

# Introduction to symposium on *Philosophy and the art of writing* by Richard Shusterman

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**Abstract**

This introductory piece provides context for this symposium on Richard Shusterman's new book, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*. The piece reflects on the symposium genre from Plato's classic dialogue to its form today. It claims that Shusterman's work asks us to take this kind of philosophical writing more seriously, and for that reason the symposium itself has taken on a different structure. The piece discusses how each of the contributors responding to the book (with Shusterman leading the way), Eli Kramer, Randall Auxier, and Charles Johnson, have engaged in practicing, nurturing, and supporting broad modes of philosophical writing, and in turn why they have chosen to do so in this context.

**KEYWORDS**

Charles Johnson, philosophy as a way of life, Plato, Randall Auxier, Richard Shusterman, somaesthetics, symposiums

While the symposium genre is grounded in Plato's raucous and playful dialogue, its most dominant form today is no party. I find much potential in the modern professional philosophy symposium—as should be clear from my contribution to this dialogue.<sup>1</sup> But there is room for complaint, since modern symposium contributions tend to fall between two problematic poles: they are usually either pieces that are even more prosaic than typical academic papers or “attack pieces” whose essential aim is to dismantle a work at whatever cost.

So what does one write for a symposium on a work that challenges us to engage more deeply and authentically in the philosophical art of writing itself? By its very subject matter Richard Shusterman's *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* (2022) inevitably asks us to reevaluate what we should contribute to a symposium on it. The book provides templates from the history

[Correction added on June 23, 2023 after first online publication. The changes are made in footnote 1 on p. 1 and in the References section on p. 3 in this version.]

<sup>1</sup>For example, I had the privilege of helping organize a wonderful symposium for Richard Shusterman's book *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*, published in *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*, where I am an editor. See Kramer 2021.

of philosophy on how the art of writing is used to deepen philosophy as an embodied way of life. In particular, it explores how spiritual exercises (*askeses*, or practices of disciplined self-cultivation) employed through writing have been used to cultivate rich “selves,” express the ineffable, and become attentive to one’s whole bodily way of being in the world, and then reflecting on that experience for the benefit of oneself and others. Shusterman’s work covers an enormous diversity of metaphilosophical orientations, as exemplified in the genres of writing in which they deepened their philosophy, for example: the humane-eclectic approach to philosophy of Michel de Montaigne as developed through his genre of humanistic essay writing; the radical, cautionary, and lived skepticism hidden behind Bertrand Russell’s positivism as expressed through his fiction; the private, hermit-like existential orientation of Søren Kierkegaard as practiced through first-person stories, essays, and meditations that experiment with different kinds of selves to create a realm of meaning for a more complete and authentic self; and the Confucian and Daoist orientation of Shen Zhou on cultivating a refined whole-person deportment that is illuminated in artworks that bring together painting, poetry, and calligraphy, in a spiritual exercise of aligning oneself to the *way*, with the patterns of nature. We see a panoply of ways in which philosophical writing is so much more than an empty form to rush through or a means to put down others in the name of career advancement. Rather, the philosophical practices we are concerned with here are ones that discipline one’s efforts to deeper philosophical ends. These practices of the written word complement embodied, and other sorts of, spiritual exercises that move beyond discursive expression. The art of writing, then, is an essential part (but not all) of a philosophical way of life.

The myriad examples Shusterman provides need no additional exhortation; they by themselves challenge us on a metaphilosophical level to take our writing more seriously. For this reason, in keeping with the spirit and values of his work, we decided to take a different approach in this symposium. First, we invited symposiasts renowned for their commitment to creating, nurturing, and expanding the genres of philosophical writing practice within and beyond the academy. Shusterman’s credentials here are impeccable, and he is ideally situated to guide our inquiry as the founder of somaesthetics, as one of the world’s leading scholars in pragmatism, the philosophy of culture, and the intercultural history of philosophy as a way of life, and as someone who is committed to self-cultivation. His enactment of the Man in Gold in artistic performance (in collaboration with Yann Toma) and the fable he created about it (see Shusterman 2016), as well as the scholarship he has developed from it, are especially revealing of the way he complements the philosophical art of writing and scholarship with nondiscursive practices of self-cultivation.

As for our symposiasts, we are very honored, first, to have as one of our contributors the world-famous writer, philosopher, cartoonist, Soto Zen Buddhist practitioner, and, if I may say so, model of the person of letters, Charles Johnson. His career has been devoted to the work of engaging philosophical literature in practice and at the level of scholarship, showing the ways it can navigate the brutality, beauty, diversity, and unity of the American experience and more generally of our all too human lives. We could have no more important voice in our dialogue.

Second, we have the noted philosopher, metaphysician, essayist, journalist, and musician Randall Auxier. From the beginning of his career, he has championed and practiced broader forms of philosophical writing, including contributions to trade books in philosophy and pop culture. He regularly publishes philosophical dialogues as well as editorials and journalistic publications. This commitment is also expressed at the scholarly level in his historical account of the development and changes in our ways of mediating our world, and how to help us prepare for the next great transition, to the image age. It is expressed too in his scholarly study of the origins and development of professional philosophy, and why a return to a more culturally relevant philosophy of service to, and an improvement of, persons and culture is called for.

As for myself, I have devoted my young career to developing the field of philosophy as a way of life. This includes advocating and supporting venues for diverse modes of

philosophical writing. Beyond this symposium, I have worked alongside all the authors here in other contexts to highlight and deepen the art of writing in philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Our hope is that more professional philosophers see their writing as a part of their embodied practice of self and communal cultivation that can lure others to enriched ways of living. We need more spaces and opportunities to assist our colleagues in resisting the pressure to see their work as only about gaining points of prestige in almost hardly read journals for the purposes of career advancement. This is difficult in the unjust and precarious lines of work that most professional philosophers find themselves in, but such a crisis of typical career paths in the academy, and increasing cultural irrelevance, requires us to reevaluate the sustainability of our current writing practice.

With such insightful colleagues, led by Shusterman himself, we decided to break away from the typical formula and made space for each symposiast to creatively respond to the book. Each of us used the book as inspiration not only to discuss the philosophical art of writing but also to enact and deepen our insights via different genres of writing. I play with memory through pieces of semi-autobiographical creative writing to discuss the realms of meaning we create in philosophy as a way of life; Auxier writes a letter to the younger generation about how the philosophical practices of writing can be authentic, deep, and transformative as they radically change in the age of the image, including the kinds of selves we cultivate; and Johnson provides a layered philosophical essay to illuminate the way that through our writing and reading practices we can attend to our situation with calmness and clarity of vision, and also immerse ourselves in a broader cosmos beyond the illusion of atomic, isolated, and substantive selves.

While these responses may seem quite radical as academic journal contributions, they are all created by serious scholars all too capable of fulfilling the normal forms. We aim with the routes we provide here, however, to practice what we preach and show the value of pluralizing our work. If we have meaningful insights for the reader, it is only possible because of our scholarly work that helps hone them. While we all value and defend the fundamental need for the traditional academic essay (and symposium response), we want to show that the life of the scholar of philosophy, or better put the *junzi* (cultivated person 君子), is much broader, richer, and deeper than just that one kind of writing practice. In that spirit we extend a welcome to a dialogue of a different sort. While we cannot promise as genius the sort of philosophical party Plato once envisioned in his *Symposium*, we can ensure a celebration of all that philosophical writing can be. We hope you too join in the revels.

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<sup>2</sup>Besides the aforementioned symposium with Shusterman, which included explorations of arts of the erotic with writing as a medium, Charles Johnson participated in a thematic issue of *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* entitled “Philosophy as a Way of Life During a Time of Crises,” which explored how different philosophical literary genres might serve at this crucial moment of ecological and social crises. For more, see Johnson 2021. As for my work with Auxier, it has been a regular theme for our collaborations. For example, we co-organized with Krzysztof Skowronski a collection that, among other themes, explored the deeper structures and roles Richard Rorty saw for philosophical writing. All three of our pieces paid special emphasis to this dimension of his work. For more, see Auxier, Kramer, and Skowronski 2019.

Shusterman, Richard, with illustrations by Yann Toma. 2016. *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life: A Philosophical Tale/Les aventures de l'Homme en Or: Passages entre l'art et la vie: Conte philosophique*. Paris: Hermann.

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# The philosophical way of life as sub-creation

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**Abstract**

Richard Shusterman's *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* suggests something vital about the tension between philosophical discourses that cannot capture or be the full meaning of living a life in relation to wisdom, and lived philosophies that cannot do away with discourses to deepen a lived experience beyond them: that philosophy as “an embodied way of life” is a *sub-creation* that emerges from the tension between them. This paper uses several different moments and ideas from *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* as points of departure for further inquiry. Some “memories,” repurposed, reorganized, and manipulated, take up these starting points to further the investigation. The present work was a spiritual exercise for the author and, one hopes, will be for the reader in what it means to practice philosophy as a way of life. By doing so, we may find more forgiveness and appreciation for our philosophical vocation that creates something more than what we say or are now.

**KEYWORDS**

J. R. R. Tolkien, philosophy as a way of life, philosophy of literature, Pierre Hadot, Richard Shusterman, sub-creation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, I believe, is strongest when both its written and more embodied modes of practice are combined to reinforce each other as they did in ancient philosophy. (Shusterman 2022, 15)

This clear and important, yet largely underappreciated insight, is at the heart of Richard Shusterman's foundational text on the role of the art of writing in philosophy as a way of life (PWL). A short but densely packed work, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* covers in

much needed detail the genres and modes of philosophical writing that as spiritual exercises (*askeses*) (see Hadot 1995, 81–124)—symbiotically with our embodied practices—help us hone and deepen our arts of living. Shusterman's book does so through a study of the particular written and read spiritual exercises of philosophers and philosophical poets in the history of philosophy, from Plato and Søren Kierkegaard to Bertrand Russell and Shen Zhou (沈周).

By doing so, the work sheds light on an all too underexplored dimension to PWL: the complex and contested relationship of the discourses of the philosophers (whether their own or those created by others) with their authors' ways of life. As Pierre Hadot, who inaugurated the field, famously said of the relationship of lived philosophy to philosophical discourse, it is “incommensurable—but also inseparable. There is no discourse which deserves to be called philosophical if it is separated from the philosophical life, and there is no philosophical life unless it is directly linked to philosophical discourse. This, moreover, is the locus of a danger that is inherent to philosophical life—namely, the ambiguity of philosophical discourse” (Hadot 2002, 174). While their inseparability, given the PWL aim of living one's philosophical values as articulated, guided, and reinforced by philosophical discourse, is fairly clear, their incommensurability as well as the danger lurking within this relationship perhaps need more explanation. This tension is where the fundamental challenge to the meaning of the philosophical life begins: “Philosophical life and philosophical discourse are incommensurable, above all, because they are of completely heterogeneous natures. The essential part of the philosophical life—the existential choice of a certain way of life, the experience of certain inner states and dispositions—wholly escapes expression by philosophical discourse” (Hadot 2002, 173–74). And, as Shusterman adds, “[p]hilosophy's art of living may always require the art of writing, but it also needs more than words to realize its full and most rewarding potential for human flourishing” (Shusterman 2022, 117). He begins in *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* the critical task of studying this inseparable incommensurability, exploring how philosophical arts of writing work symbiotically with philosophical ways of living (for the latter improve the quality of the former too) through being resources, tools, and modes of expression for something that they themselves as discourses can never fully capture.

The book lays a masterful groundwork for future research on this subject by providing a variety of examples of how philosophers and philosophical poets hone their self-identity by articulating and reinforcing who they are, strive to be, wish they were, are different from, and are guided by through writing as written and read; how they transform themselves in expressing and finding identity with the ineffable in life through their writings and those of others; and how they express and illuminate their ways of being through the very strokes of the authorial brush and pen. In the latter case, Shusterman shows how the act of writing itself in calligraphy and painting can be the very means and expression of PWL *metanoia* for author and reader alike. As he decisively demonstrates, many PWL-oriented philosophers and poets have utilized this art via a variety of genres of writing, both private and for the public. These genres include but are not limited to journals, meditations, creative fictions, plays, poetry, dialogues, calligraphy, and even painting with discursive elements. These discourses as spiritual exercises do not exhaust a philosopher's embodied experience and mode of existence. Rather, they, alongside other kinds of spiritual exercises, hone, develop, reflect upon, and deepen the philosophical ways of living of both authors and readers—that is, as long as these philosophers do not become scholastic Narcissuses, all too enamored with the propositions and prose of themselves and others as the only truths worth attending to in life.

Shusterman's work, naturally developed out of his own PWL practice and research, also *almost* says something else; or better put, it suggests something else perhaps even more radical about the tension between philosophical discourses that cannot capture or be the full meaning of living a life in relation to wisdom, and lived philosophies that cannot do away with discourses to deepen a lived experience beyond them: that philosophy as “an embodied way of life” (Shusterman 2022, 11–20) is more than a tension between discourses and the lives of the philosophers—it is a



*sub-creation* that emerges from the tension between them. I want to explore whether we can move beyond the idea that PWL practice is *merely* a struggle between our everyday living and some idealized discourse that cannot capture this life in its complexity (both in its limitations and in its overabundant richness). Rather, it seems to me that Shusterman's work gestures toward how this push and pull of finished discourse and inexhaustible (yet all too tragically limited) life generates a mode of experience (for author and reader) in but not totally *of* this tension, and rather is a new sort of creation that shapes and further guides this dialectic. From this perspective, PWL is found neither *within* the philosopher nor *in* their discourses, nor yet *in* the lives and discourses they pay homage to, nor *in* their readers, nor *in* the combination of the aforementioned, but rather is a realm that *emerges* from this dance, a realm that affords us a deeper experiential engagement with our philosophical practice.

The most direct inspiration for approaching PWL as sub-creation comes from Shusterman's work as the Man in Gold. The Man in Gold is difficult to characterize. It can be interpreted as a personality that emerges in an act of philosophical performance art, where Shusterman dons the habitus of a gold unitard and enacts a unique way of being in the world with his very embodied gait. This personality has appeared in many locations across the world. As he puts it in a footnote in *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*: "I explore the idea of a silent philosopher who expresses thought through gesture in my work with the Man in Gold, a project of performance art that extends into literature and philosophy. One of its products is the illustrated novella, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* (Paris: Hermann, 2016) that also aims to revive the genre of the philosophical tale, which was an appealing, influential form of philosophical writing in the eighteenth century" (Shusterman 2022, 119 n. 20). And this story itself incited others to further engage with this image of a PWL personality.<sup>1</sup> It has emerged as a realm of engagement through performance and reflection upon the character. *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* (Shusterman and Toma 2016) is thus a manifestation of this sub-creation and further enhances its reality: it is a philosophical fairy tale as a spiritual exercise in fiction writing that illuminates the emergence of a sub-created personality generated from Shusterman's lived practice, his somesthetic research, and his and others' imaginations, which in turn others now deeply engage with.

Although the aforementioned example has many fictional elements, I do not mean to suggest that PWL as sub-creation is devoid of concrete reality. To the contrary, I want to suggest that it functions as a real influence on the world (as the Man in Gold indeed is), as shaped by our embodied ways of living and our discourses to hone them. For this reason, I want to play with reappropriating J. R. R. Tolkien's idea of "sub-creation," which he used initially to describe the nature of writing high-level fantasy and in particular fairy stories. For Tolkien, sub-creation is the way we as authors generate reality through our works as a microcosm of the divine process (in Tolkien's view as a practicing Catholic, of God with his creation). His point is to make clear that such artistic creation can *really* express something true and fresh about the world that has real influence and consequences. "The mental power of image-making is one thing, or aspect; and it should appropriately be called Imagination. The perception of the image, the grasp of its implications, and the control, which are necessary to a successful expression, may vary in vividness and strength: but this is a difference of degree in Imagination, not a difference in kind. The achievement of the expression, which gives (or seems to give) 'the inner consistency of reality', is indeed another thing, or aspect, needing another name: Art, the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation" (Tolkien 2008 [1947], 59). Notice that "seems to give" is a follow-up qualification, one I deem to be for those who might find his apology for art as demiurgically offering us reality as found/created by a disciplined imagination to be too radical a view, or to account for works that do not quite fully achieve the status of sub-creation. Art forges a path for imagination to say something real about the inner consistency of reality, and that expression itself is real in its affects and powers for the author and reader.

<sup>1</sup>For a good introduction to current engagement with the Man in Gold, see Smętek 2022.

In this case, however, it is not the philosophical discourse that is the sub-creation but the experience of the philosophical way of living that emerges through the mutual dynamics of philosophical discourse and philosophy as lived. It is a difficult thought to articulate and is, to borrow Rilke's term from his famous letter to Franz Xaver Kappus of July 16, 1903, "almost unsayable" (Rilke 2013). In order to attempt to get at expressing this difficult but not quite ineffable, and yet fully to be unpacked, insight, and in the spirit of engaging with Shusterman through the insightful medium he has elucidated, let me try my untrained hand at the art of writing beyond the academic symposium response.

Since I think this intuition that PWL can be treated as sub-creation is latent in Shusterman's text and practice, I have chosen to use several different moments and ideas from *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* as points of departure for further inquiry. Some select "memories," repurposed, reorganized, and manipulated, take up these starting points to further our investigation. This work is a spiritual exercise for myself, and, I hope, for you, in what it means to commit oneself to philosophy as a way of life. Through these memories we can also explore if and how PWL might be considered sub-creation. For our purposes it does not matter where memory ends and fiction begins. The original sources for these narratives are starting points to explore a problem that is beyond them. We need not be limited by a desire for fidelity to autobiography. The task is to explore—in the writing and reading of these narrations drawn from life but not reducible to it—this account of how we create realms of engagement for the art of living as philosophers, which is not so easily sayable via the means of a typical symposium response. By doing so, we may find more forgiveness and appreciation for our philosophical vocation that creates something more than what we say or are now.

