

Dead, Shed Skin

An Autoethnography

THEODORE CHRISTOU
University of New Brunswick

THE SPACE is jovial and dinner was luxurious. It has been a short day and the night will be long. There is always reading to do. I will pay penance for the time spent laughing and sharing a bottle of wine with friends. The conversations turns, I cannot remember how, to the issue of eating disorders. I consider a creative segue to change topics but in my impatience blurt out: “I had an eating disorder.”

The room gasps while my companions are more polite: “That is almost unheard of for a male.” A fair amount of discussion emerges from my comment, much involving my personal experience. More intriguing than any autobiographic or narrative details is the dispassion with which I discuss my experiences. It has been ten years, after all.

I retire from dinner and sit, solitary and quiet. I, who have for a decade bartered and lied my way out of any conversation relating to my battle with anorexia nervosa, have blurted out unmentionable things, saying what pained me to think about. This is not one of those occasions where I was all-along waiting to speak about a topic and seized the opportunity when it came. Mortified, my reflection intensified and continued over the pursuing days. I came to think that I embodied the Cartesian duality. My mind and body are engaged in civil strife, and despite claims that I am healed and whole, there is a suppressed self nested in my present being. In order to reconcile the space between my past and my present, I became absorbed in the study of artefacts from my personal past. Central here was my own poetry, the concrete and tangible evidence that I existed as an anorexic. Photographs from the time under scrutiny were discarded and lost. My writing operated as the hinge to reveal some of the thoughts, feelings, and coping strategies that I could not otherwise recall.

I use autoethnography to investigate memories of the thoughts, feelings, and coping strategies I had and employed while in the grips of an eating disorder. I am framing and bracketing for interpretation the writing that I composed with raw immediacy during a difficult time. Now, I feel, the passing of time makes it possible for me to be emotionally distant and confident enough to undertake this study. My poetry is a bridge between my present perspective and the emotions and purposes encoded in the images and words of verse. This autoethnography is centred on the functional purpose of reclaiming and recreating a story of suppressed personal history.

Autoethnography allowed me a medium to examine the forces that were integral to the creation of my self. My context had changed, yet I can never entirely enter an anaesthetized or insensible state that will separate me from myself. The autoethnographic research tradition enabled me here to investigate my own experiences in “their own right,” thus writing my “way out of the crisis of representation” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733). Writing in the first person and assuming the posture or position of researcher, I remembered a personal past and costumed it as if it were a subject to be studied. This ‘costuming’ was a useful consequence of the pain involved in remembering, yet the writing that emerged engendered thought and self-evaluation (Harris, 2003). The autoethnographic tradition, free of academic and abstract jargon, permitted me to elaborate on the remembrance and on the narration embedded in autobiography. It was important here for me to be conscious of my tendency to omit, simplify, distort, fictionalize, and romanticize painful experiences in order to make them more manageable. Further, because much of my remembering unfolded in the process of writing, I was required to enter into an iterative write-revise-rethink-critique-analyze cycle where new memories and judgments were juxtaposed and evaluated against old and older ones.

My past ‘self’ was transformed, then, into a culture to be studied and, as this examination will show, I chose to enter the culture of poets and lean upon the traditions of poetry for my support in composition. My membership in that culture provided the structure and form that permitted me to journal my emotional and intellectual movement through the labyrinthine space of an eating disorder. This autoethnography, an analytic account, affords an anaesthetized distance from my past and permits interpretation of personal writing that preserves keys to self-explanation. I give voice to a poet who described and managed his sense of self through composition. By listening and interpreting his art through my current life circumstances, I draw out from lost emotional and intellectual positions a narrative thread that I can weave around me and into my personal story.

