

**Mad Desire and Feverish Melancholy¹: reflections on the
psychodynamics of writing and presenting**

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Abstract

This paper builds on investigations, outlined in previous papers, into essay anxiety amongst late adolescent 'A' level students (Barwick 1995, 2000), where the author suggested that a student's experience of uncontained aggression - in particular sexualised aggression – appears to be a strong contributory factor in essay writing anxiety. In this paper, examples of essay anxiety are broadened to include students at primary, secondary, undergraduate and post-graduate levels. Further, drawing upon contemporary post-Kleinian thinking regarding the oedipal situation, the author suggests that many of the problems students encounter in their efforts to write, may be prompted by unresolved oedipal issues. Conflicts arising from such issues may produce writing blocks or other neurotic essay symptoms. The author includes for consideration his own anxiety in preparing to present a paper at a conference. Some attention is also given to ways of alleviating essay anxiety, with particular reference to the use of transitional space.

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Introduction

When approached to present a talk recently, the special attention the approach implied was a source of great pleasure to me. That night, I had a dream.

I was preparing to go out for the evening – a significant party or social occasion. My partner and some friends were downstairs. I was upstairs in the bathroom, shaving, trimming my beard. I wanted to make sure the cut was sharp, clean. In my eagerness, somehow I managed to shave off the left half of my beard, leaving the white flesh of that side of my face entirely exposed. I realised then that I had to go out and ‘meet the public’. I awoke with feelings of intense anxiety, verging on panic, and the fear of terrible humiliation and shame.

This dream was the beginning of a journey - the journey of writing and presenting what is, in large part, this very paper. It was also, very nearly, the end. I was seized by anxiety. What had I agreed to? How could I have possibly agreed to it? I had nothing of value to say; knew nothing; was nothing. My partner gently reminded me of a number of ‘realities’: for fifteen years I had been a teacher, struggling every day with students’ essay anxieties; for over ten I had worked in a therapeutic capacity in educational settings; I had written and published material on essay anxiety; run workshops on writing and on writing for publication; I was a capable communicator, a reasonably experienced writer, and had, in my capacity as an editor, had countless exchanges with anxious authors. Yet, despite the seeming solidity of these facts, they felt to me no more than ‘fragments ... shored against my ruin’ (T. S. Eliot 1922).

And so, to mutilate T S Eliot still further, in my beginning was, very nearly, my end. I decided, then, that I would ring the conference organiser and, in a calm and rational manner, explain that I felt that what I had to say on essay anxiety I had said already, that my experience, working as I now did at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, was more suited to speaking about performance than essay anxiety and that, although very pleased to have been considered, thought it best that I should withdraw.

Such withdrawal would have brought with it, for myself at least, immediate relief. It would also have brought loss. The loss would of course been felt, at least for a time, by the conference team as, bearing the frustration, they would have had to seek a replacement speaker. Yet the loss would also have been mine. It

would have been a lost opportunity in which to do many things: to develop a degree of authority, to demonstrate a degree of potency, but above all, to share and to create.

Such a loss and the willingness, even desire, to bear that loss rather than press on, would, I believe, have been predicated upon the difficulty in bearing other losses, both prior and potential - in particular, a loss of face. This phrase, so often casually employed, speaks much. It speaks, for example, of a loss of courage and determination - an inability to 'face up to' or 'face down' what lies ahead. It speaks of humiliation, of having one's face rubbed in it, where 'it' is the shitty reality - often as much our own as others' making - that inevitably ('let's face it') bruises our narcissistic dreams. It speaks also of the feared loss of self, both the protective 'false self' - as in 'put on a face' - and, beneath what is put on, the exposed 'true self': the face which, for most of us, is that aspect of our bodies which we believe most nearly expresses the core of who we are. There is much, then, at stake in a 'loss of face'.

