

EDMUND BERGLER, M.D.

THE
WRITER
AND
PSYCHO-
ANALYSIS

Second Edition

INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES PRESS, INC.

Madison

Connecticut

The lines from "Spilt Milk," from *Winding Stair*, by William Butler Yeats, are copyright, 1933, by The Macmillan Company; reprinted by permission of The Macmillan Company, N. Y., Mrs. W. B. Yeats, and Macmillan & Co., Ltd., London.

The lines from "Ash-Wednesday," from *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, by T. S. Eliot, are copyright, 1936, by Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc.; reprinted with permission also of Faber & Faber Ltd.

The extract from "Tradition and the Individual Talent," from *Selected Essays 1917-1932*, by T. S. Eliot, is copyright, 1932, by Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc.; reprinted with permission also of Faber & Faber Ltd.

The extract from *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet*, by Philip Horton, is reprinted by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

The extract from *The Creative Life in Our Time: An Exchange of Letters Among Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, and V. S. Pritchett*, is reprinted from the November, 1948, *Partisan Review*.

The extract from *Creditors*, by August Strindberg, translated by Edwin Bjorkman, is reprinted by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

The extract from *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann*, translated by John Oxenford, edited by J. K. Moorhead, is reprinted by permission of E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

The lines from *Martial: Epigrams, Translations and Imitations*, by A. L. Francis and H. F. Tatum, are reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press.

FIRST PRINTED BY DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY
COPYRIGHT 1950, 1951 EDMUND BERGLER

SECOND EDITION PRINTED BY ROBERT BRUNNER
COPYRIGHT 1954 BY EDMUND BERGLER

COPYRIGHT RENEWED 1982 BY THE ESTATE OF EDMUND BERGLER

FOREWORD BY ROSE ORENTE COPYRIGHT 1986 EDMUND AND MARIANNE BERGLER PSYCHIATRIC FOUNDATION

INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES PRESS, INC., 59 BOSTON POST ROAD, MADISON, CONNECTICUT 06443-1524

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THE WRITER AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

BOOKS BY EDMUND BERGLER, M.D.

FRIGIDITY IN WOMEN

(In collaboration with E. Hirschmann)

TALLEYRAND—NAPOLEON—STENDHAL—GRABBE

PSYCHIC IMPOTENCE IN MEN

UNHAPPY MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

DIVORCE WON'T HELP

THE BATTLE OF THE CONSCIENCE

CONFLICT IN MARRIAGE

THE BASIC NEUROSIS

THE WRITER AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

MONEY AND EMOTIONAL CONFLICTS

COUNTERFEIT-SEX

THE SUPEREGO

FASHION AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

KINSEY'S MYTH OF FEMALE SEXUALITY (In collaboration with W.S. Kroger)

THE REVOLT OF THE MIDDLE-AGED MAN

HOMOSEXUALITY: DISEASE OR WAY OF LIFE?

LAUGHTER AND THE SENSE OF HUMOR

PSYCHOLOGY OF GAMBLING

ONE THOUSAND HOMOSEXUALS

PRINCIPLES OF SELF-DAMAGE

TENSIONS CAN BE REDUCED TO NUISANCES

CURABLE AND INCURABLE NEUROTICS

JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE

(In collaboration with J.A.M. Meerloo)

PARENTS NOT GUILTY!

SELECTED PAPERS OF EDMUND BERGLER, M.D.: 1933-1961

Poets utter great and wise things which they do not themselves understand.

PLATO, *The Republic*

Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. . . . The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach.

A. E. HOUSMAN, *The Name and Nature of Poetry*

. . . then Massival had yielded to that species of cessation of creative power that seems to smite the greater part of our contemporary artists like premature paralysis. They do not grow old, as their fathers did, in the midst of their renown and success, but seem threatened with artistic impotence even when in the very prime of life. Lamarthe was accustomed to say: At the present day there are only great men who have gone wrong. . . .

GUY DE MAUPASSANT, *Notre Coeur*

I am heartily glad your education does not expose you to the same hardship that mine does, that you may provide for your family without the expense of conscience, or at least what you think so.

