‘All writing worth reading comes, like suicide from outrage or revenge’, writes William Gaddis in his novella, *Agape Agape* (GADDIS 2002, p. 63). These are the words of Gaddis’s fictional character, an elderly man with a terminal illness, rambling on about his dissatisfactions at the decline of civilization and grumbling about the book he never managed to write. I take these words, although controversial, as a starting point to my argument that traumatic experience can give rise to feelings of shame, rage and the desire for revenge. If such emotions are harnessed they can lead to creativity, particularly in the autobiographical act of life writing.

In arguing for a psychoanalytic object relations approach to trauma, psychoanalyst Caroline Garland, writes that ‘trauma touches and disrupts the core of … identity … Trauma is like a wound’, she writes (1998, p. 9–11). It pierces the psychic
skin and breaks through the normal filtering process begun at birth with the aid of the mother/caretaker. The person’s mind is flooded with more than it can manage as the trauma overrides all usual defences leading to a breakdown in functioning. The traumatised individual can no longer go about the business of everyday life in the usual way. There is a loss of any sense of predictability. The traumatised individual is increasingly vulnerable to overwhelming anxiety that emerges in the first instance from the external trauma but eventually coincides with anxiety arising from internal sources. Primitive anxieties from infancy are stirred up, including paranoia and the terror of annihilation.

In the aftermath of a traumatic event, as a consequence of the grieving process, it is not unusual for the traumatised individual to experience intense anger, even rage against those who have inflicted the trauma. If these feelings can be tolerated and understood, they can then lead on to creativity.

The person makes sense of the traumatic event by making it part of his own familiar internal world. It fits in as another piece of the internal jigsaw. Not everyone reacts to the same traumatic event in the same way. The response depends on one’s particular vulnerability to a singular event, at a particular time. Trauma overrides existing defences against anxiety and confirms one’s worst primitive fears. In order to understand the desire for revenge we need to consider three aspects of that experience, the victim, the perpetrator and the trauma itself. Salman Akhtar argues that some revenge is helpful for the victim in so far as that it redresses the imbalance. The victim is able to shift from a position of helpless passivity to a more active one, leading to increased feelings of mastery. ‘The victim no longer remains innocent and the perpetrator is no longer the sole cruel party; now both seem to have been hurt and to have caused hurt’ (Akhtar 2002, p. 179). Herein lay the roots of empathy, a necessary precursor to forgiveness. ‘Forgiving others for their hurtful actions and forgiving oneself for having caused pain to others are crucial to moving on in life and to opening oneself for new experiences’ (Akhtar 2002, p. 206). Such forgiveness takes time and can only occur following a period of mourning. The Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, post apartheid, reflects this process, central to which is the opportunity for victims to express their desire for revenge.

John Steiner writes about revenge and resentment in the clinical setting, when patients, whether consciously or unconsciously, can experience their desire for revenge to be unacceptable, and even more shameful than the shame and humiliation that induced such desire in the first place. The desire for revenge is then transformed into a grievance and can become the focus of a ‘psychic retreat’, a state of mind into which the patient withdraws ‘as an area of relative peace and protection from strains when meaningful contact … is experienced as threatening’. These
states of mind are extreme and Steiner explores them to exemplify a ‘powerful system of defences, which serve as a protective armour’ (1993, p. 1).

According to Steiner, the striking aspect of revenge in such patients ‘is the sense of right, of justice, of duty and of devotion to a cause, which accompanies the quest for vengeance even in those individuals who appear to be consumed with hatred’ (1996, p. 433). When the patient feels wronged and victimised it frees him from guilt and anxiety. He becomes, according to Elizabeth Bott Spillius, ‘impenitent’, full of grievance, and he ‘justifies his hatred in a variety of ways’ (1993, p. 1203). Often the desire for revenge can begin as a ‘demand for justice’ but ‘can be taken over by insatiable destructiveness, which appears to be nothing less than an expression of the death instinct’. At this level, Steiner explores the notion of vengeance in its ultimate extreme—its actual enactment, whereby the desire ‘will not be satisfied until self and object are totally destroyed’ (1996, p. 434).

