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My response to Roland Barthes's *The Grain of the Voice* and/in/as autobiography

Abstract:

Most academics, students, critics, readers and writers are very familiar with the term 'voice' as applied to writing. This is particularly so of narrative fiction, but 'voice' is also evident in narrative non-fiction. In this paper I identify an unintentional authorial 'voice' that intrudes into the text as a sub-voice that I as reader identify. I propose that the author is unaware of her or his unintentional interaction with self, text and reader. This paper explores and focuses upon this 'unintentional' received authorial voice which I call the 'sub-voice' in autobiography. I go on to wonder if this is liminal.

Biographical note:

Dr Josie Arnold is the inaugural Professor of Writing at Swinburne University of Technology. She has taught for 45 years and has had over 40 books published in a number of genres including poetry, film, drama CDROM and curriculum. She is currently writing a series of magic games-based books for pre-teenagers. Her research is focused upon the practical implications of critical and cultural theories. As both a writer and an academic, she is engaged in research upon culture and globalisation and has published on cyber issues. She is particularly interested in how teachers might utilise electronic deliveries to enhance teaching and learning. Since 2002, she has set up for the University the Master of Arts (Writing) and a Practice Led Research PhD following an artefact and exegesis model. She currently works with PhD candidates, and applies her pedagogical as well as writing and academic skills to such supervision. She still finds teaching a most rewarding occupation, seeing students as the future. She has received three Swinburne University Teaching Awards, and was the recipient of a 2006 National Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning: *'For excellence in the pedagogy of postgraduate courses including the PhD by artefact and exegesis and developing a-synchronous virtual materials for the Master of Arts.'*

Keywords:

autobiography—authorial voice—threshold voice—subjective academic narrative

Introduction

This paper arises from my reading and interacting with Roland Barthes book *The Grain of the Voice* (1985). (Unless otherwise given, all references to Barthes are from that text). In this paper, I am proposing that a sub-voice exists in texts that is derived by the reader of the text and not known to the writer. I address this as liminality. The word derives from the latin for ‘threshold’: the space between the inside and outside; the known and the unknown. I propose that this sub-voice that makes itself available to the reader of the text may be best expressed as within this liminal space between knowing and not knowing.

We might learn here from Victor Turner, whose anthropological work about social drama in/as ritual moved from seeing ritual as fixed in meaning to being ‘reconceived as a crucible for the emergence of original meaning, of new ways of structuring relations and for reorienting experience’ (Kapferer 2008: 5). This provides another understanding of liminality, and of this autobiographical sub-voice I am proposing through expressing the ‘virtuality of reality’ and ‘the actual possibility of imagined events’. Autobiography requires of both the writer as reader and the reader as writer that we act as ‘real people acting in relation to one another, often passionately’ (Turner 2008: 26).

Edith Turner speaks of liminality as ‘dreams of how things might be, the getting inside of another’s personality’ (2008: 26). The autobiography aims to do this for the writer as well as the reader. In revealing the existential paradox of being, such placing of self upon the page can never be seen as an act of rationality alone, or perhaps of rationality at all. Rather, autobiography in a liminal sense walks the rim of the opposing forces of paradox and in doing so produces energy.

Autobiography and memoir, which I will treat as one, are deeply informative texts that claim a veracity and an acknowledged space as a truth not available to texts proclaimed to be fictional or based upon other forms of research. Yet autobiography provides a complex interplay between self, other, time and place within the text – the personal landscape intersecting with the cultural landscape – and just as complex a relationship between the writer and reader within and even beyond the given text. This is true whether or not the autobiographic text claims this scholarly ambition. It is the concept of a liminal sub-voice that I wish to introduce into this paper.

In writing/reading/writing Roland Barthes’s book *The Grain of the Voice* (1985), I am not attempting to provide a persuasive structured argument about autobiography...or, indeed about Roland Barthes’ book itself. This paper uses my reading of this book as a point of departure for *my* narrative about reading this book and reacting to it. This will satisfy some readers and distress others. Those who are satisfied may see a narrative methodology that could also be termed autoethnographic: others may see a lack of traditional knowledge structures commensurate with the requirements for submission for conference proceedings or refereed publication.

Methodology

In developing a response to the ideas I gleaned from my readerly-writing of Barthes' book, I am following the ideas of Canadian academic Gregory Ulmer (1985) who identifies a 'mystorical' approach to thinking and research. A 'mystory' puts under erasure all claims to fact/authenticity in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical. It questions the dominant analytico-referential model of knowledge. At the same time it accords with much late 20th and early 21st century thinking about the self, the culture and even the world as a text to be constructed and read.