In order for this fabric metaphor to be fruitful, I make the assumptions that: a) My needs, desires, and understanding changed while I was in the grips of and recovering from an eating disorder; b) The poetry written over that same period of time will provide evidence of those changes; and c) I am able to interpret those changes and learn from them some of the coping strategies and beliefs I held. Over the course of the last month, I have been reading hundreds of poems that I wrote between 1997 and 1998, coding them according to formal and stylistic elements. The self-criticism that will follow leans on a handful of poems that demarcate shifts in the style and sentiment of my verse composition. The first poem I can date to the initial onset of anorexia, July 1997, represents an appropriate starting point for this study:

*Without the airy breath of fairy dreams
To ferry tranquil quiet sleep into
My fearful wide-eyed soul, the needful night
Might onto sorrow fix my spirit's sight.*

*Without the fragrant, fresh delights of light
And lively verse, the woe that chokes my sense
Of self might reign with iron-fisted fear
Above the songs that hearts and hopes hold dear.*

Here, I was reaching for something ethereal in order to deal with a physical catastrophe. There are echoes here of a Byronic hero, a Promethean spirit, chained. I was aware of the power of poetry, and I manipulated it as if it were a tool that could extend my reach and grasp. When the mirror held horror, I required beauty that was of my making.

It is no coincidence that the lines are left-justified. It is important to note the iambic rhythms of pentameter and the purposeful dependence on rhyme. These structural and stylistic points demonstrate a desperate attempt to gain control over a life that was slipping away. The issue of control is not always discussed in reference to poetry.

While it is common to associate the expressive element of art creation with the need to exorcise one's demons, it has become clear to me that poetry was the medium I manipulated in order to exercise power. The eating disorder, in part, demonstrates my feelings of insecurity and powerlessness. My draconian ability to control caloric intake ravaged my body, but it persisted because it was one thing in the swirling chaos of life that I could control completely. The control of language differed greatly from the control over my physical self, and I never conflated the two. Micro-management and micro-manipulation of the literary composition, while indicative of my need for control, were generative and conducive to thought; they helped me to be mindful of things not found in kitchens, orchards, and grocery stores. The more I wrote, the more I thought about and pursued a creative impulse that was liberating and, it turns out, glorious. Where food was concerned, the more dictatorial I was, the less power I achieved. The control I exerted over my body dammed up creative and reflective thought. Poetry, then, was an important structural support in the construction of my present self.

Consider the following example of a piece of writing that scaffolds the distance between where I felt I was and where I wanted to be:

Morose Morn! You that sorrow brings
Into the luminous shimmer of dawn.
Weep for me! Weep for the sad soul that sings!
Weep for the night that, with your coming, is gone.

Wherefore am I forsaken by slumber?
To what ends will I be stricken with woe?
"Funeral pyre?" Nay! A lone mere ember--
Tossed and thrown and battered and blown--so low!

Paradisiacal dream - fine, fleeting Grace!--
From which I wake unwillingly.
Light! Back to your heavenly source retrace
Your obtrusive steps. I mourn the dim moon!

Come sleep! Come peace! Come love! Come truer life!

Come cloak this hopeless heart! Subdue this fear!
Let me dream, illusory sun! This strife
You pass for pleasure is unwelcome here!

“Nothing in excess?” Then why is there no
End to this treacherous expanse of pain?
“Know myself?” No! I’ll not exhume sorrow
Simply to see its sublime sights again!

I’ll resign to smile. I’ll love life despite
The protracted temper of its tenure.
In the eyes of my loved ones, I’ll venture
To seek inspiration. Then breathe to write.

The exclamation marks, dashes, capitalization, and personification of nouns, pentameter, and archaic language are tightly bound by Romantic conventions. I have never spoken with the kinds of phrases that build this poem. There is nothing original, and all is cliché here. It is precisely this component of the over-familiar and unoriginal that allowed me comfort. Byron, Shelley, and Keats died young and were tormented. By writing as I imagined they did, I was able to give some semblance of structure to an existence that was, in my perception, chaotic. The ‘antique’ quality of my influences hearkened to an established and grounded tradition. I could hide behind the walls of tall, large structures. Even the physical use of space in the poem was strictly regimented here. The manner in which the words are lined up on an indented left margin with the first and third lines of each stanza pushed towards the right is entirely imitative of the way Byron’s verse is presented in an anthology of his work that I read. This poem, despite its allegiance to convention, despite all posturing, marks a turning point in my thinking.

In the collection of verse I wrote, this is the first piece of writing that rebels against elements of my heretofore idealized childhood and youth. The phrases quoted in the poem are interpreted adages from Greek antiquity. In light of my heritage and upbringing, both steeped in Greek tradition, I interpret the remembrance and rebuttal that characterizes the second-to-last stanza as a rejection of my own history and past. I had always believed in the liberating power of reason and had faith that all things are knowable and that all is controllable. My positivistic perspective, in part, ruled against the power of literature to liberate.

