

## **THAT DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENT: A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO READING AND WRITING FOR NURSES**

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### ***‘A supplement for living’***

In a letter to her friend Mary Clarke, Florence Nightingale responded to an earlier query:

You ask me why I do not write something. I think what is not of the first class had better not exist at all; and besides I had so much rather live than write; writing is only a supplement for living. (cited in Cook 1913)

This letter was written in 1844, ten years before Nightingale’s historic trip to Scutari and fifteen years before her seminal book *Notes on Nursing* (Nightingale 1859). In retrospect it might appear odd that such a prolific writer should diminish the importance and significance of her own work by dismissing it both as second-rate and as largely irrelevant to the real business of life.

Nightingale’s choice of words is both interesting and significant, and echoes the words of the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau that ‘Languages are made to be spoken, writing serves only as a supplement to speech’ (Rousseau, cited in Derrida 1967). In claiming that writing is ‘a supplement for living’, Nightingale is not necessarily suggesting that writing is unimportant, but rather that it performs a supplementary or secondary function in life; that it is primarily a substitute for the presence of the writer. Seen in this way, her letters were attempts to promote her person, her views and her spoken words in her absence; for example when she was nursing in the Crimea, or afterwards when she took to her bed for long periods.

Similarly, her book *Notes on Nursing* was recognised by Virginia Dunbar in the preface to the American reprint as fulfilling the same function of imposing Nightingale’s presence. Thus, Dunbar writes:

the thoughtful reader of these *Notes on Nursing* will enjoy the sensation of having at her side a “guide, philosopher, and friend” who walks painstakingly beside her, talking of nursing and putting a finger squarely on “what it is, and what it is not”. (Dunbar 1946).

The clear implication is that Nightingale’s book should be regarded as a substitute for Nightingale herself, or at least for Nightingale’s spoken words. Despite Nightingale’s own plea that ‘the following notes are by no means intended as a rule of thought ... [but] simply to

give hints for thought' (Nightingale 1859), the text itself and the style in which it is written suggests not so much the presence of Nightingale as a 'guide, philosopher and friend' at the side of the reader, but rather of Nightingale as an authoritarian instructor, informing the reader (to quote the subtitle of *Notes on Nursing*) what nursing is and what it is not. In the space of a little over 100 pages, this short instruction manual constantly tells the reader what she *ought* (37 times), *should* (53 times) and *must* (61 times) do. I am suggesting, then, that Nightingale's writing acts as a supplement for her own formidable presence, and that she wrote primarily to assert her will and her opinions.

***'For what is it and who is it that we write?'***

This narrow view of the function of writing as essentially denotative, that is, as serving to tell, instruct and inform, is widespread throughout the profession and discipline of nursing. Nurses write primarily to record the care they give to patients, that is, to inform other health care professionals, and nurse academics write mostly to inform or instruct students, practitioners or other academics. For example, Burnard (1999) asks (and answers) the rhetorical questions:

We must write, surely, to communicate? If not, then, for what is it and who is it that we write? ... If we want our ideas translated into practical action then we need to write about them in ways that practitioners and others will understand. (p.598)

Burnard, an accomplished and prolific writer, appears not to recognize any purpose of academic writing beyond telling practising nurses what to do in simple and straightforward language that they will understand.

However, writing can perform many functions in addition to simply informing or instructing; its purpose stretches far beyond acting as a stand-in or a supplement for the presence and voice of the writer. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein referred to the many functions of both written and spoken language as 'language games' (Wittgenstein 1953). Writing can be employed variously to argue, to debate, to express dissent, to offer critique, to provoke, to imagine, to reflect, to day-dream, to create and to speculate. But most importantly, writing offers us an opportunity to *think*. Unfortunately, few if any of these activities (including thinking!) are valued in the profession of nursing, and hence few of these alternative language games are evident in the published writing of nurses. It is as if nothing has changed since Nightingale instructed us about what nursing *is* and *is not*.