## 2 | THE MUSE-LESS WRITER AND THE PUTATIVE PHILOSOPHER

### "The Lack" (Insights from Montaigne)

The favored concepts and theories of philosophers are often affirmations or justifications of the lives they have chosen and led. However, such concepts and theories can conversely serve as compensations for what they felt missing or lacking in their lives. (Shusterman 2022, 15)

### "The Lack" (Insights from Kierkegaard)

Kierkegaard (who loved paradox) was, in stark contrast, a prolific, indeed, compulsive writer. Writing formed not only his public identity, but was also how he defined himself and his life in his private journal entries. "Only when I write do I feel well"; "once I decided to stop writing," but could not, as "writing is my true life" (Kierkegaard 1993: 52, 139). Wanting his diverse writings to reflect his ideal of unity, Kierkegaard engaged in "revising some of his older journals" to ensure "that his whole authorship should demonstrate the unity whose lack he had always criticized in others and had long worried about in his own person" (Hannay 2001: 357). (Shusterman 2022, 49)

That incandescent color to the sky. That is where my memory begins. It was that intensely striking bright orange haze fading into evening's pastel blue. This palette of colors was so quintessential to my time there. Beautifully dystopian, this landscape of memory both expresses something about the Inland Empire on the edges of Los Angeles and my own mood at that time in my life. This memory unfolds into individual elements, both sensations and thoughts.



A large oat-milk latte in an oversized cup is in front of me. Across from me is Jean, with his rough but not quite rugged beard and light brown hair, sunsetting to gray. As I remember him, he had that hint of wear with the world that he wore as comfortable clothing. He had witty eyes that stared into himself and others with a sort of sideways knowingness. He wasn't one of those who could see straight into the depths of your heart. Rather, as if he was a coincidental fellow traveler you met along the way, he met you on your own worn-out paths of thought and being and stayed alongside you as you moved forward. It was a rare sort of indirect insight, which left his fellow traveler safely and comfortably within themselves, and not laid bare and prostrate to the forceful insight of another. Perhaps this gift was due to his uniquely open sensitivity to the cosmos in its immensity, beauty, and pain. A writer celebrated by writers, and of some general fame, he too felt a lack, a muse-less period of continued duress.

He was responding, "But I can't hold it"; he meant the images he was trying to bring into being as a writer, "—it is too slippery. It is gone from me, that the world cannot be held so stable and illuminating. What was so true is sliding into a story from long ago ... one where I knew how to say what I wanted to say. Our talent is not so real a [as] we think. It is fickle and feckless. My first works came easily, directly from the muse to me. It was ever present, inexhaustible, creative, new, and fun. Refreshing, so sweet and nice. And yet something happened, not age, not malice, not my fragility breaking me. So what, why am I here, why does my writing now need to be pushed so hard?" We both shared and were bonded together at this time by a sense of lack and loss in words and life.

But something happened when we shared in dialogical catharsis. Together we had a way of getting our thoughts to move, to catalyze them to that feeling of the warmth of live thinking, what Kant once called *Lebensgefühl*, that joy in expressing what one is struggling to bring out of intuition. How rarely do we find such a fellow companion. I was and am grateful.

I responded, "And there is just where I feel so ashamed. I thought I had a world. I was a philosopher committed to a unified view of the world, it included lessons and the tradition of Javanese mysticism, *kebatinan* (from my *silat* training), it included a story where I could ameliorate problems through being sensitive to the way potentials of fate can be enacted in the present, it promised a community of meaning and trust. It promised that I would grow and develop as person, as a philosopher. But this world. ... It cannot be sustained; it is too unified for life that is so much more than it and that, that I'm so much less than. I felt a pride in having my truth about how to live my life in accordance with my values and communities. My life was so existentially rich and full of meaning. I had such clear direction. It is not that I expected it of others, but it gave me such solace. I found out that the tragic world would not afford me such unity and finality, the limitation and even evils of this way of living, as you know, became clear. I knew better but was young enough to still fall into such romanticism. It was a sickening obsession with purity, one that had secret arrogance and anesthetized me from a fuller, fractured world. I now look at my writing and I see so much sweet-sounding optimism, such an easy and unified picture, what bullshit! What a farce."

As Jean begun to answer me, the relentless Santa Ana winds blew my napkin across the table. I snatched at the air in vain. It fell, but my soft loafer had more success. It was firmly under my left foot. Just then, I felt that recognizable twinge of a lurking spasm wanting to shoot up from my toes to seize control of my leg. I quickly pressed down on my toes and flexed them to avoid an embarrassing charley horse dance for the whole back of the coffeehouse to behold. Free for mischief, the napkin was already prepared for its escape on the wind. I snatched it quickly without taking my eyes from Jean and shoved it awkwardly into my pocket. I nervously crumpled it in my hand for the rest of the talk. I regularly crinkle and smush things. My body's struggle with its excess of energy is nervously destructive.

During this whole episode Jean was responding to my complaints about life and authenticity. I missed the beginning of his response. “Stay focused!” I felt rather than thought. I was embarrassed that I might lose the thread of our dialogue. I began to catch some words “... but we cannot help that”—these were the first words I registered—“there is no gnashing, abusing, destroying oneself, that can save us from ourselves, from the world, from lost insight. I might not be able to get it back, that art I once had, but it can often be had through my desperate force. I must accept some violence in me and my creation. We hope for some sweet song to well up from our soul. No, no, it is not always so easy a process to say something about life that means something for life.” He put his hands on the sides of his forehead and rubbed his temples. “Life and words break sometimes. You must find peace in these breakages and utilize them.” He then rested his hands on his coffee cup. Hugging its warmth. “Eli, sometimes what we need to say will only come out roughly and with a hoarse voice. That is not a bad thing, we don't need to punish ourselves because we can't write flower petals. It is O.K. to work and rework your broken record. Our world is a theater of cruelty,<sup>2</sup> filled with risk, vulnerability, and no safe fourth wall to communicate across, only us in the magical ritual of the performance that we can share with others. But to share with others requires not just the unity but the breaks, the rough spots, what is not so much unsayable as comes out in a way that is hard. We must go “unto the breach once more” (he was referencing Shakespeare's *Henry V*). “But even then, even this aggressive hard work might burn out in me. I must face too that the words might not come, even with force.”

“I despair with this whole affair!” I bemoaned. “Despair of and for love, despair for a view of life that is increasingly untenable, despair in the face of my isolation from others, despair for my own weaknesses, and poor tufts of language. You are not afraid to discuss these places and did not condescend to me for living in them, to the contrary—you recognize me. We both know how hard it is to be our full fiery selves; it burns most, we must wrap it up, and it's a strain. My soul would hurt me and others if let free. I have so much damned energy with too few outlets, and I'm wasting it on crumpling paper in my pocket and in useless spasms in my legs.”

Our conversations were really like this. They were almost monological, taking up themes and rhythms from each other, though it was never clear if we were having the same conversation. I suppose it doesn't really matter if we were. Jean's ability to “be there alongside” got us to the heart of our matters, both different and yet all too similar.

I continued, “There is this lack both in my philosophical works and in my messy crumpled self. My philosophical work is a way to work through my loneliness, my fears and hopes for the kind of life I want to live, but on one side I do not live those values so completely as my writing would indicate. And on the other side there is ... there is something so absurdly complete in my writing ... so holistic, so exhortative of the hopeful, that offers a facsimile of life. And I'm not sure I would want to put real life on the page anyway, with this lack in me. So, on the one side my writing is sickly sweet, and on the other my complications as lived are not worth sharing, or at least I'm not capable of great writing, to make my awkwardness and messiness worth reading about.”

Jean, patient and understanding, rebuffed me: “But that is just the point, the facsimile of your life is a simile *for* your life ... we are always analogizing what it is like to live our completeness and incompleteness as messy, awkward creatures. We are always talking to ourselves, trying to find analogies or aspects of the world to highlight or to hide, to help or warn against. The issue is not with being an optimist or not, or speaking about your broader experiences. The issue is that you need to accept at least sometimes being muse-less. That although you might not have a truth to share, you can still articulate your struggle for yourself and others, through rough analogy, no better or worse than your optimistic works. Your vulnerabilities and awkwardness may have more insight than you realize, even if said with a scratch in your throat. For those things will bear their own fruits with time, resolve themselves into deeper and newer ideas. Some of them will have muses, be elegant, others will not, and some will be worthy for being just what they are.”

<sup>2</sup>A reference to Antonin Artaud's theory of performance. For more, see Artaud 1994 [1958], 84–104.

I protested, “But I feel mad ... as we have discussed so many times, you and I are half-mad. The old Renaissance sense of mad; a body that is too sensitive to overwhelming reality, and barely manages to function in it. If I were to share this vulnerability I would release my pent-up intense inner life, already too chaotic from the bits of the world I let in. I can only dull myself to find a comforting home in my embodiment against the onslaught of reality. Maybe the problem is I want safety and comfort over truth, over expressing ineffable but fundamental insight about the world or working to deepen myself. I don't know how to find *ataraxia*, while having Bergson's clear and present perception about the immensity of the world.” (For more, see Bergson 1991, esp. chaps. 3–4.)

“But Eli, it is there in this struggle that you will see and find value in something that is more than your writing and that is less than all your life has been and will be; beyond your present disappointments something of value will appear. You can be a Thales, mythically starry eyed, falling into ditches all the time, and still have a tale worth telling across time. You will see as you get older that a way of life is created in the struggles between your words and your life, something warm and of vitality that others might share in, and that something is birthed of real meaning, of the world and for it. Others who know you and read your work will find that together you give birth to a creation that has efficacy in the world. When I see you here with me right now, there is something that is a collection of what I have read, seen, and felt of you over our time together. Trust this process, and a way of life will grow, just perhaps not quite as you expect or would wish. It won't be anywhere you can point to, and yet be ever present as a realm of *anamnesis*.”

### 3 | RECALLING SPIRITUAL PRACTITIONERS

#### The Awful Trade of the Professor (According to William James)

“What an awful trade that of a professor is—paid to talk, talk, talk!” James laments. “I have seen artists growing pale and sick whilst I talked to them without being able to stop. And I loved them for not being able to love me any better. It would be an awful universe if everything could be converted into words, words, words” (James 1999: 358). (Qtd. in Shusterman 2022, 13)

#### The Bone and Sinew of a Cultivated Person

Mastery of the brush in Chinese writing involves distinctive somatic skill. A Chinese scholar skilled in the art of the brush could read not only the characters he wrote but also the state of his own mind when he wrote them, merely by looking at the quality of his brush strokes. Similarly, by simply practicing his use of the brush (often by imitating exemplary models), he could increase his refinement.

(Shusterman 2022, 98)

Let's go back farther, let's unravel memories and make a tale worth telling about this philosophical way of life that is sub-created. But where do we turn to in the storehouse of memory? Whence the model of this sub-creation? Surely not us academics, fragile, often petty, filled with self-doubt and anxiety, who can hardly sleep on a functioning schedule. No, let's start with lives that seem more whole, and work back to the displaced and *atopos* philosopher who engages with a realm not quite his discourse and more than it, a realm less than his life but driven by it; let's start with people much more whole but whose life is close to this one and whose creations may be easier to enter.

I naturally wander to a regular topos of comparison in my own musings, the personality of my friend Marco. Black curling hair with deep-set features, eyes bubbling with perception

and joy and love for others. He is gentle, but not limited to a life divorced from the rougher parts of the world. He has depths and insight into the tragicomedy of the grand play. He is a Soto Zen practitioner, but not doctrinaire and very much of and in the world (as Master Dogen surely wished). He is one of those people it is good to be around, who warm the soul up with sincere care. He has had his own struggles, he is all too human. Yet, let me illustrate this powerful balance he has, his ability to be whole in a way that I feel too scattered to quite be.

He mentioned during our most recent call, “It was a powerful experience, I could truly observe and let pass my vulnerability, my intensity of feeling. So I’m really grateful to see this gift from my practice, even though I’m sorry we couldn’t stay close. They would have been a wonderful friend. I really wish there was a way we could have held our intimacy, but I know that wish will force me to cling to a situation that wasn’t really tenable. Today I really felt the gifts of my practice. I didn’t need *zazen* [seated meditation, 座禪] to observe and let my emotional intensity dissipate. I really felt what you were saying about Hakuin, that it deepens one’s practice to meditate in everyday life.” (For more, see Hakuin Ekaku 1985, 29–37.)

“When was the last time I had such success in my spiritual exercises?” I wondered. “When was I so whole?” For the past few years I have had increasing admiration for the equanimity Marco has found in his life between his spiritual practice and nonprofit work of great service to others, while at the same time finding the lacks in myself all the more pronounced in contrast to him. He has temperance and moderation; he eats healthfully, and while enjoying Dionysus’s parties doesn’t seek them out as a source of distraction. He is becoming a cultivated humane person, a *Junzi* (君子).

He is starting to develop that delicacy one finds in the great Chinese calligraphy masters. He has much “bone,” as they would put it: he has strength, vitality, and clearness of expression; his life seems close in its deportment to that sinewy writing, whereas I, “with flesh and slight bone,” feel all too much of an “ink-pig” (for more, see Shusterman 2022, 99), all too uncouth in my way of being. I feel far closer to an arhythmic Thales and have aspired to the best of that life, as Plato defended it in the *Theaetetus* (172c–175b). My handwriting in any case is sloppy, borderline dysgraphic. What does this express about me? Marco’s thought and expression are integrating, my thought is a scattered overenergized rhizome, ever developing, and sometimes expressing itself in my embodiment, but in clumsy, awkward, unfinished ways.

And yet, during his most recent call he noted, “That’s exactly it, you can always get to the heart of the matter, the eternal bard is perhaps a function in all great sub-creation. The likes of Väinämöinen [for more, see Lönnrot 1963] are rebirthed in Tom Bombadil [for more, see Tolkien 2005, chaps. 6–8] and in any story; they are but particular personages of, as you call it, an ‘imaginary universal’, right?” We were discussing the ways in which the archetype of the artist as creator is embedded in mythos about artistic creation, from the demiurge in Plato’s *Timaeus* to the wry, ironic, and omnipresent narrator in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (Ellison 1995).

So that is something. My philosophical discourse might have more artful bone than I give credit to, spoken and in writing. Perhaps in my own myths about myself I should give more credit to my eternally Thalesian personality. There is a clarity of vision I sometimes have access to. I do think my writing has improved. But isn’t the point to have a life that is more than the discourse? Why do I lack this balance in life? I take solace in philosophers perhaps being rougher than this, and having to practice *parrhesia* as care of the city, to be with Diogenes of Sinope and be uncouth so as to imitate “the chorus trainers; for they would set their pitch a little sharp so that everyone else would hit the right note” (Laertius 2018, 276 [6:35]). To have such a balanced life is not the equanimity of philosophy, which always pushes and presses, jostling us awake from our “dogmatic slumbers.”

And here another personality appears, a particular brother at the Abbey of Gethemani in Kentucky, a student of Thomas Merton and Dan Walsh (the latter was a University of Toronto-trained philosopher and a contemporary of Etienne Gilson). Short graying hair, of middling height, with a soft wry smile and piecing hazel eyes that assess you with

good-humored care and honesty. This Trappist brother shares the tragicomic wit of his mentor Merton. He loves discussion, the pleasure of fine wine, poetry, and laughter, yet he is critically honest and lives the spirit of a strict monastic observance. In the summer he lives mostly outside with a light mattress in the woods, making friends with the animals as St. Francis once did. He was always so honest about the beauty and the all too human concerns and challenges of his monastic life. He once said to me: “There’s two extremes you can go to. Some people are so meticulous about doing everything right. I think that can cause a narrowing down. You get preoccupied with these external observances. I think that the fault of the past is that it was all that. It was just a life of penance and keeping the rule, and if you keep the rule, the rule will keep you. That was the kind of code that the abbot was preaching. Yet, there’s so much more to it. You can go to the other extreme where you can just be completely free and not pay much attention to anything, anybody else is doing” (qtd. in Kramer 2021, 174). Now *there* is someone whose incompleteness, his humanness, his roughness of character, is part and parcel of his whole person. I can find it in his discourse (he is a published author) and his life, and in the very sinews of experiencing him in my memory. He found a way not only between the rule and spirit of the monastic life but between the all too necessary though fallible discourse on it and his own wry character. And yet his way of life is all of this and more for me.

And here is a point for PWL sub-creation: it is a Bergsonian image (see Bergson 1991, 9–16) of the philosophical personality, felt and intuitively developed by an experience of them and/or their work (or of oneself and one’s work), in their (or our) own dynamic incompleteness. This brother is more than himself and what he said to me; in memory he exudes the beauty of a life that is words and more than words. My friend Marco also exudes a sub-created personality, though perhaps far more the bard than the messy and awkward philosopher.