Ulmer's mystorical approach opens up the text to many possible readings: there is no 'one way'. Thus even the act of writing, much less the lived experience of being, displays itself as non-authoritative in the conventional sense. The implications of this are manifold. For me, perhaps the most important – and the most galvanising – is that the academic life and academic writing and language are now able to be seen as open, explorative and aware of their own evanescent nature in the same way as any other form of written or lived discourse. That is, academic writing can be understood as related to and made up of multiple ways of respecting various personal experiences.

Personal narrativity is beginning to be seen as an integral aspect of knowledge itself; that is, to be epistemologically sound. There is a growing body of researchers who claim that narrative non-fiction, even subjective autobiography, is in fact the basis for all published research, most particularly and obviously in the social sciences, and as such should be seen as important in both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Mary Midgely alerts scholars to the seductive simplicity of Enlightenment concepts (2004: 5), arguing that cultural 'norms' celebrate the scientific knowledge model because it has led to so many demonstrable advantages (Midgely 2004: 9). Yet this celebration ignores what has been lost or has not occurred because of this dominance. Such cultural interstices are an important element enabling the growth of feminist poetics that act to draw together multiple ways of thought, enquiry, research, theory and practice. The academy, ways of knowing, pedagogy, theory and practice are entwined.

Jane Gallop is a proponent of enacting an academic feminism that breaks down the barrier between the professional and the personal through what she calls 'anecdotal theory' (Gallop 2002:7). Such thinking accords with the postmodernist dispersal of paradigmatic thought which urges the academy to accept alternative ways of knowing. It also coincides with Jacques Derrida's (1983) ideas of not doing again what has already been done and accords with what I call 'fictional truth' (Arnold 2007), and 'subjective academic narrative' (Arnold 2009). Perhaps this personal narrativity within the text is also what we bring to the text as Barthes' 'readerly-writer'.

Autobiography

Barthes speaks of his 4 'regimes' as a writer: I, He, You, and R.B (1985: 216). These are all consciously perceived and understood-to-be voices that he produces as a writer and recognises as a reader of his own work. It is, perhaps, yet another 'voice' that engages my attention: that which we as readers bring to our inner ear from what we read that comes out of the text yet, it would seem, is an unintended echo of the scriptor's voice and an unintended relationship with the listener/reader from both the scriptor's and reader's positions.

For example, Linda Mclean's 1981 memoir *Pumpkin pie and faded sandshoes* is deceptively simple in tone and presentation. Yet its story of the Great Depression in Australia and its effects on her family is riveting in itself, as a piece of social history and because it gives voice to an individual from a sector of society that might otherwise remain mute.

The loss of his home and furniture, was a bitter blow to my father...we were good people. My parents had worked hard, never asking for anything they hadn't first earned. They had always paid their debts until the great depression (1981: 82).

Later, her family live under canvas in a labour camp while her father works on building the Queensland train line known as 'The Sandy Hollow Line'. Here,

although we were all fond of the horses, we did feel a certain resentment that they were treated better than our menfolk. They were given certain rest periods in heat waves, but the men had to keep going, from seven in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon with a half hour break for lunch (152).

Throughout her autobiography, it is easy to identify Barthes's 'regimes', but I also identify a class-conscious voice that is both plaintive and assertively angry: that is taking the chance to be heard by the reader through the unconscious rather than conscious interaction with/by the scriptor. It provides a useful example of how autobiography frees up more than the givens that appear in Barthes's 'regimes'.

Applying Barthes's 'regimes' to Linda McLean's autobiography show that she has insights into the writerly voice of herself as the first-person narrator: the 'I' voice that Roland Barthes describes. This is available to the reader who also understands the ways in which we might read her as 'she' (comparable with Barthes's 'he') and 'you' when she addresses the reader both directly and indirectly. Her insights into herself as writer who has experienced and then recorded this memoir are the equivalent of Barthes's recognition of the grain of his voice as 'R.B.'.