This view of the function of writing as primarily to instruct nurses how to do their job has been reinforced in recent times not only by Burnard in his attempts to have his 'ideas translated into practical actions', but by the turn to evidence-based practice (EBP) and the somewhat naive view that EBP is little more than the implementation of the findings of published research reports. Indeed, one of the most influential and most often cited papers on EBP echoes Nightingale in its title *Evidence-based medicine: what it is and what it isn't*

(Sackett et al 1996). In the remainder of this paper, I will explore the importance of writing from a post-structural perspective as *a way of thinking*. This view of writing takes us far beyond Nightingale's denotative language game of instructing and of standing in for the absent writer. From a post-structural perspective, writing is not merely a *supplement* for living, it is a *way* of living; it is not merely a record of nursing practice, it is a way of thinking about and practising nursing.

### ***'To write: an intransitive verb?'***

I have suggested elsewhere that as well as its function of recording our thoughts, writing can also be regarded as a creative research process in its own right (Rolfe 2009). As well as writing in order to communicate our thoughts, beliefs and actions to others, we sometimes also write for ourselves in order to tell ourselves things that we didn't realise that we knew. The novelist and theorist Hélène Cixous uses the metaphor of a ladder to depict writing as a means of exploring the writer's own unconscious thoughts and feelings. Thus:

To us this ladder has a *descending* movement, because the ascent, which evokes effort and difficulty, is towards the bottom [...] When we climb up towards the bottom, we proceed carried in the direction of – we're searching for something: the unknown (Cixous 1993, pp. 5-6, her emphasis)

In her curious metaphor of climbing *up* towards the *bottom*, Cixous invokes the difficulty of descent into the unconscious, along with the excitement and (perhaps) danger of not knowing what we might find there. She continues: 'Giving oneself to writing means being in a position to do this work of digging, of unburying...' (Cixous 1993). Contrary to Burnard's earlier assertion that 'we must write, surely, to communicate', Cixous's notion of writing as self-discovery appears to have little to convey to the reader.

However, the literary theorist Roland Barthes proposes the idea that 'to write' can be regarded as an intransitive verb, a verb with no object (Barthes 1966). According to this view we do not have to write a research report or an essay – it is enough simply to write as an end in itself. Furthermore, to write in this way is not simply to write about our thoughts, it is to write *as a way of thinking*, and what we produce is not simply a transcript of our thoughts but 'something quite different which requires a different form of consciousness ... which is *created* by the act of writing; when we write, we are thinking in a different way' (Rolfe 1997).

### ***'That dangerous supplement'***

As well as serving to stimulate our own thinking, writing can also provoke the reader into thinking differently. In a short essay entitled *The Death of the Author*, Barthes argued that the purpose of writing is not to tell, instruct or inform the reader, but to stimulate a series of new

and creative readings of the text. Barthes pronounced the death of the author (and of the authority) of the text, and suggested that:

Once the author is distanced, the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes entirely futile. To assign an Author to a text is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing (Barthes 1968, p.53)

Barthes therefore replaced the single author with the multitude of readers as the creative force in writing; it is the readers who give meaning to the text, and since there are many readers of any given text, there are also potentially many meanings. Elsewhere, Barthes asks the question:

Has it ever happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren’t interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven’t you ever happened *to read while looking up from your book?* (Barthes 1970, p.29, his emphasis)

Another function of writing, then, is to stimulate the reader to creative thought beyond what is written in the text, that is, to produce her own interpretation of what she has read, and also, in a sense, to write her own text, ‘that text which we write in our head when we look up’ (Barthes 1970).

We have travelled far from Nightingale’s notion of writing as a supplement for living, as a way for the writer to (re)present her self in her absence, and even from Burnard’s assertion that the primary (or perhaps the only) function of writing is as a vehicle for theorists and researchers to communicate their ideas to practitioners. I am suggesting, however, that writing fulfils a number of creative functions well beyond simple straightforward communication of information and ideas. Firstly, writing can offer us a ladder to our unconscious mind, a means of self-discovery, of discovering (or perhaps, of uncovering) those things that we did not realize we knew. Seen in this way, writing is a form of (self) research, and as such it deserves to be published. Secondly, a written text can provide a stimulus to the reader to think constructively and creatively and to produce her own text, even if it is only, as Barthes put it, one that we write in our own head as we look up from our reading. Thirdly, and most importantly, writing is a way of thinking and a way of coming to understand and critically engage with the practice of nursing (Rolfe 2008, 2009). If writing is, as Nightingale asserted, a supplement for living, then it is ‘that dangerous supplement’ (Derrida 1967) which continuously reproduces itself as more and more readers look up and write their own texts in their heads and in nursing journals.

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