THE WRITER'S HELL: APPROACHES TO WRITER'S BLOCK

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In 1934, twenty-eight year old Henry Roth published *Call It Sleep,* a novel about the moral and psychological development of a young Polish émigré that was to win wide critical acclaim. During work on the novel, Roth considered himself "a disciplined writer who could turn his hand to whatever literary task he cut out for [himself]"[1] and his drive sustained him fifty pages into a second novel before the first appeared in print. But then something inexplicable happened:

> In spite of my tremendous creative urge, something was working against me, stymieing me, preventing me from doing what I desired most. . . . Once the contract was signed . . . I did not write another word. . . . I seemed to have arrived at an utter impasse.[2]

Roth abandoned the work and later burnt the manuscript.

Henry Roth's case is an extreme example of something everyone who writes has probably experienced in some form — something that is called "writer's block." Not one, but a range of difficulties whose origins are subtle and uncertain, writer's block is the inability to write when writing is wanted and the writer has something to say. Ranging in severity from a pattern of frustrating halts between words or sentences to month or year long "dry spells," writer's blocks can be accompanied by agonizing feelings of incompetence, anxiety, paralysis, or self-doubt: "If I do not write," wrote a tormented Fitzgerald in "The Crack Up," "I am no longer a human being!"[3] Blocked writers may also describe themselves as feeling a numbing indifference that causes procrastination followed by rushed or plagiarized work. For the aca-

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demic or professional whose career depends on productivity, or the college student who wrote freely, often successfully, in high school but can't start or can't finish college writing assignments, a writing block can devastate morale as it undermines competence.

How much do we understand about why competent writers habitually miss deadlines, produce work that doesn't reflect their ability, or complain "I hate to write," or "I can't?" In his 1980 analysis of blocked student writers, University of California researcher Mike Rose contends that their "frustrating, self-defeating inability to generate the next line" represents failure in "cognitive style";[4] that is, it results from misconception of how to proceed with a writing task. But as Rose indicates, cognitive difficulty does not account for the role anxiety or irrational fear may play in the blocked writer's pathology. Nor does a cognitive theory of writer's block address features of the writer's environment — from local and immediate accidents of time and place to the circumstances created by the writer's role in society — which may also circumvent his or her will to write. And it is also conceivable that blocking may arise in physiological or neurological maladjustment.

Review of the growing literature addressed to writer's block (in composition, education, communication theory and psychology, as well as literary behavior study) and talks with writers and writing students suggest to me that there are at least four ways of understanding writer's block. Each of these conceptions, three of which I outline in the Appendix, traces the difficulty to distortion within a certain kind of activity upon which writing is contingent. Broadly speaking, the process of writing depends upon: (1) the rational and analytic, or "cognitive" faculty of the writer's mind; (2) the writer's non-rational, and to some extent preconscious, feelings about the writing; (3) the writer's environment, from its immediate and local circumstances of time and place to its social and political context; and (4) the writer's hands.

In a report of research on "writer's cramp," a writing block, I suggest, in its most overt, physical form, H. B. Gibson links this malady to "errors of overactivity, or errors of inertia."[5] In other words, writer's cramp sufferers tend to have histories of "overconcern" with writing skill, or tend, on the other hand, to evade writing whenever possible.[6] In each of the other approaches to writer's block that I will explore

here, analogous kinds of imbalance are considered sources of difficulty: from the cognitivist viewpoint, writer's block is triggered by too many, too few, or conflicting conceptual rules; as an affective phenomenon, it is associated with feelings of grandiose self-esteem, or self-abasement; and as a condition prompted by characteristics of the writer's environment, it is aggravated by periods of excessive or unregulated productivity. I conclude my discussion of sources of blocking with some notes on means of treating it.

