

The Doctor as Poet – The Poet as Doctor Trauma, Therapeutic Autobiography and the Power of Literature

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Abstract

This paper deals with literature as therapy within the context of the new migrant literary scene in Italy and the legacy of Giuseppe Bonaviri (1924-2009), a doctor, health officer and cardiologist who was also a prolific poet and author of novels. After examining Italy's hybrid origins and the trauma of migration from a literary point of view, I will give a brief overview of italoophone migrant literature and common pathologies of migration in artistic terms. Using his professional skills as a physician in literature, the Sicilian writer Bonaviri identified himself as a migrant in order to better diagnose this character on the one hand, while on the other he tried to identify cultural and literary therapies for the illnesses of migration and, thus, of an individual –i.e. psychological– as well as social –i.e. collective– tedium of life. Bonaviri's transcultural humanitas, the importance of cultural roots and his suggestion of autobiographical writing as therapy will be read in contrast to his fellow countryman Luigi Pirandello, also a continental migrant from Sicily, with the intention of showing not only the cathartic effect of Bonaviri's texts, but also the significance of literature and writing for overcoming sociocultural conflicts and personal crises.

1. Hybrid origins in Italy: Theoretical Background

Mohammed Lamsuni, the Moroccan writer and self-proclaimed Pan-Arab intellectual known for his book with the original transcultural title *Porta Palazzo mon amour* published in 2006, grasps in his text the traumatic nature of the illegal immigrant's first experiences of Italy: "I am a citizen without a country. A professor without students. A father without children and a husband without a wife" (Lamsuni 2006, 135).¹ However, towards the end of Lamsuni's book, this "citizen without a country" will rediscover himself in exile, enabling him to say: "How wonderful is Italy [...] when she tells me: «Never mind! You're an orphan and I have adopted you»" (Lamsuni 2006, 138; italics by M.L.).

Nevertheless, as emphasised by the first-person narrator, summing up an absolutely essential concept of migrant literature, true salvation comes from the act of writing for oneself, to which he attributes a cathartic, redeeming and therapeutic role:

"My agony lasted six years. In the infrared hole of a life that knocks me down only to get back up again, I have won. I have won thanks to the verb and the blank page. I have freed myself from alienation with an invincible weapon: the pen, my soul mate" (Lamsuni 2006, 137; translation by D.R.).

I would like to theoretically expand on this concept so poetically formulated by Lamsuni in his poems, short-stories and novels, which tell of exile in a compact, well-organised, unsentimental, yet bitter tone, stylistically suited to the scandalous social, political and financial circumstances in which migrants find themselves. As well illustrated by Daniele Comberiati's monograph on migrant literary production in Italian language, it is only over the course of the last twenty years that "Italy has become a place of transit or destination for increasingly intense migratory flows [...] until today exceeding [...] the considerable figure of three million" foreigners (Comberiati 2010, 9).

¹All English translations that appear in this essay and that are taken from Italian titles according to the bibliography at the end are by D.R.

1990 –“the year generally believed to mark the start of Italian migrant literature” (Comberiati 2010, 15)– saw the publication of the first two initiatory novels by Pap Khouma (*Io, venditore di elefanti*, 1990)² and Salah Methnani (*Immigrato*, 1990),³ both written in Italian by two people, that is to say with the help of a native Italian co-author.⁴ The end of this silent revolution that is taking place on the Italian cultural scene, that is to say of italoophone migrant literature, is not yet in sight.⁵

In any case, moving away from the contemporary literary trend of new italoophone literature, and also from Italian postcolonial literature in a traditional sense, we can observe that Italian history has always been characterised by foreign influences, by violent or not so violent conquests and by cultural hybridity. Just think, for example, of the various intercultural contacts made due to the French and Spanish invaders in pre-unification Italy, the cultural phenomena associated with Italian regionalism, the resulting dialectal literature, and the ill-famed conflict between north and south that also characterises Italy in literary terms. The problem of the division of Italy into a northern cultural zone and a southern cultural zone and the conciliatory desire to make these two zones compatible, characterise the works of the writer Giuseppe Bonaviri (1924-2009), a Sicilian author exiled in the Ciociaria area of Central Italy and a paradigmatic representative of the emigrant generation in Italy, which preceded and paved the literary way for the acceptance of the Italian immigrant literature studied by Comberiati. As I aim to demonstrate, this remarkable Italian author, a doctor by profession, was a visionary in terms of issues regarding the hybrid nature of man, his nomadic state of mind and the deriving psychological problems. The doctor, but also the individual citizen within him, viewed these issues as being related to the hidden violence behind the trauma of migration, which he attempted to overcome through his belief in highly artistic autobiography and the power of literature in general.⁶