WILLIAM LAW in an undated letter to his brother, after refusing the oath of allegiance to King George in 1714. Quoted from Arthur Wormhoudt's *Biography of Law*.

FOREWORD TO THE 1986 PRINTING

THE first edition of Bergler's *The Writer and Psychoanalysis* quickly sold out to writers and would-be writers who said to themselves, "This man is talking about me." That edition was based on Bergler's analysis of three-dozen writers. By the time the second edition was published in 1954, still more authors had presented themselves to him for analysis, despite the fact that critical opinion of the volume ranged from one extreme to the other. The new edition sold as rapidly as the first. Soon, copies were no longer available but Bergler's work continued to attract attention and by the end of 1961, he had analyzed nearly eighty authors.

Within this large group were some writers who turned to Bergler to alleviate difficulties not directly related to writing but the vast majority suffered from "writer's block." Bergler coined this term for the painful condition experienced by those who feel driven to write but are unable to produce for reasons beyond their conscious understanding or control. Pats on the head from friends or encouragement by teachers had been of no avail to the procession of writers who consulted Bergler. Many had tried psychoanalytic treatment based on the generally accepted theories of the time but with negative results. Bergler was ultimately able to record nearly 100 percent cure of the difficulty in those who persevered and completed

analysis based on his innovations in theory and methodology.*

Inquiries about the book, some of them nearly desperate in tone and one by telephone from as far away as Australia, have persisted over the years during which it has been out of print. Authors and analysts, with their original copies on hand or lucky enough to obtain used copies at ever-increasing cost from rare-book dealers, still quote passages in interviews, articles and books. A Spanish translation published in Argentina and an English edition are no longer available. An Italian translation, however, has been kept in print for fifteen years. The need for the volume has indicated for some time that a reprint of the original was inevitable.

What people still recognize and respond to in *The Writer and Psychoanalysis* is one of Bergler's greatest contributions to creative endeavor and accomplishment: his discovery of the unconscious "autarchic mechanism" that results in creativity—a fruitful sublimation and socially acceptable defense mechanism—rather than in the self-defeating floundering of writer's block.

According to Bergler's observations, clinically substantiated, neurotic symptoms have a five-layer structure the basis of which is stabilization on the rejection level. This deepest layer—*entirely unconscious* and a result of the infant's unavoidable misconception of reality—is the ego's wish to repeat the feeling of being refused by the unconsciously enshrined "bad mother image." (The original nurturer is viewed as an ogress even though she really may have been a devoted and loving parent.) This masochistic layer is covered by an ego defense—an unconscious pseudoaggressive attempt to deny the wish to be refused; the defense is necessary because the initial masochistic wish is vigorously attacked by inner conscience which vetoes the defense as well. The self-damaging results in the form of suffering comprise the fifth and most superficial layer.

The self-damaging outcome is more severe than cocktail-party wit would have it. To a blocked writer, the negative ending to the five-layer structure can be, at the very least, an acute embarrassment,

*First stated on page 262 of the text and again noted in *Curable and Incurable Neurotics*, Liveright Publishing Corp., New York 1961.

especially when friends ask (and then stop asking) when the "great novel" will be finished.

Though masochism's detrimental manifestations take on different forms in different people and can pervade the everyday life of a writer as in anyone else, a specific unconscious trait exists during the actual process of writing. Productive writers, unlike their blocked counterparts, have the *unique ability to effectively deny the masochistic attachment to the bad mother image by unconsciously managing to claim that no mother exists at all*. The formula has been poetically phrased as "mother and child together am I," with writers in effect giving of themselves and to themselves; this is the basis of the sublimation that results in creativity. The inner breakdown of this unification mechanism leads to the condition of writer's block.

