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Discovering the self: Fictocriticism, flux and authorial identity

Abstract:

Fictocritical writing has fallen in and out of academic favour throughout the past twenty years, still superseded in humanities and creative writing programs by the two poles of the traditional academic essay or more abstract experimental works. In the context of life writing and self-discovery in experimentation, the fictocritical writing process has much untapped potential for self-invention and deconstruction of ideas around authorial identity.

This paper examines the difference between self-performance and self-discovery in the writing of experimental non-fiction. The paper explores the relationship between authorial identity and the traditional academic essay, and between authorial identity and fictocritical writing. The paper explores how fictocriticism and epistemic academic essay hold two different conceptions of authorship, and their divergent potential for the projection of self through writing.

Using the works of practitioners in this field, this paper discusses how the traditional, circular logic of the academic essay is as autopoietic for self-concept as it is for rhetorical discussion. Focussing on a comparison between 'essay' and 'fictocriticism', different meanings for authorial identity and performance in writing will be examined through discussion of the deconstruction, reconstruction and plotting of authorial identity, or 'self', across the textual space of the fictocritical essay. This paper suggests that the truest form of self-writing is the integration of critical and creative practices in non-fiction.

Biographical Note:

Elizabeth Pattinson is an honours student in writing at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her current area of research and writing is fictocriticism, writing the self in crisis, midlife writing and the academic novel. She is in the process of working towards a higher research degree in writing that will examine authorial identity, the performance of self and variants of the essay form.

Keywords:

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‘Before long, the very word *autobiographical* feels shameful to me.’ (Jonathan Franzen 2012: 128)

‘Essays, like poems and philosophical meditations, should elude our grasp just because their business is to approach the liminal spectrum of near-unintelligibility-immediate experience complicating what we thought we knew.’ (Joan Retallack 2004: 48)

Introduction. Fragmented selfhood: fictocriticism as textured window

After concluding a reading at the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2011, author Jonathan Franzen addressed the perennial questions asked of contemporary authors, the last of which was the question of autobiographical content in his fiction and non-fiction work. His answer, while comprehensive, was laced with frustration. What was to be gained from drawing a line between the Franzen who writes and the Franzen who lives? What insights come from knowledge of exactly where the imagination intervenes and where reality pales?

The contemporary cultural obsession with memoir and the autobiographical content of writing has grown beyond the presumption that authors must use and at least re-weave some of their own experiences into fiction. This leaves us now – in the clouded air of mistrust and constructed reality – with the question of honesty, selfhood and the performance of identity in writing. Most interesting is the projection, invention and discovery of self in the writing process, what Lorange calls ‘thinking-while-writing’ (Lorange 2009). I seek to define the limitations of epistemic writing in approaching an expression of the complete ‘self’ of the author, that is, the multiple shifting paradigms that together constitute a ‘self’ – that is, for the purposes of this essay, the complex perceptions of self-identity of the author, hereby taken to be synonymous with ‘authorial identity’.

Fictocriticism is, in my view, the most interesting form of non-fiction writing,¹ unhampered by the generic stricture of autobiography, the narrativisation and preconceived affect of memoir, and the circuitous tradition of the essay. Fictocriticism focuses less on constructed notions of self than it does on the reflexive, deconstructed self; the self of multiples. Through writing, fictocriticism can collapse authorial identity and subjectify the self into text. This communicates the self as an idea, something flexible, disputable and often, indeed, as incorrigible as a traditional text open to analysis; as Raine describes the importance of fictocritical essay for her own identity, ‘[b]eyond argument, essay writing becomes self making’ (Raine 2009). The problem of selfhood and identity in writing is not at all a new one, but when given the experimental context of fictocriticism, the traditionally presumed values and potency of the essay can be re-evaluated and re-mapped for the contemporary ‘I’.

Fictocriticism is a state of flux for writers, elusive of a unifying definition. Participatory writing encompasses many fields, notably anthropology: Michael Taussig fondly calls it a writing existing ‘between the real and the really made up’ (Taussig 1992: xvii). Fictocriticism allows liberties to be taken in writing, and

creativity imbued into fields of writing traditionally presented in more perfunctory writing structures. The structural and thematic inventions in the liberties of fictocritical writing are distinct from those of fiction given the critical context within which most fictocriticism is generated and accepted. The authorial presence of a fictional work, in spite of implicit autobiographical content, exists in a constructed framework of comparative freedom from the ‘accountability to history and to truth’ of non-fiction (Williams 2013). Authoring oneself in fiction is flexible and inventive, and the process occludes the experimental self-learning afforded by creative non-fiction through a fundamental generic construct: the invention of a separate world. The world of fiction is unburdened by explicit critical exploration, and in that detachment the authorial self loses the relevant autopoiesis of argument. There is, in the end, not quite so much at stake. It is in this notion of something at stake – Joan Retallack’s ‘wager’ (Retallack 2004): more often than not, someone, one’s very self, at stake – that imbues writing non-fiction with the risk, the performance, and the discovery discussed herein.