In 1958, Bonaviri became an “emigrant with a stethoscope, rather than a hoe” (Costantini 1979), moving from his beloved Sicily to the Ciociaria area, where he died in Frosinone in 2009 after a good fifty years of so-called ‘voluntary’⁷ exile. He saw his migration as a generalised *condition humana*, providing us with an example of that phenomenon which Pasquale Verdicchio describes as “internal colonisation”.⁸ In fact, Verdicchio uses this term to describe “the historic emigration, mostly from southern Italy”, recalling that “the socio-economic discrepancy between north and south is one of the reasons for the southern inferiority, as also analysed by Antonio Gramsci [in his famous essay about *The Southern Question*, 1995 (*Alcunitemidellaquistionemeridionale*, 1930); D.R.], and one of the causes of internal emigration” (Comberiati 2010, 19-20).

The case of Bonaviri, an ‘internal emigrant’ in this sense, is paradigmatic for the modern individual who lives in a social precariat which conditions the life of all migrants worldwide, and which has been described on a cultural level as a “liquid modernity” by Zygmunt Bauman (*Liquid Modernity*, 2000). Remo Ceserani also focuses on this metaphor of liquid modernity, basing his work on a re-reading of Marx and on the contrast between solid state and liquid state. According to Ceserani, this antithesis acquires “an existential character, comparing two different types of concepts of life, of human behaviour and of world conditions” (Ceserani 2010, 23).

² English translation published in 2010 (Khouma 2010).

³ Novel, no English edition published, title means: *Immigrant*.

⁴ Pap Khouma’s co-author was the journalist Oreste Pivetta, while Salah Methnani’s was the writer and journalist Mario Fortunato.

⁵ As highlighted by Sebastiano Martelli, Italian criticism is only slowly beginning to focus on italoophone migrant literature “if we exclude Gnisci’s numerous contributions from the early 1990s onwards” (Martelli 2009, 740). In fact, the critical approach to the subject of immigrant literature in Italy is dominated by Italian emigration, which is much more widely studied (cf. Martelli 2009, 725-740) and first has been made accessible to a broader audience in Italy through the literary and theatrical work of Gian Antonio Stella (Stella 2002).

⁶ Referring to the notion of cultural trauma in the context of the aesthetic of literary production cf. Caruth 1996 and Reichardt 2013.

⁷ For further autobiographical details on the migration trauma that, for Bonaviri, began at the tender age of just two years old, when he was separated from his mother in order to go and live with her better-off sister, i.e. Bonaviri’s aunt, cf. Reichardt 2000, 12/13. In the context of traumatic symptoms, Dante Marianacci’s comment on the “moments of sadness and melancholy” of “Bonaviri the traveller” also seems to be revealing (Marianacci 2009, 15).

⁸ This expression used by Comberiati (Comberiati 2010, 20) refers to the postcolonial “decontextualisation” and the “unrecognised postcolonials” thematised by Pasquale Verdicchio (Verdicchio 1997, 191).

Working on the basis of this cultural premise, principally reflected in all texts by migrant writers, we will try to identify some narrative techniques used by Giuseppe Bonaviri in the attempt to propagate a transcultural polyphone humanism so as to deal with his migratory experiences. We will then compare them to the procedures used by his fellow Sicilian Luigi Pirandello in order to better reveal the significance of literature in the migratory context in general and the specific importance of Bonaviri's writings for the purposes of correct diagnosis and cultural therapy, and for overcoming the migratory conflicts underlying the malaise of contemporary man.