In this brief preamble I am aware already of throwing rather a lot into the case I am trying to make - or should I say pack - about the anxieties of essay writing and presentation. Indeed, I am reminded of a passage from Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* :

When he wrote, he slipped into the page as if it were water, and tumbled on. The writer was a tumbler (Would he remember that?) If not, then a tinker, carrying a hundred pots and pans and bits of linoleum and wires and falconer's hood and pencils and ... you carried them around for years and gradually fit them into a small, modest book. The art of packing. (Ondaatje 2000)

I should now like to unpack some of the pots and pans I've been implicitly tumbling for the last few pages, and have indeed be tumbling for the last good few years.

A very Kleinian pot

The defence I nearly chose or, more accurately, felt impelled to chose, against this feared 'loss of face' - that is, of identity, of all that I am, would like to, and feel that I should, be - was 'withdrawal'. Carrying as it does both military and sexual connotations, this word betrays a myriad fears and phantasies. In both semantic fields, it denotes a *pre*-caution, the strategic intention of which is to prevent full-frontal engagement. To engage, it is feared, is to instigate a catastrophic birth-cum-slaughter.

The link between creativity and aggression and the losses that need to be borne in the struggle to develop and give birth to something new, are central to Kleinian thought and it was in the guise of a Kleinian t(h)inker that I explored some of what I thought to be the reasons for essay anxiety some years ago (Barwick 1995, 2000).

My explorations took as their premise an analogy: that the texts from which students read prior to producing their own texts/essays could be likened to the mother. The transition from consumer to producer was only fully possible, I suggested, if the student is able to bear the loss of the 'mother text', or more accurately, bear its transformation, since the text produced has to be born out of the digested parts of the text (or texts) consumed. Tolerance of the transformation and the loss it implies is complicated by the aggressive nature of the feeding and digestion processes. Students need to 'get their teeth' into a text. They must 'enter into it', 'pull it to pieces', make it their own. Such creative use of aggression may bring succour of personalised knowledge, yet phantasies arising from unconscious recognition of aggression's destructive nature may also bring anxieties of guilt (Joseph 1978; Klein 1935).

I went on to suggest that how aggression is experienced depends upon the experience of containment (Bion 1962); my hypothesis being that many students, gripped by the intellectual paralysis resulting from essay anxiety, were haunted by phantasies arising from uncontained feelings of aggression.

To add to the infantile phantasies stirred up by the prospect and act of essay-writing, I suggested adolescent-oriented phantasies also played their part, since, as the body acquires adult potency, curiosity and its ally, independent, creative, original thought are not only aggressive but sexualised. Indeed, the Hebrew word for knowledge – *da'at* – is rooted in sex. Thus, phantasies about 'entering', 'devouring', 'knowing' the text and then conceiving an essay may, at an unconscious level, give rise to disturbing phantasies about parental jealousy, envy and retribution. This, after all, is how it was for the first adolescents. Adam and Eve, feeding from the Tree of Knowledge – committing thereby both original thought and sin – first became excited, then fearful, then ashamed. Fearful, they hid from the Father. To some degree, of course, the fear was worse than the reality. Although innocent dependence *was* lost, Adam and Eve were neither destroyed nor entirely abandoned. They were, however, humbled, made mortal and exiled from the parental home.

The Oedipal Pot

This story of the Fall reminds me of another tale of coupling and collapse:

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven: and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand another's speech.

So the lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of the earth: and they let off to build the city.

(Genesis 11: 4-8)

In both the Eden and the Tower of Babel stories, people 'get it together' and are punished for doing so.

These tales could be read as warnings against omnipotence. The all-knowing Father, firmly but wisely, puts his children in their place. Alternatively, they could be the acts of a 'jealous (indeed envious) God', one who, enraged by the threat of displacement, divides the over-excitables and, by dint respectively of mortal blow and ruined tower, cuts them down to an appropriately diminutive size.

It is often difficult to assess whether the actions and/or words of a 'third', which have the effect of frustrating our possession of the good object, are prompted by destructive envy or good intent. Indeed, even when we do trust the good intent, the frustration may be so great, the blow to our dream so wounding, we cannot bear it, or them. (The fate of the messenger who bears bad tidings is well known).