The Cognitive View

In *The Act of Creation,* Arthur Koestler describes the outcome of an experiment on perception that suggests a kind of thinking difficulty writers can have. Of this "fixed gaze" experiment, Koestler writes: "when the subject's eyes remained really fixed on a stationary object, his vision went haywire. The image of the object disintegrated and disappeared. . . . Static vision does not exist; there is no seeing without exploring."[7]

If "static vision" — which could be described as a kind of perceptual fixity — causes breakdown in assimilation of an image, so may a kind of "conceptual fixity" cause breakdown in a writer's capacity to let thought move freely. This capacity is fundamental to theories that explain composing as a type of problem-solving activity, a cognitive process during which the writer consciously orchestrates "thought" activities — generating, planning, reading, reviewing, and editing — that chart a solution to the problem posed by the writing assignment. From this perspective, a block occurs when the writer's preconceptions of what rhetorical and stylistic choices she will need to make in the work prohibit exploration of a variety of choices. Orchestration of all activities in the composing process is locked, one might say, in the planning mode, and composing breaks down.

This is the conclusion Mike Rose came to when he interviewed competent student writers who were inhibited, he argues, by the fixed and inflexible "algorithmic rules" for rhetorical and stylistic decision-making with which they tried to initiate work. Claiming she had been told "always grab your audience in the introductory paragraph,"[8] one student couldn't find a point of view she cared enough about to stick with; another, feeling obligated to follow an outline, found the work of drafting so boring he'd quit; a third was inhibited by her misunderstanding that writers of critical

papers must clarify all ambiguity in a literary text. Rose concludes that misinformation "occasionally instilled by the composition teacher, or gleaned from the . . . [text]" turned into "[dysfunctional] . . . planning strategies"[9] that prevented these writers from discovering their own, meaningful solutions to problems posed by writing assignments. So they stopped writing.

Dysfunctional drafting strategies can also inhibit generation of ideas. Novice or uncertain writers often exhibit what has been called "premature editing,"[10] a relentless rereading and rewriting of text that impedes the momentum of thought and chops up the pace of work. Coupled with the misconception that the good writer "gets it right" before going on, this may be an acute and distracting attention to matters of usage and grammar — matters about which the fluent writer is not conscious. In "The Writer Writing is Not at Home," Barrett Mandel cites Julian Jaynes' suggestion that during fluent drafting, consciousness of the technique, the mechanics, of writing must be suspended:

> In writing, it is as if the pencil or pen or typewriter itself spells out the words, spaces them, punctuates them properly. . . . Just as sitting and breathing are simple — when they are not conscious — so writing simplifies as the writer disappears into the act itself. . . . Writing increases in fluency and specificity to the degree that the conscious mind is not present to itself.[11]

Like breathing, Jaynes suggests here, fluent text production is seemingly involuntary, and is disrupted by conscious attention to its structuring devices. The writer must be able to "disappear" — in effect, lose consciousness of what he or she is doing to capture consciousness. Jaynes' intriguing hypothesis has recently found empirical support in research on the development of children's writing abilities. In his report of some effects of reading on children's writing, Robert Bracewell concludes that:

> . . . Decline in children's Grade 4 writing was precipitated by *awareness of technique* [emphasis added] . . . at age 10 an awareness and concern for technical aspects of productions in both art and writing manifests itself. With this manifestation productions in both media decline.[12]

The awareness and concern about technique that impels a frustrating perfectionism in college student or pro-

fessional writers has been described by William Styron as "a neurotic need to perfect each sentence, each paragraph as I go along . . . ,"[13] and Styron's description of the difficulty as "neurotic" suggests an affective source for what Mike Rose and other composition researchers describe as a cognitive problem. As Rose indicates, it is difficult to separate the inhibiting effect of inflexible or conflicting preconceptions, or "cognitive strategies," from the inhibiting effect of emotional needs that impel, or are in some subtle way linked to a writer's attempt to control all phases of composing simultaneously. "Dysfunctional rules," Rose concludes, "are easily replaced with functional ones *if there is no emotional reason to hold onto what simply doesn't work*"[14] [emphasis added]. Guilt or anxiety may provide reason.