A desire for revenge that moves into a chronic aggrieved state goes beyond my exploration of such desire into enactment, but the basis of such intense feelings needs to be understood to demonstrate not only the inherent destructiveness of vengeance when such ill-considered emotion leads to action, but also the positive potential of such desires and fantasies.

I am not concerned with extreme forms here. Literature is full of examples in which people exact vengeance and in so doing destroy themselves and those against whom they seek revenge—from Aeneas in the Iliad, to Hamlet, to Captain Ahab in Herman Melville’s Moby Dick. I am not talking about the enactment of revenge, rather simply the desire—the wish to put a potato into someone’s car exhaust when they have wronged you, the wish to expose them publicly through a vicious letter to the newspaper, the horse’s head in the bed. These revenge fantasies are powerful ways of redressing the power imbalance between victim and perpetrator without actually doing further violence or other wrong. The roots of this desire for revenge lie in infancy, in that first taste of ‘the terrible sense of unfairness that is felt when the object does not behave in the way … [the infant] believes he deserves’ (Steiner 1996, p. 435).

When a child feels let down by ‘its good objects’, its parental caregivers, ‘a painful confusion between good and bad impulses results’ (Steiner 1996, p. 434). The desire for revenge more often than not starts as the child’s wish to maintain its good relationship to its good objects and the child does so by splitting. The good object is idealised and all the badness, the hateful feelings are projected onto the persecutor. Further, when the relationship between one’s self and one’s good object is damaged, ‘it is the good object that seems to demand revenge’, and the person feels duty bound to restore that ‘lost idealised relationship’ (Steiner 1996, p. 434).
Steiner argues that revenge is the opposite of forgiveness and typically emerges in the Oedipal situation when a child realises the reality of the relationship between his parents and senses his exclusion from it. This disruption to the mother/child dyad is especially ‘provocative of revenge’ (1996, p. 436). Such experiences are universal and can lead to the development of psychic retreats and a permanent sense of outrage and grievance. Alternatively, they can lead to growth, when the patient emerging out of the state of grievance and psychic retreat, after a period of struggle and despair, is able to rebel against parental authority and to enact his desire for revenge ‘in phantasy’ (1996, p. 436), and in a modified form in his real relationships, through the transference. Thereafter, the patient can begin to reconstruct his internal world and set in train ‘the long and painful task of finding forgiveness and of making reparation’ (1996, p. 436).

In 1989 I enrolled with the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Psychoanalytic Society to begin my training as a psychoanalyst. After two years the committee responsible for training discontinued my candidature without any clear explanation. My experience of being sacked from the psychoanalytic training created a seismic shift in my sense of myself, as if my whole world had been ripped open by an earthquake. I experienced the sacking as a trauma, one that reverberated with earlier childhood traumas, and one, which has taken me several years to dismantle.

For cultural theorist, Elspeth Probyn, ‘shame marks the break in connection’ (2005, p. 13). She writes about the importance of a sense of belonging and the shame of the cultural outsider, which is ‘fed by a deep desire to fit in and an abiding interest in being able to do so—to belong where you don’t belong’ (2005, p. 39).

Such was my experience once ejected from the psychoanalytic society. The sense of dislocation, of shock and disbelief and the gut wrenching tug of shame. For so long I had wanted to be included within my new professional family, the best family, as I saw it then. Now suddenly I had been told I was not wanted.

Psychoanalyst Phil Mollon writes about the significance of a sense of community within analytic institutes: Psychoanalysts tend to form communities with strong group cohesion, the mutual support being very important since the work is so difficult and so unusual. Psychoanalysis, as an occupation, is regarded by most people as rather odd and few outside the profession have much understanding of it. It is not readily comparable to any other activity and way of life. Therefore it is only amongst other analysts that we find empathy and understanding of our work and daily experience. The lack of ready understanding found amongst society generally means that declaring one’s occupation and identity as a psychoanalyst may be a source of shame as well as pride. It also means that the acceptance of other
analysts is of particular importance—with the inevitable result that deviations from group cultural norms will be exceptionally liable to evoke the threat of shame. The psychoanalytic culture therefore is likely to be particularly conservative (Mollon 2002, p. 137).

