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Ethics versus morality: the case of *Joe Cinque's consolation*

Abstract:

Creative nonfiction writers, intent on being creative *and* truthful, walk a thin line that other writers might not necessarily confront. Journalists and scholars, with their proclaimed dedication to fact, tend to avoid the ambiguities of memory, imagination and emotional allegiance. Fiction writers, with their dedication to stories have no qualms about inventing worlds that are seductive to their readers. But creative nonfiction writers, with the intent to write stories that are both true and seducing, grapple with specific issues of ethical and aesthetic integrity. This question is particularly complicated when sensitive issues, such as mental illness, become the focus of storytelling.

Prompted by my reading of Helen Garner's (2004) *Joe Cinque's consolation*, this paper considers some of the possibilities, implications and hazards of representing mental illness in creative nonfiction. In particular I argue that as the experience of alterity, mental illness cannot be narrated within the parameters of reason and that it is therefore the responsibility of the creative nonfiction writer to honour this alterity. I suggest that the problem with Garner's book resides in the identification between authorial voice and some hypothetical reasonableness, ordinariness, or normality.

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To be credible the writer of creative nonfiction has to play fair. This is a statement of both ethics and aesthetics—Lynn Z. Bloom

Creative nonfiction, ethics and aesthetics

Nonfiction is in the facts. Creative nonfiction is in the telling: it entails writing about facts ‘using literary techniques such as scene, dialogue, description, allowing the personal point of view and voice rather than maintaining the sham of objectivity’ (Gutkind 2001: 173). To put it differently, the ‘creative’ part of creative nonfiction acknowledges the emphasis on aesthetics, its use of fiction writing techniques and its allegiance to art. The ‘nonfiction’ part of the term, on the other hand, acknowledges its divorce from fiction as a genre and its commitment to facts. Thus creative nonfiction may be said to read like fiction while staying loyal to the truth. It ‘carries the writer and the reader into a deeper dimension of trust, truth and believability. The creative nonfiction writer may take certain liberties with the truth (he or she may push the blurred gray barrier between fiction and nonfiction to the limit) without breaking through to the other side’ (Gutkind 1996: 16). A more fluid genre than fiction and nonfiction, creative nonfiction seems to offer considerable possibilities in terms of narrative technique, including characterisation and point of view.

However, the fluid genre of creative nonfiction has held vexed positions in scholarship. Critics have long taken umbrage with writers who develop, as part of their narrative style, a consciously subjective methodology that brings the ‘eye’ that sees into contact with the ‘I’ that experiences (Gass 1994: 46). As Eisenhuth and McDonald remark in *The writer’s reader*, some critics still ‘cling doggedly to the bogus notion that objectivity is an outcome that can actually be attained’ (Eisenhuth and McDonald 2007: x). This leads us to the question of ethics, for as Eisenhuth states in a section of her own ‘what counts for readers and critics alike, is the contract that’s forged between the writer and the reader’ (Eisenhuth and McDonald 2007: 148). She adds that ‘the more the text claims to be reportage, the stronger the expectation on the part of the reader that the story will be both true *and* accurate’ (Eisenhuth and McDonald 2007: 148). Bloom further defines ‘the ultimate attribute of the ethics of creative nonfiction’ as ‘the shared ethos of writer and readers’ (Bloom 2003: 288). She explains:

Readers expect the writer to tell the truth. Writers, in turn, trust their readers to understand and respect that truth, and the larger Truths their work implies, even though readers may not share its values. *This ethical principle dictates an aesthetic fulfilment*—that the meaning will be conveyed through character and story that will provide their own clear-eyed witness to the truth, that witness untainted by vindictiveness or special pleading. (Bloom 2003: 288, my emphasis)

What Bloom’s words suggest here is that what might be called the ethics of representation *dictates* its own aesthetic accomplishment. This will take us briefly into the field of ethical criticism, a field of inquiry where the voices of Plato and Aristotle have been echoing for centuries right through the work of contemporary moralists such as Wayne Booth.¹

Three of Booth's ethical principles from *The company we keep* (1988) may be useful to understand how narrative ethics operate (both in fiction and creative nonfiction), which in turn may help us formulate what an ethics of representation may consist of. By ethics of representation I specifically refer back to Bloom's words and speak of the creative nonfiction writer's obligation to factual truth rather than mere consistency and coherence in the story line, or one of the many possible versions of truth. The first of Booth's principles is 'the ethics of rhetorical purpose' (Booth 1988: 252), one that applies to the final cause, the effect elicited from us by the text, and the ethical quality of that rhetorical purpose—its implications for human comfort. The second is 'the ethics of the told' (Booth 1988: 256), which refers to what is presented in the text, with specific reference to the characters, their actions, thoughts and choices as we are made to understand them from the words and larger discourse. The third is 'the ethics of the telling' (Booth 1988: 257), which refers specifically to narrative technique, how the story is told, the ethical consequences of decisions made about how to convey the story, decisions which can make the reader more or less sympathetic to certain characters, their origins, ideas, beliefs and moral choices.² Although these principles can be thought of as separate issues for our purposes, it goes without saying that they are interrelated, partaking as they do of the telling and the told inherent in all discourse.

