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Transacting trauma: reader transaction theory and fictocritical infinity

Abstract:

Empathy is defined as the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. However there has been a long-held belief that empathy has limitations as feelings and thoughts, although they can be talked about by others, cannot be seen, or had by them, leaving empathy as an approximation of what is felt. In contemporary theories of empathy personal experience and self-awareness are seen as the shaping forces behind how close the approximation of feelings and thoughts can be. Psychoanalysis shows that it is possible to improve self-awareness and challenges the contexts of our self-narratives, raising the question of whether it is possible to construct an experienced and aware self which is capable of a higher, more accurate empathetic response. Through the lens of psychoanalysis this paper will explore the empathetic relationship between reader and trauma texts using reader transaction theory and fictocriticism. Reader transaction theory emphasises a dialogic relationship between reader and text and will be used to demonstrate how the reading experience develops self-awareness and how that awareness shapes further reading experiences. This development of self will be combined with fictocriticism, a genre which occurs in the excess of speech and knowledge, in an attempt to fill in the gaps in the empathetic experience of a traumatic text. This combination of reader transaction and fictocriticism will be used to explore the following question: **What are the limits, in the reading process, on forming a complete understanding of a traumatic experience?**

Biographical note:

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Key words:

Empathy – trauma – reader transaction – fictocriticism – self – text – experience

Introduction

Hume states that 'feelings, and thoughts and images and pains ... although they can be talked about by others cannot be seen, or had by them' (Hume 1738). What Hume refers to here is the ultimate failure of communicating, in totality, the experience of one person to another. Empathy, in its current form, is defined as the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person (MacIsaac 1997). This raises the question of how far one could think or feel oneself into the life of another. Empathy has been shown to be related to a number of learned skills and cultural knowledges and that they impose limitations on what, and how much, of another's experience can be understood. This leaves empathy as an approximate understanding of an emotional experience. This paper will interrogate how close we can approximate that understanding and ask the question: What are the limits, in the reading process, on forming a complete understanding of a traumatic experience? To answer this question the paper will explore through the lens of psychoanalysis the limits of empathetic response to shared written trauma and offer the dialogic reader transaction theory and the contradictory and contrasting act of fictocriticism as ways of challenging those limits.

What is written trauma?

Trauma writing is the process of articulating negative experiences for exploration and understanding. It is a process that draws upon multiple theories of language, memory, pain, subjectivity, identity, creativity, and the unconscious (Murphy and Neilsen 2008) to construct an organised story within the individual. The construction of stories are a 'natural human process' that helps individuals to understand their experiences and themselves (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). By converting emotions and images into words a change occurs in the way that a person organises and thinks about their trauma. Through the integration of thoughts and feelings into past experiences a person can then construct a coherent narrative of their trauma (Pennebaker & Seagal 1999) capable of being more easily shared.

This constructed narrative can be beneficial in making our complex experiences more simple and understandable but, at the same time, they distort our recollection of them (Pennebaker & Seagal 1999). Once through the catharsis of reconstruction and integration there is a true separation from, and hence a forgetting of, what went before (Webb 2003). When recalling this story later we have the tendency to fill in the gaps in our story to make it more cohesive and complete (Pennebaker & Seagal 1999). The overall effect of constructing a good narrative is that our recollection of emotional events is efficient—in that we have a relative short, compact story—and undoubtedly biased (Pennebaker & Seagal 1999). The construction of narrative and the translation of distress into language ultimately ends in a type of forgetting, a forgetting that has an impact on the sharing of the story as well as how it is received.

What are the empathetic limits of reading trauma?

When reading shared trauma there are several limiting factors on an individual's ability to empathetically understand another's experience. This onus of the understanding is both on the individual who has experienced the traumatic event and the person who is empathetically responding. Firstly, it relies on the text that is shared to be an accurate representation of the

emotional experience and following that the reader should be equipped with the skills necessary to understand what has been shared once the information has been internalised. These two issues have a series of underlying problems including memory, testimony, aesthetics, ethics, identity and the imagination.

For the witness of the event, the construction of the trauma narrative is not easy as traumatic memory is often repressed or forgotten due to the event being encoded by the brain in a different way from ordinary memory (Radstone 2007). The memory of a traumatic event has a suspended origin which is marked by the absence of memory traces (Radstone 2007). In trauma theory the absence of these traces highlights how the individual's mental representation's relates to a traumatic event or actuality. Trauma theory constitutes, 'not so much a theory of recovered memory as ... one of recovered referentiality' (Radstone 2007).

