Editorial

“In Search of Good Form”: The Aesthetic of Contactful Writing

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Write your first draft with your heart. Re-write with your head.

– From the film, Finding Forrester (2000)

When something can be read without effort, great effort has gone into its writing.

– Enrique Jardiel Poncela, Spanish playwright & novelist (1901-52)

Writing is both mask and unveiling. Be obscure clearly.

– E. B. White (1899-1985), author of Elements of Style & Charlotte’s Webb

A critic can only review the book he has read, not the one which the writer wrote.

– Mignon McLaughlin, American journalist & author (1913-83)

The inspiration for the title of this editorial, written for the third Festschrift issue of Gestalt Review celebrating the power of Gestalt writing as a tribute to

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Sonia March Nevis and the late Edwin C. Nevis, comes from Joseph C. Zinker’s (1994/1998) book by the same title. If the subtitle specifies *Gestalt Therapy with Couples and Families*, this editorial’s secondary title refers broadly to what Gordon Wheeler, in the Foreword, credits E. H. Gombrich with having achieved: “[Gombrich] based a lifetime of art criticism and aesthetic theory on the idea that certain visual forms, certain formal creations, are inherently more satisfying, more aesthetically pleasing than others – and that these ‘process’ distinctions will hold across differences in medium, content, even culture” (p. xiv). The subtitle refers equally to Zinker’s (1994/1998) own assertion:

The concept of good form is based on the smooth flow of gestalten structuring and destructuring through the process of awareness, energy mobilization, action, contact at the interpersonal boundary, closure (new learning), and withdrawal (reestablishment of boundary separation). (p. 27)

And Zinker continues:

Gestalt therapy envisions “pathology” as interruptions in a natural process that lead to repeated, often brave, efforts to solve a problem. Pathology is conceptualized as an interruption of process – a “stuckness” – which in turn only partially succeeds in solving the problem. (p. 27)

Zinker is, of course, speaking about the aesthetic of the “good form” of human relations which, he says, “is very much like comparing the merits of one painting to another; here we are not talking about criticism of style, content, and function, but an empathic response of appreciation to what is” (28).

If we think about good form with respect to writing, however, we must invariably think not only of process, but also, and to an equal degree, of style, content, and function. The goal of writing is, after all, good communication, good “contact,” if you will, and that implies an aesthetic. If the spoken word exists in the “here and now,” writing codifies that experience and memory; it only returns to the “here and now” when a reader attempts to make meaning in an interactive experience with the text. As adherents to “reader-response criticism” state: “The text’s autonomy, its absolute separateness, is rejected in favor of its dependence on the reader’s creation or participation. Perception is viewed as interpretive; reading is not the discovery of meaning but the creation of it” (Maillot, 1977, p. 414, emphasis added).

Contact – “the work that results in assimilation and growth, is the forming of
"a figure of interest against a ground or context of the organism/environment field" (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951, p. 231, emphasis in original) – is by its nature situational and interactional. As Georges Wollants (2007) puts it emphatically: “The person is always a part of a situational whole, the co-ordinates of which determine his [sic] behaviour. It is not only through some internal drive of the organism that the contacting process is induced; the requirements of the environment also invite contact” (p. 92). Edwin C. Nevis (1987/1998/2005) stresses the “participatory” aspect of contact in the following way:

The integration of sensory awareness and motor behavior is called contact, and it involves more than just reaching out for or stretching toward a complete experience. Contact involves an aggressive response to a figure of interest, a form of active participation in which the figure is literally transformed through work to comprehend and assimilate it. (p. 27, second emphasis added)

Contact, as Nevis (1987/1994/2005) underscores, “does not mean achieving a goal or having a ‘peak’ experience,” but “the uniting of a desired goal with the possible” (p. 29).

Contact, not surprisingly, is at the core of all writing; good contact is its optimal goal. If there is an interruption in the flow of energy – a disruption of the integrity of the aesthetic – good contact between the reader and the written text is perforce disturbed. Put another way, good writing is both an art and a craft: thoughtful concern for language can yield clear and orderly writing that sharpens personal style; allow for individuality of expression and purpose; and enable a tone that will result in strong, simple, and elegant communication. By developing ideas clearly and logically, moving from thought to thought, the writer enables the task of reading to be a more agreeable – contactful – one.