To the extent that creative nonfiction narratives read like histories and despite the overtly subjective nature of the truth that they offer, they implicitly convey that the world they construct corresponds in some ways to the world we live in. The main distinction to make here is possibly between auto/biography and reportage as these vary in intent, and therefore rhetorical purpose, one highlighting the singularity of experience, the other its commonality. What are then the possibilities, implications and hazards of representing inherently singular experiences in a reportage mode? In particular, what are these possibilities, implications and hazards when one of these singular experiences is 'madness'? This paper ponders these questions by focusing on Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's consolation* (2004). It suggests that this book is an example of creative nonfiction gone wrong in terms of characterisation and point of view.

Madness is by definition construed by its very difference from reason, and therefore also by its deviation from linear narrative (Stone 2004a: 329; Baldwin 2005: 1023). As psychoanalysis testifies, tales of mental illness highlight alterity in aspects of being that deviate from a perceived norm of mental or physical functioning; for example, speech disturbances and bodily disturbances which account for altered ways of experience. Auto/biographies relating experiences of madness often translate this alterity by deviating from traditional narrative form either plunging the reader into narrative chaos in unmediated texts or keeping her afloat through the use of elliptical narrative techniques (Stone 2004a; 2004b).

Though this issue is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, the point is that the experience of madness cannot be narrated within the parameters of reason. But by way of illustration, the reader might recall here the famous debate between Foucault and Derrida initiated by the publication of *Madness and civilization* (Foucault 1965; Derrida 1978). It was the very question of whether narrative, indeed linguistic

representation, was inimical to the expression and presentation of madness which informed and inflamed their quarrel. I agree with Derrida that to speak of mental illness, or for the mentally ill, or even to portray either from the point of view of reason subsumes the alterity of mental illness within the parameters of reasoned discourse and does violence to the other. A prime example of this is Garner's construction of Anu Singh, a young woman suffering from borderline personality disorder in *Joe Cinque's consolation*.

The story, the author and the ethics of representation

In October 1997, with the help of a friend, a young woman sedated her boyfriend and injected him with heroin, thus inducing a slow and painful death. The circumstances of the killing were complex and bizarre. There was a trial. The young woman was convicted of manslaughter on the grounds of mental impairment, and sentenced to ten years in jail—of which she served four, while her accomplice was acquitted. There was also a book: *Joe Cinque's consolation: a true story of death, grief and the law* (Garner 2004).

Clearly, the ethics of rhetorical purpose differ when applied respectively to the discourses of the law and aesthetics. A trial and a creative text do not aim at the same kind of conclusion, nor do they strive towards the same kind of effect. A trial is presumed to be a search for the truth. But, technically, it is also a search for a decision, and thus, it seeks not simply truth, but finality in the form of a resolution. A creative text is, on the other hand, a search for meaning, for heightened significance and symbolic understanding. Writing as a narrative activity supposes a dual ethical position, one that heeds the material and one that heeds the reader. While a writer's ethical responsibility towards her material may be described as the respect for the other as other in terms of narrative truth, which includes characterisation, what matters for the reader is the contract established between the writer and the reader and the extent to which it is honoured.

Joe Cinque's Consolation is Helen Garner's attempt to pay tribute to the twenty-seven year old engineer from Newcastle murdered in 1997 by Anu Singh, his twenty-five year old girlfriend. In light of the ethics of rhetorical purpose, Garner's book is problematic from the outset because of the 'conflict between a voiced ethics of reportage, and a demonstrable, compromised exploitation of its subject matter' (Gelder and Salzman 2009: 185), which leads to a breach of the writer/reader contract. In other words, despite the author's 'fantasy of journalistic even-handedness' (Garner 2004: 269), she unwittingly proves disrespectful towards both material and reader: firstly, because of her motivation in writing the book and the ensuing biased construction of Anu Singh; and secondly, because she identifies with some hypothetical 'ordinary' citizen, which reflects and informs social stereotypes, thereby shunning alterity.

Katherine Wilson's review of *Joe Cinque's Consolation* rightly suggests that Garner has breached the writer/reader contract 'through repetition [of moral judgements] and emotive appeals to the reader' (Wilson 2005: 77). Garner in fact presents herself as a messenger of the dead; a bearer of moral meaning she has the duty to preserve and transmit to some hypothetical 'ordinary' citizen with whom she identifies herself and

presumes her reader does as well. Not only is the meaning she conveys predicated upon this ‘ordinary’ person’s subjection to the discourse of the law and medicine, but also on a stereotypical conflation of mental illness with evil. Let us consider some problems caused by this moral stance.

