

EDITORIAL: PSYCHE IN CYCLES

by

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This special issue with the title “Psyche in Cycles”¹ brings together twelve pieces written by the undergraduate students from School of English who attended the creative writing course that was offered during the winter semester 2013 with emphasis on narrative medicine.

What is narrative medicine? In the late 1980s, Dr. Rita Charon M.D. went to the English Department at Columbia University to ask the professors there if they could teach a doctor something about stories. As a physician at Columbia, early in her practice of medicine, Dr. Charon had come to understand that the care of patients unfolds in stories and that the better she understood her patients’ stories, the better she might attend to those in her care. Not only did she learn from her study with literary scholars a bit about the theory and structure of story, but Dr. Charon remained to earn a Ph.D. in English Literature. In the year 2000, more convinced than ever that the study of narrative has the power to change how physicians are trained and how medical care is given, Dr. Charon assembled a professional cohort from medicine and the humanities founding the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, New York. Narrative medicine is an interdisciplinary practice that applies all the tools that literary scholars are so familiar with—close reading, active listening, reflective writing—to the clinical encounter between patient and physician.

Narrative medicine allows us to understand that writers and literary scholars can and do have impact on the real world as is the case with doctors and health care professionals. So we hope that the writings this issue offers will shed light on how narrative medicine in conjunction with literature and cultural studies can inspire an understanding of our human condition that moves beyond medical reports and tests, and medicinal prescriptions by bringing to the fore the emotional complexities patients and medical doctors experience in coming to terms with the challenges of illness, pain, and death. Charon in her book *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (2006) claims that “[t]he more we learn about how human beings tell of themselves in general, the more we can respect the

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diagnostic importance of what our patients tell us and, perhaps, the more effectively we can really listen. Patients are by no means the only ones to be telling of themselves. They join with the culture at large in doing so, thereby enacting the continuity between being sick and being alive” (67). What these words underline is the centrality of storytelling in human communities and its reciprocal dynamic coming both from patients and doctors in an attempt to ensure survival and healing.

The writings presented in this issue are the outcome of a semester-long creative writing course. The students were invited to explore works of American Literature in the context of Illness and Trauma, and to respond to what they have learned in these works by writing creative works of their own. The student works were inspired, for example, by their reading of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the life writing of Audre Lorde, the fiction of Tim O’Brien, the drama of Charles Mee, and by their forming “medical alliances” with the writings of such medical and health care professionals as Rita Charon, Sayantani Das Gupta, Arthur Kleinman and with visiting physicians as well as artists.² The student pieces draw on various literary styles and genres touching on topics such as AIDS and epidemics, ability and disability, doctors and hospitals, illness and identity, illness and the family. Almost all of the works are accompanied by a self-reflective response in an effort to enhance the creative dialogue between writing practice and narrative medicine scholarship.

In particular, in the duet “Wandering Hopes,” dancers Philip Christofi and Annie Sakellariou weave their individual stories together in an attempt to choreograph a journey through injury and loss, releasing the strengths hidden in their own scars, physical and emotional. While responding to psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman’s notion of being “marked by a special kind of pain” (294), they draw encouragement from psychiatrist Christine Montross who writes in her online blog that illness enables “mysteries to unravel.”

Entering the body of a drug user in her dramatic monologue “A Dangerous Trip,” Despoina Papadopoulou captures the experience of a young, healthy mind’s deterioration into paranoia. Papadopoulou has studied writings by psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman and neurologist Oliver Sacks in order to develop insights into the nature of addiction and the physiological effects of drug use.

Lizzy Pournara’s “The Ballad of the Body” operates like a medieval morality play in which anthropomorphized body parts, rather than vices and virtues, are set at war with one another. Spurred by Charon’s exhortation that “illness and suffering must be told” (65), Pournara dramatizes the importance of patient narrative in preserving whole-body integrity when faced with the fragmenting effects of illness and trauma.

² The students had the opportunity to converse and work with Dr. Vassiliki Koulourida, Microbiologist, from Papageorgiou Hospital in Thessaloniki, Dr. Simeon Metallidis from the Infectious Diseases Division part of the 1st Department of Internal Medicine in AHEPA University Hospital in Thessaloniki, and Athina Dragkou, performance artist, from A4M Performing Group in Thessaloniki.

What begins as life writing for Evgenia Kleidona develops into a work of fiction and a multimedia performance. Writing her short story “Corpus Delicti,” she uncovers her deepest fears and strongest wishes. In the accompanying video, she recruits her own body as landscape on which different experiences are recorded and enacted. Inspired by the concept of “relationally created self” (74) in Charon’s *Narrative Medicine*, Kleidona comes to understand that life writing can function not simply as a form of documentation or reporting or even self-reflection, but rather as a form of recreation of reality and of our own selves.