Autobiography: Spoken writing

In his lecture on transcription, 'From speech to writing' (1985), Barthes offers us the opportunity to question whether or not speech is 'embalmed' when it is turned into writing. In doing so, he reminds us that speech is not 'innocent', but is itself interred(?) in cultural influences (3-7). Furthermore, he asserts that as '...all the watered silk of our image-repertoire, the personal play of ourself; speech is dangerous because it is immediate and cannot be taken back...scription, however has plenty of

time'(4). He further considers speech as having eruptions that expose the thought behind what we are saying as part of saying it: he calls these 'expletives of thought' that are 'often sparing' in writing. He states the obvious in his observation that 'writing is not speech' (6). What he goes on to say is of great interest to me in the context of this paper:

In writing, what is *too* present in speech (in a hysterical fashion) and *too* absent from transcription (in a castatory fashion), namely the body, returns, but along a path which is indirect, measured, musical, and in a word, *right*, returning through pleasure, and not through the Imaginary (the image) (7).

The relationship of writing and inscription is important in autobiography, as it claims to be the guaranteed voice of the author herself or himself. Autobiography almost always reads as a seductive speech situation in which private discourse occurs between the autobiographer (a self and cultural voyeur) and the voyeur-reader. This is what makes the autobiographic genre particular: it is also the most elusive and illusory reality, as all autobiographies rely upon unreliable memory and particular views of the personal, interpersonal and cultural landscapes.

Barack Obama's autobiography (2004) certainly reveals a 'voice' that seems to me as a reader to be much more revealing of his self than the carefully worked over text claims/proclaims. Perhaps it is more like speech that cannot be taken back when a text reveals the writer's voice in a way that is not subject to the writer's command. In this way, there is that aspect of the text that is clearly 'readerly-writing'. Obama's acknowledged textual voice is that of an older man looking at what has formed and informed him to make him a black man in America. In itself it is tremendously engaging and insightful. I came to it from hearing him read it on radio. He is a wonderful writer and reader: but there is this voice, that I call a sub-voice although that is not a completely satisfactory term, that I am investigating that even such a powerful and gifted man cannot control. In his case, I heard that voice as both plaintive and angry. The dominant plaintive sub-voice was evoked by questions such as:

Where is my father? Why do women have so much power over my upbringing? The parallel angry sub-voice evoked in me in my identification of such questions as: Why am I not a significant man because I am black in America? Why do people lie and cheat and must do so to survive, particularly if they are poor and coloured? Why do the whites do this to be rich and powerful?

There are many further illustrations that are in this text of what I nominate as my opinion of Obama's plaintive sub-voice. To give a close analysis of the whole text is not appropriate here. Nor does it illustrate the narrativity of this paper, which is a personal opinion of the text. My thesis is not about close reading of the texts I have briefly considered here. Nor is it about an illustration of non-traditional narrative theory such as what Gallop (2002) has termed 'anecdotal theory'. This is an attempt to have a theoretical perspective that engages and enriches in an 'exorbitant' manner, and not to have a theoretical perspective that leads to barriers of academic language, intent and research boundaries related more to the Natural Sciences than to life stories.

our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play of language, since dynamic rather than fixed forms seem more to our liking' (Gallop 2002: 1).

It is my opinion, unsupported by quasi-scientific textual analysis, that Obama's book will be a text for all politicians, as it reveals both purposively and in this sub-voice, so much of the man who is in the most powerful position in the world.

Autobiography: Fact and fiction intersect

There is still debate about qualitative and quantitative in the social sciences. I am following Jane Gallop who proposes that 'anecdotal theory' is a feminist activity that enables non-patriarchal ways of thinking and doing academic work. It aims to 'tie theorizing to lived experience... anecdotal theory must be... the juncture where theory finds itself compelled—against its will, against its projects—to think where it has been forced to think' (Gallop 2002: 15). Indeed, Gallop forces us to consider theory itself as an act of power that disempowers others. belle hooks agrees: 'I am constantly amazed at how difficult it is to cross borders in this white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society' (2006: 6). It is not, she avers, an act of will but social privilege that enables such border crossing; it relies upon material, educational and cultural advantage that privileges individuals. Her aim is to establish how borders can be crossed by others (the 'non-us' of 'them and us'?) who enact multicultural and colonized backgrounds of repression so that there is freedom of movement available to all who desire to enact it.

Today, the autobiographical text comes into being to redeem social and cultural experiences that would be lost within the traditional patriarchal and paternalistic canon of famous men recording their lives and times. Although the traditional canon did include women, the model that was followed was a patriarchal one of defined upper class structures and achievements. Hence, there is little recorded in this way about the everyday lives of men or women.