For a short time, I shared this sense of community, in which I, the analytic candidate, was like a child under the protective wings of her parents—my own analyst and the analytic society. In applying to do the analytic training I was looking for a professional family with whom I might feel safe. Instead, I joined a group of people whose difficulties and flaws emulated those of my own family of origin. In her book, Psychoanalysis, the Impossible Profession, Janet Malcolm asks the pseudonymous analyst, Aaron Green, what it means when someone is dropped from the training.

‘I don’t know’, he says. ‘These things are shrouded in mystery and a tremendous amount of secrecy—secrecy that is observed not only by the Institute but by the person dropped’ (Malcolm 1982, p. 64).

In the weeks that followed the sacking, my mind felt no longer mine. No one told me not to talk about it but my shame left me silenced. Even now as I talk about it, I still feel a shiver of shame, as if the person to whom I am speaking will look at me cross-eyed, as if to say, ‘so what’s wrong with you then? There must be something wrong with you to have been given the sack’.

Shame is a precursor to the desire for revenge. Mollon argues that ‘Shame and fear of shame are among the most powerful of human aversive experiences, precipitating panic, rage, and the wish to disappear—and in extreme cases, homicide, suicide and even psychosis’ (Mollon 2002, pp. 20–21). When my mentor told me the news as I sat in the low armchair opposite her on the second floor of the Toorak Road consulting rooms, it felt like a cold gust of wind had blown into my face. I saw before me an audience of hundreds, of friends and family, of enemies. How could I tell them? How could I share my shame?

‘I’ve lost my dignity’, I told my analyst over and over. To hide my shame I stopped reading psychoanalytic texts. They enraged me. I stopped going to psychoanalytic conferences. I did not even go to hear Joyce MacDougall, renowned for her work on mind and body, when she visited Melbourne. I avoided contact with all but my closest professional colleagues. I went underground. I hid from the light of day. That is when I started to write.

I started to write to find a voice for my helplessness, my rage and my desire for revenge. I started to write in the first instance about my childhood experiences in a
family that was also riddled with secrets and trauma. I began then to see more clearly the parallels between my experience in my family of origin, my experience within the Catholic Church and my experience within the Psychoanalytic Institute.

‘To be caught up in a severely traumatic event stirs up without fail the unresolved pains and conflicts of childhood’ (Garland 1998, p. 4). Garland argues that in order to ‘get better’ the individual needs to recall the traumatic experience and, through the process of recall, begin to integrate it into consciousness by ‘working through’ rather than walling it up ‘in some avoided area of mental activity’. It takes time for the experience to ‘make sense, to be able to be thought about, rather than being dismissed as bad luck, a meaningless accident or fate’ (Garland 1998, p. 5).

When I was forty-one years old, not long before the birth of my last daughter, I sent my mother a story called ‘Night Terrors’ in which I had written about my experience as a small child sharing a bedroom with my older sister. I wanted my mother to know what it had been like to be the child who had witnessed my father’s many visits to our bedroom for the purposes of sexually abusing my older sister. He never touched me.

My mother rang me after she had received my writing and told me that it had made her sad to read what I had written and that she had tried to put a stop to my father’s visits to my sister all those years ago. She told me that she had not realised until it was too late that despite telling my father she would kill him if he did not stop visiting my sister in this way, he did not stop until my sister was sixteen years old.

Most of my early writing centred on this aspect of my family life, incest and the secrecy surrounding it. There are nine children in my family of origin. I am the sixth child and second surviving daughter. My parents migrated to Australia from Holland in the early 1950s, ostensibly to start a new life post war. My mother has since told me they migrated primarily to escape the shame my father had experienced in relation to his own family of origin.