2. The Meaning and Significance of the Rhizome: Bonaviri's Transcultural *Humanitas*

The main character in many of Bonaviri's novels is a prototypical migrant, who is often one with his emotions, imagination and mystery, a restless ego who travels, who moves through space, who is perennially searching for his identity, who compares himself to other cultures which are blurred in their turn, and who desires contact with nature and the reader. In short, he represents the literary incarnation of the perfect hybrid human being. Just think, for example, of the first-person narrator in the novels *Nottisull'altura* (1971),⁹ *Dolcissimo*¹⁰ (1978), *Il dormiveglia. Sicilia – Luna – New York* (1988)¹¹ and *Silvinia* (1997).¹² The writer from Mineo drew inspiration for this model character not just from his own biography, but also from a complex concept of life, that is to say a way of life propagated in the 1970s by the French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: as part of their work on the link between capitalism and schizophrenia, the two authors had turned the modern late 20th-century way of life into a metaphor, seeking to illustrate it in *A Thousand Plateaus*¹³ (*Mille plateaux*, vol. 2 of: *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, 1980) by using the image of the rhizome.

The rhizomatic idea was later taken up and furthered by the francophone poet and creolisation theorist Edouard Glissant, using the image of mangroves (Glissant 1997).¹⁴ It became established in cultural studies as a symbol of the hybrid condition of life and increasingly complex, differentiated and ramified biographies, especially in the globalised era. Bonaviri's works portray these delicate and fragile, yet earthly, native existences, with special sensitivity and ontological empathy.¹⁵ The empathic effect is emphasised by choosing the point of view of a first-person narrator, which facilitates the reader's identification with the fictional character by using an internal focus, and the integration of the autobiographical elements within the text.

However, above all, Bonaviri continuously switches from narration in the first person singular, to the first person plural,¹⁶ as if he wanted his writing to embrace not only the reader as the implicit interlocutor of the first-person narrator, but to include within the narrative discourse a fictional community of readers, an imagined group that conveys the inclusion of the character in a wider community. In this way, Bonaviri expands the spectrum of the narration and also of his own philosophy to encompass a reinvented and reconstructed *we* in every single work: this sense of belonging to a community includes the imagination of a *we readers*, of a *we human beings*, of a *we thinkers and supporters of certain ideas*, or rather of a *we who understand* and codes the intention of Bonaviri's message, which is a message of solidarity, pacifism, ecological thought, transcultural society and family tradition. Effectively speaking, this is the essence of Bonaviri's therapeutic approach, with which his characters, in the faithful tradition of Verga's choral novel, continuously seek to deal with, defeat and resolve their fears, obsessions, searches, desperations and nostalgias. In fact, these are the aspects of Bonaviri's writing that overcome every hermeneutic concept, making it empathetic, that is to say following a process of maturation from a mere (autobiographical) account to a specifically therapeutic effect.

⁹English translation published in 1990 (Bonaviri 1990a).

¹⁰English translation published in 1990 (Bonaviri 1990b).

¹¹Novel, no English translation published, title means: *Half Asleep. Sicily – Moon – New York*.

¹²Novel, no English translation published, title means: *Silvinia* (which is the name of the female protagonist in the novel).

¹³English translation published in 1987 (Deleuze/Guattari 1987).

¹⁴ The critic Alexandre Leupin grasped Glissant's idea in the notion of *Writing as Mangrove* (or "œuvre mangrove" in the original French, cf. Leupin 2000) that I feel is very applicable in the sphere of literary criticism.

¹⁵ I have sought to emphasise the significance of the link between empathy and literature for the first time, by studying Ugo Foscolo's translations (cf. Reichardt 2007).

¹⁶ For an exemplary illustration of this technique in the novels *Il fiume di pietra* (title means: *River of Stone*) and *La divina foresta* (title means: *The Divine Forest*) cf. Reichardt 2000, 83 ff.

