The Habits of Writers: Models of the Private and Public

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Painters, musicians, and writers — among others — often begin as novices by modeling the practices of their best teachers or favorite masters. In a 1992 radio interview, for example, Susan Minot was asked how the writing of*Monkeys*, her highly-praised debut novel, came to be written. She responded by saying that it began as a collection of short stories that were "kind of imitations of writers that I liked" (Swaim). My purpose in this essay is to suggest that the habits of working, published writers can serve our students as informal models for how processes happen behind the scene of public work. Students can examine connections between the private journals and notebooks of professional writers and their polished, more formalized public work; and then, through studying such models, they are in a better position to anticipate what is necessary for the development of their own effective writing habits and projects. Examining the ways in which working writers use journals and notebooks to suit their processes and projects helps student writers visualize the many possibilities open to them through such practices.

Janet Emig proposed something along these lines in a 1964 essay that examines the static approach to writing instruction taken by various composition guides. The textbook approach assumes only the conscious self is involved in the act of writing as it plods through the stages of choosing a subject, organizing materials, outlining, drafting, and revising (47), never once hinting at the "preverbal anguishing and the hell of getting underway" that might better illustrate the untidy ways in which writing often begins (48). Emig hunts for textbooks that acknowledge what Gertrude Stein says about the act of writing:

> … You will write … if you will write without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say the creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought, or afterwards in a recasting. Yes, before in a thought, but not in careful thinking. It will come if it is there and you will let it come, and if you have anything you will get a sudden creative recognition. (48)

Emig ends her essay by suggesting that writing teachers might "encourage students to examine their own process and learn to estimate their usual length of time for moving from jottings to polished final draft" (53). I am suggesting an approach to writing instruction that uses as models the private, discovery-based writing practiced by working writers. Students can examine the kind of starting points described by Emig and imitate habits for writing-in-process that ultimately may help them compose more successful finished products, while deepening their sense of what it takes to do writing.

Surveying two current and widely-used composition textbooks underscores Emig's *early* concern about the teaching of writing as a fully conscious and linear process. A glance at the table of contents of Rise Axelrod's and Charles Cooper's *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* (6th edition), for instance, shows such a pattern. Included are sections on invention strategies, from invention to draft to revision, planning and drafting, and so on. I am suggesting that this is a partial picture at best of a writer at work.

The 8th edition of Laurie Kirszner's and Stephen Mandell's *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide* provides another example. In opening remarks to students, the authors point to three stages in the writing process: invention, arrangement, and drafting and revision. They explain that the writing process is "the procedure experienced writers follow to produce a finished piece" (13) but admit that the process is often "erratic" and that the three stages often "overlap" (14). The table of contents would seem to contradict this admission, however, since the chapters arrange a straightforward process that includes, for example: understanding the assignment, moving from subject to topic, grouping ideas, recognizing a pattern, and drafting and revising. Having put these guidelines for process in place, the textbook then moves into examples and discussion of the various modes of discourse, such as description, process, cause and effect, and so on. Again, I suggest that such material presents a narrow view of how writing gets produced.

Many current scholars have taken up the critique that Emig made in the 1960s, citing composition textbooks for their reproduction of dominant ideological discourses or the limitations of their linear approach to the writing process (see, for example, Welch, Gale and Gale, and Tischio). Still others have written composition textbooks that focus on the way writing actually gets done. In their introduction to *Writers Writing*, for example, Lil Brannon, Melinda Knight, and Vara Neverow-Turk explain to students that their book is "not the usual hogwash about writing … this book is not just

another collection of rules and model essays" (1). Instead, the authors hope their textbook will help students learn to write by writing, dramatizing the way an actual writing workshop operates:

> This book dramatizes this process by showing not only what composing looks like but also what it feels like, providing you with glimpses of how other writers, experienced and inexperienced, have used their own powers or perception and the responses of readers to see their writing in new ways. (1)

The goal here is to illustrate how writers move from the beginning of an idea to a finished product. Still, the process activities showcasing early ideas, revisions based on response, and finishing work concentrate on single assignments. Indeed these are writers writing, but they are writers working out the problems for individual assignments, not writers involved in the kind of daily practices that may or may not result in public writing.