My paternal grandfather had been imprisoned in 1943 in Haarlem, Holland on charges of ontucht, which is Old Dutch for vice, lewdness, pornography and prostitution. It could well mean incest given that my father’s sister, then nineteen years old, brought the charges against her father, which resulted in his incarceration.

The wish to have a large family, a wish that according to my mother was frowned upon in Holland at the end of the Second World War, when space was at a premium, was also among her stated reasons for leaving. She was pregnant with her fifth child when my mother arrived in Australia in 1951, her fourth son, born three weeks after her arrival. I was born a year later in the Diamond Valley.
Memorial Hospital. In another seven years my mother’s large family would be complete, all nine of us, though later still in 1963, her eleventh child, a fifth girl, was stillborn. My mother’s first daughter died at five months of age during the *Hunger Winter* of 1945. We are book-ended by dead babies.

Large families tend to fracture and divide. Ours did. We could not sustain the parameters. My mother’s powerful belief in the sanctity of the family, her family, crumbled under the weight of all these divisions. When we were children scrambling for space, scrambling to be heard above the cacophony of one another’s jealousies and resentments, we fought bitterly and my mother wept. She was tortured to see her children so unloving. She could not reconcile the loveliness of her homeland, the land of her childhood with this harsh land of disappointments.

Although I was sixth born, a later born, I saw myself as the oldest of the last four. Also, we divided into the girls and the boys, four girls, five boys and the divide between those born in Holland and those born in Australia. These divisions and the competitiveness that emerged as each of us fought to create our own ‘niche’, as Frank Sulloway has described it, trying to find a guaranteed way of gaining parental approval, has been enormous (SULLOWAY 1997). Such intense rivalry can trigger a desire for revenge, which again must be understood and tolerated in order to enable a creative response.

Religion also became a way of trying to get parental approval. Many of my older siblings, at least for a time, made the decision to enter the priesthood. My older sister wanted to enter the convent, but the nuns would not have her, on the grounds of my father’s alcoholism and the belief that my sister would become mentally unstable. I too wanted to enter but only, I realised even at the time, to be close to my favourite teacher, a nun. By the time I reached university, my plans changed, as did my calling. Growing up in a large Catholic family I had a strong sense of a calling, if not into religious life then into a profession—teaching or the helping professions. I chose the latter. I wanted to help people from families like mine. From social work I moved into psychology and psychotherapy, specifically psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and four years after I had completed my university degree I began a four-year course in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. This was not enough for me. All around me, I sensed that the *crème de la crème* of the therapeutic field was psychoanalysis. Ten years later I went into analysis with this thought in mind and was finally accepted for the training in 1989.

There were six candidates in my analytic training group, a large number relative to the usual number of candidates going through at that time, generally, only one or two. From the onset it seemed that one or two of us would have to go. Sibling rivalry between candidates was also a feature of the training experience, and when
two of us were sacked, the remaining four felt all the horrors of survivor guilt, at first identifying with me for my trauma and later closing off contact, as if the sight of the failed one was too disturbing.

It is important, though perhaps difficult, to understand the degree of my desire and commitment, my desperation to belong to Freud’s inner circle, at least metaphorically. I was in awe of my analytic ancestors, of Freud and Melanie Klein, the post-Kleinians. I had begun to feel I was part of a great tradition, a great line of thinkers. Once accepted into training I felt proud of myself, proud beyond proud. I had reached the pinnacle of my professional career. I was in analytic training. Home at last. It was this investment and my subsequent rejection that led to the state of shame, rage and the desire for revenge, I have earlier described. Because I felt silenced, because I knew that to make a lot of noise, to complain publicly about my sacking from the analytic training, would further establish the idea that I was unsuitable to do that training, (analysts are required to be silent, thoughtful and introspective) I could only work through my grief at the loss in continuing with my personal analysis and in the writing.