The recovering of references to construct meaning and narrative from experience is an important process for individuals who have suffered trauma. The recovery of references indicates an engagement with deeper thought-processes around the traumatic experience. This is an important task as those who have suffered trauma engaging primarily with surface level processing of sensory impressions, rather than more in-depth contextual and meaning related elements of the traumatic events, are at greater risk of developing amongst other problems, post-traumatic stress disorder (Halligan et.al 2003). For example in the written context Webb (2003) offers us this narrative generation as catharsis, and as a way of navigating depression 'by crafting our own territory, a place of safety in the midst of chaos, a place from which we can emerge into, and participate in, the wider community'. Narrative construction has also helped other mental illnesses such as anxiety as well as those suffering from drug dependency and homelessness (Alschuler 1997). The construction of narrative helps traumatised individuals on an emotional level that is useful not only for PTSD and other mental health issues, also offers usefulness when shared in the written form.

The addition of narrative to trauma is a step in the process of recovery as the designing and telling of a life story is a 'purgative, reconstructive, integrative, transformative activity' (Chandler 1989). These self-understandings are important to have developed for empathy as self-awareness is a necessary condition for mental state attribution and cognitive empathy (Gallup & Platek 2002 p37). Transformations of self-narrative from the reconstruction and purging, while useful to the person who experienced the event, have further implications to consider for the reader once the even has been shared.

What is empathy?

Empathy takes place in the realm of fiction and the imagination, in mimesis, as well as in representation and reproduction. Heinz Kohut (1957) describes empathy as 'vicarious introspection' (247), a process by which we may be introspective of our own experiences and learn what it may be like for another person in a similar psychological circumstance, namely, a sort of projected understanding. Kohut suggests that our experiences can never be the same as another person only that we can approximate what it might be like for another person (MacIsaac 1997). He further states that an awareness of our own attenuated experiences of abuse, such as feeling unwanted or rejected 'is sufficient to allow us to empathise' (vicariously introspect) with another's more severe abuse or trauma (MacIsaac 1997). The gap between the

actual experience and the empathised experience is closed with an imagined understanding.

The imagination plays a crucial part in empathy as the space between event and understanding constantly fluctuates (Kerr 2003 p187) and needs something that can adapt alongside it. This adaptation, for Kearny (in Kerr 2003 p187) is seen as oscillation or playing. The imagination, for empathy, needs to play in a way which animates and enlarges our response to the other (Kearny 1988). This imagination, to be capable of meaningful empathetic response is dependent on the subjective nature of aesthetic experience (Kerr 2003). Empathy is therefore a subjective construct built from learned experiences, relations, and ethical understandings of community.

The empathetic response to shared trauma is an individual reading of what must belong to a collective experience (Kerr 2003). This collective experience of trauma includes the imagination and subjective understandings, thus opening questions of truth. If the trauma shared is a constructed narrative with omissions and amendments is the empathetic response and understanding limited in its capacity for truth? Does this affect the empathetic response? The contemporary way of attempting to address these questions is through the use of testimony which focuses on ideals of truth against the subjectivity of shared experiences.

There are two main problems with the use of testimony in contemporary theory. Firstly, the term testimony is often used in a way that tends to create the illusion of unanimity of meaning (Plant 2007) which we have seen previously is not the case. Secondly, questions of testimony are epistemological and ethico-political. Plant argues that ethically motivated sensitivity to the suffering of others presents the risk of indefinitely suspending apparently cold epistemological issues raised by testimony; specifically questions of truth (Plant 2007). For Plant, attending to how someone perceives their situation cannot simply override questions of what their situation actually is.

In the act of testimony, whenever someone speaks, false witness is always possible and as such, in my addressing the other 'I must ask for faith or confidence (...) there where (...) perjury [is] always possible' and yet 'unverifiable' (Plant 2007). Plant argues that, in testimony, the distinction between truth and sincerity is of fundamental importance, however these ideals do not exist in psychoanalysis. Not only can others bear false witness, but we are often confused about our own experiences especially regarding trauma (Plant 2007) due to the suspended or screen memories. If truth is to be found in testimony the narrative of that testimony needs to be interrogated and reflected upon. If there is an unreflective methodological reliance on testimonial discourse, it is at best misconceived and at worst irresponsible and leaves us with more misunderstanding. This leaves us with the question: Who is responsible for this interrogation and reflection?

Challenges to the limits

The deconstruction of event and reconstruction of self that is required for narrative development is a prevalent theme in ego-related psychoanalysis. For Boothby imaginary incidences do not represent the essence of our experience, but rather reveal what remains inconsistent in our desires (Boothby 1991). These inconsistencies are able to be explored by participating at a conscious level to the act of reading, as McLaine suggests that it contributes towards the development of a more integrated sense of self, and increased self-awareness

(McLaine 2013). This is seen as a recovering of self, a recovery that the ego itself makes necessary, however it is the ego that remains the primary obstacle to its accomplishment. This effort of self-recovery is taken not in the service of the ego but at its expense. The ego once under control is shaped towards an understanding that is beneficial for the therapeutic act by the unconscious (Boothby 1991).