Hannah Segal (1989) suggests that it is the frustration at the breast that causes the infant to split off the bad aspects and with them create a prototype third. This third grows in complexity as the containers available for such projections become more plentiful: first part objects - bad breast, penis – then whole objects partially construed - father, mother – and finally, any object, animate or inanimate, that fits the bill: the critic, the essay assessor, the essay itself. An adequate experience of containment helps to modify such splitting and projection; an inadequate experience does not. In this case, the 'third', whatever the guise, is ever more

likely to be perceived as threat. Unable to bear the frustration with which its presence is associated, we continually seek to ban it – to exclude it from our company. Such exiles, of course, bear both real and projected grudges and are the perfect vehicles of both phantasised and real retribution.

Meanwhile, enamoured of our own company and temporarily swollen by our own omnipotent, masturbatory phantasies, either we continue to build our towers, blind to imminent danger, or, trembling with persecutory guilt, try all manner of shifty convolutions to hide our shame.

There is, of course, in the end, nowhere to hide. This is because every creative act of coupling, by its very nature, both excludes and produces a third, and this third, whether cast in the role of god or terrorist, sees all, since it lives within us as well as without. Thus, while it is in coupling that we seek succour, at some point we must face a fact well known to proverbial wisdom, that things happen in threes.

Oedipal illusions at work in essay anxiety

Sigmund Freud, in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), links sanity (essentially the individual's capacity to stay in touch with reality) to the capacity to give up the idea of a permanent possession of the loved object. Melanie Klein develops this notion (1935, 1940) noting that from the moment of weaning, we are called upon to relinquish possession of aspects of the external world, over which we have limited or no control. Out of such relinquishment, out of the frustration of our deepest desire and expectations, we may, if our envy is not too great, learn to install what is lost in the external world, in our internal, psychic one.

The oedipal situation is inextricably bound up in the issue of loss since, when our desired, dreamt of object is absent (and thus lost to us), there is an important sense in which it may be understood to be elsewhere - that is, with a third. This is never easy to acknowledge and certainly, at some level, is experienced as a profound blow to our narcissism. Yet, if we are to mature – that is, to develop in a real way our relationship with the world, which includes our relationships with our loved objects - then we must be willing to witness and able to tolerate the loved object's possession by another. Arguing along these lines, Ronald Britton (1985) proposes that the question at the core of a healthy negotiation of the oedipal situation is, 'will our love survive knowledge?' (p. 45), particularly our growing awareness of the separateness of our love objects and their relationships with others which exclude us? If our doubts are greater than our faith in this respect,

we are likely to take refuge in 'the cultivation of illusions', amongst which the oedipal illusion in which the phantasy of remaining the secret chosen one, is often favoured.

Difficulties in beginning: the 'secret' couple

For some students, I suggest, the essay itself represents the unwanted third, from which an internal coupling of student and 'mother-text', or the imagined produce of that coupling, is kept secret. This is not surprising since the form of the academic essay itself has a natural valency for negative projections. Characteristically involving an accepted code of terminology appropriate to its subject orientation, a tightly organised argument, a series of apt exempla, framed by opening and concluding generalities (all of which are of course to be duly scrutinised by yet another third, the reader-cum-hard-marker), its demands are great.

Kevin frequently found he could do little more than begin essays. They often petered out after a couple of paragraphs. He described this experience as if 'all the life goes out it' – it being the ideas with which he began each essay venture. He described the essay form as 'insensitive', 'ungiving' and the organization and planning the essay required as 'uncreative'. 'To be honest', he added, 'I don't want to give my feelings up to it. They'd get lost.'

Kevin's attitude to the essay can be seen in terms of the devouring container. The written word itself had this characteristic for him. Yet I think it is useful to think about his essay anxiety in terms of the intolerable third. From this perspective, he cannot bear to share the good object he possesses with another, for fear that that 'other' will rob him of all potency. His defence is to hide.

One further extended example I would like to give which captures, I think, the nature of some of the oedipal anxieties which can so confound a student's efforts to begin writing. It's a vignette about Harry.