It took another ten years before I could find an audience, before my writing was first published, before I came to realise I did have a voice. The autobiographical act in this sense has become the enactment of my desire for revenge, but the quality of that desire is muted and transformed over time. My narrative demands analysis but the analysis itself becomes a narrative, limited by my difficulty in considering events from the perspective of others involved. Each of us has a story to tell. When we remember from a distance our present perspective adds layers to the actual event. My abused sister has told me repeatedly that she wants no more secrets and that we must all speak out about the past. She welcomes my writing about my experience, even in so far as it involves her, but at the same time she has told me, whenever she reads my writing about our childhood together, it sends shock waves through her. My sister has difficulties remembering events between the ages of four and fourteen, the significant years in which my father repeatedly abused her. My writing revives these painful memories for her.

My mother’s willingness to believe my father’s visits had stopped is not an uncommon response to child sexual abuse. My mother herself traumatised by the demands of her life in a new country and overwhelmed by the sheer size of family, her nine children, and her husband’s alcoholism, could not face up to the horrors of this experience. Instead, she found comfort in her religion and used her optimism and a degree of denial to cushion her guilt. My mother was pleased years later when I told her that my father had never touched me.

My father never touched me I suspect, because I had learned quickly that I must stay as far away from him as I could. I learned that I must never speak to him if I
could avoid it and that if he ever touched me I should scream. Those were my sister’s words: ‘If he touches you, scream’. I learned those words so well that like many others who have fallen under the shadow of trauma, I became adept at avoiding feelings simply by switching off my body. My writing, as a continuation of my analysis, has enabled me to face such feelings, to re-revisit their pain, and as well, to give voice to my desire for revenge against those who have hurt me, feelings which I might otherwise have buried.

At the end of her series of essays, *A Plea for Eros*, the writer Siri Hustvedt asks the question:

Is the wounded self the writing self? Is the writing self an answer to the wounded self? Perhaps that is more accurate. The wound is static, a given. The writing self is multiple and elastic, and it circles the wound. Over time, I have become more aware of the fact that I must try not to cover that speechless, hurt core; that I must fight my dread of the mess and violence that are also there. I have to write the fear’ (Hustvedt 2006, p. 228).

Hustvedt’s fear, as she discovers in exploring her life, is one of the violence within her. She is the oldest of four girls, of Norwegian parents, brought up in mid west America. When I started reading Hustvedt’s book, I was intrigued by her ostensibly happy childhood. By the time I reached the final chapter and read about her premature birth, the first two weeks of her life in an incubator, not held nor comforted, the fact that it was touch and go whether she lived or died, I began to see the connections and the source of her creativity. You need to be closer to death perhaps, to be able to be truly creative, to have something to fight against.

I have spent many years in analysis. My writing is a further attempt to analyse and refine, the process begun in my analysis but impeded by the sacking. Hustvedt calls it sublimation, the term coined by Freud to delineate ‘the transformation of inner dramas, fears and wounds into something else: a work of art outside the body of the artist’ (Hustvedt 2006, p. 171). Perhaps the practice of autobiography in the act of writing trauma can operate as a form of treatment of the desire for revenge, a treatment, which according to Garland ‘is, at its best, about connectedness, about emotional contact, about making sense of the apparently meaningless, and of re-finding one’s good objects, however long and difficult and bloody the process on the way to those goals’ (Garland 1998, p. 28).

As Akhtar suggests in relation to the South African Truth and Reconciliation process, when a perpetrator is able to acknowledge the harm he has inflicted, this also goes some way to redressing the pain for the victim. It softens the victim’s desire for revenge. By way of contrast, Akhtar, referring to Leonard Shengold’s work with child abuse victims, argues: ‘To harm a person and then question his or her perception of it is a double jeopardy, tantamount to soul murder’ (Akhtar, 2002, p. 180).
Apology shifts ‘the psychic locale of the representations of trauma from the actual to the transitional area of the mind’. In other words, the experience of trauma moves from simply being recorded in the victim’s mind as a real event, to an experience that enters the ‘unreal registers of the mind’. In this way the trauma can shift and sway. It need not stay as some unbearable pain, almost too unbearable to think about. Reconsideration becomes possible. The experience can be transformed from trauma and a desire for revenge, into empathy and the grass roots of creativity.