Beyond linear writing and the problems of truth and authenticity

Much academic writing is inherently both critical and epistemic, with the epistemic (knowledge-displaying, expository) formula ‘seemingly native to the academy’ (Sturm 2012). This writing practice challenges the authenticity of authors in that the ‘self’ that they write with is largely irreconcilable with their ‘actual’ or acknowledged cognitive self. Webb describes the voice of academic argument as ‘detached [...] scholarly’ and the academic essay as obliged to ‘keep attention on reason and logic’ (Webb 2009). Thus, academic authorship necessitates an element of performed authority. In this performance, organic traits of rhetoric and playfulness are sacrificed for more suitable, and indeed more limiting, structures.

The ‘personal’ traits I mention as rejected in the academic essay are not merely superficial; they are not flourishes of style that embellish an otherwise straightforward exposition. The exercise of ‘self’ the reflection of authorial identity as a facet of the academic argument are conducive to a more holistic representation; to a more effective work of ‘self’. Webb’s desire ‘to produce work that is always and peculiarly *mine*’ (Webb 2009) is something that reaches, as I reach here, toward Giorgio Agamben’s creative/critical symbiosis in which ‘every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy’ (Agamben 1993: xvii).

The fictocritical essay is a blank map across which meaning is charted, less a space for confirmation and conclusion than a plotting of identity. This comes from the significance of language in fictocriticism, in the capacity of this ‘in-between genre’ to explore ‘the ways in which language – and especially discourse – becomes “second nature”’ (Gibbs 2005). This tension between author and medium, the fluidity of language and discursive authority in the fictocritical essay, creates a state of flux. This provides a space for the author to deconstruct their own identity in the process of meaning-making, without the limitations of rhetorical formula. Authors are able to reconstruct their identity around the process of invention in composing the text and, in

the process, expand beyond the capacity for 'self-knowledge' afforded by the traditional essay. This departure from mere self-knowledge is distinguished by having to rebuild identity in a blank space, reminiscent as it is of the fear of the ether and the unfurling infinite beyond defined knowledge.

The question of truth and the self in non-fiction writing must, before further exploration, be qualified with a relevant definition of truth. Michel Foucault, as ever, serves: "'Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it' (Foucault 1980: 133). Here the truth sought is the true authorial self, produced and sustained, inducing and extending. The sustained difficulty of defining and verifying the self in writing stems from the divergence of social narratives of identity and the fragmented interior; conceptions of self that rarely approximate an holistic self-concept. Foucault's 'system of power' here refers to the prescriptive doctrine of 'narrative' that shapes the course of essay construction, the 'straitjacket' of obligation that Webb describes feeling in the course of academic writing: '*Now I am a thinker and now I must write in an objective and lucid yet not "writerly" way; now I am a writer and must think in story and language, must be rigorous yet not too philosophical*' (Webb 2009). The circular relation of the production of the epistemic essay with systems of knowledge and power is perpetuated through the poetics of rhetoric. This poetics of academic writing is described by Anna Gibbs as:

[w]hen disciplinary authority and discursive protocol function as the voice of the dead stalking the present so as to paralyse it with terror, or else as a kind of watchful superego as resistant to modification as if it were a text inscribed in stone. (Gibbs 2005)

Neither academic nor personal essay can, without experimental foray into reflexive fictional writing –break the fixed, culturally produced, historically situated and politically defended notion of self (Marsh 2011). Galen Strawson defines this fixed identity construct as:

the *ethical Narrativity thesis*... that experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood. (Strawson 2004: 428)

Breaking apart the page: deconstruction and reconstruction

We are left now with the question of how to break patterns of writing in the expression of identity, indeed, whether identity can actually be expressed in a 'self-simulating world' (Lewis 1998). Fictocritical writing provides a theoretical yet personal platform for the development of ideas and for personal enlightenment (Muecke 2008). This experimentation is an opportunity for the author to submit his/her identity *into* the text as a critical discourse itself, creating a fluid work around constantly changing poles of identity and meaning. The distinction here is between self-discovery in fictocriticism as a natural part of the experimental writing process, and the self-performance inherent in the traditional epistemic essay. As in both 'Essaying the Self' (Raine 2009) and 'Momentum' (Muecke 2008), fictocritical

authors use fragments of memory, critical discourse and speculation to establish a strong polemic with which to play with self-concept in written portraiture, and to work with their own identity as a subjective notion.