Bernard Smith's 1985 memoir, *The Boy Adeodatus: The portrait of a lucky young bastard*, bridges the gap between fame and the underbelly of society. Smith, an illegitimate baby (Adeodatus was the illegitimate son of the Pope and Saint Augustine) is farmed out by his mother in times when many such children became wards of the state. Her bravery is rewarded because the family chosen to look after him provide him with much that supports him into his later high social and artistic position as scholar and interpreter of the visual arts.

Some would say that the Keens were poor. But they never thought of themselves as poor. The children in that house were never hungry. Old Dad managed a vegetable patch... It was harder, he said, for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, and he showed Ben where it was written down in the bible. A proud family who kept their own counsel (1985: 6).

Bernard Smith, of course, went on from this very humble background to become a foremost Australian scholar and interpreter of the visual arts, a Professor of Contemporary Art at The University of Melbourne, and the President of the Australian

Academy of the Humanities. His 'sub-voice' is one of powerlessness, hopefulness, and a sense of being saved from despair.

Autobiography and/as history

Gunter Grass has written an ironic and deeply self-questioning autobiography entitled revealingly entitled as *Peeling the Onion* (2008). In this text he reveals much personal angst about his mistakes in life and also tends to hide from his enormous successes. He deals with his life story by using ironic-defence techniques to distance himself from the one that was, the one that is, and the famous writer, as well as to leave behind his families. This also allows him to draw what he mainly chooses to distance in when and how as he chooses to do so. The only way that he seems to be able to deal with the exigencies and triumphs of his life is to utilise unceasing irony. This can be tiresome, yet makes the book both a fascinating and difficult read. It is, however, what I have called the 'sub-voice' that interests me here.

Grass displays this as a deep guilt at his lack of moral formation during his teenage years under the Nazis and his service in the SS. Speaking of the aftermath of the war, when young Germans were shown material relating to the holocaust and prison camps, he says revealingly:

It was some time before I came gradually to understand and hesitantly to admit that I had unknowingly – or, more precisely, unwilling to know – taken part in a crime that did not diminish over the years and for which no statute of limitations would ever apply, a crime that grieves me still. Guilt and the shame it engendered can be said, like hunger, to gnaw, gnaw ceaselessly. Hunger I suffered only for a time, but shame ... (2008: 196).

Grass is an accomplished wordsmith. He knows that when he finishes a section like this ('but shame...') that the readers will fill in for him, and probably do so sympathetically. What interests me about his sub-voice is that he tries to control it in this way. He allows the apparently 'authentic' voice to come through as though he is extremely intimate and self-revelatory, then the dominant ironic self-deprecating tone takes over. What is serious and what is not? His sub-voice, to me, is one that seeks always to control by pleading never to take life too seriously. Yet its very presence often belies the apparently serious sections and interpolations. It speaks to my ear of an autobiographer who seeks to tell his story whilst taking no real responsibility for what it contains. It is the sub-voice of the *jongleur*, the person who entertains but does not reach any inner reality for the reader or for himself.

Grass's autobiography does not claim to be a history in itself. Yet autobiography is inherently placed within a person, a time, a space and a place. Should autobiography be subject to historical authentication? Should it be involved in asking crucial questions about society: 'do things mean something?' (Barthes 1985: 10) This question does not need to be encased in the traditional uses of patriarchal Western autobiography which were to record the lives of great men and hence provide both a memorial and a rule of life for others to follow. It is in essence an existential question, and it would be irredeemable if autobiography was to be confounded by it.

Conclusion

It would appear that autobiography provides facts in a fictional as well as non-fictional way, thus providing some evidence of the falseness of that dichotomy. Nevertheless, autobiography has traditionally been perceived as too unreliable and personal to be viewed as a contribution to knowledge in the same way as ‘serious academic research methodologies’ in what Roland Barthes calls ‘a society that honors “scientificity”’ (130). In the lexicon of genre, autobiographies sit uneasily, therefore, somewhere between fact and fiction. They also sit between the spoken and the written so that autobiography has the capacity to shape a particular social discourse by bringing the two together. Certainly McLean’s multiple voices do provide access to knowledge about the lived experience of the Great Depression that scientific objectivity (whatever that might mean in the humanities context) could never convey and, moreover, ought not be expected to convey. Roland Barthes’s *The Grain of the Voice* alerted me to the liminal voice within autobiography. In responding to his insights into his own voice, I have attempted to identify a sub-voice that is another and possibly more evanescent aspect of the reader as writer of the text.

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