The basic five-layer structure and all its ramifications as well as the unconscious steps taken by a writer to arrive at a creative solution are more fully explained in the text. Giving clinical and literary examples throughout, Bergler also considers such vitally related topics as inspiration, voyeurism and exhibitionism, hack writing, plagiarism, and talent. The subject of voyeurism-exhibitionism, as it relates to everyone, writers included, receives particularly extensive treatment in Bergler's *Curable and Incurable Neurotics*.*

Without emphasis on unconscious factors, the act of writing is unintelligible. Like all activities, writing is a conscious endeavor but it is motivated by unconscious forces. It can be said that when writers write, they know what they do not know. Each writer, in addition, has individual characteristics and is affected by different circumstances; no two people are alike whether writer or not. Analysis of a block in any person is most effective when these personal specifics are taken into consideration. Above all, the masochistic components that interfere with the autarchy or diminish the actual quality of writing must be reduced as much as possible. Bergler cautioned that the removal of writer's block alone is not sufficient to qualify for the term "cure" when neurosis and personality distortions still affect other areas of the psyche. In many instances, the writing

**Curable and Incurable Neurotics*, Liveright Publishing Corp., New York, 1961

itself can be improved by diminishing these self-damaging tendencies in the rest of the personality.

Discerning that "the real writer writes out of inner necessity to solve an inner conflict," Bergler could tell from the characteristics of patients whether their fictional characters accurately reflected the author's unconscious conflict or if they were merely cardboard figures such as critics rightfully deplore. When fictional characters and their actions represented a valid defense against an author's inner difficulty, Bergler could then analyze the characters themselves as if they were real people.

A case in point concerns a patient who had the experience of writing a novel during the early part of analysis. The heroine of this novel had a dream which puzzled the author who had created her. Bergler was able to analyze the dream both in relation to the heroine and in relation to the heroine's creator.

Equally concerned with the field of literary criticism, Bergler wrote many reviews of both fiction and technical psychiatric books. His admiration for good writing often led him to write letters of appreciation to authors and to quote them in his own books and papers. Ever the researcher, he would ask these writers whether their well-constructed characters were the result of intuition or of their own research. In this way, he was able to broaden the understanding gained from his intensive work with creative patients. By explaining his findings in books and articles, and detailing the steps he followed to arrive at his conclusions, he was able to lay the groundwork for future research which he felt to be vitally important to increased comprehension of the creative impulse.

As a prolific writer himself, an extensive reader and a creative thinker, Bergler was especially sympathetic to writers and their problems. He worked as a journalist to support himself through medical school in Vienna, and soon after receiving his medical degree, began to write scientific papers and books without pause. Eventually, he produced four books a year and achieved a total of over three-hundred papers. Nonetheless, in his analytic relationships with writers, he displayed none of the jealousy and malice often apparent in writers. He was known to recommend agents or give patients

tips—based on his own experience—on the realities facing them in the publishing world.

This volume is not only for blocked writers. So complete are the observations of the writer's personality and problems *per se* that even the most prolific author can glean a better understanding of what makes the pen or typewriter keep moving. Artists and composers who share the wellsprings of creativity can also take note. The person whose creative process is intact can learn from this book what leads to inspiration, how the source of creativity can be probed, and how flaws can be eliminated or diminished to permit even greater achievement.

Many reading lists for college literature and writing courses kept *The Writer and Psychoanalysis* on record for as long as copies could be obtained. Such lists can now have this title reinstated and again provide information to those who otherwise may be lost to the literary world because of problems with the creative process. Despite the increasing volume of work, there are many writers whose literary gifts have barely been tapped. They may not even know they are blocked or that, with help, their genuine yearning and abilities can be mobilized for the production of something worthwhile, enjoyable to others, and even beautiful and enduring.

Psychotherapists today working with Bergler's clinically confirmed theories and methods are still resolving full or partial blocks, not only in writers but also in other creative individuals to whom the basic theory applies. For the professional therapist, there is the satisfaction of helping overcome the patient's anguish caused by the inability to establish the inner autarchy. For those so far familiar with only briefer references to writing in Bergler's other books, this new printing will provide the entire exposition of Bergler's approach to the subject.