## 4 | THE PARTNERS

### Philosophical Autobiography Integrates the Self but Is Not the Same Self

Autobiography provides a remedy for this multiplication of the self because it integrates past and present, and even future-looking thoughts. The unity of narrative provides an aesthetic unification to compensate for the loss of psychological and cognitive unity due to the fading of memory and the disruption of attitudes through personal transformation. In a finely wrought written narrative, one can put oneself all together again in a compelling, attractive order. The remedy of writing, however, involves a different doubling of self. There is the subject-self or “I” who writes, but there is also the object-self or “Me” that the “I” describes in writing (whether in the past, present, or future). Moreover, even the subject-self suffers duplication, because besides the “I” who writes, there is also the “I” who reads and reacts to the writing. Although writing can fix a single, permanent order of words, the reading subject’s consciousness continues to change with time and may read the same words in different ways. (Shusterman 2022, 29)

### We Are Different from Whom We Write That We Are

Moreover, because of his [Montaigne’s] feeble memory, he rarely is able to recall exactly what he meant when he wrote something down. The present self may not be smarter than the past self, but it is now alive, whereas the objectified self as written description is dead. The book can never be consubstantial with its author



because the objectified self of autobiography is always different from the writing and reading subject. (Shusterman 2022, 38)

“—But, I don't see it,” she replied, “I don't see how this personality that emerges from text and [philosophical] author is real. It's their actions that count, that make the philosophical life real, and the text that suggests something about reality that enriches us. Where is the in-between, where is your ‘sub-creation’?”

The waiter interjected, “I'm sorry, but is it O.K. for the kitchen to use sesame oil, without the seeds?” We replied almost together impatiently, “Yes.” She said, “Thanks”; I said, “No problem.” Not that it made sense to do the latter, but the reflex to avoid any sort of friction is a deeply set habit for me, even in situations where there is no tension to be had. She, a partner of ten years who knows me all too well. A writer too, with philosophical training, these themes touch her own concerns and questions. She has dark brown hair that cascades, keen eyes, a warm smile that brightens her intensity. She also has a razor-like perceptive penchant for *parrhesia* that one can feel in simply being in her presence. Through the medium of philosophical sub-creation, we return to a perennial source of controversy in our discussions, the meaning of a deep and grounded, authentic and lived philosophical practice. We continued on this theme before our meal arrived.

“I mean,” I replied, “that there is a level of creation in PWL beyond the author's objectification and unification of themselves in autobiography or self-writing practice, and the lived engagement with such writing by the author and others. I want to say that the struggle some of us have to live a philosophical life produces a kind of sub-creation that lives both through us and through our texts.”

“But I don't get your point here,” she said with a hint of impatience for my sideways, indirect way of thinking, “where is this sub-creation? It's far simpler: do you have philosophical values and do we see them in your actions? Are you really doing what you say you will, or are you just another academic, talking and talking, and talking, and talking?”

“But, Freya, it is not exactly anywhere. Where is Tolkien's “Middle-Earth”? Is it stuck on paper? ... In our minds? But the books, the movies, the art, the hippy communities, the endless discussions online and in person that have shaped generations of folks, that have guided their visions of good and evil, don't have one physical simple location. Further, it's insight into friendship, irrepealable loss, and kindness and grief for a world well lost that ring true to reality, I think. In Tolkien's classical sense sub-creation is a function of a kind of literature that expresses reality. It is not exactly located anywhere, albeit that persons need to be able to cognize and reflect on it.

“In that sense I suppose there are critical points where we engage with its reality. Let's take another example, one that is a PWL sub-creation. Let's look at the life and work of Ernst Cassirer. Remember? I just wrote something on this subject [for more see Kramer 2022]. We have his more complete image of the values of philosophy of culture in his discourse, alongside his life, which we mostly have access to through hagiographic writings, themselves objectified versions of his life drawn from memory. I have an experience of him through my engagement with his work and the hagiographic echoes of his life ... a new PWL creation that is from *theoria* and *anamnesis*.”

“I thought you were saying that it was the sub-creation of the author, not the reader,” she replied. “It seems like you were at first defending the imperfection and limitations you feel as an academic philosopher, that gap between your philosophical aspirations in writing and your life. That together they are somehow good things. This is different ... this is saying that when you read philosophers and learn about their lives you hold in your mind some sort of complex image of them. These seem different to me.”

“Yes, you are right, as usual I'm bringing too many things together far too quickly. Let's go with a Kantian heuristic, which might help me here. The philosopher in his sense is a regulative ideal. We never truly are ‘the philosopher’ but use it as a sage model to regulate and guide us.



Discussing the sage in discourse as a regulative pedagogical model is an old practice reaching into the most ancient PWL traditions [see, e.g., Hadot 2002, 220–31]. It is an asymptotic quest. For Kant the philosopher is an ideal type, which we strive for but never achieve, as the sages were for the Stoics. Now I want to go farther and say that when Kant wrote the *Critiques*, and lived a life in relationship to their insight, he generated for himself not only a lived philosophy but a PWL approach as the experience of the tension between his work and his life; he generated a realm for a kind of self he and others ought to be, and sought to escape the antinomies of thought, to within the limits of reason express something about our ineffable condition [for more, see Mueller 2022, 242–74]. For Kant this sub-created realm (an affective image part and parcel of reality) emerged from his lived experience and his discursive writing experience, and has been further enlivened by those of us who continue engage with it over the ages. That is PWL.”

“Well then,” she noted, “PWL is not in some ideal sage, and is not really here exactly; maybe that’s a part of its problem, it is sub-created literature, and not in the mess of life.”

I countered, “My hope is that this complex *real* image makes that embodied way of life meaningful, if messy. To borrow Ikkyū Sōjun’s famous quip, ‘It is easy to enter the realm of the Buddhas. Much harder to enter the world of demons’ [qtd. in Besserman and Steger 1991, 71]. Epictetus famously agreed, for in order for PWL to be effective it must be generated by life in and of the world.<sup>3</sup> I think there is more here than just living a PWL tradition’s values, there is living in the world so that this tension between existence and philosophical discourse can be productive. So that Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* can be an art of writing one can say something of value, and for that writing itself to enforce in him and others their lived practice. This creates a kind of reality, one worth articulating and getting in touch with to deepen our quest for a good life.”

She concluded the discussion with her ever astute clarity: “So, then, philosophy is not so far off from literature and poetry as we like to think, but not for the reasons some claim. It is not that philosophy is bad art and that it is too hyper-rational to adequately express deeper truths. Those that reject philosophy as art and see it as science or as ‘critical thinking’ are also mistaken. In this sense philosophy as a way of life is something we sub-create together. It is our collective reworking of an art of living. To do so we have to go beyond our lives and works, and feel out for ourselves how to live meaningfully in and of the world. We sub-create a place for us to do that work. We create a piece of art to make our lives art. The *atopos* label then makes so much more sense; philosophy has no simple place, it is a route to places for ourselves and others.”

## 5 | CONCLUSION

### Midwifing Sub-Creation

[H]e gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty. (Plato 1997b, 493 [Symposium 210d])

<sup>3</sup>Epictetus: “A carpenter doesn’t come to you and say, ‘Listen to me discourse on the art of carpentry’; but he draws up a contract to build a house, builds it, and thereby shows that he possesses the carpenter’s art. Do as he does: eat like a human being, drink like a human being, get spruced up, get married, have children, lead the life of a citizen, learn how to put up with insults, tolerate an unreasonable brother, father, son, neighbor, or traveling companion. Show us these things, so that we can see if you really have learned anything from the philosophers” (qtd. in Hadot 1998, 190; from Epictetus’s *Discourses* III, 21, 4–6).

“Or haven't you remembered,” she said, “that in that life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty). The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it.” (Plato 1997b, 494 [*Theaetetus* 212a])

I will not offer an eloquent summation with some novel turn of phrase. This is no academic essay. This idea, this real Bergsonian and not Platonic image of what we sub-create, is not fully midwived. The gods have not so blessed me, at least yet. I do something unusual for professional philosophy and break our fourth wall. I share not a finished product but a developing inquiry. I take the opportunity here to experiment and explore. Shusterman's work reminds us of the importance of, and should further our commitment to, the art of writing as part of an act of sub-creation to engage with an embodied way of life guided by the love of wisdom. Even a published piece can be a spiritual exercise. To write such a piece requires a willingness to break out of the modes and tropes of the academic essay that so dominate our writing in academic philosophy.

I feel grateful for the opportunity to engage with Shusterman's important work that has been so generative for me. I'm lucky to have had the opportunity to meet and talk with him in person, as well as read his work, and by that process touch on his truly rich PWL sub-creation, one whose reality can be found imprinted on this very text.

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# Philosophy as a thief?

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**Abstract**

This is a performative piece of writing in the presence of and inspired by Richard Shusterman's *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*. It tries to show that the relationship between the act of writing and the formation of our human consciousness (philosophical and, more deeply, poetic) is a developing and growing process through history, and before it. The dominance of an image consciousness was slowly challenged and then replaced by a linguistic consciousness with the advent of writing, and accelerated by the invention of printing and mass literacy. Shusterman teaches us an embodied kind of philosophizing that uses the word but isn't limited by it. This paper suggests that a return to image consciousness has already occurred and that the old book consciousness is disappearing. Lessons from the book consciousness are offered.

**KEYWORDS**

embodiment, history, images, literature, philosophy, somaesthetics, writing

## 1 | PHILOSOPHERS AND BAD WRITING

A number of things struck me as important and original in reading Richard Shusterman's delightful recent book *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*. The purpose of this symposium is not so much to review the book as to use it as a springboard for further and (one hopes) important insights into the general problems and possibilities the book addresses. I adopt an unusually personal tone in what follows, and I confess I have been adopting this tone more and more often, even in academic writings, in recent years. I have been told in advance that I may do that here, and it is a welcome invitation. I don't believe that philosophy is all autobiography, but it is not possible without self-experience. Concealing that aspect of the *having* of philosophical ideas seems to me counterproductive to the stated end of self-knowledge. Why may I not write from the *having* of my own experience, and in the *way* I have had it?

That is certainly what I do here, but I need first to state the problem as I see it: philosophy has lost touch with the art of writing, and it cannot afford to do that. Even though there was surely philosophy before there was writing (more on that shortly), there is a kinship of philosophy to the act and art of writing that cannot be safely ignored. There have always been bad writers among the philosophers—Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger always come in near the top of that list (perhaps this is the “H.” when one vainly says “Jesus H. Christ” in frustration). The H's are followed closely by what one of my teachers used to call “the French Fog,” by which he meant Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Cixous, Kristeva, Deleuze, and anyone else difficult to follow whose writing was “in” with that crowd. These writers had different weaknesses, depending on whom you ask, but that they are difficult to read no one questions.

Yet, there have always been great writers, sometimes truly great, even among the difficult philosophers; one thinks of Bergson (with his Nobel Prize for Literature), or Sartre (who turned down that same prize), or Whitehead's metaphysics so poetically expressed, a pleasure to read so long as one lets go of any hope of understanding it conceptually. And, of course, there is the utter density and beauty of Emerson's prose. Shusterman places Bertrand Russell (and his Nobel Prize in Literature, presumably, since he mentions it) high on that list. One cannot deny Russell's stylistic power and clarity, even if, like me, one perfectly despises him as a philosopher and a human being—although less so after reading Shusterman's section on him. And then there were less difficult to read philosophers with the ability to say profound things in fairly simple language, from Plato to William James.

I was discussing this problem a few years back with my colleague Doug Anderson (an excellent writer), and he was commenting on how bad philosophers of the present are as writers. I countered, “What about Umberto Eco, John McDermott?” He revised: “Name me someone in academic philosophy educated after 1960 who can really write.” I immediately said, “You . . . and Sartre . . . and Shusterman.” A longish pause. “And what happened to them?” he asked. “The assholes didn't like what they were doing,” I answered. “My point,” said Anderson.

By “the assholes” Anderson knew I meant mainstream academic philosophers, timid little creatures striving to look like idiots savants so that no one will point out how little they have to say. This faux-autistic boys' club *is* the discipline, wearing poor writing as a badge of honor, suspicious and hostile to any, and I mean *any*, employment of style or flair, or even just good old-fashioned economy of expression.<sup>1</sup> This attitude enables them to marginalize anyone different, which generally includes anyone nonmale and nonwhite. These so-called philosophers work at *not* working at writing well. Some of them *unlearn* how to write well in order to fit in. It's a problem. Shusterman is nicer than I am by a fair stretch. I am not angry at the boys' club, I am disgusted by it. Its members in fact never mistreated me, which I appreciate, but it was only because I could pass, and I only talked bad about them behind their backs, mostly.

But here we are at something of an impasse. Everyone knows these days, pretty much, that these people were as fraudulent as Rorty said they were. Indeed, Shusterman credits Rorty for saving him from them. And so he began, way back in about 1983, a life journey toward becoming a real writer. For my part, I woke up to the fact that I couldn't write in 2001, and I went to work on it. I still work very hard to improve. Maybe someday I will be able to write well. If I ever achieve this, I am sure they'll throw me out of the club. The fact that they haven't done so already is proof that I can't write. Maybe they have done so and didn't tell me. That's how they'd do it for sure. Almost none of the boys is really an asshole as a human being. Most of them are very nice, care about the environment, don't vote for Republicans, and wouldn't kick

<sup>1</sup>Of course, in no way do I mean any disrespect to people with autism. My contempt is reserved for people who pretend to be asocial or in some way incommunicative in order to evade uncomfortable questions. They will pretend you have been unclear when they aren't able to respond to a tough question. They will shift what you ask about to something they actually know about instead of addressing the question. They will be dismissive if they think they have the upper hand in the room, among their chums. Or they come back with such fierceness as to try to intimidate the questioner. They use innuendo and sideways glances to deflect a question. They refuse to meet the gaze of the questioner.

a cat or dog. The problem is the toxic and hereditary culture of academic philosophy. I have given up on it. Or maybe I haven't, and this is my last try at changing it a little.

## 2 | THE PRIMACY OF WRITING

As Shusterman rightly points out, we need to get clear first on the two central terms in Shusterman's title *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*. We note that this is not philosophy of writing or literature, but *and*. Philosophy is not assumed to dominate or to prescribe to us what literature and good writing are, although such a discourse can certainly be found in numerous formulations by numerous good philosophers of literature. In these efforts, the philosophers will assume the ascendancy of philosophy and its right, as Queen of the Sciences, or First Philosophy, to seek the deepest reasons and roots of the way things *are*, and from there describe, prescribe, and normatize the achievements of some writer. Such exercises are common enough, but along with Shusterman I doubt their presuppositions. Philosophy arrogates to itself an authority it never genuinely had.

Early on Shusterman makes the following very interesting point:

Poetry was the prime artistic enemy, since it best captured the sacred wisdom of tradition and lacked the banausic character of plastic art. As philosophy adapted many of rhetoric's strategies of argumentation, so it took key epistemological and metaphysical orientations from art. The ideal of knowledge as *theoria* (which means detached contemplation of reality rather than reconstructive interaction with it) reflects the attitude of a spectator at a drama or an appreciative observer of a finely finished work of plastic art or poetry. Similarly, the idea that reality ultimately consists of well-defined and stable forms that are rationally and harmoniously ordered and whose contemplation affords sublime pleasure suggests a preoccupation with fine works of art, an envious fixation on their clear, purposive, well-wrought forms and distinct contours, their enduring and intelligible harmonies that set them above the confusing flux of ordinary experience. This makes art seem more vivid, permanent, compelling—in a sense more real—than ordinary empirical reality. (Shusterman 2022, 2)

This envious thievery, in which philosophers steal from the hated poets the clarity of form and intensity of presentation, and claim authority over senses, only holds, however, if one accepts the absurd narrative that “philosophy” begins with the Greeks. Of course, almost everyone in the West does accept this narrative. It has been repeated and chanted and pushed and sold and delivered for so long by so many that it must be true, right? It is nonsense. On stilts. (I thank Bentham for that useful image.) This outright lie has had the effect of allowing the West, and the modern West at that, to pretend it has something that was not possessed by the older, wiser, and more inclusive philosophical traditions. As if there was no “philosophy” in Confucius, or Buddha, or the Vedas, or Mencius, or Lao Tze—or Ecclesiastes and Imhotep. An interesting text attributed to Irsesh, Egyptian philosopher at roughly the time of Moses, reads as follows: “Man perishes; his corpse turns to dust; all his relatives return to the earth. But writings make him remembered in the mouth of the reader. A book is more effective than a well-built house or a tomb-chapel, better than an established villa or a stela in the temple! . . . They gave themselves a book as their lector-priest, a writing-board as their dutiful son. Teachings are their mausolea, the reed-pen their child, the burnishing-stone their wife. Both great and small are given them as their children, for the writer is chief” (Wilson 2016). As Shusterman says, philosophy must “cede to literature the status of generic primacy” (2022, 2), but it is not willing to do so.



Socrates rebukes writing, as we find, ironically, in the *writings* of Plato. Socrates is held as the paradigmatic philosopher in the West, and yet, as with Buddha and Jesus, if he wrote anything, it does not remain to us. I wonder how many professional philosophers would vote to give Socrates tenure. Westerners grudgingly admit that maybe philosophy does need to be written, and so they generously extend the reach of “philosophy” to the time before it had a name, including a list of Greek-speaking men who seemed to be “philosophers” in anticipation of Socrates. So, clearly, they cannot say philosophy never started until it had the name “philosophy.” Yet, most will doggedly (which is to say, cynically) insist that there was no philosophy until the Greeks.

### 3 | THE BIG LIE

The truth is that the older traditions have learned very little from the Western experience that they did not already know. The Chinese and Indian adventures in philosophy have tended to run a thousand to three thousand years ahead of the West. For example, the first truly advanced, modern analytical philosophers disputed in the schools of India between the eighth and twelfth centuries. (The Indian schools did a better job of this, in my nonexpert judgment—better logic, better epistemology, better philosophy of mind, better philosophy of language, a better take on personal identity).<sup>2</sup> The Daoists had the same philosophical problems, but they argued in different ways. And the Egyptians had explored existentialism as thoroughly as Camus and Sartre during the dissolution of the Old Kingdom and the interregnum to the rise of the Middle.