The poem avows that the author will live to write. There was a maelstrom, but I had discovered a less destructive way of finding shelter. I could take pleasure in writing, and I could, similarly, control what the product became. Poetry became the means of my salvation, and while I would be tethered to convention for some time still, the images that represented me in verse were increasingly concrete and powerful:

I sail a stormy, tempestuous ocean;
The frantic, frenzied waters swirl and swell.

Winds bellow, and echo, and weep within
The pharos that funnels me out of Hell.

Somber clouds cloak the curtailing moonlight.
My heart, rapidly racing, rebukes sleep.
Your beacon eyes are fading from sight—
Mine are too weakened and weary to weep.

Shadows of death dream themselves from the deep;
With whispers and malice they crawl and creep
Towards my heart's hearth, but the barracks are steep.

Deepening darkness is shrouding my past.
The gale engulfs me, yet mighty's my mast.
Siren! Thy song shall be silenced at last!

It may appear at first that there is no marked difference in this writing—the language costumes itself as a Renaissance monarch might; the rhyme pattern is a fishbowl; the imagery is largely unoriginal—but the poetry is playing the role of best mate to the poet. I could not face a plate of food when I wrote this. Sitting at a table and eating was scarier to me than anything before had been or has been. My muscles had atrophied and I could only get up the stairs by dragging myself. The skin on my arms, legs, and stomach was loose and flabby. In my imagined self, a boat battered by the sea, there was a tiny Odysseus tied to the mast rejecting the song of temptation.

Without the structure, admittedly modified, of the sonnet, I could not imagine surrendering the structure of my eating regimen. Had I not cloaked my thoughts in antique words, I would not have been able to sneak in a glimmer of self-praise. The decision to take a stand and face myself critically could only be done privately, in the journal of a song. The lines lean on the left side of the page for support; indents and wavering space could not permit me to assert that something inside me, like a mast, is mighty and unfaltering. The words speak to the horrors of holding on to painful memories. These monsters rise up from dark places and make their way into the writing, even as the composition, in some way, shields me and nurtures me.

It would be false to describe my battle with anorexia as one of perpetual progress. An electrocardiograph reading or a stock market ticker might be better models of the kind of improvement that I had over a year's struggles. The non-linear movement that represents the alternation of personal success and failure resulted in verse composition that aimed to limit the intellectual and emotional divide between my aims and achievements:

Frail-winged Moth,

vast as pinpricks
lost as faces baked with dirt

all i know and need is spinning
i am spinning
i am spinning
deriving no salvation from
the bonds with other atom things

i an atom
substitute me for another
like myself and naught is lost

i an atom
elemental chaos strikes

In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the first sight of the sun's brilliance is blinding to the emerging philosopher king. The lines of verse quoted above demonstrate the sense of disorientation that accompanied my first steps to recovery. I was a drunken man trying to teeter across a line. I was a child relearning how to eat. I was an existentialist philosopher aiming to understand what differentiated me as an individual. I was a mix of many metaphors.

At this point in my life, it was important to me that I reread, revisited, and reevaluated the situations and people that were part of my life before the eating disorder. The notion of 'reevaluating' is deeper than its surface-level appearance because it implies not only retrospection and introspection but, more significantly, the valuation of self. There was a great deal of idealization of the time before my sickness, when I was healthier in body and mind. If I could do the same things at about the same time and in around the same order as I did them several years ago, I could provide myself with the means to improve my quality of life. If my habits of mind and action could mirror those of a prior time, they could reflect the possibility of some positive change, I thought. After a long period of self-denial and rejection of my self-worth, I was beginning to appraise aspects of my life and find that they were valuable and beautiful.

The sense of bewilderment—the spinning and repeating—that is conveyed in the poem grew from the realization that I was not (and never again could be) the person I had been. No algorithm of subtraction could take away the self gripped by anorexia. That self was nested inside me and had contributed to who I became. A moth cannot tear off its wings and go back to being a caterpillar. The lines of the poem are backed up against the right margin because this period of question-asking and value-seeking was menacing and confusing. The shape of the poem demonstrates that I had backed myself against a wall, petrified, and was inching my way towards some end.