Affective

In 1975 John Daly and M. D. Miller designed a test of students' attitudes toward writing — a "Writing Apprehension Test" — that has prompted considerable study of what one researcher, Donald Davis, calls "an irrational, unproductive fear of writing characterized by avoidance and withdrawal."[15] Levels of writing apprehension may have been related to age, sex, SAT scores, grades, teacher expectations, vocational choice, and various personality traits such as extroversion and introversion. One significant set of findings is that highly apprehensive writers tend to expect negative or ambivalent response to their writing, and teachers tend to expect inferior work of students identified as highly apprehensive — hence the expectations of the apprehensives and of the teachers whose judgments they feared appear to reinforce each other.[16]

This trend may be reversing as evidence of the value of positive and encouraging response to student writing comes in, but the composition teacher traditionally functions as critic and editor, an "error finder" who may read less for understanding and more, writes Mina Shaughnessy, "like a lawyer, examining a client's document for all possible ambiguities and misinterpretations."[17] The demanding teacher may be internalized as an unrelenting critical voice that Linda Flower describes in her recent composition text as "poun[cing] on every scrap as it's written."[18]

Like apprehension that one's writing is "never good enough," a guilty sense that one is appropriating an unearned authority may also diminish incentive and some con-

fidence in some writers. When he conducted seminars with blocked playwrights at the University of California at Berkeley, theater professor Marvin Rosenberg found that these writers, for using in their work taboo materials for which they had been punished as children, felt a hidden sense of shame at this defiance, and a sense of guilt for "escaping, in the fantasy process, the laws and strictures of rational living."[19] This inhibiting guilt may have an added psychic dimension if the Old Testament biblical prohibition against naming exists in a writer's consciousness. In *Love and Will,* Rollo May writes that "writers in therapy may cry out, 'If I write it, I'll be killed!' " in recognition, perhaps, of this injunction. "In all cultures," continues May, "words are what distinguish man from the rest of nature, and words also are danger to him."[20]

A writing block prompted by apprehension or guilt may appear as "perfectionism" or "premature editing," or it may lead to avoiding writing altogether — procrastinating. The writer who fears he "doesn't know enough yet" may protect himself against fear of not knowing enough or having enough to say by drawing out preparations — taking more and more notes, for example — until a research project has so grown in scope that the writer feels inadequate to taking it on. Note-taking pushes anxiety into the horizon. This attempt to evade anxiety may begin with what transactional analysts call "grandiosity":[21] an exaggerated sense of accomplishment, impelled by discoveries made during research, that excuses postponing the recording of those discoveries. But as the writer begins to feel guilty for not writing, an exaggerated sense of the writer's unimportance may set in. An internal war between feelings of exaggerated self-esteem and self-depreciation distracts attention and depletes energy needed for writing.

Environmental

The internal critic that fuels perfectionism or procrastination can be muted when the writer's environment encourages productivity. Light, space, time and energy are, of course, crucial, and so, I suggest, is the incentive offered by response to a writer's work. Lack of a listener, reader, or outlet for publication can undermine morale and stymie full development of ideas. M. L. Abercrombie's discovery of how judgment and insight are inspired by the collaboration of minds points to the need for response that most writers express.[22]

In *Silences,* her record of how women writers have been blocked, Tillie Olsen argues that isolating social, economic, and political circumstances close off needed opportunities for collaboration and response. Olsen claims that the most devastating of "punitive circumstances" are role expectations that preclude writing as a full-time, professional occupation. The demands of child-raising and domestic management and a scarcity of role models lessen aspiration and productivity.[23] Successful marriages between two full-time writers have been rare: typically one spouse — as listener, reader, editor, typist — supports the other's career; traditionally, the female partner has taken that supporting role.