Authorial identity is most recognisably present in the establishment of a qualifiable 'voice' in text, something productive of the essay form, whether epistemic or fictocritical. The voice of argument that is established is constructed and contextualised by the body of information and rhetoric that forms the foundation of the text. The voice of the epistemic essay is thus detached from the self-concept of the author by the qualifications of form and the autopoietic capacity of rhetoric itself.

Authorial identity is thus established and performed; even in fictocritical essays, there is little risk in fragmentation. Rarely does the fictocritical essay experiment with the subjective elements of self-concept, the self as a product of discourse, indeed, as a cluster of ideology. Self-concept is a fluid notion actively formed by the text that attempts portraiture. The importance and, indeed, the necessity of moving away from linearity and rhetoric in writing the self is the nature of authorial identity. The 'self' whom we seek to map in writing is fundamentally unpredictable and ever changing. To perform the unpredictability of self, it is necessary to write unhindered by the construct of conclusion as textual goal, of circulatory and self-proving theses. Ideas of memory, identity, context, the exterior and the interior must be valued more than the circuitous achievement of concluding. To borrow Jen Webb's use of the word *promiscuity* for writing that 'refuses obedience to discursive domains' (Webb 2009), this promiscuity indeed detaches the authorial self of the fictocritical essay from overbearing, from singular exposition. A failure to commit to a conclusion, to epistemic writing, may catalyse the development of a more holistic self.

Essays that defer the circular self-validation necessitated by epistemic structure are neither unique nor new. Joan Didion's experimental personal essays have long toyed with autopoietic identity and self-concept (Didion 1968). In 'On Self-Respect', Didion used much of the rhetorical process of a traditional essay in which a conclusion is sought, a discussion enacted, and a performance of identity present. Yet, where a traditional essay would reach the conclusion, verification, and celebration of the points made through hearty confirmation, Didion's reasoning is open-ended and without closure. Fictocritical writing is evidently a contemporary metamorphosis of the personal essay: an undisciplined, invigorating writing, free from the anxiety of structure. The text becomes a playground with elements of veracity, linearity and tone discarded in favour of flexible modes of writing. The fictocritical essay is the truest incarnation of self-writing, as it takes self-conception and pushes the essay into 'an urgent and aesthetically aware thought experiment' (Retallack 2004: 4).

Mapping the unknown self through experimental non-fiction

The fictocritical essay is significant for me as a developing academic author discovering both a writerly voice and an understanding of personal selfhood. Its value lies in the power it affords, giving me the ability to relinquish privilege and authority in authorship, and to transfer questions of subjectivity and knowledge creation into a circular sphere of intellectual enquiry. In this sphere, language, ideas, author and

reader are all involved in the text at an equal level of power: the rhetoric is not self-confirming but instead an exploration of the selfhood of the author, the knowledge at hand and knowledge acquired, and the process of creating discourse. Thus the process of authoring a fictocritical essay is comparatively heuristic: I am not merely writing knowledge, I am writing myself *as* essay and plotting the relations between the self and subject. I am mapping out thoughts and identity into an experimental form that allows the essaying process to record and develop my own version of what Sean Sturm calls the ‘mapping [of] the terra incognita’ (Sturm 2012), that is, the unexplored interior.

Danuta Raine’s piece *Essaying the self* (2009) explores the author’s own experience of using the fictocritical essay as a means of mapping herself and draws lines between autopoietic, autobiographical and autotelic writing in fictocriticism. In the assignation of boundaries of knowledge (i.e. what is known already versus what needs to be discovered), Raine sees the space of the essay as a place to reconstruct fragments of broken selfhood. In Raine’s words, she uses the fictocritical essay to ‘resketch [herself] in something other than the crayon of the dislocated and displaced’ (Raine 2009). To draw in the notion of the essay as risk – discussed by Joan Retallack in terms of the social experiment and implications of unmediated rhetoric as it can exist in essay – Raine identifies the risk to her own selfhood present in constructing an uneasy selfhood through essay. She draws upon Deleuze’s imagery and refers the fictocritical essay to a mapping process in which ‘there is room to navigate uncharted regions and to explore the boundaries of self’ (Raine 2009).