The process of writing initially to the audience within and later when an external audience reads it, allows for such reconsideration. My experience of being sacked from the analytic training has lost most of its hard edge, but I continue to resonate with my memories of that dark time. I write now to accommodate those resonances.

Literary critic Paul John Eakin suggests that autobiography is ‘an expression of homeostatic regulatory activity’ in the body and mind (Eakin 2005, p. 4). He argues that the function of self-narrative is to push us towards future stability. ‘We are steadily moving away from the past into the future, and we want to bridge the gap’. We cannot talk so easily about the present in self-narrative terms, rather we tend to hark back to the past, ‘because the present isn’t a story yet’ (Eakin 2005, p. 5). In this sense, the autobiographic impulse, ‘conscious marking,’ as Eakin describes it—the urge to reflect on the past—is akin to psychoanalytic work, dealing with the past in the present, not only for its own sake, for increased understanding, but also as an attempt to prepare oneself for the future.

For me one such moment of conscious marking, ‘the prototype of the autobiographical act’, what Eakin means ‘by living autobiographically’, came the day my mentor announced that my training was over (Eakin, 2005, p.13). Writing autobiographically with an eye to the future is also about my desire for revenge. Moving through time, the link between the past, present and future is fuelled by that desire. I imagine myself at some future time finally exonerated, those who had failed me at last realising their mistake. I think of these imaginings of future times as fantasies or daydreams. Such daydreams or wish fulfilments could be seen as attempts to cope with the hardship of the present and the trauma of the past. Such fantasies of revenge can help to overcome the sense of helplessness, rage and despair.

After the door to the analytic training had been closed to me, as my mentor had suggested, I tried to find a new way. Not that I should give up my work as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, she had said, but that I should give up the desire to be a psychoanalyst. Writing became a bridge then between the past and the future. It enabled me to catch some glimpses of how I had come to this position and how I might move beyond it, even including those delicious fantasies of getting even.
I once daydreamed of a planeload of analysts crashing en route to a conference. All on board dead. Similarly, the memory of the hatred I bore my father as a child began to come back to me, as I wrote my way through my childhood into the present. In writing about the trauma and imagining a different future, I have come to realise that the ideal future of my daydreams was not possible, that I have idealised the analytic training and life as a psychoanalyst, and that a different future, a good enough future is now possible.

Eakin writes at length about how breaking any of the three rules of autobiography, truth-telling, respecting the rule of privacy and ‘the obligation to display a normative model of personhood’ can lead to serious consequences, social reprisals, stigma and even financial punishments. At the same time, ‘the performance of self-narration confirms that identity is in working order’ (Eakin, 2001 p. 121). The absence of that ability, along with the absence of an affective response, can be interpreted as a sign of abnormalcy. Eakin does not argue in favour of creating an image of normalcy, rather he writes about societal pressures to create such images. Deviations threaten the status quo. In this sense, although writing autobiographically is a way of reclaiming the ‘I’ of the self, the identity, one has to be careful. As Eakin suggests, ‘autobiographers lead perilous lives’ (Eakin, 2001 p. 118).

A few years before he died, I visited my father in the Queen Victoria Hospital in Melbourne. My father was in the men’s ward on the fourth floor, the receptionist had told me, and I followed the yellow painted line to him. He was resting against a pile of pillows in a high cast iron bed with an empty chair on one side and a window on the other. The room looked out over rooftops to tall city buildings that threw shadows against one another like stacked children’s building blocks. Since the time I had left home as a nineteen year old, whenever I rang to speak to my mother and my father answered I hung up the phone, both terrified of and furious with him for being there. I imagined him then looking into the earpiece and wondering why someone should hang up in his ear. Could he have known it was me? That I had left him with the dull burr of the cut off tone, the line dead and the discomfort of being shut out.