Harry was a young would-be-writer of eleven. Although intelligent and eager to write, he appeared almost totally unable to maintain concentration in class. While others worked he would soon start fiddling: with books, with pencils, with anything to hand. This included the belongings of those around him. It was the disruption that this led to that led Harry to Anne, a counsellor-trained, special needs teacher who I was supervising.

The first thing Harry said when he came into Anne's room was, 'So this is what my mum's room looks like!' Harry's mum, who Anne met later to discuss Harry's progress, was a special needs assistant. She was a drawn, tired looking woman, committed to her job, who would not, despite Harry's protests and evident interest, tell him anything about her work on the grounds of 'confidentiality'. She told Anne what an exhausting child Harry was and had always been. Indeed, as a baby he had cried so much that neither she nor her husband got a wink of sleep. Consequently, she had moved out of her own room so as not to disturb her husband. Enquiring about Harry's relationship with his father, Harry's mother said it was 'difficult', confirming Harry's own experience, summed up by the fact that his father, no matter how hard Harry tried, always called him 'stupid'.

Harry worked well with Anne. He caught up with much missed work. Yet despite this, his behaviour in class did not improve.

Anne's room was situated on the upper part of a split level room, the lower, larger part being dedicated to music lessons. These music lessons often took place while Anne worked with individual children. Harry, having already had a number of writing-focused sessions without any musical activities taking place below, was, for the first time, forced to witness just such a 'scene'.

What happened was that while Harry was concentrating at work, Anne left him a while and went over to look at the music class below. A moment later, she became aware of Harry standing next to her. In a tone heavy with contempt he said, 'I feel really sorry for you.' Anne asked why. Harry answered with a question, 'Don't *you* just want to drop something on top of them?' Anne asked if he hated music. 'No' he replied. 'I love music. I just can't stand anyone else *making it*, while I'm not.'

Two morals, I think, can be drawn from this story. The first is, that to write (indeed to engage in any kind of sustained process of creative symbolisation) it is necessary to be able to have faith and take pleasure in the creative act of coupling. To write, writers must engage and couple with their own internal objects and with the essentially external object of the written word. The second moral is, that these capacities – to have faith and be able to take pleasure in the act of coupling – are dependent upon having borne witness to such acts

of coupling. To 'bear' witness is an apt collocation, since what must be tolerated, is a sense of one's own exclusion.

The dynamics of Harry's family suggests an environment unsuited for lessons in this kind of witness training. Here, coupling becomes a source of envy as much as of aspiration, whilst exclusion, far from being tolerated, gives rise to retributive acts. Thus the infant Harry, in claiming his mother, divides his parents, breeding resentment in both. This resentment is played out by a parallel exclusion of Harry by his mother from her work and repeated acts of retribution by a father who appears compelled to castrate any glimmers of creativity in Harry's mind.

Ronald Britton describes the import of such oedipal transactions in the development of the epistemophilic impulse:

The primal family triangle provides the child with two links connecting him separately with each parent and confronts him with the link between them which excludes him ... If the link between the parents perceived in love and hate can be tolerated in the child's mind, it provides him with a prototype for an object relationship of a third kind in which he is a witness and not a participant. A third position then comes into existence from which object relationships can be observed. Given this, we can also envisage *being* observed. This provides us with a capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves whilst being ourselves.

(Britton 1989, p. 87)

Such a capacity is what we hope of patients-cum-clients in therapy – the ability to maintain a therapeutic split constituted of 'observing' and 'experiencing ego' (Sterba 1934) and, through this, to engage with us in a therapeutic alliance. It is also this ability, I believe, that is central in enabling students to write essays.

Oedipal disillusion and the writing alliance

'There are three rules for writing', said Somerset Maugham. 'Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.'

This perfectly encapsulates the curious paradox experienced by the writer, that there is a right way of doing it but that that right way has to be rediscovered each time.