A central therapeutic factor for Bonaviri, educated in Sicily and exiled through his own free will, is the family perceived as a traditional Italian value in its most authentic composition, free from all anachronisms and deliberately accentuated even in Bonaviri's later works, in the postmodern era. This is demonstrated by the novels composed around Bonaviri's family saga, especially the trilogy of *Il sartodellastradalunga* (1954),¹⁷ *Ghigò* (1990)¹⁸ and *Silvinia* (1997), followed in 2003 by *Il vicoloblu*.¹⁹ The importance of the care and protection offered by the family microcosm as a benevolent factor for the modern individual, over and beyond the barriers of time and space, has an archetypal, commemorative and therapeutic nature, and is closely connected to his memory of his birthplace of Mineo (one of 55 municipalities in the province of Catania) and, in narratological terms, to the textual category of space. In fact, Mineo becomes an imaginative symbol within the text that lends itself well to individual ideas. The descriptions of the town, often conveyed to the reader through the discursive technique of travel (cf. Reichardt 2000, 149-171), provide a blank page that the reader is free to fill subjectively, with his own images, with the colours he associates with them, and with his own recollections. Read on this level, Mineo becomes a symbolic *third space* in the sense of the theorem put forward by Homi K. Bhabha, a creative *in-between space*, an imaginary refuge and, therefore, a symbol of a possible homeland for the reader.

The demands for the integration of the ego in society, for respect for nature, for real family life and transcultural society, form a rhizome or a large base, on which Bonaviri constructs 1) the idea of transnationality as an ideal meeting of cultures, and 2) of the cosmos as a reunification or reconciliation between man and nature. This *humanitas* represents the most significant and perhaps most fascinating aspect of Bonaviri's work, because Bonaviri manages to restore life to a contemporary conception of it in the reader's mind, making use of primordial images and Empedoclean connotations. By doing so, he succeeds in adding an additional value of eternity and classicism to a modern notion of humanism. However, for Bonaviri it is not about going back to one's roots in a regressive sense, but instead a progressive process in a surprisingly scientific sense. He sees the humanism, which emanates from his works, as being positioned within the traditional pre-Socratic philosophical vein, but manages to channel it towards medicine that is, in addition to literature, his professional field and therefore forms part of his identity.

For Bonaviri, 21st-century humanism from a philosophical and scientific point of view is equivalent to the concept of a *Menschlichkeit* described by the German psychoneuroimmunologist Joachim Bauer. Bauer defines the human, human behaviour or humanity as individual and social behaviour through the capacity of resonance (cf. Bauer 2007, 151). As Bauer specifies in his work *Prinzip Menschlichkeit* published in 2006,²⁰ the American expression (specifically from New York) of being a 'mensch' (that is to say a 'human' being) – "He (she) is a mensch [sic!]" (Bauer 2008a, 9) – derives from Yiddish, and that is to say from the Jewish cultural sphere. Bauer latches on to the discovery of so-called mirror neurons, identified by the neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti of the Università di Parma,²¹ made accessible to a wider audience through the publication of the book by Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia entitled *Mirrors in the Brain. How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions* (2008). The book was released in Italy in 2006²² as part of an interdisciplinary series ("Scienze e Idee") and sums up the discoveries and studies carried out since the early 1990s by the group of researchers around Rizzolatti.

¹⁷ Novel, no English translation published, title means: *The Tailor on Main Street*.

¹⁸ Novel, no English translation published, title means: *Ghigò* (according to the explanation given by Bonaviri in the prefix of the novel, 'Ghigò' was the first word pronounced by the author's nephew Gianluigi at the age of four months: the infant pronounced these two syllables, consisting of a light and a dark vowel, in order to denominate everything in the universe).

¹⁹ Novel, no English translation published, title means: *The Blue Alley*.

²⁰ Nonfiction, no English translation published, title means: *The Principle of Humanity*.

²¹ Bauer cites Rizzolatti as the father of mirror neurons (cf. Bauer 2007, 21).

²² Original Italian title: *So qualche fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*.

According to this sensational scientific study by Rizzolatti, which has also opened up a new dimension in the sector of genetics,²³ empathy, or rather the ability to relate to someone else, triggers a social process that keeps societies united and that implicates complex narratives and an idea of community and solidarity, which cannot be explained by purely technical and scientific means.²⁴ From a sociological point of view, the importance of the empathic force as a civilising means for reaching a global consciousness has been confirmed by the work of Jeremy Rifkin about *The Empathic Civilization. The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (Rifkin 2009). It is precisely the aspect of cooperative relationships, man's participation in the physical activities and mental conditions of his neighbours, as fundamental principles of biology that Bonaviri intended to emphasise in his texts, thus helping to pave the way for a constructive reception of migrant literature within Italian criticism.

