Self-Editing: How the Writing Process Shapes the Writer-Self

The first draft of this paper was written in a cafe not far from where I go to school. It was finals week, but I didn't have any tests that day, and knew that if I didn't try to get this paper moving before classes ended I would likely end up procrastinating until about a week before the paper had to be presented. So I bought a little notebook from the school bookstore and, armed with the plethora of ink pens which I am never without, I drove to the nearest writerish place I could think of. Places that make coffee, wraps, and trendy health foods just seem writerish in my mind, so this cafe seemed like a logical place to start.

I got a good few paragraphs written in between bites of lunch – I admit to having ulterior motives in my choice of venue – and the work was all very indicative, I thought with some pride, of my location. I was channeling that writerish quality – that artsy quality – that I thought I wanted. There were paragraphs describing the other patrons, which only numbered a few because I was a little early for the lunchtime rush. There were paragraphs about the decor, which admittedly didn't hold many surprises if you've ever been in any cafe or coffee shop ever. There were paragraphs about how I very seldom handwrote anything anymore, least of all a paper of any sort, and those were followed by paragraphs about why. And while I liked what I read, they didn't say anything that needed to be said here. Those words, in and of themselves, would have been as pertinent to this topic as a thrilling retelling of the weekend's weather forecast. Gripping, I'm sure, but irrelevant.

What *is* relevant is the fact of how those words were created. That situation is not my norm. Every now and then I try something similar, and will no doubt try again in a few years, because some part of me envisions Writers (with a capital 'W' because they're the real thing) hanging out, sipping drinks I probably wouldn't like, talking with the faintest hint of an accent

about things that probably wouldn't make a lot of sense to me, and in all likelihood wearing fancy hats. Or smoking jackets. Or both. But these misconceptions have never served me well, and this most recent time was no exception. Yet I was in that mode, that complete fiction of the writer, and so, without realizing it at the time, I was writing like I thought that sort of writer would. But it didn't work, and frankly, it gets a little frustrating trying to look for the deep dark philosophical reasons why the woman in the snappy business suit ordered a turkey sandwich *without tomatoes*.

But before I get too far into my own reflections upon that abortive attempt to be a Writer (capital 'W'), let me backtrack. This paper is somewhat about the writing process, and so I should probably touch on that sometime within the first page and a half. I had not considered the effect of how I wrote on what I wrote or how the words worked until I enrolled in an English course discussing just that very thing: the writing process. I had to take some writing course on that level, so I gritted my teeth and prepared myself for lecture after dull lecture on writing a descriptive-yet-concise thesis or how to partition my argument into paragraphs, and was pleasantly surprised that the class was exactly the opposite. In reading scholars of composition and rhetoric – people I certainly had never heard of and likely never would have otherwise – I watched as questions were applied to the actual composition of a text that I had only ever considered relevant to the resulting text itself: what, why, how, and even, to a degree, where and when. Conspicuously absent from the discussion, for quite some time, was the question of who – everything just seemed to assume "the writer," but who the heck was that person?

Then we hit upon Susan Miller's "Rebelling Against the All," in which I found some solace that *somebody* was looking more deeply into the identity of the person who keeps putting all of these words on all of these pieces of paper. Miller suggests convincingly that the text

creates an identity for a writer – that the reader's concept of the text's author is a product of that text, rather than the actual person producing it. I could buy the relationship, but somehow I didn't feel like it was moving in the right direction. After all, is Clark Kent created by Superman's bright red cape?

Superhero analogies aside – and fear not, we're almost back to that cafe – it just seemed like there was something else there. Who the writer appears to be based on a text alone likely is not the person that you could actually meet and talk to, that much was clear. However, Miller had the effect before the cause; we create a new version of ourselves – the "writer-self" – in order to write, and we do it through the environment we establish in which to do that writing – that is, our writing process.

For example, then, my foray into the cafe, and the fact that I chose to write by hand, in a little notebook bought from the school bookstore, established the writer-self which I was conjuring. His words didn't sound like I do; reading them and talking to me, you would be hard-pressed to guess that the same person was behind both the writing and the conversation. My mistake was that I *knew* what writer-self I wanted, and he does *not* live in cafes or write things by hand.