Garner states in an interview that her motivation for writing the book was, on the one hand, a fascination with murder that we all share ‘because they show us *ordinary* people who “crack”’ and, on the other, her own newly felt sympathy ‘towards women who kill blokes’ (Eggins 2004, my emphasis). In light of this seemingly frank statement, both the title and focus of the book appear peculiar. Indeed, it is not with the murderess and her accomplice (women who kill blokes), but rather with the victim(s), that Garner overtly sides—the dead son and the grieving mother she befriends. The cause of this apparent change of heart bears an uncanny resemblance to what happened when Garner was researching her account of a case of sexual harassment in *The First Stone* (1995). What irks her is that two women (Anu Singh and her accomplice Madhavi Rao) ignore her (again). This sentiment is highlighted through her use of italics:

The women won’t talk to me. Suddenly I felt very tired. Here I was, back at the same old roadblock. My fantasy of journalistic even-handedness, long buckling under the strain, gave way completely (Garner 2004: 269, emphasis in the text).

Garner’s ‘fantasy of journalistic even-handedness’ seems closer to one of ‘vindictiveness or special pleading’ which Bloom (2003: 288) deems as undesirable stance in creative nonfiction. However, witness how this undesirable intent finds itself inscribed in the text long before the author’s frustration at the women’s silence:

Whatever the reason, I sided with Joe Cinque. I searched for him in all documents. But every place where he should have been was blank ... His direct speech is rarely recorded. He is forever upstaged by Anu Singh. As the transcripts’ tapestry of versions unfolds, she kills him again and again. Attention always swings back to *her*: why she did it, what sort of person *she* is, what will become of *her*. She gets bigger, louder, brighter, while he keeps fading (Garner 2004: 178, emphasis in the text).

Garner’s impatience seems odd here since she is researching Anu Singh’s court case, betraying some vindictive fantasy.

There are other such veiled fantasies in the text. These essentially pertain to some problematic identification between the narrating instance (itself conflated with the author) and her material or audience. At the point in the trial when the author realises that Singh might get twenty years if convicted of murder, for example, she exclaims: ‘Twenty years! Stunned, I got the sum wrong: I thought, she’ll be *my* age when she comes out’ (Garner 2004: 71). Upon this realisation the author adjusts her tone as if attempting to recapture her intended focus on Joe Cinque: ‘How soon even a frightful event like Joe Cinque’s murder is swept away into the past! Something in me rose up, indignant for him. What – not even a decent, respectful pause? No breathing space?’ (Garner 2004: 71) she asks, noting that two months remain before Singh is actually sentenced. Singh is in fact convicted of manslaughter on the ground of mental impairment. Her sentence is therefore significantly reduced. The author’s own moral judgement, one that she lends to some hypothetical ‘ordinary’ person, obfuscates this

outcome: ‘in the speech of any ordinary person, what Anu Singh had done was called murder’ (Garner 2004: 11).

It is precisely Garner’s identification with this hypothetical ‘ordinary’ person so reminiscent of the ‘reasonable man’ now called ‘ordinary reasonable person’ in legal texts which compromises the ethical framework of the narrative. As one reviewer put it, though her book ‘is a writer’s profound response to a tragedy and to questions about human responsibility over time as well as precise moments, questions about duty of care in a community, about the law and its limits, this is also precisely what nips such questions in the bud’ (Fraser 2004). In the telling, Garner pits the reader as a reasonable law abiding and sane person against the object of her own fearful and hostile gaze in an impersonation of otherness reminiscent of one of the oldest clichés in the Western world: the infantilised woman as impersonating madness, badness and sadness (Appignanesi 2009). Garner puts it pithily: ‘what a woman most fears in herself—the damaged infant, vain, frantic, destructive, out of control’ (Garner 2004: 18). Thus both ‘the ethics of the told’ and the ‘ethics of the telling’ are here being compromised because the author’s rhetorical purpose is conflicted and confused: the final cause is further undermined by what is tacit in the text.

In fact, otherness is consistently derided in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the characterisation of Anu Singh. Singh is cast as a ‘hysterical young woman’ (Garner 2004: 4) from the very first paragraph. Moreover, if Garner gives her speech, it is only in order to better despoil her of it, better to subjugate this speech to the discourses of the law and medicine, two disciplines which, as I show in the next section, notoriously objectify human beings. Singh is further depicted as a ‘frantic girl’ (Garner 2004: 9) who is ‘obsessed with her physical imperfections *both real and imagined*’ (Garner 2004: 15, my emphasis), and is said to have ‘hysterical fits’ (Garner 2004: 17). In Garner’s text, Anu Singh is cast as a manipulative and narcissistic bitch, but, significantly, she speaks in ‘a very *adolescent* voice’ and seems ‘to lack a language for the trouble she was in’ (Garner 2004: 18, emphasis in the text). There is clearly no subject capable of agency in Anu Singh. The otherness inherent in her illness is completely ridiculed and obliterated.