The unconscious is a continuously changing construct which is built up at the same time as it is destroyed by the words and symbols that the individual engages with (Boothby 1991). This is also shown in reader transaction and efferent reading. Efferent reading derives ultimately from what the reader does, the activities he carries out in relation to the text (Rosenblatt 1978). The reader 'concentrates on what the verbal symbols designate, what they may be contributing to the end results that he seeks', drawing on their past to explore the information, concepts and guides that are left when the reading is over (Rosenblatt 1978). The work of analysis, effected along the paths of linguistic signification, does not extend the hegemony of the ego, rather it tends to bring about a certain deconstruction of its domain (Boothby 1991). Here Boothby echoes Radstone's recovered referentiality of traumatic memory for it is the event, not the subject which emerges as unpredictable or ungovernable (Radstone 2007). The deconstruction of the ego allows the traumatic event to be explored as a symbol used to recover the real.

Reader transaction theory

Self-understanding generated from textual dialogue to improve understanding another's experience can be illustrated within the reader-text relationship of reader transaction theory. Reader transaction theory states that within a book the author's words direct where the focus is placed but it is the reader that assembles a meaning based on their experiences in their life. Life context is seen as the shaping force of understanding as 'one must draw on their past experiences with the verbal symbols, then select from various alternative referents that occur to them. To do this they have to find some context within which these referents can be related' (Rosenblatt 1978).

The subject, to understand the object, must work on acquiring missing self-structures from the object through a process of 'transmuting internalisation' (Kohut 1959). Transmuting internalisation takes from the other, which is an imagined ego, and after applying the different contexts of the individual's perception a type of understanding is achieved. Transmutation is a growth-producing process by which an individual is able to internalise the needed functions from within the object of their communication (Kohut 1959), for example a therapist or a text. This communication takes the form of a dialogue, where understanding an individual's needs and then explaining what they symbolise is an interplay that takes a step into the abstract. The abstraction of meaning within the explanation allows the symbolic in language to be used as a tool in shaping self-understanding (MacIsaac 1997).

The construction of self requires individuals to draw upon available symbols, myths, genres, discourse and narratives, to then pull these together and fashion a self that fits within the 'discordant cultural parameters that situate their lives' (McAdams 2003). A person's narrative identity is formed from the 'plagiarising' of the many stories and images they find in culture (McAdams 2003). This 'plagiarising' allows for the reforming of identity where, within each transaction new discoveries can build up until a new theory is arrived at, which later findings

will fit (Martin 1977). The exchange with the text becomes for the reader a process of self-creation, where responding, correcting errors, searching for the sources of the response, speculating about the author's intent and weighing the author's values and ideas against their own forms a heightened sense of self (Probst 1987).

Clagget states that within the classroom, where texts are used as educational tools, all of the elements involved in the process: reader, text, and context are examined with care and reading widely and deeply is encouraged. With this reading students are encouraged to then 'rewrite the texts within the contexts of their lives so they may continually rewrite their lives in the light of those texts' of their peers, the diversity of their lives and the difference in opinion (Clagget 2015). The reader has the ability to learn indirectly about other's experiences with the text, and may come to see that their own was confused or impoverished, and then may be stimulated to call from the text a better reading. But this must be done with their own experiences in relation to the text and what they call up for them (Rosenblatt 1978). Through class discussion students are provided enriched opportunities to explore their experiences with the text so they may choose to re-examine their responses (Brown & Harrison 2000). The more a text is read and engaged with the more the reader's self-narrative changes, strengthening their beliefs by challenging them or supporting them. This improved sense of self allows for more enriched readings further contributing to the cycle of self-construction founded upon reader response. This cycle is a foundation for bridging the empathetic gap between the reader and the shared traumatic experience.

Fictocriticism

The theme of deconstructing and reconstructing identity through language and narrative present in reader transaction, narrative therapy and writing therapy, the sharing of trauma and the empathetic response is also present in fictocriticism. Fictocriticism emphasises the interplay between text and experiential knowledge offering a unique perspective for the navigation of trauma. This perspective is one that could allow the retracing of paths and discarding of directions or misinformation until it had found the perfect route to its destination, the complete understanding of another person's experience.

Fictocriticism can accomplish this because it is a discursive mode that gives scope to the contradictions and negotiations between the utilitarian form of language and the poetic (Hecq 2005). This echoes Rosenblatt's (1978) description of the interaction between reader and text. The continual oscillation between the literal and metaphorical in fictocriticism (Hecq 2005) offers a unifying metaphor of the in-between, or interplay implied in the theory of reader transaction, psychoanalytic deconstruction and reconstruction, as well as Kohut's theory of empathy.

