neurosis is not under conscious volition, hence I cannot be held responsible."

The writer's self-cure from a pressing inner conflict corresponds to a sublimation. What is represented finally, is not the end-result of his infantile conflict in the specific case: psychic masochism—nor the defense against his inner wish in the specific case: pseudo-aggression—but only the

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*defense against the defense*. In my personal opinion, that sequence of events is typical for every sublimation.

Whether a writer strikes out at institutions, mores, prejudices or injustices, the basic common denominator is identical: attack. Unconsciously and, of course, compulsively, the writer needs this aggressive mechanism as an alibi in his intrapsychic struggle with his own conscience. Only secondarily is a rationalization adduced. Therefore, Pritchett's statement—that he did not intend to render a social service by exposing an evil in his X-ray story—is honest and admirable (few writers would admit to it). It is, of course, not possible without clinical analysis to prove the substructure of his hatred for the housing problem of his elementary-school days. Only an analogy is adducible: a patient of mine once wrote a very similar story, identifying the "impersonal coldness" of his school building with lack of love. Completing the analogy, it was this same patient who dedicated one of his novels to his mother and then began the first chapter with a description of a cruel female school teacher punishing the boy unjustly.

This fortissimo of unconscious alibis, underlying the literary productivity, covers thinly the basic mood of the artist: depression and "injustice collecting." The life history of most writers bears out this contention. Therefore, it is quite characteristic that Greene's first thought in connection with Pritchett's definition of society (people bound together for an end) should evoke in him the association of the Loire mass murders.

What Pritchett and Bowen call the "solitary monologue" is but the unconscious plea and plaidoyer of the inner lawyer presenting his client's case to the accusing conscience, using all alibis and every mitigating circumstance.

The writer's alibi in his work is of a peculiar nature: the *objective* psychological truth must coincide with the *subjective* specific defense which the writer needs in his individual battle of the conscience at the *specific* moment. If the two processes go separate ways, the writer in his work falsifies psychological fact. Once this falsification begins,

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the writer becomes a failure. Almost always it is the first precursor of a writing block. One could also say that the coincidence of objective and subjective factors in the writer's work is "unjust." But that "injustice" is compensated for by an advantage (at least, a financial one): if subjective inner defenses of the writer coincide with a so-called trend currently in favor with the public, the writer may

have a best-seller at hand.

How are we to explain the great variety of topics and conflicts described by different writers? If, as I contend, the basis is always psychic masochism and the defense always pseudo-aggression, then why is all writing not uniform? This objection, voiced by many patients, is a spurious one. Every neurotic person attempts to climb from the deepest layers of his inner conflict to the more superficial ones. Since in this attempt there are varying and different "rescue stations" the secondary defenses are different too. It is not the variety of the basic conflicts but the variety of inner defenses which makes for the kaleidoscope of manifold topics. Mark Twain once said, "It were not best that we should all think alike; it is difference of opinion that makes horseraces." The psychoanalyst might say: "It is the difference of defense mechanisms that make for variation in literature."

The writer is the most antisocial human being conceivable. Small wonder that Elizabeth Bowen claims that no relationship exists between writer and the rest of the world, though she is at loss to explain why this should be so. Remember the humble beginnings of the alibi-sickness called writing: the child in the writer denying the existence of the duality, mother-child, by creating an autarchy. This type of alibi is asocial to start with; later, the remedy becomes stabilized and paradigmatic. Psychologically speaking, the writer's daily bread is his urgent need for an unconscious alibi. This alibi-compulsion leaves little room for anything else. This slogan is to him a temporary respite in his desperate battle of the conscience.

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