In “Iota Sign,” Ignatios Charalampidis focuses on body memory by following his female character’s transformation after being subjected to a brain and heart transplant. Drawing on Thomas Fuchs’s article “The Memory of the Body,” Charalampidis is interested in understanding how our bodies retain as well as acquire new habits, skills or patterns of behavior. The highly technologically and medically advanced setting of his story does not guarantee the character’s well being. Charalampidis explores the complexity of human actions and emotions while sharing with us a much more deep-seated doubt whether scientific progress secures human happiness.

Ruoxi Zhu’s short fiction “A Farewell” works as a confessional piece elaborating on the emotional upheaval and trauma a child feels when family harmony dissolves. The main character’s interior monologue provides an insight into the inner scars and traumas that are created when due to the loss of strong familial bonds the individual gradually withdraws from external reality into a world haunted by doubt and guilt.

Victoria Tzoannou’s “Love Triangle” dramatizes, with a touch of magical realism, the relationship between a patient, a tumor and a surgeon, all of them caught up in a relationship of both control and dependence. At the same time it highlights the irony both our knowledge and ignorance about our own bodies triggers. Found on the operation table, the narrator has the opportunity to self reflect on her condition as well as on her own body not as a separate entity but as a companion through life’s interesting journey. It is the reconciliation with our own bodies that the story proposes as well as with our fears, uncertainties and anxieties. The story is supplemented by a poem bearing the title “Incision” that is presented as an entry point into the wonders of the human body as well as a reminder of medical intervention. Tzoannou’s story, through a multiplicity of voices and points of view, challenges readers to take a distance from and at the same time identify with their inner bodily reality, a process that leads to a different awakening and consciousness building.

“Puzzling” by Michalis Michalodimitrakis is a dramatic monologue that elaborates on the emotional dilemmas of a dyslexic character. By allowing us access to his main character’s inner thoughts, Michalodimitrakis invites us to reconsider the fine line between normality and abnormality in addition to the various attitudes that we may adopt or observe around us when it comes to certain mental conditions. Being particularly drawn to G. Thomas Couser’s exploration of disability, Michalodimitrakis in his play confronts us with the stereotypes we often construct; but what happens when a so-called defect proves to be someone’s special gift? The romantic ending to the story provides an

alternative reading of the dyslexic character's initial dilemmas that here transform into a message of acceptance and positive outlook on life.

Anna Koronioti's "A Story about Freedom" works as a confessional and empowering narrative after a self-confrontational experience. This dramatic monologue records the narrator's effort in coming to terms with her own demons after a self-inflicted dieting experience that turns into a bulimic nightmare. The story focuses on the narrator's inner battle that has led her from self-destruction to self-empowerment.

Konstantina Daskalopoulou's "Fear of Contamination" offers an insight into the stereotypes and prejudice that still exist nowadays when it comes to certain contagious diseases, as is the case of HIV. Through the use of the short story format and interpersonal dialogue, Daskalopoulou effectively reveals the behavioral patterns that determine characters' body and gestural language when it comes to taboo health issues. It is not accidental that she resorts in her story to a male and female character, as this allows her to communicate their reactions and emotional outbursts to her readers in a way that implicates all, regardless of gender. The story closes in a reconciliatory tone making us understand that fear caused by ignorance can lead only to isolation and damaging behavior.

In Marianna Chatzidimitriou's "Between the Lines," the main character is a seven-year-old girl named Lina who finds out, while wandering around the different wards in a hospital, about the death of her little sister. There is an enigmatic quality in Chatzidimitriou's writing reinforced both by the title of the story and its ending. The tragic characters here are Lina, who indirectly finds out about her grave family loss, and the surgeon, who has to communicate the bad news to the family. Playing with silence and inference, the story moves between instantaneous impressions and events in an attempt to highlight the complexity of communication in the face of a traumatic event, the loss of a loved one.

Chunxiao Wei's "Encounter with the Doctors" is a one-act gently satirical play that brings together doctor personas from various cultural contexts and time frames spanning from ancient Greece to China to popular TV series. It resembles a time-travel narrative where voices from the past and the present intermingle. This kind of narrative structure is further reinforced by the main character's hallucinatory experience, triggered by a severe headache. The humorous dialogue in Wei's piece brings to the surface diverse attitudes that highlight the cultural centrality of the doctor figure throughout time.

We hope that you will find that, in the hands of our students, the very serious topics their writings touch upon are approached with hope, vigor, and a great appreciation for the complexity of life. Charon herself notes in *Narrative Medicine*: "Knowing something about the body grants us the license to near another. It grants us admission to a proximity to the self of the other and, by reflection, of ourselves"(xii). This is exactly what these plays, poems, and stories attempt to do, through an exteriorization of fictionalized experience to help us interrogate and eventually understand our own deepest fears, accept our vulnerability and engage in fruitful conversation first with ourselves and then with those around us.

Works Cited

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