When I was eleven, a new teacher was a little less enigmatic. He asked the class to open the front cover of our exercise books and to write there the three things that were the essential components of all good writing. They were::

1. Some paper
2. A pen
3. Myself

I think that a sense of omnipotence is vital in the act of creation. Without it, nothing begins. Yet the loss of the beloved object – that perfect piece I have in mind – must be borne. And not just once, but again and again and again. To write, says J-B. Pontalis (1993) is both to dream and to mourn:

to be animated by a mad desire to possess things through language, and to experience with each page, sometimes with each word, that this is never it! Hence the feverishness and melancholy, sometimes the one, sometimes the other, that always accompany the act of writing. (p. xviii)

Further, during these fumbled acts of never quite satisfactory coupling, as feeling becomes thought and thought becomes word and word becomes phrase and sentence and paragraph and page, we must be able both to engage fully, to abandon ourselves whole-heartedly, painfully and pleasurably, and yet retain a sense of perspective from which we can bear witness to the loss, tolerate the frustrating exclusion bound up in that loss, and face the gap between what we have and what we desire.

Writing 'under the influence': cause for distraction?

In 'The Anxiety of Influence', the literary critic, Harold Bloom (1973), describes the difficulties a writer faces when he fears that a 'dominant predecessor' has 'already taken total possession of the field' (Britton 1997, p. 18). I first came across Bloom's thesis as an undergraduate when, disappearing under the weight of literary criticism which I felt it incumbent upon me to read before ever venturing an opinion of my own, I told myself that if I did not risk writing 'something that was me', I would not write at all. As I came across Bloom again in preparing this paper - Britton (1997) refers to him in a chapter on 'publication anxiety' (revised and extended in Britton 1998) - I too felt the anxiety of influence. Britton has contributed significantly to my thinking in this paper and, on re-reading some of his work in the process of preparation, it struck me how present his influence is in some of my previous writing on essay anxiety and how much, therefore, I find myself in his debt.. My awareness of such debt is a cause of both anxiety and consolation: consolation in

that, having a good role model to draw on, I do not feel so out on a limb; anxiety because I find myself fearing the humiliation I may receive for seeking, by means fair or foul, to possess knowledge already possessed.

I note with a certain amusement (at least that self-reflective witness within me does) that my mention of my first encounter with Bloom as an undergraduate might be aptly interpreted by Britton as a 'distraction'. My effort to claim authority in the face of a feared diminishing space in which to make my mark, leads me to digress. Britton analyses a number of distractions, distortions and digressions in people's writing as they struggle to negotiate the nature of their oedipal relationships with eminent forebears. These include some interesting asides from Karl Abraham (1924) as at first he challenges, then defers, then challenges again the prevailing paradigm (that is, Freud's) regarding melancholia. Such convolutions are symptomatic of an inner oedipal conflict: the desire to possess the good object and the fear of the excluded third (and his or her allies) who previously possessed it; the desire to express one's debt and the desire to come into one's own. Such a struggle for *authority*, for *authenticity*, is the very stuff that *authorial* individuation is made on.

The delusion that sometimes besets some authors is that either they are Author of All (that is, God) or author of nothing, when truth is, what we may realistically be, is authors of something. As Donald Winnicott remarks, '*it is not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition.*' (1967, p. 117) I think, in a more provocative way, this is what Roland Barthes (1977) alludes to when, challenging the outright possession of texts, he promotes an alternative in the form of 'intertextuality': that inextricable interweaving of mind within mind, text within text, like a communal orchestration in which it is difficult to delineate precisely either an end or a beginning. It is within this intertextuality (one that is charged with oedipal anxieties) that the author needs to negotiate a place they can call their own.

In a group which met without formal agenda but with the sole purpose of reflecting on difficulties experienced in writing publishable papers, three disparate conversations arose. The first centred around how much theory to include; the second on anxieties concerning confidentiality; the third, on how to bring together a mass of research involving detailed interviews with many individuals, in a way that did justice to the individuals, yet allowed the would-be author to establish her own voice.