Wendy Bishop's *Working Words: The Process of Creative Writing* also speaks directly to student writers about the work they have to do. Plenty of material is provided for writers to explore their beliefs and feelings and to examine the various scenes of writing. Bishop also makes an important connection between a variety of exercises often useful to creative writing students and the work of students producing college-level prose. Here the assumption is that students care about their writing, enough to tackle their work with the same kind of trial and error method used by practicing writers. Again, as with Brannon, Knight, and Neverow-Turk, I admire Bishop's approach for the way she conceives of students as fellow-writers and brings them into a writing lifestyle. My approach takes up a different component of Emig's original critique, however, in its emphasis on devoting critical attention to the work of professional writers. A study of working writers moves out of the world of textbooks and guidebooks and into what happens behind the scenes of published writing. To look at the practice of writing requires something beyond a textbook.

By studying the informal writing habits of authors through their (usually posthumous) published journals and diaries, students explore a range of processes and products that underscore how writers develop and work with ideas. Studying the habits of working writers through their personal journals and notebooks can help students understand how they might develop their own habits of writing and acknowledges the importance of writing as a cognitive, expressive, and social act that happens over long periods of time and in a variety of ways. This program of study does not provide a specific set of formal rules or patterns to follow but rather asks students to read the writing-in-process of working writers in order to watch the way production unfolds in the context of specific writer's lives. It asks students to study the writing that emerges long before actual finished products and looks at how writers work over time, using (or perhaps not using) what is produced in private to create their public writing.

When we watch behind-the-scenes work of professional writers in the informal, private confines of their journals, notebooks, or diaries, we see rehearsals, inventions, wanderings, ventings, lists, whole texts, names of favorite foods, and writing exercises rather than straight-forward plans; the kind of "preverbal anguishing and the hell of getting underway" as noted by Emig (48) — in short, everything we hope our students' exploratory writing might be and living proof of the idea often expressed by working writers that for every good sentence, thousands of rotten ones have to be written. We see writers scribbling and erasing at their work benches, but we see them later as well, with the finished product in their hands.

What might a course using such an approach look like, and how might students respond? The writing course I have designed uses the creative process as its topic of inquiry. We study this notion of writing-in-process in terms of prose and process models by examining the private writing and working habits of authors like Sylvia Plath and Franz Kafka, then comparing their informal, writing-in-process to their later publications. In addition to writing required reading responses, exploratory assignments, and analytical essays, the course also offers students an opportunity for developing a self-directed, semester-long project. This is both a private and a public project, partly hidden from an audience other than the individual student, an independent experiment in terms of the amount of time devoted to it and the amount of writing produced, and one that is meant to parallel the models of working writers that we are reading together. Over time, students and I refer to this part of the course as the "hidden project." At the end of the semester, after developing their ideas privately within the venue of their choice — perhaps a personal notebook or diary or other forms of exploration for most of the semester — and keeping me informed of their progress, they translate some portion of this hidden project into a public text that can be shared with their peer groups. There is also a final retrospective essay that asks students to comment on what they have learned about the idea of writing as a creative process and about themselves as writers.

Using working writers as informal models, then, offers students examples of processes and products that reflect the movement from private ramblings to public coherence, examples of sorting through and thinking through ideas in the often long journey toward publishable work. The writing habits thus studied do not necessarily show students a single-minded journey from less to more coherent writing around a single idea or even a set of steps leading clearly to a specific genre; in fact, sometimes the kind of exploration that happens in private notebooks and diaries can be

chaotic and confusing as well as emergent and focused. Through their course reading assignments, students gradually become alert to a changing sense of purpose and audience, to the intersections of form and content, as working writers try on ideas for the first time, experiment with forms, or simply write for the sake of writing — with no other obligation in mind than to keep writing until something happens.

We look at Sylvia Plath, for instance, whose journals help students investigate how her private work — usually hidden from any audience except her husband, Ted Hughes — relates to her published poetry. Reading Plath's private journal next to her *Ariel* poems provides students with a dynamic example of private-public interaction when it comes to writing. In one journal excerpt from February 1958, for example, after her marriage to Hughes, Plath writes:

> A walk the, in the dusk, warmer, warm enough to walk around the park of black-green trees dark against the phosphor of the snow & blue watered sky. Sudden: a new moon, like a cup coming from clouds & gathering into itself the blaze, whitened & purified, of sunk sun which still flushed the west with light. The brilliant crescent forming a chalice between the tall black pine branches: we will yet see a moon in Rome like this one. (335-6)

We then follow the similar use of tree and color imagery in just the first stanza of "The Moon and the Yew Tree," written by Plath after she and Hughes returned to England:

> This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary.
> The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.
> The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God,
> Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility.
> Fumy, spirituous mists inhabit this place
> Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
> I simply cannot see where there is to get to. (*Ariel* 41)

The "black-green trees" in the journal entry and images of "blue" sky with a "new moon" point students to just a couple of the images introduced directly from the journal into the poem. Students can then begin to understand how a writer might work material between the private and the public domain, how a writer might process ideas and forms that may begin in murky, often confusing private time and space, only to be crafted (or sometimes discarded) through social interaction with self and wider audience into what is shared publicly.