An unblocked writer may ultimately turn out to be without great talent but still experience considerable relief while writing. Another, who may produce good work but have difficulties in obtaining a publisher, can acquire the perseverance needed in the face of competition and gain hope for eventual acceptance. Still another may have achieved deserved recognition before becoming blocked. In the latter case, as Bergler concludes here, analysts who have been

FOREWORD TO THE 1968 PRINTING

called upon to delve into the causes of someone's lack of productivity and have helped effect the blossoming of a superior talent, can consider that they have not only performed a "job well done but a service to society."

I am indebted to a co-trustee, the psychiatrist Dr. Melvyn L. Iscove of Toronto, for careful readings of preliminary drafts of this foreword, together with his numerous suggestions for pertinent details to be included here. Dr. Iscove's clinical experience includes successful treatment of writers, painters and composers.

Rose J. Orente, Trustee

*Edmund and Marianne Bergler
Psychiatric Foundation*

New York, N.Y., October 1985

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

WHEN a book is out of print, the misconceptions about it—promoted by people who have never read it—become stabilized. These authoritative-sounding legends are made irrefutable by circumstance: no book, no correction of the myth. So it has been in the case of *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*; during the past three years this book has been unavailable, and exorbitant prices have been paid for second-hand copies. In the meantime, non-readers have been summing the book up with dicta such as: “That’s the book that took writers apart,” or “Oh, yes, that’s the book by the block-buster who hates writers,” or “He claims that writing is neurotic.” My slight amusement at their exhibitions of naivete parading as sophistication hardly compensated for these dicta.

Certain speculations have been invited by this attitude towards the out-of-print *Writer and Psychoanalysis*. Are writers—and especially people on the fringe of the writing profession—unusually prone to generalizations about books they themselves have not read? Must one, in order to “get along” with these people, acknowledge their mysterious gift of “original talent,” and compliment them effusively for being the self-appointed bearers of said God-given gift? Has reading become a rather out-dated exercise, supplanted by more modern means of communication,

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

such as cocktail-party conversations based on the claim that the speaker knows somebody who knows somebody who is rumored to have looked at that specific book (or more likely, at a review of the book)?

The fact is that the so thoroughly dissected book did not "take writers apart" just for the malicious fun of it. If it took them apart at all, it certainly put them safely together again. Does it make sense to claim that the surgeon takes the body apart in the course of the operation? Basically, this book is a clinical-medical treatise, expounding the psychoanalytic curability of "writer's block."

As to the alleged "hatred" of writers evinced in the book, this argument has already been refuted, in the Foreword to the first edition. If respect for the creative process in real writers, and humility in witnessing this process, denote hatred, then hatred it is.

Finally, there is no claim, anywhere in the book, that "writing is neurotic." This impression obviously arises from confusion between the neuroticism of writers in their private lives and writing as neurotic expression. On the contrary, the book states that writing is sublimation, and therefore a healthy, though temporary, defense against reproaches of the inner conscience.

Singling out these misunderstandings does not imply that my book was understood during its first lifetime. It received a great deal of critical attention, both friendly and inimical. It was hailed as "great scientific progress," as "novel," likely to "produce a radical change in the present attitude to writers and their art." This was one side of the "ingeniously presented theories containing enough evident truth"; the other side greeted the very same book as a "smear" worthy of a "Bronx cheer" (*verbatim!*) since "what the author reports that he sees sometimes makes you bug-eyed, but—is it science?" Frequently friend and foe alike approved or disapproved on the basis of emotional misreading. Some reviewers developed an "emotional reading block," obviously an occupational hazard comparable to "writer's block"—the difference being that the former does not prevent the "creating" of misleading reviews and consequently is no hindrance to one's earning
xiv

capacity, while the latter definitely impedes real productivity and thus spells financial ruin. In my essay, "Literary Critics Who Can Spell But Not Read,"¹ (see Supplement, page 267) I tried to summarize the tenor of two hundred reviews. The compilation and my refutation must have been convincing, since one of our leading critics (frequently considered *the* leading literary critic in this country) spontaneously wrote me subsequently, deploring in extremely sharp and unmincing terms the "ignorant" attitude of his fellow-critics.