My point is that there is simply no empirically sound argument for limiting “philosophy” to a kind of writing or dialectic invented by the Greeks or in the West. It is simply false. One might as well say, “We start here because we are better than everybody else and we don't care whether it is true, because we have the bombs and planes and tanks.” One of the things I benefited from the most in Shusterman's book was the fourth chapter, on writing in Chinese thought. I knew about the calligraphy as art, but I never knew about it as embodied philosophizing. I have changed my thinking as a result of this. It cannot be said that this idea was never had in the West. Ludwig Klages, now discredited for his proximity to Nazi ideology (it is disputed, but he is an archconservative by any measure), had a philosophy that did something in a modern way not far from what Shusterman describes as the ancient wisdom of writing in the East. To this, it might be added that as the Korean language came to be a written language, the characters were designed to imitate the shape of the mouth in saying them, and hence the written language is “embodied” in a different way that is worthy of some serious thinking.

Returning to the falsehood about philosophy beginning in ancient Greece, fortunately Shusterman rose above the lie he was told, probably gradually, since the lie is all-encompassing. Now, being a kind soul (and very different from me in that respect), he sort of repositions us gently with a wider truth, especially in his final chapter of the book. He shows the complete myopia of the disembodied Western view of mind. It makes one wonder how he can like Russell as well as he does, except that his discussion of Russell as a writer studiously avoids Russell's actual philosophy and its deleterious effect on the discipline in favor of a side of Russell no one talks about—Russell the existentialist. In any case, the Western myopia about embodiment is a problem Shusterman has done much to correct in his long career.

It isn't exactly good news that we need to be reminded of the role of our bodies in producing whatever wisdom, knowledge, and beauty we may succeed in creating in this world.

<sup>2</sup>I recommend Douglas Berger 2015 and 2021. These studies have the advantage of not presupposing a Western point of view, while remaining accessible to Westerners who are ignorant of the past.

Temperamentally, I would prefer to Rolf this piece of news into the lazy and self-deceived minds of those who still accept this lie and who do not see the damage it has done, rather than use the Feldenkrais guiding touch of Shusterman. He wants to help you change yourself from within, reconnect your mind to your body by repositioning you. I would rather just change your bad habits (if you have them) by any means necessary. But Shusterman has added something else quite profound: philosophy is (and always has been) *performative*. It is *more* than a performance, of course, but it is *at least* a performance, and in East Asia it is a discipline of performative writing. I agree, and more now than before I read the book.

Plainly stated, the lie that “philosophy” started with the so-called ancient Greeks (who were in fact recent arrivals on the scene of world civilization, as they knew but we ignore) has done more damage, I believe, than the lie that European culture and progress justify the colonial “experiment”’s treatment of the rest of the world with militarism, violence, exploitation, murder, robbery, and subjugation. Indeed, this lie about philosophy is worse, because it helped to create the conditions that later led to and then justified our peculiarly European type of inhuman behavior. Philosophers are Promethean thieves, but they deny being thieves at all. We steal things and call them our own. That puts a new spin on Heidegger’s “event” of “appropriation,” doesn’t it? Then we *believe* our own lies, and we have (until recently) silenced anyone who points out that we lie. Very civilized, no?

#### 4 | REDISCOVERING WHAT WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN ALL ALONG

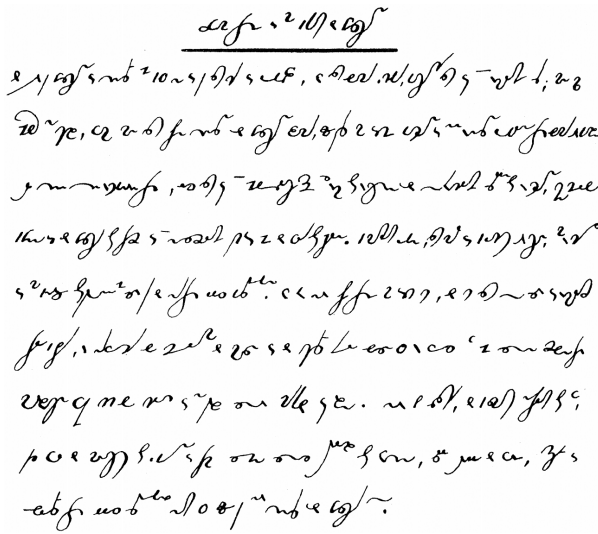
Now we arrive at a question that is new (still) for most Westerners, however ancient it may be for the pre-Greek philosophers: Do we really have the philosophical insight *before* we have written it? Speaking personally, I find that I do have insights, intuitions, ideas, if you will, that make me *want* to *write them down*. But then this happens: I begin writing and they become something different (and better, clearer, more creative) than I had intended in the insight. This written thing before me is not exactly like what I was thinking, and sometimes isn’t even similar. Something of this sort also happens when I am lecturing, prepared but improvising the actual words. I find that I understand things I did not realize I understood as I set the lecture out extemporaneously in spoken words. Sometimes I am obliged to pause and ask whether anyone is “taking this down,” since I am afraid I will lose it unless someone does. Those are wonderful moments in teaching. I think every teacher has them. And thus also with every writer.

In short, I find that the “philosophy” that emanates from my own insight already includes a deep-seated desire to arrest and preserve it, call it Irseshian desire, if it seems worthy of preservation. I would analogize this desire to improvising a really nice solo on the bass guitar and hoping that someone had an iPhone recording it, since I am in doubt whether I could ever play it again (and, fortunately, sometimes someone does record it, and I can watch it in surprised glee, having no idea where it came from or how I did it). I believe that many of you, perhaps all of you, have had this experience in improvising while teaching, or conversing. And perhaps you have had the same experience while writing.

Thus, we seem to presuppose the potentiality of saving the experience, just as Irsesh says. Never mind the vanishing of every worldly thing we hold dear, O Ozymandias! With the pen we hold and touch and even *create* immortality. Irsesh would surely smile if he heard me reading his words in the unimaginably distant future. He would say, “See, I told you so.” Yet, the idea that philosophy is a kind of literature leaves us scratching our heads, ignoring that philosophy comes, as Shusterman says, in “essays, dialogues, poems, meditations, treatises, speeches, confessions, memoirs, letters, discourses, journals, commentaries, investigations, sermons, notes, lectures, fragments, aphorisms, inquiries, outlines, and sketches” (Shusterman 2022, 2).

And the list could be extended, and he does extend it in chapter 4, into places Westerners never really considered.

I would offer another analogy from my experience. I have lived through a remarkable transformation of culture, even civilization. When I learned to write, I was taught and graded on “penmanship,” as it was called. Students were not taught to type until high school. As a result of effort, I developed a lovely English cursive script, which I can still write—but increasingly my students cannot read it. They are not taught to write or read cursive script anymore. I wrote my first philosophy papers in cursive, even into graduate school, and would revise them when typing (using an electric typewriter—electronic word processing was very new, I hadn’t learned it). I noticed that composing on a typewriter was very different from writing a paper by hand, especially in cursive. When we write by hand, as Irsesh did, and for every philosopher who took his advice, before and after, the ideas compress and edit themselves because they come faster than the hand can accommodate. I now understand why Husserl adopted the Gabelsberger shorthand:



My teacher in undergraduate and M.A. studies, Thomas Nenon, was (and is) a Husserl scholar and one of only a handful of people who can read this script, no longer used in Germany. Awful enough that Husserl was a terrible writer, but worse yet that he wrote in a cryptic script hardly anyone can untangle. But I see why Husserl used shorthand, because I found, as he must have, that in writing my philosophical ideas, my mind moved so much faster than my hand that I lost ideas that formed while I was writing the ones I already had. And then I ponder a work like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and imagine what was lost as he wrote it in longhand. And I recall that John Stuart Mill allowed Thomas Carlyle's only copy of *The French Revolution* to be burned—his household help mistook it for kindling, since he'd left it by the fireplace. Carlyle was obliged to rewrite it from scratch. Carlyle admitted it was better the second time (and that is significant), and Mill had supported the project financially, and then more so after the burning of the draft, but I think he still never forgave Mill. It wasn't the first or last time an Englishman maltreated a Scot who'd trusted him.

Some of you reading this are old enough to remember the transformation I am describing, from handwritten to typed work, but for those who are not, you should pay very close attention. Only people of my generation, and the one ahead of me, such as Shusterman, remain to tell you about something you really need to understand. If you are ten years younger than I am, your consciousness, relative to the questions under discussion here, was formed differently from mine, and no one today is taking on the kind of consciousness I have. I am from the last

of the “book culture.” Even my brother-in-law, born in 1969, is a hybrid. He learned to type on a computer. He is a hybrid, but with a real appreciation of books, and yet no special desire to take in information in that form. I find that I cannot remember what I read on a computer in the way that I remember what I read in a book, and I believe this is still the case even for the youngest of you. Thus, the difference affects retention, and also possibly the very formation, function, and characteristics of memory.

My older colleagues (mostly retired now, many dead) sometimes complain that their students can't remember anything, even “cannot read.” It is not true, not even close to true. But it is true that the *forms* of retention have changed. Students today retain perceptual images that need reflective or emotional complements to hold them in such a way that they can be recalled. The emotions work better than the reflections (experimentally demonstrated by Jaak Panksepp and those who worked with him) (see, e.g., Panksepp 1998). To teach today's students well is not to assign them reading from books, it is to teach them images in such a way that their perception leads to the formation of a reflective complement (they don't like it when you make the images purely emotional, and it leaves them uncritical), associated deeply with some feeling (including but not limited to emotion) that helps them arrest not the text or image per se but the *information*. I have written a logic book that teaches students how to master this process. In my opinion, it is the only logic book in existence that actually deals with the way young people think nowadays, and will think in the foreseeable future. Education based on discursive words is already dead.

There is nothing wrong with the kind of consciousness our younger people have. In a way, it recovers much that was lost when writing itself came to dominate human consciousness. There are many excellent studies about this transformation in human consciousness, including the famous orality/literacy debate of the mid-twentieth century—consult especially Walter J. Ong and Eric Havelock but also, for interesting accounts of the evolution of the brain that would accommodate the kind of change I am suggesting, Julian Jaynes, Jean Gebser, and Terrence Deacon. who spring to mind as people who give due weight to the physiological types of differences involved here. Panksepp would also be the sort of researcher I would consult.

Granted, the debate between orality and literacy suffered badly from Grecocentrism. There is a vague awareness that dozens of civilizations underwent this transformation before the Age of Pericles, but the Greek transformation is more accessible to historians, more detailed, and tends to reinforce the primacy of Greece, which is agreeable to a Western audience, however false it may be. One can find much more about this in Derrida's almost unreadable (but brilliant) *Of Grammatology*. The association of the spoken word with the inscription or the image is no simple question. But my point is that a lively image consciousness, such as young people have today, has taken first place in the learning process and in the navigation of the present world.

## 5 | WRITING IN THE BACKSEAT OF CULTURE

Writing is thus, for the first time in many millennia, subordinated to image creation. This frightens many older people. They even fight against it (uselessly), and they will be gone soon enough. Dropping like flies already. But the truth is that what is good about writing *survives* in book culture. There was never any necessity that the book should have held such a hegemonic role in human learning, but since 1450, mass literacy was coming, and finally arrived in the nineteenth century. As it spread, it liberated people from the oppression of church and state, only to subordinate them to the power of wealth and the manipulation of word and image by those whose motive is gain. Printing is reserved for those who can afford the equipment, the labor, and the distribution. “Bring in the new boss, same as the old boss,” as Peter Townshend once penned. (I am nearly certain he used a pen or pencil; somehow that isn't the sort of line one types).

But as the image consciousness has moved (quickly) into the dominant position, it has been harder for the power of wealth to maintain its dominance. If ordinary people can create images, along with the means of moving them into our reflective consciousness, then ordinary people can have power. Who is fighting against “internet neutrality”? It is those whose power derives from “wealth,” in the sense Marx used that word, and they are formidable. Fortunately, young people understand this threat (in their way) and fight back. Their main obstacle is stupid people my age and a bit older who are too dim to understand what is at stake. May we die soon and get out of the way. Take that as prediction, since I feel sure it will happen in just the nick of time for the younger people to save the world from our collective stupidity.

## 6 | ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

But before we check out, we need to teach our successors some things they can learn from us (apart from what *not to do*, a lesson that they have taken, in spades). And, relevantly, we need to show them that there is something very important in learning how to write your own philosophical ideas, and anything else, even a grocery list, with your own hand. There is something basic in it, and, as Shusterman has shown, something fine and deeply human in the refinement of this act. The West approached writing, for a couple of thousand years, as mainly useful, which it is. But it sped past, and as the modern age dawned, we had, for some five hundred years, what might be called in a dual sense “the illuminated manuscript.” Before printing was a mass and gradually industrialized “product,” the discipline of writing, even in the West, was pursued as a sort of meditative discipline. The value of a “book” was tied to the discipline and spiritual excellence of its copyist. Today’s Westerner handles a medieval illuminated manuscript like a gorilla with a big red ball. “This is not for reading,” we think. And how impoverished, then, is our idea of reading? See how quickly and stupidly we pass over the real magic of reading, not recognizing the greater magic of writing.

The truth of the matter is that we should read as if every book is an illuminated manuscript, and indeed here, I suggest, is what really brings philosophy and literature together. Philosophy is a mode of illumination that can be, but need not be, captured, and partly detemporalized, in writing. Irseshian desire. Other forms of literature serve different purposes. Technical manuals tell us how to do things. Histories teach us the past. Sacred writings guide us regarding the highest and lowest human possibilities. Imaginative literature teaches us our own humanity, its strengths and weaknesses, in narratives. We can learn how and who we are without writing, yes, that must be admitted. But there is no doubt that writing enables us to externalize our collective experiences and preserve them for longer periods.

Yet, as Socrates observes, be careful what you *think* you know, when the writer is not there to explain and defend. The point is made famous in his attack on writing in *Phaedrus*, but the more important moment comes when Phaedrus is trying to recite a writing of Lysias he has paid for, and Socrates catches him sneaking a look at the manuscript and asks why he should listen to the stumbling recitation of Phaedrus when “Lysias himself is here.” This is Socratic irony, of course, since we learn later that Lysias is *not* there *at all*. But then, as we read Plato, neither is Socrates there—a point not lost on Plato, I am certain. Platonic irony? One thing I admire about Shusterman’s book is the bold historical sweep of his discussion. I hope he won’t mind if I imitate that.

## 7 | BYGONE DAYS, LOST EXPERIENCES

In school and early college, I turned in my papers handwritten. It was allowed, except in high school senior English, which had the unusual requirement of a typed paper and typed note



cards, yes, *note cards*. I still use them—but I don't type the notes. Later, there were two stages, writing by hand and then typing. I learned that editing while I typed a handwritten draft of a paper was a powerful process—I haven't done it in nearly forty years now. What was this “discovery”? Instead of having only one chance to articulate my insight, I was able to add a second layer, to interpret my earlier self. I discovered that I needed to place one or, better, two weeks between initial composition and typing. I needed time to forget the “immediacy” of the insight of writing by hand, and return to it reflectively, in forgetfulness, and to see my earlier self as another, reading myself as I would a book.

That was a weird self-othering. Very often the idea(s) that tied my discourse together, made it into a whole, would come at this second stage, and I felt a bit inauthentic as I typed in the later idea as if it had been there all along. Who would know? Only I would, and I would make it a point to forget the tactic. The second paper was “my paper,” not the first. The first was “only a sketch, a draft.” At some level this was true, because I came to be profoundly aware that when I was writing the paper by hand, I would not have to “keep it.” That was a change. Previously the handwritten paper was “my paper,” and now it was someone else's or at least not mine in any sense that counted. The later imposter doing the typing *became* the author writing. You, my young friends, will never know this experience. Anything you put in your own hand is not “your paper.” Your life is all sketches until you hit “send.” Three million tiny revisions, as you compose and right up 'til you hit “send,” and if you are like Eli Kramer, my treasured former student and the instigator of this Shustermanian feast, even after you hit “send” it still isn't “your paper”—if you caught a typo and can resend with a small apology. I have done it too. I did it with this paper.

That dawning conviction that the handwritten paper wasn't “my paper” changed the writing process. I no longer committed my ideas to cursive with the conviction and intensity I had before. It was an “attempt,” an “essay” in the literal sense of that word, not some final prize. Yes, I still had that old intensity in my essay exams, which lasted through my four four-hour doctoral exams at Emory University—an experience so intense and draining that almost all students who endured it went into a depression afterward. I thought myself impervious to such tender-minded nonsense, but I too had a significant dip after writing those exams, and some of my fellows never came back from it. They lost all Irseshian desire afterward.

Philosophical writing can do that. I suspect other sorts of writing can also, but I haven't got the experience of it. Yet, it is very interesting to consider that the magic, the energy, flows out of us and is imprisoned in the written words until someone releases a bit of it by reading them. The more powerful the energy, the more readers the words need to set them free into the world. Think of Plato, or Shakespeare, or Goethe, and what it must have taken *from* them to give us such energy. There is no way they didn't pay heavily for what came through them and issued from their pens, or the stylus in Plato's case. Why did they not simply die from exhaustion? I do not think that word processing does the same thing that writing by hand does. Somehow the energy drain and transfer is different. It seems to me that Shusterman's description of the method in Chinese philosophy comes into existence with a built-in and purposive understanding of this dynamic, and a strategy for conservation of the writer without depleting the writing of its energy—indeed, the writing seems *more* invested with that energy, not less.