3. The Value of Cultural Roots: Bonaviri versus Pirandello

In order to better highlight Bonaviri's role as a pioneer, precursor or 'father' of migration literature, we shall conclude by briefly putting the empathic and therapeutic effect of Bonaviri's texts to the *ex negativotest*, comparing them to the positions of his fellow Sicilian Luigi Pirandello, also a 'voluntary' migrant who left his native Agrigento as a young scholar and writer.²⁵ By analysing the autobiographical elements of Bonaviri's work in relation to the narrative voice,²⁶ we can ascertain a typical fluctuating movement between a detached and masterful scientific attitude on the one hand, and a restless, anxious and touchy individual on the other. In his personal contact with the writer from Mineo, Dante Marianacci has observed how he himself "was able to transform himself from a cardiologist, generous with advice, to a patient, desirous of attention" (Marianacci 2009). In both roles, both as a biographically real author and as a fictional character telling a story, Bonaviri's voice is visibly concerned with everyday normality and family relations and, in general, with aspects of healing, care and therapy.

In his essay *L'eternodubbio ha il volto di donna* of 1987 (Bonaviri 1987),²⁷ based on his own "readings", Bonaviri with his typically good-natured tone, impregnated with great nostalgia for collective pacification, examines Pirandello and sets out his theory of the "ethical worry" which would motivate Sicilian literature (Bonaviri 1987, 47).²⁸ After having touched upon the subject of "religious panic" (Bonaviri 1987, 47), he questions the humorous technique of overturning things in Pirandello, reaching the conclusion that Pirandello's key theme is the "limitless solitude of man" (Bonaviri 1987, 48; italics by G.B.). He concludes that the Pirandellian trauma consists of the "collapse of 19th-century legends", that is to say the devaluation of the Manzonian notion of *providence* (*provvidenza*) and Verga's notion of *property* (*roba*). In this "philosophical nucleus" (Bonaviri 1987, 48), Bonaviri identifies the modernistic and visionary potential of Pirandello. According to Bonaviri, the "conflict between man and woman" in Pirandello expresses all the "anxiety of man", rendering the European anxiety, and uncovering the "male ideal" as "sophism", self-illusion, traumatic desperation (Bonaviri 1987, 49). At this point, the woman is nothing more than the alter ego of man who, vice versa, is "a feminised self [...], closed in himself like a twisted spiral"; Pirandello's man is, according to Bonaviri's reading, "a self-inferno, [...] an inner drama, [...] a society in crisis" (Bonaviri 1987, 49).

²³I refer to the critical re-evaluation of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and the origin of the species, and their reception in the theory of Social Darwinism expounded by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer: while the dogmatic vein of Darwinist genetics culminates in Richard Dawkins' publication of *The Selfish Gene* (1976), living systems began to be rethought in the early 21st century. In fact, both Rizzolatti and Bauer maintain that man, and every living being, has two goals – to ensure his own survival and to seek continuously to adjust to and mirror himself in the other, that is to say to cooperate (cf. Bauer 2007, 170). Bauer summed up these positions in his most recent publication on *The cooperative gene* (no English translation published, for the German original cf. Bauer 2008b), confirming that Rizzolatti's discovery of mirror neurons and their cooperative function is equivalent to a fundamental change in the scientific paradigm.

²⁴It is no coincidence that in almost all religions, especially Buddhism if we can describe it as a religion, the ability to have empathy is a saving grace, or elementary practice. If our modern society is described as autistic in a derogatory and discriminatory manner, then this is not intended purely to criticise collective egocentrism, but also to highlight in positive terms the fundamental importance of empathy for different peoples and ethnicities to really be able to live together peacefully.

²⁵For a detailed illustration of this comparison between Bonaviri and Pirandello cf. Reichardt 2013.

²⁶For the autobiographical aspect of Bonaviri's work cf. Musarra 1999, 96-124.

²⁷Title means: *The Eternally Doubting Face of Woman*.

²⁸All translations of quotes originating from Bonaviri 1987 into English in this essay are again mine.

The dark self-image of the “man of crisis” reflects in Pirandello’s texts “the island or general southern rural middle classes”, a contorted, solipsistic society, which has become “a summa malum, a nerve racking and ongoing doubt [...]” (Bonaviri 1987, 50).