This third topic, I think, crystallized an important aspect of the other two. 'Gaining knowledge of an object', says Britton, 'engenders in the individual a sense of possessing it' (Britton 1997, p. 16). Thus, in the bid to make public that gain – i.e. publish - these would-be authors were beset by two dominant, inter-related phantasies and their concomitant anxieties: the feared destruction of the good object aggressively devoured and the feared retribution of a third, be it in the form of suing client or derisive reader-cum-editor-cum-peer-review.

Withdrawal revisited: a Winnicottian perspective

Sometimes, the thought of the external third produces such fear in the would-be-writer and stimulates the persecuting internal third so greatly, the writer is forced, for the sake of authenticity and creativity, to cut all ties with the real world. It is as if this oedipal defence of 'turning a blind eye' (Steiner 1985) becomes necessary for creative survival. Such a defensive manoeuvre, however, though often in the short-term successful, can leave much to chance. Further, when reality does at last impinge, it can do so with a vengeance.

Sergei, a professor of composition, was no novice to having his work performed. When he was asked by the conservatoire at which he taught to compose a piece for a centennial celebration, he quickly began writing it. While doing so, he found himself taking enormous compositional risks, including orchestrating on a grand scale. With the piece completed and rehearsals of the various orchestral sections under way, he woke up one night with a panic attack. It suddenly occurred to him that he did not know if the full orchestra (which was to meet for the first time after the weekend) would fit on the stage. He thus spent the whole weekend crawling around the stage with a tape measure, obsessively planning and re-planning the seating permutations.

Sergei's anxiety was caused by the sudden realization – one he had turned a blind eye to until the night of the dream – that amongst the audience would be his colleagues and his students. What was at stake, he said, was his 'authority'. Ironically, faced with the possibility that his grandly orchestrated piece would not fit its receptacle, he was suddenly faced with his worst fear: that he would be ridiculed as an 'amateur' and thus lose his authority.

It might be argued that Sergei delineated a transitional space for himself, in which the necessary illusion of control, without the impingements of reality (the demands of an external third), allowed him to write.

However, the manner in which reality suddenly broke in on him has more a sense of traumatic weaning about it – of an infant, from his mother's breast 'untimely (or perhaps just in the nick of time) ripp'd' – than of transition.

As a teacher, I sometimes encouraged students to create what is more akin, I think, to a transitional writing space to place alongside the academic essay. This often took the form of a personal journal. In this space, the writer could take refuge from the impingements of academic demands. Here is an example of a writer, a postgraduate student in his late twenties, using such a journal:

I am sick. That is where I'll start from. I must give myself a little time for that. Time though is against me ... I have six weeks to finish my dissertation: to write my dissertation, because what I've written I do not own ... So what's the problem?

It can't be what I've not read, not with the stack of books I've piled beside me. It can't be the lack of notes – I've got over two hundred pages of those. What it is, is a lack of me. Where am I amongst all these words which aren't mine?

A day later, he continues:

I need an image, an idea – space. I need a space in which to play around. That isn't easy with the pressures I feel. Pressure of time. Pressures of authority. Space, play – these promote meaning, meaning through ownership, possession. They allow me to take in, digest, re-create. Such space occurs only where there is safety, trust, room for encounter, room to move, trip, stumble, get up again. Authority prevents such trust, disallows such space or the playfulness that takes place within it. Just to consider it [authority] makes me hesitate; it makes me distrust my own uncertain being; it makes me think that every utterance is either simplistic, worthless, or mere indulgence. Somehow I must break free. Change the relationship – refuse authority. More precisely, I must make my own.

The writing in this journal is solipsistic. Yet it is also, increasingly, reflective. In this 'potential space' (Winnicott 1971), the lost good object is first recaptured, then played with until, finally, the writer recaptures the capacity to bear witness to the playing. Once this internal triadic relationship – the object of possession, the playful possessor, the witness to the playful possession – is healthily re-established, more academic language can begin to be tolerated within the mental space constituted by its triangulated frame. After a week, the journal begins to peter out. After a fortnight, it is gone. The transition is made back to the academic essay but now with a sense of ownership (based on an intimate coupling) as well as an appropriate sense of debt.