Another moment's pause with this almost indescribable experience that you younger ones will never have, as you peck away at your computers: as the computers arrived and took me by the scruff of the neck, the intensity and purpose flowed away from my handwritten efforts and began to coalesce around my typed version of a paper or essay or book. But, like every person my age, I did not allow the form of consciousness associated with writing by hand to lapse. The simple reason was the trauma and the PTSD of the essay exam. All the way through my schooling, including the ordeal of doctoral exams, this kind of writing *by hand* was required. No time for rewriting. We had to unreel it from our memories and our bodies—no books, no sources, just us and a bluebook and a pen. Our translation exams at Emory were the same. You



don't recover from them. I actually petitioned the department to allow me to write my doctoral exams on a wiped computer (it was 1991). No dice. "You must suffer, young man—that's what it *means* to be a doctor of philosophy." There is an uncomfortable truth in this. Even though it destroyed some of my friends, I wear my war wounds like a crown, I and Levon. (Look it up, youngsters.)

To be honest, the only people reading this now who could pass such doctoral exams are my age and older. Those behind me, even those born in 1969, do not use their memories or their hands in this way. They have been composing on typewriters and even computers for their whole lives. There is nothing at all wrong with this, nor is it inferior. It is different, that's all. But there are some things about writing that most of you younger people will never really know, unless your parents forced you to learn what I have described about releasing the energy through the tip of your pen.

My parents did not have to force me, since everyone my age was educated as I was. It was the cultural norm, and excellence in knowledge meant the command of writing and reading (and calculating) that was associated with a book culture. A professor was a walking encyclopedia. Now such an ability is only a curiosity. It is not my job, these days, to teach you youngsters to remember as I do. It is my job to put you in better command of your processes of image formation, and to learn from you what is difficult for me but easy for you. Text for you younger ones is first image and only secondarily discourse. For most people my age, the written word is only discourse first and usually not image at all. We derided picture books, infantile image learning. Is it any wonder we find communicating with each other a challenge? We were very narrow, and many of us still are. It was hammered into us—us and everyone before us who got an education after about 1450. We expect you to understand that, without telling you even what it is, what happened to us would be difficult for you to empathize.

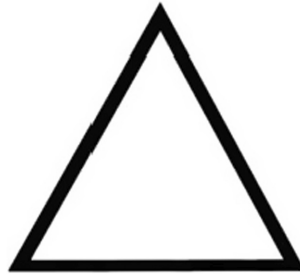
I do not know how to explain to my own age cohort how to make this transition to your world. Some get it. But those slightly younger than us (born in 1969 to 1980) understand what our limitation is and why we are like this. They are often sympathetic and helpful as we try to adjust. But those of you who are younger, especially millennials, do not understand at all, and you are impatient and sometimes abusive. You often do not appreciate that there will be no more who are like us and that we understand things you ought to learn and value (within limits).<sup>3</sup> The book culture is dying every day. Yet literature is doing well. Literature has been associated with the book culture for so long that it is a bit difficult for the elders to imagine literature without books. And yet storytelling has made a big comeback in the image culture, and the form of memory and performance that goes with storytelling has come back with it. It was never lost, of course, having been kept alive in theaters and around campfires, and by grandmothers and grandfathers who still had a share of the oral culture in their experience. But is that literature? It isn't just writing, is it?

## 8 | THIEVES

Shusterman makes the point, and rightly so, that "poetry" had held first place in philosophy—and, I would add, every other form of cultural memory—before writing battled with the oral tradition, one civilization after another, with the Greeks being very much

<sup>3</sup>When I gave the first draft of this paper as a public lecture in Poland in the fall of 2022, I was informed, and I see it is true, that what I am describing applies to the United States and maybe Britain and France and Germany, not to other countries, yet. The generations in many places are running one behind those of the United States, and in other countries perhaps even slower. I am chastened by this, but to those whose generations do not match the demographics I am describing I say, "You wait." What happened to us will certainly happen to you.

latecomers to this quarrel. As Shusterman reminds us, Plato called the quarrel between philosophy and poetry “ancient,” which ought to shut up the idiots who assert that philosophy began with the Greeks: *Plato* disagrees with you, and if that isn't good enough for you, to hell with you and your stubborn narrowness. So perhaps we find that the new version of “philosophy” doesn't so much war with literature as with poetry—that is, *primary creativity* in language and image, *poiesis*. Philosophy wants the Promethean fire for itself, doesn't it? Thieves and idiots. And ignoring everything we actually know about the origins of human wisdom in language, we Westerners usurp the place of *poiesis* and attack the image, claiming primacy for the creative power of a disembodied intellect. Nonsense. On stilts. “Let none without geometry enter here.” This is the very device by which the thievery is committed. As if anyone could teach you geometry without images. Geometry is a *science* of stylized images. But you were taught that the images were incidental to the intellectual understanding of their definitions, that you could understand all triangles by grasping three straight lines enclosing a space whose interior angles total 180 degrees. It is gibberish. Here is what you need to know:



When you've got this, we'll work from there. It was always thus, at least for humans. Pure geometry does not occur in nature, which is crooked and piecemeal, and every measurement an individual effort. Nature is fractal and does not repeat itself, ever; go ahead, try to step in that stream twice and tell me what *really* happens.

Perhaps one reason we do not wish to acknowledge our obvious error about “philosophy” is that no sooner have we realized that philosophy, for whatever else it is, is certainly often expressed as a *kind* of literature, we then must wonder whether it is ever *good* literature, to which we must answer, “Usually it is very bad, although the best philosophers generally find a way to produce good literature.” Professional academics, philosophers included, do not wish to be evaluated on the literary quality of their writing, and for good reason. They would nearly all fail to be judged more than mediocre. I do not exclude myself in this, but I do try. Still, I would rather read William James than my own writing. One critic is said to have observed that in Henry and William James, we have a novelist who writes like a philosopher and a philosopher who writes like a novelist, respectively. Huzzah! It is a start in the right direction!

And in many ways, this summarizes the effort of Shusterman's book. It is clear from chapter 4 that Shusterman has already fully understood everything I have been saying here, and has moved on to the constructive prospects for this kind of learning. The question is not how do we quarrel with the narrow ones, but how do we show them a better path? It *may* begin (Shusterman is so annoyingly gentle) by reminding them of their bodies. I could not agree more. Now, *smite* them with it, why don't you? And thus, a lesson from an ancient culture in which one could not *be* the philosopher without mastering the image—and not just any images, and not just their interpretation. One must create the image in order to create the philosophy. This is what I take from chapter 4. Thank God I didn't have to pass *that* doctoral exam. I would prefer the Daoist master's stick to the Tai Che of “Shustermanian showing.”

The current mainstream will largely ignore this teaching, and probably Shusterman's book. But you who are younger, who belong to the new image world, you already understand what Shusterman is saying, but still your elders keep insisting that you discount this power of images and cling to a puny and scrofulous form of the written word. My advice is otherwise. You must dive wholly into image creation and remember that the creation of the word is the most important *kind* of image creation, for the foreseeable future.

## 9 | PHILOSOPHERS WHO ARE WRITERS, AND SOME WHO ARE NOT

In short, you youngsters really must read and write, but not as those in the past have done. You have already gotten very good at graphic novels, which look like comic books to people my age, but you know to say to us: “And what is wrong with comic books? Didn't many of you form your very consciousness taking them in as children?” Yes, that and baseball cards, filled with numbers on the back that taught me all the math I ever needed. Justice League of America. The source of my moral imagination, I'm afraid. I recommend for your consideration a story: Umberto Eco's *Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, and also Eco's comic-book collection, which the Italian government declared a national treasure. Eco was probably the most learned person in the West in his generation (Laurent Binet wrote a novel about that), and yet I know with near certainty that Eco would agree with what I am saying to you. The image is the source. Learn to make them.

The great gift of Shusterman's book is to show us that these insights have been with us all along, in the West, despite our stubborn ignorance of ourselves. Some whom we regard as writers, mainly, have made permanent contributions to philosophy (one thinks of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy immediately, but also of Melville, Poe, certainly Eliot, and Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Charles Johnson, even Stephen King, Anne Rice, and their ilk), while others we regard as philosophers have made literary contributions of an enduring sort, and one thinks of Plato and Montaigne, whom Shusterman rightly highlights, but also Emerson, James, and Sartre. This *poiesis* lives in a number of philosophers not famous for their writings, but we remember mainly the ones who write. Yet, not always. There is Socrates, and also Buddha, and indeed a Jewish philosopher of the early Roman Empire, Yeshua bar Yosef, who didn't write anything. Let us take this last as our example.

The philosophy of Yeshua bar Yosef (circa 4BCE to 30CE) is known only in what others wrote about him. But there was a telling episode in a tract attributed to a writer in Ephesus, circa 100CE. In an episode in that treatise, a disciple named for the great conqueror of Macedonia and father of Alexander the Great, comes to Yeshua bar Yosef, his Rabbi and Master, and informs him that there are some Greeks who want to speak to him. The Master knows that the Greeks want to know about Plato, and also what the Master thinks of the immortality of the soul. Yeshua bar Yosef answers, according to the writer: “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be” (John 24–25). An answer to the various theories and images offered in the *Phaedo*. It could be stated “the one soul becomes many by dying.” That option didn't come up in Plato. Of course, such an aphorism might come from any ancient master, and we find such sayings among many sages, but this one was a Jewish philosopher who claimed special authority. It got him into trouble. He wasn't the first or the last philosopher who ran afoul of the power structures, but he had an interesting view. He disagreed with the Greeks about the relation of body and soul, insisting that the body is equally important, especially in its kind of death, so much so that even the body must sleep until it is called to the throne of heaven for judgment. And

indeed, in this view, it is widely held that a new body, a new *soma*, that never withers or dies, is awarded to the just and the merciful, a body *made* of light, according to the same writer in a different book. Such a possibility is briefly discussed in the *Phaedo*, when the question arises what the soul is made of, as Yeshua bar Yosef surely knew Plato's works, but this idea is there rejected in favor of a disembodied soul. Yeshua said, basically, that the Greeks didn't have it entirely right. Shusterman says the same thing, in his own, much safer way.

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# The skillful means and meanings of philosophy: Attention and immersion in the philosophical art of writing

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**Abstract**

This response to Richard Shusterman's *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* focuses on his concern that philosophy is, first and foremost, a way of life, illustrated in the West by the Socratic ideal of the philosopher and in the East by the example of the scholar-artist-gentleman. This paper examines the process of Buddhist meditation and the process of creating novels, supplementing the authors Shusterman carefully examines with examples from Black American literature, the author's own teacher John Gardner, and artistic colleagues the author has known. The basic thrust of the response is that the skillful means used in writing can indeed be a form of self-creation, but it can also be a means of liberation from the self.

**KEYWORDS**

art, beauty, gesture, liberation, love, Man in Gold, performance, philosophical life, somaesthetics, writing, Zen

Part of the pleasure of writing, as well as the pain, is involved in pouring into that thing which is being created all of what he cannot understand, cannot say, cannot deal with or cannot even admit in any other way. The artifact is a completion of personality.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1995)

## 1 | PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE: THE SOCRATIC IDEAL

Early in Richard Shusterman's magnificent and exquisitely learned *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* (Shusterman 2022), we read a beautiful description of philosophy, a discipline that has inspired Western artists and thinkers for more than two millennia:

Conceived as a life-practice, philosophy is not limited to professional philosophers teaching in philosophy departments and writing for philosophical journals. Literally meaning the “love of wisdom” and defined through its Socratic paradigm, philosophy involves a critical disciplined search for wisdom that involves self-knowledge through self-examination and that aims at improving both self and society by challenging complacency and dogma. As such, philosophy is not merely the business of a particular professional class, but a project for anyone who seriously cares for her own welfare and that of society and who is brave enough to examine herself critically and question established beliefs through a rigorous, disciplined mode of living.

Much is compressed into those three sentences, just as so much of importance for our time is condensed in the 132 pages of *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*. Its length belies its richness and philosophical density. Whatever else one might want to say about this groundbreaking book, it is, first and foremost, an exploration of art and spirituality. I have spent a lifetime brooding on, studying, and writing about this important subject. So, reading this text as a Black American philosopher (phenomenology), storyteller, essayist, comic artist and illustrator, martial artist (Choy Li Fut kung fu and Tai Chi Chuan), and practicing Buddhist, I find myself overflowing with so much I want to respond to, and on so many levels. And like Eli Kramer's response, mine will be less an academic article, sans footnotes, than a philosophical essay.

First, in the definition above, the author is critiquing the waning of this ancient, inspiring vision in Western philosophy brought about by the “institutionalization of philosophy as an academic profession.” He traces the quarrel between philosophy and literature back to ancient Greek philosophers like Plato, acknowledging that while we need to be able to distinguish philosophy from literature it is also crucial that we understand that philosophy, even Plato's dialogues, is enriched by the methods of literature, and that the forms of philosophy during the past two thousand years have covered many literary genres. Or, as I put it far less eloquently in my essay “The Truth-Telling Power of Fiction” (Johnson 2013): “The relationship between philosophy and literature is reinforced by the obvious but seldom-stated fact that philosophers are not just thinkers; they are also writers. And our finest storytellers, the ones who transform and deepen our understanding of the world, are not just writers; they, too, are engaged in the adventure of ideas, to borrow a phrase from Alfred North Whitehead.”

Second, Shusterman's invoking the literal meaning of philosophy as “the love of wisdom” highlights the time-honored understanding that philosophy, this Socratic belief that the unexamined life is not worth living, this ancient Athenian concern with the good, the true, and the beautiful, originally was focused practically on the art of living—philosophy as a way of life (PWL). That *and* literature, Shusterman argues, serve the individual's quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement, which then enables the individual to better understand and serve others and society. But what does it mean, in Socrates' terms, to lead a life devoted to wisdom?

One answer of course, is dramatically delivered to us in Plato's “Apology,” or “Defense of Socrates” (Plato 1961), a first-person monologue that is one of the most beautiful documents in Western literature and has inspired men and women for more than two millennia. At the age of seventy, Socrates a poor man (one made poor, he says, by his pursuit of wisdom) appeared for the first time in court to defend himself against his accusers Meletus (who didn't care for how Socrates characterized the poets), Anytus (who didn't like the way he talked about professional men and politicians), and Lycon (who didn't approve of how he spoke about orators). The charges against him were that he corrupted the minds of the youth and believed in his own gods and not those approved by the state. His defense should be mandatory reading and discussion for all our high school students, because at every point in his speech, Socrates, this gadfly of the state forever scolding his kinsmen, is eloquent, fearless in his allegiance to something greater than himself, indifferent to death, established in his spirituality, able to teach



with humor, irony, epistemological humility, and always steadfast in his inspiring appeals for a life dedicated to virtue—this philosophy he presents to his countrymen is one he *lives* daily. And who were they?

Socrates' fellow Athenians were men, as I described them in my short story “The Cynic” (Johnson 2010), who in the years after the draining, debilitating Peloponnesian War lost interest in *sophrosyne* and the good of the polis. They were overcome with a cynicism and selfishness such as Euripides attributed to Jason in *Medea*, and devoted themselves like so many Americans today not to civic duty but instead to the immediate pleasures of food, drink, sex, and especially power. Of these new Athenians, Thucydides said: “The meaning of words no longer had the same relation to things but was changed by them as they thought proper. Each man was strong only in the conviction that nothing was secure. Inferior intellects generally succeeded best. For, aware of their own deficiencies and feeling the capacities of their opponents, for whom they were no match in powers of speech and whose subtle wits were likely to anticipate them in contriving evil, they boldly struck at once” (Thucydides 1881).

Who can doubt that this sounds, tragically, like the zeitgeist of a very incoherent America in 2023, a country of which Martin Luther King Jr.—a philosopher/theologian who truly lived his philosophy as much as Socrates and Gandhi, and like them was killed for it—said, “The great problem facing modern man is that the means by which we live have outdistanced the spiritual ends for which we live” (King 1994). To somewhat similar men in his own time, Socrates said:

Gentlemen, I am your grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and as long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul. (Plato 1961)

This time-honored model of the philosopher (practicing philosophy as a way of life) and the integrity of the individual in “Apology” works as a vivid character sketch worthy of revisiting at every stage and season of our lives. Knowing no fear in life or death, the philosopher in Socrates' case listened to what he called the prophetic voice (or conscience, we might say) that spoke to him whenever he was about to do something wrong or wicked. Although his friend Chaerephon told him the priestess at Delphi said no one was wiser than Socrates, he insisted he had no special knowledge, but neither did the politicians, craftsmen, and poets he interviewed. Only God, he claimed, possessed real wisdom. But serving that deity amounted to his living in great poverty and incurring the wrath of his countrymen, who put him to death. Yet for Socrates death was preferable to dishonor. And it was for that reason—honor—that he avoided politics, knowing too well how he differed from others:

I have never lived an ordinary quiet life. I did not care for the things that most people care about—making money, having a comfortable home, high military or civil rank, and all the other activities, political appointments, secret societies, party organizations, which go on in our city. I thought I was too strict in my principles to survive if I went in for this sort of thing. So instead of taking a course which would have done no good either to you or me, I set myself to do you individually in

private what I hold to be the greatest possible service. I tried to persuade each of you not to think more of practical advantages than of his mental and moral well-being, or in general to think more of advantage than of well-being in the case of the state or anything else. (Plato 1961)

## 2 | DOES WRITING ENHANCE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE? THE VIEW OF AN AMERICAN POET AND A NOVELIST

As Shusterman notes, Socrates left, as a teacher, no writing. Nor did Jesus or, I would add, the Buddha, whose words were not recorded until five hundred years after his death. I mention Shakyamuni Buddha here because Shusterman's text explores at length two of the major influences on Chinese culture, Confucianism and Daoism, and mentions Ch'an Buddhism or Zen once (on page 115), when discussing the artist Shen Zhou. Zen is my wheelhouse, and so in this response I will refer to it often, especially its characteristic of nonduality.