Raine’s use of cultural history and the reconstruction of personal trauma in the thought trajectory of the essay is interesting in that it provides a tangible example of struggle in the performance of self, serving as a space where Raine creates an autopoietic text. Raine uses writing’s autopoietic capacity and thus fashions a mosaic of self-identity from the threads of emotive rhetoric that develops. The picture created is indeed a mosaic, encompassing smaller images into something whole, a performance of the self that colours in areas of darkness, moments of her narrative unwritten.

This example is a more obvious form of self-performance in comparison to the writings of Stephen Muecke, who describes his writing in this way: ‘They are self-portraits, using that tag to get away from the genres of autobiography and memoir, with which we are already very familiar. Autobiographies might be more interesting if they had something more “auto” about them’ (Muecke 2008: 13).

The Enduring Question of ‘I’

Who is Muecke’s ‘I’ if not himself? How is it that a form of writing deeply based in personal authorship can exclude his identity? The self is not performed in his writing in the ‘I’ capacity, rather Muecke’s *self* is the contextualising object of critique: it is in so many of his pieces the subject that is read *with*, rather than in the traditional externally-based essay analysis. ‘The Fall’ (2008) reads as someone, ‘I’, falling in love – not Muecke, no – and in that fall, ascending with a conclusive theory on fictocritical writing. In a turn of what I can only term cheekiness, Muecke paints a

person whose existence is irrelevant, uninteresting, but whose experience and theories are deeply mimetic of Muecke's own. Monsieur Mouche, as we know him, doesn't matter; he is largely unknowable. But as he falls in love with this person, we fall in love with his thoughts.

Curious, then, is the comparison between Muecke and Raine, as one writes about fictocriticism as a process of self-development, challenge and identity (Raine), and the other is at pains to get out of the driver's seat (Muecke). The question raised in this comparison is how authorial self is best conceived. Through what is collated, what is considered: simply, what is said? Through the collapse of identity altogether, and the application of a self-concept to the text as another body of ideas, a discourse to be argued, to be deconstructed; in this case, what is not said? More correctly: *who* is not said. The self, for Muecke, is collapsed into language, a melting-pot of words and experiences within the text.

The question that these texts produce in their comparison is the enduring problem of writing the self, of mapping a cluster of consciousness that is evolving, transient, unpredictable. Both texts experiment with and closely approximate the frenetic nature of identity in their writing, more so than the more linear forms of autobiography or essay; indeed, both put authorial identity at stake. Writing oneself – Raine's practice of mapping oneself through fictocritical writing experiments - can and should be unbound by constraints of truth, and indeed, unbound by objectivity. The reflexive writing Raine produces in meditating on this process explores the potential for fictocritical writing free from narrativisation, plotted instead in Cartesian terms, mapped as a terrain to be surveyed, observed, recorded; the potential for meditations on the surrounds to be noted. As Raine says: 'I can extend my mapping of self into the dark spaces of no-man's land, the unexplored' (Raine 2009). She is free from the autopoietics of the essay; her narrative avoids the linear determinism of the essay, that tendency for it to become 'true in its progress' (Adorno 1984: 161).

Putting identity at stake in the projection of self: writing as risk

Consider Joan Retallack's argument for the essay as risk and the comparably ignored notion of authorial subjectivity: 'My implied "I am" as I write I is as other to myself as any other that is an I whom I/we can never fully know' (2004: 5). Considering the self as the other, the other that is as subjectively discoverable as a rhetorical conclusion in the process of essay-writing, it is necessary to move toward an understanding of the self that helps to make sense of the fictocritical puzzle of self-concept in authorship and the potential risk involved in fictocritical self-discovery. Who is 'I' when I write, if not myself? There is in my own conceptual notion of self, many 'I' incarnations, each of whom are infinitesimally – and in some cases, extremely, as I should like to think of myself in certain embarrassing moments – different from another, and not, then, the 'I' with which I now identify. The 'I' of the essay, then, is as unconquerable as the form itself, and such a notion is almost certainly what leads writers, myself included, into essaying that circulates around self-construction and narrativisation.