Plath's journal entries also illustrate the way she uses her writing-in-process to explore story ideas:

> THE FRINGE-DWELLER: A la James (whose story "Altar of the Dead") I've just finished reading though I should be doing Joyce. Girl, aging girl, is haunted by own nothingness & devours views from windows, (stories, movies, overheard talk & sights in the street, pictures in the newspapers, etc.) with continuous feeling she is "just about", miraculously, to come into her OWN — her own life. (320)

Spontaneous feelings, petty comments about friends and family, longings for creative productivity, emotional torment, experimentation with form and imagery, specific story designs — these are some of the many characteristics students trace from Plath's hidden to her public writing, and doing so is especially useful for students who are creating journals (often for the first time) as their hidden writing project.

We read Franz Kafka to find examples of similar private-public connections. Kafka, for instance, had an emotionally volatile relationship with his family and a tendency towards extreme self-deprecation and doubt, as indicated in the following journal entry from 1910:

I feel as if I were made of stone, as if I were my own tombstone, there is no loophole for doubt or for faith, for love or repugnance, for courage or anxiety, in particular or in general, only a vague hope lives on, but no better than the inscription on tombstones. Almost every word I write jars against the next … my doubts stand in a circle around every word. (29)

Students find such heavy, despairing words to be typical in much of Kafka's private writing, but we also read *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, a selection of journals separate from his regular diaries and saved by his friend, Max Brod. In them Kafka seems to experiment with story ideas and designs exclusively rather than focus on personal inner torment. For instance, in one excerpt, Kafka tries out the following idea:

When the little mouse, which was loved as none other was in the mouse-world, got into a trap one night and with a shrill scream forfeited its life for the sight of the bacon, all the mice in the district, in their holes, were overcome by trembling and shaking; with eyes blinking uncontrollably they gazed at each other one by one, while their tales

scraped the ground busily and senselessly. Then they came out, hesitantly, pushing one another, all drawn towards the scene of death. There it lay, the dear little mouse, its neck caught in the deadly iron, the little pink legs drawn up, and now stiff the feeble body that would so well have deserved a scrap of bacon. The parents stood beside it and eyed their child's remains. (69-70)

Concurrently, we read several of Kafka's published stories and notice parallels with *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*. Particularly, Kafka's interest in animals, obviously experimented with in the notebooks, comes to public light in well-known stories like "The Metamorphosis," where the central character finds out he has "been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug" (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories,* 11) or "A Report to the Academy," where the narrator reports on his "former life as an ape" (81). Themes of human frailty, isolation, and weakness, in other words, can be traced from their origins in various types of Kafka's hidden writing to his published stories, again allowing students to examine the work of a writer, the way various processes resulted in finished products. The life experiences of Plath and Kafka and their habits as writers help represent the work of creation, the dynamic interaction of private and public, the social and rhetorical processes at stake when students themselves work as writers.

I want to conclude with selections from students' final retrospective essays to illustrate the significance for students of using writing-in-process and subsequent published work as models. Liza, for example, began the course with a limited view of private, journal writing as not necessarily essential to writing projects in general. By the end of the course, however, especially having read Plath's journals and poetry, she began to see that her hidden project contained ideas that could have "surfaced nowhere else:"

> I relate to Plath's work because the content of her personal journal is so similar to mine. It is based on day to day events and private emotions. At the time that we began to read Plath's journals, I was interested in interpreting specific aspects of her life, understanding her as a person, and analyzing her journal as therapeutic. However, once we began reading *Ariel*, bells sounded in my head. It was amazing to me to see the similarities between her two types of writing. They overlap in theme, in symbolism, in color patterns, and in words … [her journal] is practice for a later debut.