As I inched along, the next step in my evolving understanding and recovery was characterized by an unconscious struggle to overcome the shame that I associated with the image of my anorexic self:

i
had a
dream in which
i shed my skin
and i remember
something of a candle
burning though whether it was
night or not or dark or not or
whether there was a single waver
of this candle's fire or a chandelier
of licking lights i cannot recall
i shed my skin i heard the thumping
of a drumbeat of a heart
that came from me or to
me from around or
from inside the
skin i shed
it bled
this
skin i
shed it reeked
of yesterday
and of idle hope
and i understood what
happens to our childhood prayers
when i looked upon this withered
rag of skin i'd left behind me in
sandy trails of slithers i'd forgotten
i lean over the edge of me this
edge that is this skin i shed and
know that it resembles me

more than i that it is
 dead that it was not
 always so is
 something i
 am sure
 of
 milton's
 satan too
 perhaps was a
 mirror of his fall
 surely i am also
 gone blind gone falling though this
 skin presupposes by its shape
 the fulfillment of mutation by
 its death the end of change by blood a wash
 of tortured grief by eyes agape the
 splendour of deciduous leaves i
 scream my arms outstretched as
 absolutes the thump
 and the firelight
 cease i am
 dead shed
 skin

The verse is dominated by images of the grotesque. Reading the poem, my senses are stimulated as they might be in a nightmare. I have stomped on as many conventions as I could, abandoning lyricism for garbled trails of symbols that are meant to represent ambivalence about my embodied history. There is movement that is not progress. There is emergence without improvement. Consciousness is a wide-eyed gatekeeper for learning, but my awareness and remembrance is concentrated on horror and ugliness. To think about pain in general was not possible here; the intimate and horrible details that made memories painful are those things on which the poem concentrates. Memories of feelings could not suffice to characterize the embodied presence of fear, rage, and distress.

In terms of the physical layout of the poem, this work marks an emerging effort on my part to add an expressionistic layer of meaning to the text. By this I mean that I intended the appearance of the poem to say something about my internal state, in line with the words and imagery. In this case, if the pages that frame the poetry are turned ninety degrees counter-clockwise, the words take the roughly-hewn shape of a dead snake's skin, tattered, ragged, and torn. The left margin

becomes the floor upon which the skin rests. Considering the last thought in the poem, where I associate myself with the dead skin that dominates the nightmare visions of the poet, the shapes the lines make on the margin constitute a self-portrait. In this work, I am both poet and poem. Further, I am both my past and my present; despite the ugliness of the exfoliated skin, I associate with it directly.

Alarming is the realization that this poem is nearly a decade old, and since its composition, I have written hundreds more poems. With the exception of love-sick or angry-drunken verses, I cannot claim that more recent poetic compositions of mine are fundamentally different in style or sentiment from the one referenced above. I am unable to escape the overbearing injuries rendered on my esteem and on my body. These injuries are daily etched on my senses and embodied by stretch marks and droopy steps. If this paper is pedagogy, my poetry analyses have shown me that I have not entirely dealt with the body-image issues that are intrinsically tied to the eating disorder that accompanied me to the brink of expiration. There is, still, it must be said, this generative and fluid self that has been born in this text; this self depicts past pains as learning and not as aimless sacrifice.

Nowhere in my poetry have I expressed a love for myself or, more particularly, for my body. The physical self that catches cold, sneezes, sleeps, trips, falls, and bleeds remains the enemy of my mind. Poetry, as a pedagogical space, is a medium that I have inhabited. By encountering and making marks in verse, I have left a record of my emerging consciousness. Rereading and interpreting my poetic journal, I can approach my painful and coded past.

This autoethnographic study allows me to distance my present self from the voice approached in the poetry. My memories of confronting anorexia nervosa, independent of the concrete expressions manifest in verse, are disembodied and untrustworthy. While the remembrance I have of being anorexic is blurry, I can no longer disassociate myself from my past. Nested inside me are all the perspectives I have held and had. I *am* the culmination or sum of my embodied experiences. As autoethnographer, I pieced together more than a written testimony of an anorexic male; it is in this text that I negotiated the space between past and present perspectives, as well as the distance between the researcher-self and cultural-self that I am. It is impossible to reject what has passed because it is embedded in all that might ever be.

REFERENCES

- Ellis, C., & Bocher, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.) (pp. 733–768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harris, J. (2003). *Signifying pain: Constructing and healing the self through writing*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