In contrast with Pirandello, Bonaviri’s work is very interested in and closely related to the domestic sphere, to child characters, who are always autobiographical, to tradition and to family solidarity. His vision of woman is in no way conflicting or misogynous, but always desirable, stabilising and positive.²⁹ *Mattia Pascal* alias Adriano Meis, the main character in Pirandello’s famous novel *The Late Mattia Pascal*,³⁰ on the other hand, flees from his wife and from established social order and lives his midlife crisis through symbolic self-destruction, seeking in vain to rebuild a freer and more authentic life for himself.

Bonaviri goes back to Pirandello’s psychological and traumatic inspiration and at the same time takes the reader beyond the Pirandellian theme, emphasising the possibilities of dissolution, of overcoming, and of medical solution. The vision of the two writers meets in the understanding that the 20th century suffers from the absence of transcendentalism and liveable ideologies that it would be worth dying for. In this, Bonaviri senses the ensemble of future human tragedies, which need to be taken on with all the hope, imagination and empathy possible. In the neo- or transmodernism at the threshold of the 21st century, the “collapse of 19th-century legends” (Bonaviri 1987, 48) that Bonaviri observed in Pirandello is no longer important. What matters now is the collapse of 20th-century ideologies and the challenge of creating a liveable imagined future.

4. The Future of the Mangroves: Writing as Therapy

The trauma of the migratory experience, so widespread in the south, not only brings together Bonaviri and Pirandello, but implicates also the collective self-awareness of a people for centuries oppressed by governments and foreign invaders –like all of Italy, amongst other things– and a cultural identity that is defined through an inferior class, that of peasants, simple artisans and exhausted field hands.

The 19th and 20th-century emigration of Sicilian writers is equivalent to an escape from these difficult circumstances and at the same time a solution to them. Urgency and hope (both financial and moral) will also motivate immigrant writers in Italy in the third millennium. From this angle it seems that all therapeutic need is manifest in migrant literature: only by writing, conversing and thematising their existential and constitutive experiences for their own identity, are migrant characters able to make themselves visible, perceivable and comprehensible. From this methodological point of view, we can say that for all of them, but particularly for Italian migrant writers in Italy itself that belong to the previous generation, such as Bonaviri and Pirandello, writing has become a form of therapy over the course of their biographical and professional development, and/or of their mental and social development.

Through the monologue (of the writer) conceived as a potential dialogue (with the reader), the authors become aware of their becoming and their being hybrid and can not only accept, but also integrate this aspect more easily into their work and their actual lives. It is thus that autobiographical writing can provide the basis for so-called *expressive writing*,³¹ a therapeutic technique used over the last twenty years with growing success in transcultural psychiatry and psychology.

²⁹ In fact, in this critical essay, too, Bonaviri confirms that he feels Pirandello is lacking in aspects “of the woman as mother, the woman as firmament, the woman as earth and fruitfulness” (Bonaviri 1987, 49).

³⁰ Published in English in 2004 (Pirandello 2004). Originally, Pirandello published the novel in Italy under the title *Il fu Mattia Pascal* in 1904.

³¹ The expression is taken from the essay “Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing” from 2005 published by Karen A. Balkie and Kay Wilhelm (Balkie/Wilhelm 2005).

As demonstrated by the paradigm of Pennebaker,³² *writing therapy*, which has generated growing interest in the field of psychotherapeutic treatment since the late 1980s, can provide a medical solution to trauma, to the pathologies of migration and to a general tedium of life, both individually and socially, i.e. both on a subjective, psychological and on a collective, public level.

Using his professional skills as a physician in literature, Bonaviri identifies himself as a migrant for a better diagnosis of this character on the one hand, while on the other he shows the power of literature and culture by using his novels to create networks of therapeutic autobiography and by identifying the significance of literature and writing for overcoming sociocultural conflicts and personal crises.

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³² In the 1980s, the US psychologist James W. Pennebaker initiated various studies and experiments using expressive writing. He demonstrated that a setting of 3 to 5 sessions, during which a group of patients spent 15-20 minutes writing a text that illustrated their deepest feelings and thoughts regarding a trauma, produced results that were clearly beneficial to the patients' physical and mental condition. This phenomenon was described as *The Pennebaker paradigm*.

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