Sensing the important link between Plath's journals and her published poetry, Liza begins to see things in her own journal writing that connect to the public, creative, and expository writing she does for our class. Her journal, of course, is a jumble of free thoughts and anecdotes "without much organization," and she needs to decide how to transform such disorganized ramblings into a coherent story she can share with other students. After considering the contents of her private writing, she begins to do further sorting and planning. By developing discovery drafts and then sharing these with her peers throughout the revision process, Liza begins to "relate private reflections that I had been afraid to admit publicly."

Another student, Nate, describes his initial decision to take the class because he thought it would be another way to study texts deeply, more like a traditional English class — he being an English major. Luckily for him, he comments, he "happened to have been into journal writing quite heavily" and considered writing his hobby. Keeping a hidden writing project while studying the private-public writing connections of professional writers causes Nate to take his writing "much more seriously and view it much more as a playground for what I love to do," something that becomes much more dynamic in his eyes as, at the same time, he begins to see the "human element" in writers like Plath and Kafka through their journals. In his final retrospective essay, Nate goes on to say:

> … I never really thought about how truly honest I was being in my journals. I figured I was just trying to put some thoughts and memories on paper, and then later, just see if I can come up with anything beautiful out of it … Sylvia Plath was focused almost entirely honestly about her life. Her life was so incredibly dominant in her writing. She worried about whether she was a good writer … She clearly got many of her ideas out of her journal, and I quickly learned that the only way that I can get to that place is to be honest with myself too.

In fact, Nate is inspired to practice imitation in an unusual way:

> Out of reading [Plath] I tried something in one of my own personal journal entries. For a week, in every one of my … entries, I did the opposite of her. She wrote with such wonderful descriptions, leaving nothing out of what she saw in her head. I tried to write in as much detail as possible without using an adjective or an adverb … Excuse my language, but it actually taught me to try to get rid of a lot of the bullshit in my writing. When I allowed myself to use adjectives and adverbs again, suddenly it was a gift that I did not want to abuse.

Nate begins to use his journal as an exercise book, much like Plath might have.

Finally, Bess spent a great deal of time in her final retrospective essay discussing the influence of keeping a journal as part of her hidden writing project, a type of writing that she had tried to complete many times when she was younger but always unsuccessfully because she had approached it then as "recording day-to-day events" which soon became "monotonous and tedious." With her hidden writing project, however, Bess's journal became "a place where [she] thought … felt … believed." She goes on:

> My journal was the spine of the course, the foundation onto which all the other materials in the course were built. I could read Sylvia Plath and Franz Kafka's hidden writings (journals and notebooks) and public writing (poems and stories), then think back to my own hidden writing and my own public work. I could compare how, like Plath and Kafka, my public writing may or may not have been influenced by my private writing.

Direct connections were easy to make, as Bess reflected back:

> All my ideas for both of my [public] writing projects, for instance, came from writing in my journal. I had been remembering my cousin as we read Plath when I got the idea to connect the two for my [first] formal essay.

Then, to illustrate her process, Bess quotes at length from the hidden writing/journal she had been keeping all semester:

> Was inspired when I read Katherine Mansfield's diary tonight for class. I would love to write like her; reading her work made me want to sit here now and just practice writing like her. But there is not just one quality that would capture what is so amazing to me about the way she writes, I would never be able to name or explain how it is that she writes or how I am so captured by and drawn to it, but I am. I have decided that in addition to this journal where I record the things that I do and happen to me and that I think and believe, I will start another journal (hand-written this time) where I will record different things, things that may not be of consequence or significance individually, but will convey the way I write and the goals of my writing and my perceptions of the world. I have this romanticized picture in my head of sitting on the bench by the lake (just like an old pro) with my journal, sitting and observing the world as it drifts by me, and I would write down my observations of both the things I consider worthy of writing about, and even those I don't. I can't wait till it's warm enough to do that.

As she concludes her reflection by pointing to this powerful dynamic between the individual and the social, Bess writes:

> I'm not even sure if I could count my journals as hidden writing. I don't intend to publish them, but so much of what is in there is already public. At some point in my stories, experiences and feelings seem to get shared, so what is in my journal becomes public. The content is for the audience while the medium is private … maybe all writing is hidden and public at the same time.

Bess's final reflections remind me of the inseparability of form and content, a notion hailed by many writing teachers as a central feature of the work of writing, and one anticipated almost a century ago by William Butler Yeats when he wrote in "Among School Children."

> O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance? (ll. 61-65)

That line between form and content may seem elusive at times; yet, that very lesson — when it happens — is perhaps the most important one to be gained from this approach to the work of writing.

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