Tillie Olsen's view of the circumstances that block productivity extends to the socio-cultural environment that behaviorist psychologists call "improper stimulus control" in the immediate writing environment.[24] Assuming (Olsen does not) that the writer can control his or her environment, but hasn't learned how, a behaviorist view of writing block finds that it originates in failure to effectively manage writing situations and times. Psychologist Robert Boice designed a program which aims to modify the unproductive writing habits that follow, Boice claims, from misunderstanding of the necessary conditions for writing — from thinking, for example, that inspiration can be waited for, or that writing must be done "perfectly" or not at all — and that lead to the inability to make writing habitual.[25] Writers whose output is characterized by bursts of productivity followed by dry spells can learn, Boice argues, to stabilize output by learning to control the environments in which they write. Whereas conventional psychotherapeutic treatment of writing block is historical and analytic — the writer's difficulty is traced, via dreams and memories, to its affective sources — a behavioral management approach like Boice's follows from the assumption that a writer's inhibiting anxiety begins in unproductive behavior.

A Note On Treatment

Approaches to helping the writer break through a block vary according to where in the writer's mind, psyche, or environment the block is "located," but share an assumption that isolation in one form or another — ignorance of one's own composing process, irrational fear of a critical authority, lack of a listener or sympathetic reader — unbalances the writer by alienating him from his skill. Thus the

presence of an encouraging other, or others — a tutor, an editor, a writing group — may return the writer's needed coordination among hands, thoughts, and feelings.

There are several ways that writing teachers can help students blocked by misconceptions about how to meaningfully address the expectations of assigned writing, by irrational anxiety, or by ineffective writing habits. The student inhibited by rule-governed paradigms can be urged to think about and articulate those "rules": writing on "My History as a Writer" or "How (and where and when) I Write" can bring to consciousness useful information about preconceptions and habits. For the anxious writer, teachers can provide opportunity for free writing, or for automatic writing (a type of free writing during which the writer is unaware of what is being written), both of which have been demonstrated to stimulate writing, and which are helpful to the compulsive or "premature" editor because they divert attention from the editorial to the productive faculty. Students who edit prematurely can also be taught to "satisfice," to accept the *first* wording that comes to mind and return later to revise and edit.

Students whose anxieties or misunderstandings of the writing process make them unable to get writing started can be encouraged to talk about what they would write if they could, an activity that can lead naturally into writing. Students who are articulate orally, but complain they "can't write," can be asked to tape-record assignments, transcribe and later edit them. And they can also use a technique for getting started that many professional writers employ: recopying a well-liked piece of their own, or someone else's work. Some professionals also report that they may try switching genres when work in one is blocked (Denise Levertov translates other poets; novelist Styron writes poetry). So students blocked, for example, in reader or topic-oriented forms of discourse (to use Scholes and Comley's distinctions) may be invited to recast work in a writer-oriented form, a form that has been demonstrated to be less threatening to some anxious writers. Opportunity for expressive, reflective autobiographical writing, and for unevaluated writing, affirms in the anxious the sense that writing is primarily a means of discovering and making meaning, and not primarily an occasion to be judged and found wanting.

APPENDIX
APPROACHES TO WRITER'S BLOCK

	Cognitive	Affective	Environmental
Description	The inability of competent writers to sustain the flow of written text.	An irrational, unproductive fear of writing characterized by avoidance and withdrawal.	No writing.
Cause	Inflexible or conflicting preconceptions; excessive concentration on conscious attention to technique/mechanics of writing.	Anxiety; irrational fear of a critical authority; conflict between constraints and expectations in composition classes.	Lack of, or ineffective, stimulation to write; prohibitive role expectations (stifling economic, political, or social circumstances); inhibiting classroom learning conditions (unmotivating assignments, teacher emphasis on propriety or on editorial skill).
Treatment	Using composing profile and writing autobiography to discover inhibiting rhetorical or stylistic "rules"; use freewriting, "satisficing," talk-before writing to divert energy from editorial to productive capacity.	Have students generate their own assignments; assign expressive, unevaluated writing; use freewriting, "satisficing," talk-before writing; use group workshops, peer tutoring; provide clear goals for change.	Use composing profile to acquaint writers with their "best" writing places and times; have writers contract to meet daily writing goals; encourage writers blocked in one mode to try another; have writers share work.