An interesting concept in evaluating fictocritical writing as a process of self-discovery is Galen Strawson's 'episodicism' (Strawson 2004). To classify myself as an 'episodicist' is to say that I do not believe that the self is conceived as a still image captured from the story reel of life, instantly recognisable as a rendition of what self has come before and shall in all good luck come after. What I believe as an 'episodicist' is instead that my 'self', myself, as I exist and conceive of myself now, is nought if not the current edition of my own little reference text, doomed with each small influence on character – so, then, with absolutely everything – to die a quiet death in sleep, and wake up as a new, unconnected other. This philosophical concept links back to the fascination of authors with the playful space of fictocriticism and the capacity for self-invention: as each present self-concept is written into a piece of experimental writing, it is possible to invent and grasp each self individually and indeed to develop it further, following the episodic process of fragmented, ever-evolving selfhood.

The notion of 'selfhood' that Muecke toys with in 'Introduction: There is No Heart' is particularly interesting as he puts forward the playful theory that there may indeed be no interior to the self and projects the reaction of contemporary thinking and writing to this possibility (Muecke 2008: 10). This suggestion is soon followed by a disheartening notion for the author: Muecke answers the perpetual readers' question '*can someone really be like that?*' by noting that such subjectivity need not come only from a fully-formed character but also from questions of ways of knowing, or processes of thought, which he treats with the same dignity as the individual (Muecke 2008: 15-16). Muecke's presentation of the self as nothing more than a paradigm, an ideological construct, is true, too, of the ideas and themes of the text, which are treated in his fictocritical writing with the same dignity and significance as the self. Thus the self is again likened to the ever-changing paradigms of social and intellectual conjecture, this episodic notion of self that manifests alongside texts, thoughts and words as an equal and as something that can be rebuilt by analysis into something that is, in the end, readable.

Writing as acceptance of the unknowable self and fictocriticism as episodic text

Is there, in the end, any problem with the episodic notion of self, the phoenix of self-identity that is constantly reborn and thus can be constructed as a multi-faceted portrait, not a unified narrative hero powering through rhetoric deduction in non-fiction? The ethics of traditional autobiographical writing and self-writing would have me believe that the poetics of constructing a self from an ever-changing, often mutually exclusive collage of different examples of 'selfhood' is a dishonest act. It is far from that.

To 'write oneself' across and through a text in essay form or under the broader umbrella of 'non-fiction' is a task fraught with reconstruction, as discussed by Raine, and often dishonesty and bias, as is evident in Muecke's aforementioned tongue-in-cheek comments on the makeup of the word 'autobiography'. The fragmentary, evolving self is the identity with which we wager in our writing, and it is the one most celebrated in fictocriticism. It is a writing that means new ways of knowing oneself

when each conclusion is unexpected, and the need for a conclusion is no longer an autopoietic element in the writing process. To fall back upon the circular, often self-satisfying structures of traditional academic essay writing in order to ‘discover’ seems a comparatively facile act.

A place for reflexivity in writing the self?

Reflexive writing and risk-taking are still, doubtfully and carefully received. As a classmate of mine who appreciates classical literature commented on Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* and its very famous blank pages, ‘it’s a gimmick’ – and so perhaps it is. But surely to know ourselves is to produce self-knowledge, following cognitive and ensuing rhetorical trails as they develop, however fragmentary, autobiographically unsound, or indeed ‘gimmicky’ they may turn out to be?

The definitional obsession of genre is suppressing the true potential of ‘writing oneself’, in which writing can be used as a form of deconstruction and reconstruction of the self and of the systems of knowledge that underpin cultural and ideological production. Indeed the definitions of ‘non-fiction’, ‘essay’ and ‘novel’ are not only dull, they also do not afford the self in all its manifestations (the multiple, transient ‘I’ of episodic identity) its uncertainty.

Conclusion

The traditional rhetorical style of the essay needs to be acknowledged as a mere performance of identity for the author and, in that sense, a charade, compared to the fragmentation of fictocriticism. Traditional epistemological reservations in writing and in the structural creation of meaning need to be cast aside in order to fulfil Joan Retallack’s ambitions for the essay to ‘complicate what we thought we knew’ (Retallack 2004: 43); even if that insurmountable thing to be complicated is the daunting, and very real, layered terrain of our own ever-changing self-identity. Fictocritical writing as a definition may need to be cast aside and a blank slate drawn for a textual experiment: the discovery of self in the course of fragmentary, creative approaches to personal criticism. Experimental writing that bridges both a creative and critical approach involves a powerful process that prompts authorial introspection and reconstruction. In the same capacity, this writing creates an open, flexible space for emotional growth and the development of identity.

Endnotes

¹ Obviously a confusing classification, but I use it in the sense of differentiating ‘non-fiction’ from ‘fiction’ as a genre – so, anything but ‘fiction’.

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