As time went on, a manifest change in the attitude towards the book took place. The initial fury partially subsided, the rejection of the rejectors crystallized into the myth of the author's definite enmity towards writers, but—the possibility of cure of "writer's block" became known. More and more writers in analysis objected to the previously current theory that writing and its inhibitions are not a psychiatric problem. More and more writers entered (or wish to enter) analytic treatment for the express purpose of curing "writer's block."

This fact is the most hopeful practical aftermath of the sound and fury which greeted the book in 1950. The very author who allegedly "hates" writers has presented them with a specific technique of getting rid of their creative impotence, when and if it sets in. Peculiar hatred!

The *theoretical* assumptions on creativity, as stated in *The*

¹To bring my contributions to the process of artistic creativity up to date (earlier studies are quoted on pp. xiv and xv of the Foreword to the first edition):

"A New Misconception in Literary Criticism," *The American Imago*, 6:275-279, 1949; "Does Writer's Block Exist?", *The American Imago*, 7:44-54, 1950; "Myth, Merit and Mirage of Literary Style," *The American Imago*, 7:279-287, 1950; "The Dislike for Satire at Length," *The Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement*, 26:190-201, 1952; "Can the Writer 'Resign' From His Calling?", *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* (London), 34:40-42, 1953; "True Feelings and 'Tear-Jerkers' in Literary Work," *The American Imago*, 10:83-86, 1953; "Writers and Ulcus," *The American Imago*, 10:87-92, 1953; "Proust and the 'Torture-Theory' of Love," *The American Imago*, 10:265-288, 1953; *The Superego*, Chapter V, No. 2 ("Do You Have a Message for the Ages?"; pp. 112-120), Grune & Stratton, N.Y., 1952.

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

Writer and Psychoanalysis, are still fully maintained by me. Just as there exists (in my opinion) but *one* basic neurotic difficulty (as elaborated in my books, *The Basic Neurosis*, *Neurotic Counterfeit-Sex*, *The Superego*, Grune & Stratton, 1949, 1951, 1952 respectively), going back to unconscious masochistic vicissitudes in earliest infancy, and later solved or unsolved—there exists but *one* topic for writing, though one with hundreds of secondary elaborations.² Therefore, I have neither changed nor added a line to the original text. The maze of misunderstandings in reviews I have tried to counteract by adding, as a supplement, my study on “emotional reading block.”

Habent sua fata libelli—Terentianus Maurus’ dictum on the strange fate of books—did not include the peculiar fact that books can achieve what mortals cannot: a second chance in a revival. For the sake of victims of “writer’s block,” I hope that in this revival *The Writer and Psychoanalysis* will meet with less emotionalism and more understanding.

EDMUND BERGLER

New York, 1954.

²To those skeptics who believe that I exaggerate the masochistic components in writers, I recommend Mario Praz’ *The Romantic Agony* (Oxford University Press, London, 1951). It should be understood, however, that the Italian author Praz makes a specific distinction between masochistic and sadistic attitudes, without being familiar with the fact that sadism in *adults* is but an inner defense against more deeply repressed masochism.

FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

AS a physician and clinician I have been confronted again and again with the problem of artistic creativity. The medical aspect of this problem is always one and the same—to alleviate and remove suffering. The writers (and other artists) who consulted me did not come to find out about the unconscious sources of their calling. They came with only one purpose in mind—to be cured of their “writing block” (a euphemism for sterility of productivity), so they could resume their productivity.

The inhibited writer is rather a tragicomic figure, and, to the ironic or malicious outsider, he is often a ridiculous one. His rationalizations for his lack of production are regarded as excuses or, in some cases, as a lack of talent. Many and varied are the maneuvers of the truly blocked writer in his attempts to get started again: the poor man sharpens his pencil to take notes, then finds the point still not sharp enough; the typewriter stares up at him like a reproachful face; he is simply not in the mood, but will be tomorrow (except that tomorrow never comes); he feels a slight nausea and must first cure his upset stomach; he would like a drink, but one drink calls for more, and more drinks make him sleepy; he indulges in fantasies of grandeur, cashes in on achievements never reached, and at the end of all his twisting and turning feels only deep depression.