Writing, often thought to be individualistic and non-relational is, in fact, situational and relational: contactful and contingent. Since writers are – to use the parlance of Gestalt therapy theory – of the “situation” (e.g., Wollants, 2007), of the “field” (e.g., Parlett, 1991; 1997), they must be clearly aware of the context out of which they are writing and the audience for whom they are writing; this given is implicit in the following sorts of questions:

- What is the impact of the (re)sources and references from the field?
- What information should be figural?
- What should be in the background, and what discarded?
- How should the writing come across (i.e., tone, level of formality)?
In the same way that the good therapeutic intervention is well *grounded* in data, *simply* and *elegantly* phrased, and *boldly* stated, so good writing is well-*researched*, *stylistically* felicitous, and expressed with *directness*. Good writing is a matter of art and technique: it needs the orderly presentation of ideas in clear thought units; sustained argumentation; continuity through transparent transitions; smoothness of expression (avoiding contradictions, omissions, irrelevancies, abruptness); economy of expression (suppressing redundancy, wordiness, jargon).

Joseph Melnick has attempted to use the interactive cycle of experience to help Gestalt writers think about what they do well and where they need support (personal communication). Writing, like the cycle, has a beginning, middle, and end. We start with some vague *sensation*; to the writer this may be a thought or an idea that has not quite come into focus. This idea gathers stream (= mobilization of *energy*) and begins to take clarity and form; this phase can be compared to what Gestalt therapy theory calls *awareness*. Some people get stuck in awareness (for example, writers can have many ideas but little focus; or they can become immersed in research and lose sight of the figure they are pursuing). Often, as they are about to write, a new idea takes over, and they quickly turn to follow it, discarding the original one. The writer’s task is to allow awareness to build and taper, to let go of irrelevant ideas, and to move toward a clear figure. As writers begin to write, they reach the *action* stage; this is where words are put down on the blank page. Many writers get stuck in action: if they like the creative burst of an idea, they do not have enough support to follow it through to completion, and so they stop writing. If they have enough support to continue writing, they will eventually begin to end. The manuscript is revised and edited, and references are checked; there is a sense of *withdrawal* and *resolution*. Then a new cycle may begin: the writer may become aware of feeling a need to get feedback from others, send the manuscript to two peers, and receive it back. The feedback is read with a mind toward *making meaning* of the manuscript with real and imagined others. Another level of *meaning-making* occurs when the finished product is reviewed by an editorial board that provides pre-publication suggestions for revision (alas, very rarely, if ever, does a manuscript escape this stage). Finally, the revised manuscript finds a home, appears in print, and is disseminated. Readers begin their own interactive process with the text in an effort to create meaning. *Contact* is, in fact, occurring throughout the entire process. It can be with ourselves, with peers or imaginary critics, with a fantasized reader, or simply with the excitement of an idea. Thus writing, often considered by many to be a solitary experience is, at the end of the day, largely *relational*.

In this third and last *Festschrift* issue of *Gestalt Review*, we proudly present a series of papers which, taken as a whole, reveal the writers’ interpretive
participation in the creation of meaning as they reflected upon the useful and unexpected ways in which indicated books or book chapters, virtually all of which were published by GestaltPress, had impacted them in their writings, teachings, or clinical/coaching/organizational practice. The range of subjects offered by the books covered can be gleaned from a glance at the Table of Contents. The final piece, “Construyendo puentes: la traducción como un acto creativo” [Building Bridges: Translation as a Creative Act], reveals another dimension of the writing process. Authored by Gestalt translator Carmen Vázquez Bandín, its content is inseparable from its formal process, insofar as, happily, it appears as a translation from the original Spanish into English.

I wish to end by citing here the gratifying words of Lynne Jacobs, appended to her contribution in a footnote, not the least because, arguably, she speaks for each and every one of us – writers, readers, and editors alike – engaged in the ongoing development of a Gestalt writing tradition:

Gestalt Review has taken up an interesting project. Yes, of course, it can be seen as self-serving, in the sense that the project celebrates thinkers who have been published by GestaltPress. But it also celebrates the hard-won accumulation of a writing tradition. Gestalt therapy has always benefited greatly from a robust oral tradition. Many of the writers represented herein are also active contributors to the oral teachings that, in recent years, are being presented in written form. It is no small feat to develop a written canon from amongst people who are drawn to the practice and thought of such a radically experientially-oriented therapy as ours. GestaltPress deserves this celebration as one of the major engines behind the development of a written tradition. Over the years, with the generous support and encouragement of Sonia M. Nevis and the late Edwin C. Nevis, people like Joseph Melnick and Gordon Wheeler and many others, have pushed, pulled, and cajoled us to write. The books in this project stand as testimony to their efforts. I am proud to be represented in this project, and grateful for years of colleagueship with many of the editors at both GestaltPress and Gestalt Review. (p. 312 below)

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REFERENCES