NOTES

[1] David Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth," *Partisan Review,* 36 (1969), 265-280.

[2] Bronsen, p. 272.

[3] Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack Up," in *The Crack Up,* Edmund Wilson, ed., (New York: New Directions, 1945) p. 71.

[4] Mike Rose, "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language," *College Composition and Communication,* 31 (December, 1980), p. 389.

[5] H. B. Gibson, "Writer's Cramp: A Behavioral Approach," *Behavior Research and Therapy,* 10 (1972), p. 378.

[6] Gibson, p. 376. When writer's cramp was first identified (as "Scrivener's Palsy") in 1831, it was linked to overuse of the newly developed steel nib pen, but with the advent of Freudian psychotherapy, this explanation was displaced by interest in the disorder as an expression of a neurosis known as "hysteria conversion": the cramp was thought to be willed into being in response to the sufferer's need to evade an activity associated with early trauma. Recent research suggests that this disorder arises in occult neurological defect, or that, like stammering, it begins with a kind of obsessive concern for correctness.

Gibson provides a concise review of major approaches to treating writer's cramp. See also Crisp and Moldofsky, "A Psychosomatic Study of Writer's Cramp" (*British Journal of Psychiatry,* 111, p. 845) and Bindman and Tibbetts, "Writer's Cramp — A Rational Approach to Treatment (*British Journal of Psychiatry,* 131 (1977), pp. 145-52) for discussion of sources of this painful malady, a muscle spasm in the writing hand and fingers which locks them around pen or pencil, making writing impossible.

[7] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: MacMillan, 1964), p. 513. The implication here that "fixity" on an idea prevents its development is borne out in research on the creative process conducted by Anne Roe ("Psychological Approaches to Creativity," *Climate for Creativity, Report of the Seventh National Research Conference on Creativity,* New York: Pergamon Press, 1972, pp. 167-91). Roe observes that "too intensive a concentration upon a problem seems to prevent that recourse to the depths of the person that is required."

[8] Rose, p. 390.

[9] Rose, p. 390.

[10] Sondra Perl, in *Five Writers Writing: Case Studies of the Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers* (New York University, 1978, unpublished dissertation) identified this difficulty, also described by Mina Shaughnessy in her *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press 1977), p. 81.

[11] Julian Jaynes, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind,* as cited in Barrett Mandel, "The Writer Writing is not at Home," *College Composition and Communication,* 31 (December, 1980), p. 372.

[12] Robert Bracewell, "Is Writing Retarded by Reading?" Unpublished Paper, *Conference on Writing Research,* SUNY/Albany, May, 1980, pp. 30-31.

[13] William Styron, as quoted in "Interview with William Styron," *The Paris Review,* 5, 1971.

[14] Rose, p. 400.

[15] Donald Davis, *The Development and Testing of a Program of Systematic Desensitization for the Treatment of Writing Apprehension* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1980), unpublished dissertation.

[16] John Daly, "Writing Apprehension in the Classroom. Teacher Role Expectancies of the Apprehensive Writer," *Research in the Teaching of English,* 13 (1979), pp. 37-48.

[17] Mina Shaughnessy, p. 84.

[18] Linda Flower, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 40.

[19] Marvin Rosenberg, "Releasing the Creative Imagination," *The Journal of Creative Behavior,* 204 (1976), p. 19.

[20] Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: Dell, 1974), p. 167.

[21] Ann Craddock Jones, "Grandiosity Blocks Writing Projects," *Transactional Analysis Journal,* 1975, p. 5.

[22] M. L. Abercrombie, *The Anatomy of Judgment* (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

[23] Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacorte, 1978).

[24] John Nurnberger and Joseph Zimmerman, "Applied Analysis of Human Behavior: An Alternative to Conventional Motivational Influences and Unconscious Determination in Therapeutic Programming," *Behavior Therapy,* I (1970), p. 69.

[25] Robert Boice, "Increasing the Writing Productivity of Blocked Academicians," *Behavioral Research and Therapy,* 20, pp. 197-207.