As examples of PWL, these three teachers performed their philosophies daily through their deeds. One might say of them that philosophy, like art, is not the reflection of a preexisting truth but is instead a bringing of truth into being. (Might one dare to say that this would make PWL an artistic practice?) But had any of them set down their thoughts and feelings in writing, they might have understood how every draft, every page is a prayer, that every sentence is a risk, and found themselves sympathizing with the lament of William James, who described philosophy as a “peculiarly stubborn effort to think clearly” (to use Brand Blanshard's paraphrase of him [Blanshard 1954]), and wrote to a friend that after working all day and rewriting half a dozen times, his labor produced only a page and a half of manuscript. “Everything comes out wrong with me at first,” he said, “but once objectified in a crude shape, I can torture and poke and scrape and pat it till it offends me no more” (James 2018).

My colleague the late poet William Matthews was as sensitive as any artist to this often excruciating creative process, and stated in an interview in *Aegis*:

The language is communal, cumulative. Something of the life of everyone who's used language is in it. I'm thinking not only of the great literary masters, but of anyone who has spoken it. Babysitters, seed dealers, shepherds, anyone. The language is in circulation, as we say of money, and like money it has on it the sweat and palm oil of everyone who's used it. While I write by myself, I'm in touch, through language, with countless others living and dead. Language continues to return a writer to the central human questions, not so much as he defines them, but as they've been defined by those who use the language. If it does that well, it becomes a part of the accumulation. (Matthews 1973)

If you feel you hear something of T. S. Eliot's view of poetry and language in Matthews's words, you would not be wrong. Shusterman brings Eliot to us in a way that is thrilling, emphasizing that for this writer “the great poet as ‘master of a language should be the great servant of it,’ even to the point of sacrificing oneself and one's personal feelings.” As Shusterman writes, “This of course recalls Eliot's famous ‘Impersonal theory of poetry’ that good poetry is not the expression of the poet's actual psychological sentiments as a particular personality but rather the sacrifice or extinction of that personality for the sake and service of poetry and language in expressing feelings that are somehow new or special but as yet inarticulate. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”

There is clearly a universally known rigor and exacting discipline involved in the act of writing, where every sentence in a story or essay should be as sure and confident as a brushstroke in a painting. Not all philosophers handled those demands well. Hegel was especially

poor at rendering reader-friendly prose. The eight, canonical writers straddling the fields of philosophy and literature selected by Shusterman—Augustine, Montaigne, Wordsworth, Kierkegaard, Bataille, Blanchot, T. S. Eliot, and Bertrand Russell—all share a common desire to achieve through the rigor of fine writing some unity in themselves and a coherent vision of life as they see it. Many are also seeking a spiritual practice that will make them whole and bring peace. Like Socrates, they were not content to lead an ordinary life. Most people are not interested in keeping a diary (as I've done for most of my life since the age of about twelve) or projecting the hazy thoughts and feeling swirling around in their heads in a stream of consciousness, where no one can see them, onto a page or canvas, thereby objectifying those thoughts and feelings and ideas. But these writers discussed in *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* had a burning need for self-expression. For self-creation. They hungered, spiritually. They did not see literary art as merely entertainment; they saw literature as a tool for probing self and world, for bringing clarity to thought, as James described the “peculiar” effort of philosophy, and for liberating our perception from calcified ways of thinking, feeling, and living. While many are aware of the limits of language to capture various states of consciousness, fleeting episodes of mind, and the deeper experience of reality that forever eludes language, they nevertheless viewed writing as a means to define and clarify the meaning of their lives—whatever we want to call the “self”—with the literary artifact being a way to achieve the completion of their personalities, as the great novelist Ralph Ellison once put it in an interview. That view was shared by my University of Washington colleague, the equally great painter Jacob Lawrence, who said, “My belief is that it is most important for an artist to develop an approach and philosophy about life—if he has developed this philosophy, he does not put paint on canvas, he puts himself on canvas” (qtd. in Wheat, Lawrence, and Hills 1986).

Because *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* uses no Black writers in examples of PWL, I am tempted to suggest the inclusion of Jean Toomer in our reflections on PWL. Toomer was a visionary, philosophical poet—one much influenced by George I. Gurdjieff's philosophy of Unitism as well as Buddhism and Hinduism—whose language-rich novel *Cane* inaugurated the Harlem Renaissance in 1923, and whose book of aphorisms, *Essentials*, is as thought provoking as the aphoristic writing of Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*. But I will leave a discussion of Toomer's general importance, and the significance of his prophetic poem “Blue Meridian” (1937), for another time.

Often writing is the only way writers can exert some degree of control over their own life, a point Shusterman illustrates when he discusses the lives of Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir. For some of his writers, writing is also, one hopes, a way to escape the inevitability of death by achieving a kind of immortality in their writing, as if to say such works might be seen as their “children,” or perhaps substitutes for the real children they never had. The urgency of this creative task was something my own literary mentor, John Gardner, who was a cornucopia of creativity—the author of thirty books, spanning novels, short stories, poetry, literary criticism and manifestos, book reviews, medieval scholarship, and plays—spoke and wrote about often:

True artists are possessed. . . . They are messianic messengers. They believe that what they are doing is unspeakably important: it is only that conviction that makes the writer himself important. . . . So Beethoven does draft after draft of his works, scrutinizing, altering, improving them long after anyone commonly sane would have stopped, delighted. . . . Only the absolute stubborn conviction that with patience enough he can find his way through or around any obstacle—only the certainty solid as his life that he can sooner or later discover the right technique—can get the true artist through the endless hours of fiddling, re-conceiving, throwing out in disgust. If he does his work well, the ego that made it possible does not show

in the work. . . . He builds whatever world he is able to build, then evaporates into thin air, leaving behind what he's built to get by on its own. (Gardner 1979)

Gardner once told a revealing, important story that has stuck with me for half a century. He said he gave a reading, and during the Q&A a woman raised her hand and said, “You know, I think I like your writing, but I don't think I like *you*.” His reply was memorable. “That's all right,” he said, “because I'm a better person when I'm writing. Standing here, talking to you now, I can't revise my words. If I say something wrong or not quite right, or maybe offensive and it hurts someone, the words are out there, public, and I can't take them back. I have to rely on you to revise or fix them for me. But when I'm writing, I can go over and over what I think and say until it's right” (qtd. in Johnson 2016).

During my thirty-three years of teaching, whenever I told my writing students this anecdote about Gardner, which is included in my book on the craft of writing, *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling* (Johnson 2016), I emphasized his feeling that the result of this painstaking revision process is that for at least *once* in their lives, here on the page, they can achieve perfection or something close to that, if they are willing to revise and reenvision their work long enough. And then I would say: Where else in life do we get the chance—the privilege and blessing—to lovingly selflessly go over something again and again until it finally embodies exactly what we think and feel, our best expression, our vision at its clearest, and our best technique?

Gardner experienced—and also this author—much of what Shusterman says about the writers he so brilliantly examines. Like Augustine, Gardner understood that “the art of words can inspire vice rather than enlighten and redeem with truth,” and he railed against such writers in his controversial manifesto, *On Moral Fiction* (Gardner 1979). Such an observation about writers is echoed by the great literary scholar Northrop Frye in *The Educated Imagination* when he says, “It is not surprising if writers are often rather silly people, not always what we think of as intellectuals, and certainly not always freer of silliness or perversity than anyone else” (Frye 1964).

Gardner was a Christian writer who saw his writing as a form of spiritual practice, “God's work,” as he once put it in a belief that puts him in the company perhaps of Kierkegaard, and Augustine, who said, “Thou must be emptied of that wherewith thou art full, that thou mayest be filled with that whereof thou art empty” (Augustine 1857). Such a belief enabled Gardner to see the writer as the servant of the writing—of the language in William Matthews's terms—and something greater than himself. (And what might that be?) Gardner was always critical of existentialism when he wasn't embracing it in his early fiction, and particularly critical of Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he parodied in his best-known novel, *Grendel* (Gardner 1989). Were he alive today, Gardner would detect some of the obsessions of existentialism—“nothingness” (or the Sanskrit *shūnyatā*; it's impossible for me not to see “nothingness” as another word for Buddhist “emptiness”), “death,” “dread,” anxiety—in Maurice Blanchot's feeling that reality has a “horrible, dark underside” in its “unending, uncaring cycle of life and death upon which we, through language, construct our world of persons, things, and feelings” (Shusterman 2022). Indeed, Blanchot and Georges Bataille, especially with his interest in that “mystical” moment of “non-knowledge” when “[t]here is no longer subject-object” because that dualism is “dissolved” (Shusterman 2022) come as Western writers in their thinking right to the very edge of Buddhism's understanding of *anātman* (“no-self” in Sanskrit), but without knowing how to cross over from their little Western fishbowl to an older, nondualistic Eastern vision of PWL.

### 3 | DOES THE “SELF” COMPLETED BY WRITING REALLY EXIST? ON MEDITATION AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

For what is at stake here is a primordial and perennial question: What *is* this self? This essay does not attempt to answer that question, only briefly explore it, for trying to locate the “self” is as pointless as searching for weapons of mass destruction during the early days of the Iraq war. Hume pointed us in the right direction in his *Treatise on Human Nature*: “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. . . . and can never observe anything but the perception” (Hume 1888).

Might it be that, instead of establishing a literary “self” on the pages of one’s writing (a self or construct one feels after such writing a need to live up to, though the “self” is a process forever changing, Heraclitean Becoming, not Parmenidian Being), the very act of literary creation can lead to a liberation *from* the illusory small, egoistic, limited self, what Gardner called the ego, and Matthews depicts as a communal experience made possible by a language so much larger than ourselves, which precedes us, which we must learn, and which will continue long after we are gone but remain as part of its “accumulation”? I’m reminded of what Albert Camus said in his *Notebooks 1935–1942*: “To write is to become disinterested. There is a certain renunciation in art.” He also stated in the *Notebooks*, “If you want to be a philosopher, write novels” (Camus 1963).

Writing, like any activity we take seriously, involves sustained concentration, called *dhāraṇa* by practitioners of Eastern religions, and this is the first stage in the adventure of meditation and understanding the operations of the mind. Consider this observation in *Concentration and Meditation* by Christmas Humphreys (1993): “As a student wrote: If one is trying to do something really well, one becomes, first of all, interested in it, and later absorbed in it, which means that one forgets oneself in concentrating on what one is doing. But when one forgets oneself, oneself ceases to exist, since oneself is the only thing which causes oneself to exist.”

Humphreys’s words are in many ways a replay of the famous statement by Eihei Dogen, founder of the Soto Zen lineage in which I took my vows as an *upāsaka*, or lay Buddhist, in 2007: “To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between oneself and others” (Eihei Dogen 2019).

We must remember that the goal of the Buddhist tradition, of the many branches and sects in the Buddhaverse, is our attainment of freedom, even from Buddhism itself. It is a religion and philosophy anchored in nondualism. Shakyamuni Buddha taught a doctrine of no-self (*anatta*) but insisted that he would teach a doctrine of self if his followers became attached to the idea of no-self. Over the centuries Buddhists have developed a doctrine of Two Truths, defined differently in different Buddhist schools. One is *samvṛiti-satya*, the relative or conventional truths of the phenomenal world. (Here we speak of individual selves, as the Buddha did, for example, when addressing his followers like Ananda.) And *paramārtha-satya*, the absolute or ultimate truth, which escapes language, argument, and discursive ways of thought. (Here is the realm of no-self.)

There are, of course, numerous, time-tested techniques for meditation, but common to many are exercises that provide a practitioner with but a single object for the mind’s attention (*ekāgratā*). Bear with me as I try to guide us carefully through this explanation. For beginners, the simplest exercise is offered by the body (or *soma*) itself: one’s own breath. Try, if you can, to observe for fifteen minutes *only* the rising-falling movement of your abdomen as you breathe. Soon enough, after a few seconds, as you attempt to focus on each inhalation and exhalation, you discover your mind drifting away from the breath— into memories, imaginings, daydreams, and perceptions of physical discomfort (an itch, a stiff back, and so on)—as you



try to sit perfectly still. (The cartoonist Frank Modell [1999] captures this wonderfully when he asks, “It’s ten o’clock. Do you know where your mind is?”)

In Vipassana “insight meditation,” for example, you do not ignore these fugitive wanderings of the mind, this stream of consciousness, and its tendency to go AWOL at the first opportunity but instead carefully observe and examine each eruptive mental act as it occurs, like clouds passing across the sky or waves of water—“reflecting,” “planning,” “feeling pain,” “feeling pleasure,” “feeling lazy,” “feeling bored,” or “hearing a sound nearby”—and then you let them go, making no effort to hold on as you turn back to your breathing.

Over time this deceptively simple yet daunting exercise of just quietly tracking the labile mind’s movements, this taking interest in the phenomenology of our inner life, reveals, first, that each evanescent eruption of desire or emotion, each “imagining” or “feeling lazy,” passes away, or dies, like a mirage after it is vetted once or twice. Each is impermanent, with its own arising and falling away trajectory, and, at bottom, is empty (*shūnyatā*). And so is what we call the “self.” Since our birth, we have been dying and being reborn physically and metaphorically with every moment of consciousness, and that is nothing to fear. Furthermore, you realize early in your practice (and I have been sitting in meditation for forty-two years) that *you* are not these emotions or feelings; they are simply conditioned mental phenomena produced by the ever-restive mind. It is the mind’s job to produce thoughts and feelings, just as it is the job of the bowels to produce flatulence. (Forgive my crude imagery.) Added to which, one realizes the unicity of what we call subject and object (the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl’s terms are *noesis* and *noema*), which arise simultaneously in each flicker-flash instant of perception; they are ontologically twinned and inseparable, nondualistic, the one incapable of existing without the other. Put another way, the experiencing subject does not exist independent of an object.

From this elementary task of holding the mind to an aspect of one’s body—our breathing—the beginner advances to attempting as a Japanese *dō*, or Way, the same uninterrupted awareness and equanimity, not only when quietly sitting, but also when engaged in other worldly activities—when walking, washing the dishes, making tea, or doing archery. In other words, moment-by-moment awareness of the texture of one’s mind and experiences becomes a way of life with the philosophical goal of deprogramming all the negative conditioning one has accumulated, which causes one to be reactive and not free. This is about removing what teacher Bhikku Bodhi once described as the “layers of conceptual paint,” or social conditioning, presuppositions, reactive behavior and prejudices that obscure our clear perception of phenomena and prevent our awakening. The “examined life” for Buddhist practitioners, who are engaged in philosophy as a way of life as much as Socrates, Diogenes, or Lao Tzu were, necessarily means moment-by-moment examination of our minds, with the point of such concentration, which eventually flows seamlessly into meditation (*dhyāna*), being to attend with all one’s heart and mind to the business at hand.

Clearly, spiritual practice is nothing if it is not about attention. (The Sanskrit word for attention, *ekāgratā*, can be translated as “one,” *eka*, and “to seize,” *grah*.) The same is true of reading and writing. Like a memory, a mathematical entity (number), or the visualizations in tantra, the aesthetic object experienced in any literary work is ontologically transcendent, as Sartre pointed out in *What Is Literature?* (1993), existing only for a consciousness during the act of reading.

Open any novel. What is there? Black marks—signs—on white paper. First, they are silent. They are lifeless, lacking signification until the consciousness of the reader imbues them with meaning, allowing a fictitious character like the nameless protagonist of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1995) to emerge powerfully from the monotonous rows of ebony type. This magical act is achieved through concentration as one reads and through an active self-surrender that allows an entire fictional world to appear, redivivus, in the reader’s mind: “a vivid and continuous dream,” as John Gardner (1979) once called it. Our focused awareness invests the cold signs on the pages of *Invisible Man* with *our* emotions, *our* understanding of oppression and fear. Then, in what is almost an act of thaumaturgy, the electrifying figures in situations Ellison has created reward

us richly by returning our subjective, never very clear feelings to us transformed, refined, and alchemized by language into a new vision with the capacity to change our lives forever.

That same *ekāgratā* is at work on the writer's side of the creative equation, too, for the sustained and continuous fictional “dream” that readers discover was initially experienced by authors, who, to create an imaginary world, first had to visualize with vivid specificity each and every one of the thousands of details in their novel or short story. They had to become absorbed in the work, forgetting themselves in the efflorescence of the world they are conjuring into being. (In my own storytelling, like the fiction “Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra” [Johnson 2018], I whimsically call this “Bodhi-drama.”) No serious professional writers emerge from a storytelling project as emotionally and psychologically clean as they went into it.

For example, if a dramatic scene is richly evoked, placing us so thoroughly within its ambience that we forget the room we're sitting in or fail to hear the telephone ring; if in it we can “see” the *haecceitas* (“thisness”) of every carefully described object on the fictional stage; if our senses imaginatively respond to, say, the quality of late afternoon light as it falls upon the characters and to imagery for evoking smells, sounds, and taste; if each revealing moment-by-moment action, feeling, utterance, pause, and sigh of the characters is microscopically tracked and reverentially recorded by the writer, who, like an actor, must psychologically inhabit *all* the players at *every* moment in that scene; if every significant nuance of that scene is present with almost a palpable feel on the page, then it is because the radical attentiveness to detail, *here* and *now* in the mind's eye, demanded of the writer (who, knowing no division of creative labor, must in a single work of fiction play each principal role, be the set designer, director, costumer, hairstylist, makeup artist, lighting technician, prop master, casting director, dialogue and sound editor, location manager, and postproduction editor) is a species of the *ekagrata* (attention) practiced in meditation.