The temporary withdrawal to the space that the journal represents in this example is not so much a defensive manoeuvre as a tactical one: a chance to re-gather, to re-form before returning to the fray. This is a Winnicottian (1958) view of 'withdrawal': a healthy retreat into a state in which objects are subjectively related to and in which, free from traumatic impingements, a sense of feeling 'real' can be maintained. Further, it is a temporary retreat from 'the conflict between subjectivity and objectivity and its evocation of the Oedipal situation with its inevitable concomitants of anxiety, betrayal, guilt and shame' (Britton 1997, pp. 12-13).

Conclusion (or deadline): the final presentation

The novelist, Maggie Gee, when asked how she knew when a piece was finished, replied: 'When the publisher asks for it.' (Gee 1988). I found myself in something of a similar position as the deadline for presenting the talk upon which this paper is based, drew inexorably closer. A quick word count I did at the end of the first draft revealed a length of over 10,000 words. This confirmed a fact, I'm happy to say, I was already aware of – that such an orchestration was far too big to fit onto its allotted stage. The onus was thus on me to cut *myself* down to size.

Such cuts as the 'dead-line' approaches – that scythe that harbingers the fateful knowledge of all things neither said nor done – though potentially compromising a paper's weightiness, may make, perhaps, for a leaner product and one likely to be that bit more digestible. What is more digestible, of course, is less likely, on the part of the reader-cum-listener, to cause indigestion and, on the part of the writer-cum-speaker, less likely to leave the impression of being full of wind.

This last flatulent metaphor reminds me of one final 'fragment' I would like to proffer. I think it neatly captures a crucial aspect of presentation anxiety by making explicit the link between, on the one hand, potency of mind (and of the written word) and, on the other, both genital and anal exertions. Together, genital and anal exertions offer, I think, useful blueprints for understanding both the excitement and potential shame involved in presentation and performance anxiety. My suggestion is that, as the private (that which, at a primitive level, is experienced as being enshrined in the body) is made public, the presence of a third, if perceived as persecutory, is likely to be experienced as reducing sexual precocity to an act of anal exhibitionism.

And the fragment I spoke of? It takes the form of a vignette:

A postgraduate student, due to present a paper, has an anxiety dream the night before. In the dream, he finds himself lying outstretched in the bath. Standing over him is his wife's best friend, with whom he has, in reality, a flirtatious relationship. He watches her looking down at him with evident pleasure. He too feels excited, aroused. As he bathes in the adoration of her gaze, he becomes aware of voices from below, reminding him that wife, family and some friends are gathered, waiting to go out for the evening. Suddenly, he feels full of wind and, uncontrollably, from between his legs, bubbles start rising. He awakes with an overwhelming sense of shame.

This dream, in a number of ways, bears a striking resemblance to my own which I presented at the beginning of this paper. I hasten to add, however, to save yourself, as reader-cum-witness, embarrassment and to save myself more exposure than is necessary, this particular dream is not mine. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it summarises a number of anxieties regarding writing and presentation that might be aptly, if crudely, captured in the feared accusation, 'You're talking (writing) out of your backside!'

My hope is that this paper has not been experienced as being too full of wind. Further, though the recalcitrant size of its orchestration undoubtedly betrays anxieties as yet unresolved, my hope is that I have managed to contain enough of them, particularly those regarding a third, to welcome you, the reader, as witness to this text and not to elicit the turning of a blind eye. As witness, no doubt you will have your own emotional response to what I have said, some of which, I believe, will have its source in your own

experience of exclusion. And yet, my hope is that I have revealed enough of the pleasures and pains of my own experience of the process of creative coupling for you to wish and be able to take whatever aspects of this paper seem most fruitful and, in so doing, gain due pleasure in celebrating your own acts of inter-textual coupling, here and elsewhere.

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□ I allude here to J-B Pontalis's (1993) description of writing as a process in which the writer is caught in a cycle of dreaming and mourning.