This is despite the narrative detailing how the court heard evidence from psychiatric experts to the effect that Anu Singh had been suffering from a major depressive illness or borderline personality disorder with narcissistic features. Indeed, Garner reports this evidence, but the symptoms are discussed in terms of hypochondria, and unjustified paranoia. This reporting contributes to re-enforcing the objectification of Singh as vain, infantile and irresponsible. As Katherine Wilson points out, ‘Garner’s Singh isn’t mentally ill at all: she’s just like all (manipulative) women, but more so, and she’s trying it on’ (Wilson 2004: 77).

The problem with the representation of mental illness in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is not only that alterity is shunned, but also that mental illness is conflated with the idea of a desexualised yet repressed femininity. We are witnessing the return of the mad woman in an infantilised guise (Appignanesi 1999).

Indeed, when Garner reports how she joked with fellow journalists about having all the symptoms Anu Singh suffers from, particularly those pertaining to anxiety and

poor body image, Garner displays her own moral prejudices and thus may not be 'play[ing] fair' as these clearly interfere with her research as a writer (Bloom 2003: 284). Although Garner tries hard to get a grip on psychiatric categories, she fails to do so, pushing the line of moral high ground instead. This radical shift in point of view is ironically adumbrated early in the narrative when she asks:

If you aren't satisfied by a category from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* which claims to explain a person's dreadful actions, you are thrown back on simple, quotidian concepts of moral disapproval such as ... *selfish* At the other end of the scale you may wind up having to endorse terms like *wicked* or *evil* But does psychological sophistication over-ride a sense that some actions are just plain *bad*? (Garner 2004: 52, emphasis in the text).

Interestingly at this point in the book the concept of mental illness is discarded in favour of moral categories such as 'selfish', 'wicked', 'evil' and 'bad'. As Anu Singh's trial progresses, sympathy for the defendant lessens further; her person is reduced to body parts, symptoms and clichés. The author jubilantly complements the verdict offered by one of the journalists she compares notes with: 'What *she* needs is a good kick up the arse' (Garner 2004: 192, emphasis in the text). What the author fails to do here is convey that morality is a system of approvals: there will be as many moralities as there are groupings in society. There is no empirical way of establishing which is to be preferred. Instead, she closes ranks with 'ordinary' citizens.

Thus Singh's mental illness becomes the signifier of a moral disability that condones the discourses of medicine and the law. In these discourses, the language and conceptual terrain of personality disorder have entered into the routines of evaluating 'problem' subjects and groups in the mental health system as well as in the magistrates' courts, one essential difference being that the mental health system is concerned with diagnosis and treatment while the courts are concerned with responsibility, that is, the relationship between a person and a particular act. In a similar vein, Garner insists that despite evidence of some psychiatric illness, Anu Singh was responsible for her acts at the time of the crime and should have been convicted of murder and punished accordingly. Garner's further dismissal of mental illness is nowhere as obvious as in her use of italics when transcribing some of the evidence given by psychiatric or legal experts (see Garner 2004: 48, 50, 52, 54-55, 117, 119, 142).

Despite the author's dismissal of *The diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*'s psychiatric categories in the excerpt quoted above, she nonetheless makes good use of the term 'personality disorder' to undermine the otherness of the mentally ill. Her use of language therefore reinforces rather than problematises clichés about madness. 'Mental illness' itself is an opaque word in *Joe Cinque's consolation*, precisely because it has become a familiar cliché whose status signifies both explanation and cause. What is particularly concerning is that the moral stance adopted by the author is not only exploitative, but also condones objectification of vulnerable subjects.

To sum up, *Joe Cinque's consolation* may be seen as an example of creative nonfiction gone wrong in terms of characterisation and point of view. What the author

fails to convey is that morality is a system of approvals: there will be as many moralities as there are groupings in society. There is no empirical way of establishing which is to be preferred. Instead, she closes ranks with ‘ordinary’ citizens. Ironically, for all its flaws, the redeeming aspect of *Joe Cinque’s consolation* may be that it widens the focus of its own examination, in part by clinging to the point of view of conventional morality, and in part by misrepresenting mental illness.

Endnotes

¹ A history of key issues in ethical criticism would be beyond the scope of this paper, but chapter thirteen in Wayne Booth’s (1961) book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was a pioneering work in the area of literary criticism. It was followed up much later (1988) by *The Company We Keep*, a work which appeared like some anachronism at a time of ‘High Theory’, and therefore provoked some controversy.

² These three ethical principles roughly correspond to three of the four causes in Aristotelian analysis, namely, the final, formal and efficient causes

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