And always this process, at least for me, involves letting go of the numerous ideas that arise during intense periods of creativity (ideas I might love and feel attached to) if they do not contribute to what writer John Barth (1999) once called a story's “ground situation.” This cutting away of what one is attached to is in the service of the story, its logic, because, as Gardner once pointed out, plot—what happens next and causally *why*—is the storyteller's equivalent to the philosopher's argument. So like a *bhikshu* (Buddhist monk) dutifully counting his breaths or contemplating impermanence or compassion, I must repeatedly return my wandering mind again and again, and yet again, to the original spark for the tale: an especially demanding task for philosophical novels such as my *Oxherding Tale* (Johnson 2005), *Middle Passage* (Johnson 1998), and *Dreamer* (Johnson 1999), which had five- and six-year gestation periods. And when the work is done, does a Buddhist writer feel the existentialist's anguish over death, or the desire for literary immortality—a form of craving or thirst (*trsnā*) that the Second Noble Truth identifies as the cause of suffering—as some of the authors do in Shusterman's text? On the contrary, one will perhaps experience what the poet Ikkyū felt when he wrote:

Writing something  
To leave behind  
Is yet another kind of dream:  
When I awake I know that  
There will be no one to read it.

(Ikkyū 1973)

#### 4 | SOMAESTHETICS: THE IDEAL OF THE SCHOLAR-GENTLEMAN

The previous long Buddhist interlude brings us to the most singular and original contribution to aesthetics in Shusterman's book, somaesthetics, which he defines this way:

Briefly defined, somaesthetics is the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the living, sentient, purposeful body (the *soma*) as the locus of sensory appreciation (aesthesis), the formative engine of performance, and the site for creative self-fashioning. If philosophy is an art of living, then (*ceteris paribus*) we can improve our capacities in this art by cultivating the undeniably necessary medium through which this art is practiced in the world—the living, perceiving body or soma. Like the pragmatist philosophy that inspired it, somaesthetics is a “new name for some old ways of thinking,” particularly the ancient idea of philosophy as an embodied way of life rather than a mere genre of theoretical discourse.

Among the numerous things I admire about *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*, in addition to its freeing itself from the pall cast upon philosophy by, say, Kant's dismissal in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Kant 2006) of the emotions and passions as forms of illness that exclude the sovereignty of reason, and from the stranglehold analytic philosophy has on American philosophy departments, is how it liberates itself from the provincialism of Western cultural thinking by examining the influence of Chinese philosophy—Confucianism, Ch'an Buddhism, and Daoism—on calligraphy and Chinese writing as an artform. Calligraphy, like drawing, is an art in which the skillfulness of a trained body, which is the middle term between our consciousness and the world, is part of a creative, expressive process of discovery. And by the way, I feel compelled just now to direct readers to Don Friedman's wonderful book *The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers* (Friedman 2007), a pantheon of visual art by two hundred world-famous writers that illustrates beautifully how, as the book's jacket copy says, “a coin toss could have determined whether to spend the day in a smock or seated with a pen.”

Every artist knows, at least intuitively through experience, something about the body's role in creating, whether the creation be a painting, drawing, or sculpture. This includes literary composition, where sound and sense, music and meaning merge on the page. Shusterman brilliantly makes the body, or *soma*, a factor we cannot ignore when fully discussing the aesthetic experience. It has been more or less “invisible” in our discussions of literary art, perhaps because it enables or makes possible the very artistic process, much in the way, that, say, the glasses or contact lenses some of us wear in order to see are transparent, *unthematized* until they fail in their purpose. I think this contribution, this reinserting of the body—embodied consciousness—into our deliberations is something that would especially please Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and my own teacher Don Ihde, one of America's preeminent phenomenologists, who wrote often of how scientific instruments like telescopes and microscopes extend our senses (while at the same time reducing the total experience of a phenomenon that we have in direct perception), and how a blind man's cane extends his body's sense of touch, just as Shen Zhou's bramble staff extends his *soma* in the painting *The Poet on a Mountaintop*. Or the way that Wang Meng's *qin* extends his *soma* “through a tool that requires a well-trained body” (Shusterman 2022).

Similarly, in the martial arts, traditional Chinese weapons—staff, broadsword, daggers, butterfly knives, and the like—can be seen as extensions of the *soma*.

As a graphic artist, I deeply appreciated Shusterman's giving voice to something every visual artist knows but perhaps finds difficult to put into words. The self-cultivation of the Confucian-influenced literati artists involved a “self-cultivation through emulation of masters [that] also involved self-expression” (Shusterman 2022) or innovation based on the individual artist's personality, imagination, and inspiration. Thus, other master artists will know individual calligraphers by their style, for no two artistic styles, or ways of drawing (one might also say ways of seeing the world), are alike. Each artist's style is as unique as a fingerprint. American art students are tested on this by being shown an image from an artwork, with the artist's name removed, which they must identify simply based on the work's style. Similarly, when I was a journalism student, I had a professor fond of giving his students a newspaper article published in the 1930s,

with the writer's name removed. He asked us who wrote it. Well, it was Ernest Hemingway, the inventor of a major style of writing much emulated by others, and so identifying the literary artist by his way of shaping the expressive tool, language, to his own vision and sensibilities, was not too difficult, at least not for me.

Moreover, and equally important, is how the tools of the artist, ink pens (in my case) or brushes, are also somatic extensions of the artist. All my life I've loved the whiff of India ink, working with T-squares and triangles, playing with pushpins and masking tape, hard and soft erasers, the messiness of correcting fluid, different pens and brushes, the penciling phase of a drawing, then its inking when my mind and spirit exist in my hands.

Comparing some of the Western writers I've mentioned with the Chinese scholar-gentlemen, it is tempting for me to conclude that the Christian God of Augustine, Kierkegaard, and Gardner, the Greek God that whispered in Socrates' ear whenever he fell short of doing good (and the all-enveloping language of Matthews and Eliot, as well as Wordsworth's Nature that brings him a sense of wholeness) are substituted in the PWL of the Chinese scholar-gentlemen by Nature and its spiritual forces, especially in Shen Zhou's experience. That is a central theme, Nature and the Dao, in Lao Tzu, Chung Tzu, and the *Tao Tê Ching*. This is the something greater than themselves—something transcendent—with which these writers and artists hope to connect. Creativity, they discover, is their means for doing so.

There is more that I could say about *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*. So much more. I believe everyone concerned with the state of the liberal arts and PWL has a stake in this book. And so, humbly, I hope this response in some small measure does justice to a work I've been waiting for and wanting to read my entire life.

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# Philosophy, writing, and liberation

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**Abstract**

In responding to the three creative interpretive discussions in the symposium on my book *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*, this paper explores the different styles of philosophical discourse and their role in the practice of philosophy as a way of life that extends beyond the discursive and that combines self-cultivation with care for others in the ethical-aesthetic pursuit of living beauty. In advocating this aesthetic model of philosophical life over a purely therapeutic model, I suggest how the former can incorporate the latter's concerns for spiritual health and liberation. In developing my response to the symposiasts while elaborating on the themes of my book, I consider issues of ineffability, creative performance, embodiment, truth, heroism, vulnerability, possession, art, spirituality, love, and liberation.

**KEYWORDS**

art, beauty, gesture, liberation, love, Man in Gold, performance, philosophical life, somaesthetics, writing, Zen

## 1 | THE VOICES OF PHILOSOPHY

Beyond the ritual duty, I take genuine pleasure in expressing my gratitude to the three symposiasts for their rich and stimulating responses to my book *Philosophy and the Art of Writing*. Special thanks go to Eli Kramer for conceiving and organizing the symposium. The texts of Kramer, Randall Auxier, and Charles R. Johnson are refreshingly different in style and focus, as these authors belong to three different generations in our contemporary culture of rapid change. But all three texts share a salient stylistic feature: a deeply personal voice with a heavy dose of autobiographic material. The personal style in their responses to my book is all the more noteworthy because the book itself eschews it, avoiding autobiographical introjection. Its style is instead impersonal, measured, and succinct. One reason for this were the aims and length constraints of the series for which the book was written. But this depersonalized,

restrained style was also a voluntary choice: a desired exercise in transformative philosophical askesis, the challenge of writing differently.

My philosophical style has been known for its personal voice, its frequent introduction of autobiographical material. This “challenging the taboo of the autobiographical” (as one critic described it) was particularly explicit in my writing about issues relating to the ethics and aesthetics of self-cultivation and to philosophy as an art of living (see Mafecki 2012). In *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* I felt a different style was appropriate in which abstention from the personal served also as a discipline in humility before the towering authors I was discussing, an overcoming of the thrusting self-assertive drive that is historically so central to the philosophical psyche, perhaps even necessary for significant philosophical progress. My personal voice is explicit in the preface, but only to affirm the book's connection to my practice of philosophy as a way of life, while noting that, like that life, the book sought to be “honest” and “instructive rather than straining to be novel” (Shusterman 2022, xii).

This aim of philosophical honesty invites a personal response, which the three symposiasts have embraced with enthusiasm. Long repressed by a misguided ideal of philosophy as impersonal science, personal expression has been yearning to break free, and that liberational impulse motivated the symposium's idea of using *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* not merely as an object of critical analysis but more as a springboard for developing further reflections on the topics of its title. Properly understanding those reflections, however, requires at least a minimal account of that defining springboard. The book examines the very close, complex relationship between philosophy and literature. In particular, it explores the use of writing in the pursuit of the philosophical life, conceived as a life that extends beyond literary forms and into physical deeds, nonlinguistic expression, and subjective moods or feelings. *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* argues that although there is considerable overlap and no essential divide or gap between literary and philosophical texts, philosophy differs from literature because it is more than language. It is more than language because its loving quest for wisdom is more than merely a verbal affair; it is an embodied way of life. Exploring the ways that the art of writing contributes to this more-than-linguistic philosophical life, the book examines thinkers from Socrates and Confucius to Simone de Beauvoir and Foucault, giving special attention to important authors who straddle the presumed literary/philosophical divide: Augustine, Montaigne, Wordsworth, and Kierkegaard, then twentieth-century writers like Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, T. S. Eliot, and Bertrand Russell. The book concludes by exploring the classical Chinese philosophical life of self-cultivation through its distinctive art of writing with its mixture of poetry, calligraphy, and painting.

The texts by Auxier, Johnson, and Kramer share important themes, but they differ enough to warrant responding to each in turn, while highlighting some ways they enlighteningly overlap. I begin with Eli Kramer, the symposium leader who set its tone and rightly situates *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* as a study in philosophy as a way of life, a field initiated (or resurrected) for contemporary thought by the trail-blazing work of Pierre Hadot on the ancient Greco-Roman tradition of philosophy and its afterlife in subsequent Western culture.

## 2 | PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE, SUB-CREATION, AND THE MAN IN GOLD

Kramer begins by noting how *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* importantly sheds light on “the relationship of lived philosophy to philosophical discourse” and citing Hadot's remarks that these two philosophical modes are “incommensurable—but also inseparable” (Hadot 2002, 174). I must begin, however, by most respectfully disagreeing with Hadot. I think that discourse and life, though obviously different, can clearly be compared to each other. Indeed, a key theme of the philosophical life (as I understand it) is how well that life

measures up to the discourse. Does the philosopher just talk the talk of his philosophical ideas (say, the soul's immortality or its purification through sexual abstinence); or does he also walk the walk, as Socrates and Augustine do in cheerfully welcoming death or bravely conquering concupiscence. Both a philosopher's life and her philosophical discourse can display truth, order, or beauty; and we compare life and discourse in terms of those properties. Plato's *Symposium* celebrates both speeches and lives as *καλόν*, beautiful or fine (Plato 1997b). I therefore cannot accept Hadot's reasoning that philosophical life and discourse "are completely heterogeneous" simply because "an essential part" of the former—"the existential choice of a certain way of life, the experience of certain inner states and dispositions—wholly escapes expression by philosophical discourse" (Hadot 2002, 173–74). I too have frequently claimed (in earlier books as well as the present one) that language cannot fully capture crucial aspects of life because there is an irreducible, ineffable quality in lived experience. But that does not mean these more-than-discursive elements "wholly escape" philosophy's arts of writing (broadly construed to include its literary genres). Such writing can so powerfully suggest ineffable quality as to evoke its experience. Recall William James's phenomenological descriptions of the experience of thinking in *The Principles of Psychology* (James 1983, 286–92). Indeed, part of the persuasive efficacy of philosophical discourse is its power to communicate perceptions and induce affect that cannot be fully captured in words.<sup>1</sup> The difference between Hadot's "wholly escape" and my "not fully capture" may be merely a difference between the styles of French and Anglo-American philosophical discourse. But differences of expressive style are significant for life as well as discourse. Indeed, the pluralism of philosophy's writing styles is an important theme in my book, and it should also be evident in this symposium.

Kramer's bravely personal, dialogical essay reflects his discomfort at a lack of unity or contradiction between his philosophical discourse and his actual life. This dissatisfaction is particularly evident when he compares his life to those of friends who, in his eyes, have better mastered their art of living. Perhaps this personal feeling of dissonance makes him take Hadot's incommensurability thesis as entirely convincing and demanding of remedy. Building on J. R. R. Tolkien, Kramer suggests the notion of a "sub-creation" as a middle term that somehow harmonizes or bridges the differences and gaps between the ideality of philosophical discourse and the messy reality of life. Intriguing but frustratingly vague for Kramer's closest dialogical partner in his essay, sub-creation seems to be an imaginative realm produced by discourse that is inspired by real life and that is somehow real through having real effects. He cites my project with the Man in Gold, which he knows through the graphic novella *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* (Shusterman 2016), as his "most direct inspiration for approaching PWL [philosophy as a way of life] as sub-creation." Kramer rightly notes that "the Man in Gold is difficult to characterize," and the project in which this "man" appears defies clear classification. It is performance art without the usual contexts, protocols, and limits of art venues, so in that sense it is real life as much as art. It is equally experiential philosophical research in the philosophical life and in the limits of self-cultivation and selfhood. The Man in Gold inhabits my soma, but he has a character and a movement style different from my own. Unlike me he does not speak but expresses himself only through action and gesture. His existence is beyond my control; it requires interaction with the artist Yann Toma, who owns the glistening costume that defines the Man in Gold and that originally belonged to Yann's father, a famous dancer in the Paris Opera Ballet. Yann also produces the images from the performances, so that the Man in Gold is also a character in a series of short films and in the photographic illustrations that transform my narrative about his real performance capers and his imaginary world into a graphic novella.

<sup>1</sup>This communicative power, I argue, is also essential to forms of persuasion in literature and literary criticism. See the accounts of perceptualist reasoning in Shusterman 2002a.

His images have appeared in art shows and even in philosophical texts because his complex character and history have spurred interesting insights on subjects that range from photography, aesthetic experience, and creativity to ethics, philosophy of mind, and social theory. He has certainly transformed my sense of self. Given all this, we could agree with Kramer that the Man in Gold is both a fiction and a created reality with real effects in the world, modest though they may be.

Why does the Man in Gold inspire Kramer's approach to the philosophical life in his essay? One reason, I believe, is this character's vulnerability. Kramer repeatedly suggests his disappointment that his own life does not live up to the standards he affirms in his philosophical discourse. The Western philosophical tradition (including philosophy as a way of life) has been dominantly shaped by the founding heroic figure of Socrates (bravely invincible, even in death), and it remains steeped in heroic ideals. Philosophy's commitment to truth, especially as Socrates embodied it through the notion of *parrhesia*—of speaking truth to power by bravely challenging established doxa and presumed cognitive authority—functions as one such bold ideal; the creation of a convincing new philosophical system, the invention of a new philosophical vocabulary, and the realization of a bold new version of the philosophical life are similar heroic achievements. The Man in Gold is rather more of a vulnerable antihero. Defined as the philosopher without words who expresses himself only through gesture, he could never produce a work of discursive genius. Nor can he constitute or create a masterpiece of visual art, though he is deeply in love with beauty. And rather than boldly confronting the angry reactions to his visible otherness, he typically takes flight in search of tranquillity and communities that offer acceptance and love. In seeking beauty (like the philosopher in Plato's *Symposium*), he need not fear his quest will not measure up to his philosophical discourse, for he has none.

Can one lead a philosophical life without an explicit philosophical discourse? By treating philosophy as a gradable “range concept,” I argue in *Practicing Philosophy* that one can live philosophically without engaging in discursive theory, but that philosophical discourse makes one more of a philosopher than one who merely practices philosophy as a way of life (Shusterman 1997, 61–64). What constitutes genuine philosophical discourse is another thorny and contested question that *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* explores. It too, I believe, is a gradable notion having uncontested paradigm examples in the center of the range but fuzzy boundaries at the edges, where we find many peripheral, borderline cases that might be classified instead as merely literature, religious discourse, homily, political advocacy, or “inspirational” self-help handbooks rather than philosophy.

### 3 | HEROES, WARS, WRITING STYLES, AND TECHNOLOGIES

The spirit of philosophical heroism runs deep in Randall Auxier's stirring essay. I deeply appreciate that spirit and cherish my philosophical heroes. But lately, in examining my own philosophical life, I have grown somewhat wary of the defiant heroic pose as a gesture of pride that inhibits self-criticism and deters learning from others who think differently. I read Auxier as potently puncturing the smug pose of superiority that renders so much of academic philosophy unattractive and unwelcoming. If academic philosophy uses bad writing to conceal its other weaknesses, these go beyond the lack of significant creative insight and cultural impact but also include more painful flaws of implicit racial, ethnic, and gender bias. Auxier's challenging of the temporal primacy and cognitive superiority of Greek thought over those of non-Western ancient cultures forms part of his useful critique of philosophy in its dominant academic mode. I value his advocating for more attractive, less conventional ways of doing philosophy, and am grateful for his appreciation and defense of my style. But I should clarify some issues regarding my career and attitudes with respect to academic philosophy.