For Kohut, empathy is the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person (MacIsaac 1997), however MacIsaac is unhappy with this idea and says that while being close to the truth it is still somewhat mystical. This implies that a more tangible understanding would be useful, therefore the ability to work critically from a similar space to empathy is needed. Fictocriticism exists in the excess of speech and in the excess of knowledge (Brook 2002). Brook notes that knowledge is never adequate to its subject (2002) which could succinctly explain the gap inherent in empathy where understanding the feelings of another, even on a

subconscious level, requires a step into the abstract (MacIsaac 1997). This step for empathy, as well as in fictocriticism enters us into a 'space for reflecting on [a] knowledge that can only be practiced rather than enunciated' (Certeau in Brook 2002), a sort of knowledge that 'pertains to immanent know-how rather than transcendental axioms' (Brook 2002). We are still stuck however with the mystical aspect that MacIsaac noted.

How do we move away from this idea of mysticism when the knowledge that is sought in fictocriticism is knowledge which cannot be explained any other way because it is not 'reducible to propositional content' (Gibbs in Brook 2002)? The knowledge gained through fictocriticism is knowledge gained through accident, through the dérive, or wandering (Gibbs 2005). It occurs through falling mise-en-abyme into a loss of representation (Muecke 2002). If the knowledge cannot be planned then how does one prepare to commit the accident of fictocriticism?

Gibbs offers us two parts to start exploring this question, the first is the use of mimicry, and the second is the idea of the text as dialogical (2005). Gibbs offers us the use of mimicry as a 'strategic simulation and dissimulation' (Gibbs 2005), a sort of on-and-off performance. This performance of repetition is used ultimately to do something differently, to undo the text, to make a difference (Gibbs 2005). Gibbs states that mimicry can be used to create something that is outside the text, something new that is in excess and is different from the original (Gibbs 2005). The new text that is created is then entered into the dialogue with the original text and we can start to see ourselves falling into the Muecke's abyss with the fictocritic as the mouthpiece.

Kerr (2003) adds to this back and forth in her discussion of collage as sentimental allegory. She refers to this back and forth as the 'play of voices' which occurs in collage. It occurs as an attempt at the 'aestheticising of principled stances in relation to objects of knowledge' (Kerr 2003). The spaces between textual fragments suggest a refusal to claim authority or to tell the other's story (Kerr 2003). This refusal aligns with our goal of finding a way to empathetically work with the other to construct a unified voice. That which is experienced and subsequently created from empathic attentiveness informs both the self-conscious production and reception of the fictocritical collage effect (Kerr 2003). The collage writing of the allegorist is symptomatic of a distorted, incomplete or missing archive of the past, and/or the incommensurability of competing 'stories' in the present. The suspended memories, like those of a traumatic event can be pulled up through the fictocritical use of allegory as allegory arises from the painful absence of that which it claims to recover (Kerr 2003). Is fictocritical allegory able to recapture what is lost in the post-traumatic or does it serve only as another form of approximation? An ethical standpoint needs to be taken.

Scott Brook (2002) references fictocriticism as quantum research in his paper and even if it is in jest it still raises an interesting idea. The theory of the multiverse relies on the idea that on an infinite timeline if something has a chance of happening it will happen. The space that fictocriticism offers is one where we are only limited by imagination, or rather, we are not limited. If Muecke's image of the mise-en-abyme is seen as the mode for distilling knowledge from fictocriticism and we travel further and further down its spiral, the start, middle and end points no longer exist and we are expanding outwards infinitely. The challenge then is to find a way of mapping a journey in this space, one that has an end point, and then using fictocriticism as a way of constructing a reality from it. This reality is then used as part of the

dialogue between self and other that provides a constructive discourse for complete understanding between two people, two texts or a person and a text. This would allow us to answer our question, and challenge the limits of empathy when reading trauma through the creation a new model for experiential understanding.

Conclusion

In contemporary theory the empathetic response to shared trauma is affected by a number of influences including memory, testimony, aesthetics, ethics, identity and the imagination. The amount of intersecting ideas and subjectivity ultimately causes fragmentary understandings limiting empathetic response to an approximation. To maximise what can be understood in the sharing of the trauma from the event witness to the responder trauma theory and reader transaction theory suggest that an improved self-awareness is required. This self-awareness affects both how the narrative is shared and received but also offers up more difficulties such as testimonial truth and memory. To overcome these new difficulties critical response to the traumatic event through fictocriticism allows for a discursive space that could be used to guide the self-aware witness and responder to a new ethical point that is mutually understood.

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