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A Response to Calum Neill's Review of "The Writing Cure"

Dear Calum Neill,

Thank you for reading my book, even though, as you point out, you don't know me, or know why I wrote it. Given that premise of non-knowledge, what we have at our disposal is writing, and reading. And so I would like to respond to your review as a reader, to attempt to point to some of the assumptions and ideologies undergirding your writing (and reading), and as a way of conveying something of my own, as *The Writing Cure* represents them. I am addressing you personally, for various reasons having to do with the place of the epistolary, as well as the so-called personal, in psychoanalytic writing, and as my book works with them—but also because your review itself was so...well, personal.

Your review is bookended by the word "embrace," both times with a question about my capacity for or intentions with its performance, the first in the affirmative (that, by way of a quotation of another woman writer, I explicitly embrace the impossibility of knowing the destination of my address, which as you point out opens the question of why write, or read, or care), the second in the negative (that I appear to be "Lacan curious" rather than "Lacan embracing," though of course you admit that you are guessing at this). That admission then ironically underscores a belief in the reality of the contrast that you introduced simply by writing it: that is, that there is a clear distinction between being curious and offering an embrace. That any good reader or listener would pause over such a claim indicates that something is going on here. I suspect that what you really wanted to say was that, though I'm clearly curious about Lacan, in your estimation I don't know very much about him. "Embrace" then came in to soften the blow.

What's at stake then seems to be the unknown—this is the manifest content of the first "embrace" and the unspoken of the second. And what seems to you unclear about my understanding or knowledge base links itself, as it so often does, to the extent to which *I* am unknown: as you say, "few of us know Emma," which, you imply, calls into question why anyone would give their attention to the text of a life that includes nothing particularly "monumental," and that also offers little that presents itself as codified theory, at least in any obvious way. This raises interesting questions to put to a text of autotheory, a genre that follows the writerly vectors of theory and life, and about which important conversations can be and are being had regarding what constitutes theory (and life, for that matter). Absent the space for that conversation, I'll merely wonder about the implications of what you have written here, and how. Specifically, why the first name? And who is this "us"? By the same token, don't all analysands come into analysis as unknowns? And isn't it our job to listen to them precisely by not legislating what in a life is to be considered monumental, and what is not?

The last of the category distinctions—all apparently in service of various forms of border patrol—that you make in your text is between poetry and theory. This then harks back to your earlier warning that *The Writing Cure* participates in a genre that comes dangerously close to lyric poetry. Clearly, I see no danger here, and I'm curious as to why you do. Poetry as you understand it is on the side of not understanding, and

flux: the theorist presents a finished product, the poet, the process. The poet is also then linked to the undergraduate, who commits the “classic fault” of appearing unsure of what “she” intends to say, specifically in this instance about Freud and Lacan. The choice of pronoun here is overdetermined, in that it associates the status of undergraduate with me, as well as with femininity writ large. As a professor, I will say that when undergraduates speak about Freud and Lacan without knowing what they intend to say, very interesting things can happen. It was of course psychoanalysis that taught me to listen to and take seriously what is unintended, in speech and elsewhere. It was psychoanalysis that taught me that there’s no shame in being what you call an undergraduate, who speaks without knowing what they intend to say, because we are all undergraduates, which in this context means we are all analysands—because there is no graduation from this state.

My understanding of Freud and Lacan lives here. I read Freud as a writer, who developed his theories by writing letters; who, like all speaking subjects, wrote more than he knew; and who opened up a space for others to take up the work of having an effect with language, without ever quite knowing how it will land. I approach Lacan as a reader, who made manifest this aspect of Freud, and of psychoanalysis, and who in so doing radically shifted the status of theory in critical thought. Did Lacan, as a theorist, present “products”? He seems to me to be in perpetual process, putting us to work at the places where we can never come to some final understanding, moving on, asking us to follow. His theoretical contributions were objects for his audience to work with, to dispute, to take up in their own way—they were meant in one way or another to provoke more speech by others, to create future analysands by speaking as one. This was my aim in writing *The Writing Cure*: that is, to document the effects of an analysis, and of an engagement with psychoanalytic theory, as a way of transmitting what analysis does, for those who are curious; to allow something of an analytic approach to language to be performed, in writing; to speak back to static forms of and conventional assumptions about what constitutes theory (who gets to make it, and how, and what it has to do with life), all of which psychoanalysis puts to question; and to give a textured sense of the monumental difference that psychoanalysis makes in lived life, and in one’s reading and writing. This is theory-making as letter-writing, and as we know, letters either always, or never, arrive at their destination. That theorists could have such dichotomous responses to that metaphor, and such an imaginative conversation over that ground, may evince the extent to which all theory is poetry—as, perhaps, is psychoanalysis.

Sincerely,

Emma Lieber

Bio:

Emma Lieber is a writer and psychoanalyst in New York, where she sees patients. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Point Magazine*, *New England Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Cabinet*, *LA Review of Books*, and various academic and psychoanalytic publications. She is the author of *The Writing Cure* (Bloomsbury 2020).

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