Over the course of the aforementioned writing process class, we had several workshop experiences with our classmates. Most of our papers had fairly open-ended prompts – like "Discuss your writing process" – which left plenty of room for doing things however we pleased. If there was a leash, we had to tug extremely hard to feel it. In any case, through the workshopping of several papers I found something astonishing: several people consistently thought my writing was funny. And not like funny-weird. Funny-haha. I couldn't comprehend this. I liked the compliments, to be sure, but I wasn't really *trying* to be funny; I was just trying

to be readable. I try to be funny in everyday conversation and generally have much less success, even with close friends, than my writing had with this room full of relative strangers.

So by the time we reached Miller's essay, in which she recounts an encounter with an editor who didn't believe the person whose work he had read could possibly be as young as she was at the time, I could sympathize with the feeling. I imagine some of my classmates would be disappointed with my humor in person after reading what were, apparently, "laugh out loud" papers. But conspicuously contrary to Miller's claim – that the text makes the identity – it seemed like my texts were all producing the *same* identity, like I was attending consecutive Halloween parties in the same costume. So what if the identity made the text?

Indeed, I wrote all of my papers for that class in very similar conditions. My normal *modus operandi* involves me and my laptop and a word processor, generally cloistered in a vacant room in the University of Mary Washington's English building late at night, with few interruptions or distractions and easy access to a drink machine to feed my Dr. Pepper habit. This system produced several papers on different topics which were received in a similar manner, which seemed like evidence to me that perhaps how I was writing these papers was what determined what sort of "writer-self" came through to the reader. This writing process, when coupled with topics in the area of composition and rhetoric, for I think topic is an important part of the genesis of the "writer-self", too, creates the self with whom most of my classmates became acquainted. For the sake of ease, let's call this writer-self Jim.

Jim, you see, is a funny guy. He's also pretty good with words, if I do say so himself. Unlike me – the actual, non-writer me – Jim can articulate his thoughts on the fly, and he can usually throw in some serious verbosity just to make himself sound smart. His sentences rarely

violate grammar rules – or, at least, any of the really hardcore ones. He makes people laugh, but he also provides some insights into whatever he's talking about, or he'd like to think so.

The error in my ways with the whole cafe trip was that Jim doesn't really like that scene, but Jim is who I needed. Jim is who is producing these words right now, because while I'm not at school at the moment, I am still using my laptop, it is still late at night, and I still have access to a copious supply of Dr. Pepper. Jim is happy. The "cafe identity," however, didn't really fit the bill. I don't know what he's good for. I don't even know what his name is. I liked him okay, but I'm not sure I have much use for him right now.

Our own process creates the identity which creates the text. So, in the end, Miller's still fairly right; her readers may meet an older Susan Miller, while mine, at least if they're reading my comp/rhet papers, will meet Jim. At the same time, however, the process is what shapes this identity. The original self – me, rather than Jim – can control who the writer-self becomes by shaping the environment in which it chooses to write, and by determining what to write there.

But in the end I don't think it's even quite that simple. I didn't reference a magical formula for Jim-summoning. There is a part of anyone who is writing that must form the fundamental core of every writer-identity that the writer conjures to create text. Jim and the cafe identity are brothers by blood. This blood is the *writer-self*, the identity that the writer creates as the middleman between himself and his text. The writer-self knows how to handle all this word stuff better than the physical writer can. The writer-self is the very lifeblood which runs through a writer's texts and serves as a common bond; it is the unifying force between everything he writes. Jim covers texts like this paper for me; one of his "siblings," so to speak, covers fiction, another literary criticism. They are identities. But just as people put on different masks to deal

with different relationships – one for family, one for friends, one for work, and so on – the writer-self must don these identities to deal with different texts.

To be sure, calling this lifeblood a "self" – in the same way that Jim is a self – is somewhat misleading. The writer-self cannot – or, perhaps, simply will not – operate alone, as just itself. It is not fully-formed, like a mannequin – you can hangs things on it – trappings, like Jim – but without that it isn't quite useful anymore. It is a foundation, but not an actual building.

What, at last, creates the writer-self from the stuff of the original, actual writer's self? That I can't answer. But it is a mask we, as writers, must put on when we want to be Writers (capital 'W').