While critiquing its limits, I have always been grateful for the benefits academic philosophy offered me as a student and scholar, while also appreciating its unrealized potential. It was a privilege to chair Temple University's Department of Philosophy when it was the strongest department in aesthetics in the world. I left that department to accept an endowed interdisciplinary chair in the humanities because I realized that my philosophical work (particularly in somaesthetics) would benefit from a position free from philosophy's current disciplinary limits. If Ralph Waldo Emerson speculated that he left the ministry to become a better minister (Emerson 2010, 193), then I could say I left the philosophy department to become a better philosopher. I should also avert the impression that mainstream philosophy punished me for the quality of my writing. It was not my literary style that offended many mainstream thinkers or made them think my work irrelevant to real philosophy. It was rather my choice of topics: rap in the late '80s and early '90s (when hip hop still had an almost criminal aura), then somaesthetics and eroticism in more recent decades.

Auxier is right that the issue of good writing is important and that much contemporary philosophical writing is deplorable. But I have learned that some of the clumsiness and obscurity we find in German and French authors comes from imperfect translations; and some of those imperfections are inevitable because of terms and connotations that defy exact English translation (think of the German *Körper* and *Leib*). Other deficiencies derive from differences in grammatical structure or different stylistic traditions of writing philosophy. I wish contemporary philosophers would read and write in more languages than English, since such linguistic supplement gives us more philosophical vocabularies and tools. I have sometimes discovered weaknesses and ambiguities in my own work from examining it in French and German translations. If I urge a tolerant pluralism that embraces different styles of good philosophical writing, it is not because I am “nice” but because a variety of writing styles is better for serving a variety of philosophical purposes and moods, just as the different modes of orality and written literature each have their advantages. I have also learned that my inability to stomach certain philosophical styles was a product of my own literary prejudices. As a young analytic philosopher, I regarded Dewey and Foucault as repellingly foggy writers with little to teach me, but now I esteem their work. Indeed, I admire Foucault as an excellent writer whose French prose is compellingly clear, though highlighted by occasional cryptic moments that have their own insightfully rewarding poetic power. Although celebrated as a writer as well as a philosopher, Foucault rejects both identities as pretentious, and instead describes himself as an *artificier*, a French word that resists exact English translation but amounts to something like an explosives expert, someone who, as Foucault explains it, “makes something ultimately in the service of a siege, a war, a destruction” (Foucault 2004, 92).

Foucault links his combative rhetoric to the Nietzschean philosophical view that “truth should be understood in terms of war” (Foucault 2004, 135). We should recall Nietzsche's belligerent instructions “to philosophize with a hammer” (Nietzsche 2005) in crushing conventional beliefs and to “wage wars for the sake of ideas and their consequences” (Nietzsche 1974, 228). Auxier recognizes that my philosophical style is different (his terms are “nicer” and “safer”), and he is right. Perhaps it is less belligerent because as an officer in the Israeli Defense Force I witnessed war's unacceptable human costs and ultimate political futility. When the Italian philosopher Salvatore Tedesco explicitly contrasted my philosophical style to Nietzsche's by describing it as “acupuncture rather than hammering” (Tedesco 2013, 5), he was also adroitly suggesting the important East Asian influences on my theory and practice of philosophical life. Those rich philosophical traditions (and the beautiful, spiritual cultures in which they are embedded) helped inspire my work in somaesthetics by countering the anti-somatic bias of Western philosophy's dominant Plato-Descartes heritage.

Of course, Western thought has its important materialist thinkers—remember moderns like Diderot and Marx or ancients like Epicurus. But they have been marginalized compared to philosophers of the idealist tradition that pervades even contemporary neopragmatism.



Richard Rorty's angry attack on somaesthetics derives from his textualist view that only words matter for philosophy, including aesthetics (see Rorty 2001, 153–57). If a Hellenistic Christian gospel claimed the Word as the beginning, then for Rorty (and a host of narrowly linguistic minds) words are both the beginning and the end-all for philosophy, and also its exclusive means. A philosopher-musician like Auxier knows differently.

Auxier is superb in discussing the multisensory dimensions of writing, which range from the kinesthetic feelings of cursive penmanship to the imagery of the text, and he is equally compelling in his argument for the increased importance of sensory imagery over mere conceptual discourse in contemporary experience, especially for our younger generations. Auxier's rhetorical strategy here of directly addressing younger readers (rather than established academics) is brilliantly effective in underlining how the technologies of writing and other communicational forms continue to change over time, and how they have increased so rapidly in recent decades that there is a cognitive disconnect between the reading experience of the young and their elders. The final pages of *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* note some of those technological changes in concluding a chapter that explores the techniques and pictorial power of classical Chinese calligraphic writing and its use in self-knowledge and self-cultivation. If technology shapes our forms of writing, which in turn shape our philosophical efforts of self-knowledge and self-cultivation, then technologies of writing and other media of communicative expression have a crucial impact on philosophy. Affirming the potency of visual images, Auxier recommends the multisensory textual form of graphic novels. He does not need to mention *The Adventures of Man in Gold*, my unexpected excursion into graphic narrative and performative gesture, inspired by the ancient Chinese notion of the silent expressivity of gesture, whose paradoxical Daoist dictum of Laozi the book invokes: "One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know" (Lau 1981, 63; Shusterman 2016, 18).

Auxier concludes his richly wide-ranging text by comparing my philosophy not to Laozi but to an ancient philosopher of the Middle East who is closer to Western culture and powerfully formative of its development since Roman times, and who is also nearer to me in terms of ethnic heritage. Like Marx and Adorno, Arendt and Benjamin, Marcuse and Maimonides, he was a wandering Jew who suffered, in different ways, from antisemitism.<sup>2</sup> Auxier describes this Yeshua bar Yosef as following the traditional Hebrew insistence on the embodiment of the spiritual (which we can find in the rites of circumcision, ritual washing, and dietary laws) but also preaching a new philosophy of love to supplement Old Testament law. Pointing to this insistence on our carnal existence, its vulnerable mortality, and the consequent need for compassion and love, Auxier remarks that I say the same thing as Rabbi Yeshua but "in [my] own, much safer way." Having seen how Chinese theorists aligned my theories of pragmatism and somaesthetics with Marx's thought, I should not be shocked to have my theories compared to the views of Yeshua (aka Jesus).<sup>3</sup> All these philosophies are directed at liberation, and at least two of them (Yeshua's and mine) are grounded in the productive, healing, transformative power of love.

Along with the themes of love and liberation, embodiment and spirit, my approach advocates the values of art and beauty. I therefore side with Foucault in preferring an aesthetic model of the philosophical life to Hadot's focus on the therapeutic model of spiritual health (Shusterman 1997, chap. 1; Shusterman forthcoming). Although these models are closely connected (as health and beauty are), I prefer the aesthetic model because it is broader (in including the body rather than merely spiritual health) and more positive (in creating beauty rather

<sup>2</sup>For my formative experience of antisemitism, see Shusterman 2002b.

<sup>3</sup>See Zhang 2018 for a comparison of somaesthetics and Marxism.

than merely providing therapy for spiritual ills). It folds therapeutic and liberational value into the pursuit of a life of beauty, rich in spirit, art, and love and compassion for others. That is the message that Charles Johnson finds in my book. His insightful analysis and splendid elaboration of this message, masterfully delivered by a philosopher who is also a prize-winning novelist and distinguished cartoonist, deserves careful attention.

## 4 | ART, SPIRITUALITY, AND LIBERATION

Johnson reads past the title of *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* to reveal its motivating core: “[I]t is, first and foremost, an exploration of art and spirituality.” He understands this vision of philosophy as an embodied art of living, enriched by different artistic genres and combining respect for our vulnerable, mortal somatic existence with a keen awareness of the spiritual dimensions of such finitude and an irrepressible desire to realize that spiritual potential by liberating ourselves from the bondage of distracting worries so we can better focus on the beautiful, the ethical, and the spiritually uplifting while also helping others toward such emancipatory progress. Through this text of a philosophical colleague I have never met, I find a spiritual brother. In a world wracked by war and oppression, such happy discoveries give encouraging hope. Part of the felt spiritual affinity may be rooted in sharing the transformative experiences of Soto Zen training, but I suspect another root involves issues of identity resulting from childhood in an America that was far more oppressively white and Christian than it remains today. Such painfully familiar issues are much discussed, so I will not explore them here; Buddhism will get more attention.

Johnson's opening epigraph from Ralph Ellison immediately highlights the connection between the askeis of struggling to express the seemingly inexpressible and the project of self-critical self-creation that is central to both the philosophical and the artistic life. Work on the text is work on oneself. Ellison's claim “The artifact is a completion of personality” suggests the radical conclusion that the true aim of art is fullness of personhood, not the making of admired objects or impressive performances that reward the artist with wealth or fame. Philosophy as an art of living has the same ultimate goal of enlarged and enlightened personhood as it unfolds in life with others. *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* shows how the poet-calligrapher-painters of the Chinese literati tradition embraced this idea of art as a form of praxis, a means to advance one's self-cultivation in the ethical art of living. But it is widely shared in East Asian cultures and fundamental to their concept of art. What is important is not the objects or performances the artist produces but the way the artistic process refines and transforms the artist and her spiritual self-understanding so that she can become a more complete and enlightened person.

Consider the remarks of Japanese Noh theater's preeminent author and theorist, the medieval master Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443). “The essentials of our art lie in the spirit. They represent a true enlightenment through art. Thus ... if an actor really wants to become a master, he cannot simply depend on his skill in dance and gesture [which are mere ‘external skills’]. Rather, mastery seems to depend on the actor's own state of self-understanding” (Zeami 1984, 90). One aspect of genuine self-understanding is recognizing the idea of no-self as the lack of fully autonomous, independent selfhood. Zeami portrays this in terms of the artist's dependence on wider enviroing natural forces, citing a haiku that makes this point regarding nature's own beautiful creations:

Break open the cherry tree  
And look at it:  
There are no flowers,

For they themselves have bloomed  
In the spring sky. (Zeami 1984, 119)

The blossoms do not emerge from the autonomous inner power of the tree; they emerge through its interaction with the encompassing natural energies and surrounding frame (such as the spring sky) in which the tree can unfold its beauty, since (in Zeami's words) "the world of nature is the vessel that gives birth to all things" (Zeami 1984, 119). This includes us humans too. Our greatest artists and inventors are but vessels for creation through powers (including language) that exceed the individual's scope, authority, and control. Genius, as even individualists like Emerson and Nietzsche insisted, is always a more-than-personal force "which overawes" the artist who displays it and is "not subject to his control" (Emerson 1972, 70; Shusterman 2000).

Zeami, like Johnson, is a Soto Zen Buddhist, and his theories are deeply influenced by Dogen, as he was tutored by a distinguished fifteenth-century Soto priest and commentator on Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, named Taiyo Bonsei.<sup>4</sup> We can clearly see how Zeami's discussion of the actor's self-cultivation in the way (or *dō*) of Noh, with its aim of (no-self) vessel service and connection to the greater world of nature and spirit, is an artistic corollary of Johnson's Dogen quote. "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between oneself and others" (Eihei Dogen 2019).

The concept of possession is one familiar way of describing experiences of self-forgetting, self-effacing subjugation to greater forces beyond the individual. Johnson alludes to it in citing his mentor John Gardner. "True artists are possessed. ... They are messianic messengers," rather than "commonly sane." For this very same factor of transformative possession, Plato condemns the poets and performing artists (Plato 1997b). That the alien possessing forces are divine muses mitigates the evil but does not, for Greek machismo, erase the shame of losing one's self-control and mastery by being penetrated by another, stronger spiritual force (Shusterman 2019). That this shame relates to Greek practices of pederasty and Athenian sexism helps explain Plato's denunciation of possession yet makes it even more unacceptable and unsavory (Shusterman 2021). But is not possession by an external force or spirit the very opposite of liberation? Does it not block us from what Johnson affirms as "the goal of the Buddhist tradition, ... our attainment of freedom, even from Buddhism itself?"

Not at all! Because of the porous, changing nature of the self and its fluid boundaries, possession can lead us to a more expansive self-consciousness, free from the worries and constraints of our earlier selves. As Johnson puts it, "The very act of literary creation can lead to a liberation *from* the illusory small, egoistic, limited self." Plato similarly defined love as a divine madness through possession by the desire for beauty (see Plato 1997c). The familiar stereotype of love as bondage is a clear consequence, but one worth putting in question. Can we not see how the lover's passionate, selfless focus on the beloved could inspire a thrilling feeling of liberation from one's prior sense of self and its concerns? True love, like genuine religious experience, offers an experiential affirmation of nondualism, a feeling that beneath the apparent divisions between the different things in our world there are continuities and unities rather than absolute gaps. This underlying nondualism (or pragmatist synechism) motivates my book's discussion of the philosophy/literature contrast as well as my other challenges to presumed dichotomies (body/mind, theory/practice, art/life) that I see rather as distinctions within a continuum.

<sup>4</sup>I thank the Dogen scholar Steven Heine for providing me this information about Zeami and Taiyo Bonsei.

*Philosophy and the Art of Writing* examines Bataille's and Blanchot's versions of this underlying, distinction-dissolving nondualism, which build on Nietzschean aesthetics of possession. Nietzsche explains his nondualist vision as possession by a Dionysian intoxication whose frenzy breaks through conventional barriers that separate individuals to reveal the primordial unity of things, *das Ur-Eine*. Such Dionysian experiences, he cheerfully imagines, “forge a bond between human beings [and] reconcile human beings and nature ... in the same Bacchic choruses ... of ‘universal harmony’”: “Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community.... His gestures speak of his enchantment.... [H]e feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: all nature's artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity” (Nietzsche 1999, 18).

In Bataille and Blanchot, traumatized witnesses of two world wars, Nazi occupation, and genocide, the frenzied Dionysian destruction of individual barriers takes a darkly violent turn. Individuality is overcome not by the harmonious joy of singing and dancing but instead by the fury of death or brutal sexual aggression that annihilates the individual's boundaries and even her life, and thus “disrupts the creature's discontinuity” with the rest of existence. Here the blending and fusion of separate objects depends on and reveals the “violent impulses at the heart of things” (Bataille 2012, 22, 24).

Neither divinely triumphant like Nietzsche's Dionysian possession nor deadly violent like Bataille's eroticism, my work with the Man in Gold has taught me the liberational dimension of possession by transcending the limits of my previous ways of thinking and doing philosophy, while also radically revising my sense of self toward greater freedom and openness. With respect to theory, it transformed my philosophical views on aesthetic experience, photography, and performance, while pushing me further toward nondualist thinking by brashly putting in question the presumably clear borders between art and life, between artist and layman, between rational performer and lunatic (Shusterman 2012; 2016; 2019). The Man in Gold inhabits an experiential space that those binaries share, in which they overlap and merge, despite their allegedly strict division. He also subverts the dualist divide between philosophy and art. Are his activities examples of performance art by a philosopher, or are they rather philosophical research in fields of aesthetic theory and philosophy as a way of life but performed through an artistic medium?<sup>5</sup>

On the personal, ethical level, possession by the Man in Gold has been liberating by exploding the constraints of comportment, appearance, and thought that defined my established persona as a tenured, reputable, elderly academic philosopher and a dutiful father, grandfather, and former army officer. Because the Man in Gold's performances are unscheduled, unscripted, and improvisational events that involve spontaneously channeling the energies and deploying the objects and affordances in the open spaces where he appears, working with him provides instruction in transcending one's ordinary self-consciousness to become a useful vessel of the enviroing world. Because that spontaneity of channeled energy and action requires intense concentration on the energies and options of the moment, the performances likewise offer training in what my Zen master, Roshi Inoue Kido, insistently preached as the “now-consciousness” crucial to liberation from regrets of the past and worries of the future. In 2003, at his Shorinkutzu Dojo in the village of Tadanoumi, Roshi first taught it to me through a riddle: “How many steps do you take from your sleeping quarters to the Zendo?” I made a few hopeless guesses from mental calculation, which he greeted with a kind but mocking smile. The answer was simply: one. The message was to concentrate on only one step at a time, the present one; to focus on the now, *ima* 今.

<sup>5</sup>The Man in Gold has received a significant variety of philosophical interpretations, including six chapters in the recent book about somaesthetics edited by J. J. Abrams (2022) and numerous review essays in philosophy and aesthetics journals, available at <https://www.fau.edu/artsandletters/humanitieschair/books/man-in-gold/man-in-gold-reviews/>

Roshi had not known of my work with the Man in Gold when I later visited him in May 2018, during a brief lecture tour in Japan. But he quickly perceived a change in me, and after about half an hour of conversation, while we were sipping tea, he remarked: “You have made real progress, but you still have not freed yourself from philosophy.” I did not dare challenge him but took out my cell phone and showed him some photos of the Man in Gold, images that had convinced countless colleagues of my having abandoned the philosophical field. Roshi stared, poker-faced, at those pictures, then turned to me with strangely smiling eyes as he uttered in sagely solemn tones, “There are different ways to the Way of enlightenment, but many false paths.” I am still uncertain of what exactly he meant and what he thought of the Man in Gold. But part of his teaching was to create such cognitive puzzlement in order to goad you out of your comfort zone of self-complacency and spur you to seek a deeper connection and sympathy with the wider spiritual and material energies that animate our selves and our world. He was certainly right that I have not freed myself from philosophy. This symposium proves it.

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