I did not know at this time how to approach my father in person, but once inside the hospital I felt I could not run away. I had promised myself I would stay for the duration of this visit. I pulled up a chair alongside my father’s bed, not too close, but enough to take in his old man smell. I decided against leaning over to kiss him on the cheek, but even as I decided against this, I could still imagine his rough stubble against my lips, and I shuddered at the memory of leaning over him to say goodnight when I was little, when my father’s raspy, nicotine stained fingers would scrape across my forehead in the form of a sign of the cross as he blessed me before bed.
'How are you?' I asked in quiet desperation. What could I say to this man whom I had avoided for so long? What could I say now that I was twenty-two years old and he was a man in his sixties, a man prematurely frail, a man who could no longer hurt or threaten me, as he did when I was a child, when I had so wanted him dead?

'I have done terrible things to you children', my father said.

I looked into his liquid grey eyes, red around the rims from too many years of drinking. He had taken up studying Hebrew by now, now that he was sober. He had gone back to the church. He had befriended the charismatics, not in a fanatical way, chanting and speaking in tongues, but from an intellectual position of curiosity. When I was a child I had worried that my father did not come to church with us, that he stayed away from Mass. His irreligiousness I saw as a mark of his wickedness. If he went to church I had reasoned, he would not do the hurtful things he did. He would not get drunk. He would go to confession and he would be able to examine his conscience. But as long as he did not practise his Catholicism, he was free to continue regardless and there was no one who could stop him.

My father’s skin was like parchment. He had grey bags under his eyes and his false teeth clicked as he spoke.

'I am sorry for what I have done to you children'. He was silent then and I was silent. There was nothing I could think of to say. I did not reassure him that it was okay because it was not, nor did I bend to kiss him when I left at the end of my visit, instead I merely offered a brush of my fingers against his outstretched hand.

'Guilt is a terrible thing', my father called out to me as I walked the length of the ward to leave. 'I know,' I said. 'I know'.

I wish now that I had stayed longer, that I had tried more to talk to him then, but I was young and still too frightened to acknowledge his pain. So now I write. How do we break the rules of incest, the rules of torture and abuse in all its many forms, the rules of bullying, if not through writing? Yet writing has the power in some instances to make things worse.

Joan Didion argues that writing itself is ‘an aggressive, even a hostile act’. It is, she argues ‘the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind … setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the readers most private space’ (Didion 1976, p. 50). In this way writing can be considered an enactment of the desire for revenge, as much as it can be a creative gesture, a gesture of defiance, the speaking out against oppression, that in itself might become another form of oppression.
In her essay *On hurting People’s Feelings* Carolyn Wells Klaus writes about the nature of biography as an act of autobiography. She argues that ‘reducing a person’s story on a page, robs it of complexity’ (Klaus 2003, p. 283). Is it really the desire for revenge that sets my blood racing or is it, as Klaus argues, guilt? Non-fiction ‘sucks the life of a person onto the page’ and distorts that life to the author’s own ends. Characters are slanted in the direction of the author’s obsessions. ‘The real problem’, Klaus argues ‘is that you’re borrowing the peoples’ identities to tell your own story’ Klaus quotes at length from her own writing and others to demonstrate the ways in which a writer’s bias influences the description of other characters. And so in telling the stories of others we inevitably tell our own stories. ‘There is no script’, Klaus argues, ‘only improvisation. We fill in the outlines from the details. All we know of the world as writers is what we see—images, words, scenes. We supply the meaning, and we alter that meaning with every sleight of hand’ (Klaus 2003, p. 288).

There are no certainties in this struggle, no absolutes. The business of writing our own stories is fraught. In acknowledging my desire for revenge, I run the risk of censure for breaking the rules of decency, of normalcy, of too much self-disclosure. Even so, I share the desire for revenge. It exists as an expression of an internal experience most people have from time to time. What we do with that desire becomes the central issue, not the desire itself. Reworked, the desire for revenge as a response to trauma can provide a valuable step towards growth and creativity in the autobiographical act of life writing.

References


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