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Between the eye and the 'i' in witness poetry: ethical responsibilities of representation of traumatic events and situations

Abstract

The title and themes of the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) Conference for 2011 – Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds – ethical concerns and their implications in literature and writing – imply the moral obligation to care about the responsibilities inherent in the way literature is written and read. How does the contemporary writer, in particular, engage in ethical practices that accommodate a range of interpretations and representations, both cultural and linguistic, in modern settings? This paper explores the particular ethical considerations for the witness poet, seeking to represent traumatic events, situations, and conditions across the contemporary multicultural landscape. I explore how the act of producing an autobiographical sequence of witness poems as part of a Creative MPhil provides a perfect opportunity to engage with a discourse of the above ethical considerations. I argue that the individual poet must devise a construct of her own unique ethical concerns when representing trauma in witness poetry, and that this construct must be constantly monitored to ensure maximum ethical engagement, particularly with respect to point of view. I argue that the position of the eye and the 'I' witness alters constantly, with variations in place and time, and that the witness poet must establish an ethically comfortable vantage point from which to process her representation of trauma. In addition, I demonstrate how the process of writing witness poems of my experiences as a relief worker with HIV orphans in Zimbabwe, within the research demands of the MPhil, shaped the ethical framework for my representation of trauma in this particular contemporary setting.

Biographical Note

Susie Utting is in the final stages of completing her MPhil in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland. Some of her poems have been published in *Hecate*, *The Canberra Times* and the 2010 AAWP Anthology, *Nth Degree*. Susie completed a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne in 2007. Most recently she has been published in the inaugural *Australian Poetry Journal: Beginnings 2011*.

Keywords

Trauma – witness – ethical responsibilities – Zimbabwe – motherhood

Introduction

In 2006, while volunteering with an Australian non-government aid organisation in Zimbabwe, I encountered first-hand the ravages of post-colonial social and political upheaval in that country, with its attendant overlay of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This experience of working with a white farmer's wife who cared for over forty children, orphaned by AIDS, had a profound effect on me. When I returned home to Australia I wanted to capture in poetry, that space and time in Zimbabwe; to portray this world where trauma suffered by children is pandemic. I wanted to bear witness for them and to their traumatic circumstances.

To do this I needed to examine witness writing and the ethical and moral questions that arise from the recording of traumatic events and situations. Was my purpose an ethical one? And what of my own life experience and moral and ethical standpoints? Could I transfer to, or impose my own views and experiences on, the subjects of my poetry? In other words, how to find an authentically responsible way to write a collection of poems about the traumatic situation of AIDS-affected orphans on a ranch in southern Zimbabwe.

My journey led me to extensive research of what constitutes witness poetry and the subsequent identification of various ethical positionings of the eye and the lyrical 'I' witness, a key concern for me as a potential witness poet. This paper outlines my journey to write a collection of poems *The Flame in the Fire: Reflections* that address and attempt to resolve this ethical issue for the writer.

Witness Poetry: what is it? Who writes it and why?

Witness poetry has been described by Milosz as the representation of trauma in which the voice bears witness to the 'reality of tragic events' (Milosz, 2010, n. pag). Others perceive it as the presentation of the dark times of poets who lived, or died, in such events. Forche considered it 'a record of experience' and 'an exhortation and a plea against despair ... not a cry for sympathy but a call for strength' (Forche, 1993, 32). Witness poetry reminds us of an event, so we don't forget the past; as a permanent record of this event or situation, to avoid repetition of such in the future. Witness poetry is claimed to be a healing process, an opportunity for audience/readers too, to experience empathy and facilitate better understanding of the subject matter of such writing. Forche notes that "Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretative problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between 'personal' and 'political' poems but there is a need now for 'the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal'. She calls this space 'the social' (31).

While some literary theorists and critics describe the poet Robert Bly as one of the political poets, who write about traumatic events and situations as though they had witnessed them, (for example, Bly's *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last* takes the reader into a Vietnamese village to witness how 'The children explode'), perhaps such poetry fits Forche's space (Bly, 1986,77). Political, social, personal poems 'from the other side of extremity' constitutes witness poetry – or does it?

Witness poetry theorists have attempted to categorise trauma according to whether it was a single event, such as the Jewish Holocaust or 9/11 (affecting an entire nation or people) or perhaps a traumatic situation or condition, such as exists in contemporary post-colonial Africa, where intergenerational eruptions of civil war and genocide, together with poverty and pandemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, provide a complex situation with many interrelated events and conditions. Anthropologist Sarah Kendzior, for example, examines witness poetry and the role witness poets played in recording the event of 13 May 2005 (when government troops fired into a crowd of protesters at Andijon in Uzbekistan), therein ensuring that it is not forgotten. This evidence or trace to the survival and redefinition of national identity, Kendzior argues, functions as ‘a mode of reportage through which illicit information is spread and official history redefined’ (Kendzior, 2007, 319). Like Forche, she isn’t so much concerned that ‘no one knows exactly what happened’, as with the opportunity to present ‘competing narratives’ which enable ‘a greater debate over morality, nationalism, Islam and governance’ (319). She applauds the facility of witness poetry to be quickly and anonymously disseminated through a culture – one of poetry’s original public functions and responsibilities. This view is shared by James Belflower, who wrote ‘Commuter’, a long poem/sequence described by him as ‘a poetry of an event’ (Belflower, 2010, n.pag). This imaginary poem about an urban disaster describes the construction and detonation of a terrorist bomb. Belflower categorises his work as poetry of secondary witness which moves beyond being ‘the vehicle for the unspeakable, the testimony of those who are silenced’ to a state of communication involving the reader as much as the writer in the reconstruction of the event (Belflower, n. pag). By this point, what constitutes witness poetry and how it functions, who writes what and why, has broadened into a diverse variety of possibilities.

Unstable, ever moving and therefore infinitely variable, witness poetry is so described by Bradley and Johnson in their discussion of the controversial Hiroshima poet Araki Yasusada. His very existence is questioned, possibly manufactured as ‘*an aggressively transgressive act of remembrance*’ (Bradley and Johnson, 2010, n. pag). Testimonial accounts in witness poetry are generally acknowledged to be not necessarily, transparently true, entangled as they become in different imaginings, the pressurings of genre, the distortions of metaphor and, on both sides, the writer’s and the reader’s divergent points of view. As an apt example of this, in 1993 in *Against Forgetting*, Forche observed that North Americans were fortunate in that bombed cities were other people’s cities (Forche, 31). After 9/11, however, many things changed, including who wrote what witness poetry, regardless of birthplace. Simon Armitage wrote *Out of the Blue* about the events of 9/11. Born in England, and not present in New York (or even in the US) on that day, is he, nonetheless, considered a poetic witness to a global traumatic event?

While Armitage lacks the personal connection of Claudia Serea, a Romanian-born poet and writer now based in the US, to the trauma he portrays, does that matter, now that the status of the traumatic event or situation is perceived as universally ‘owned’ and its representation, therefore, the property of anyone so inclined to do so – as an act of universal mediated witnessing, for a variety of reasons. Claudia Serea writes

witness poetry portraying the victims of the Romanian Communist regime, whose intergenerational numbers reached two million between 1958 and 1990. She describes her poems as attempts at offering 'symbolic justice' for the pain of those who would never be remembered otherwise (Serea, 2010, 2). Serea credits personal experience, as in her grandmother's voice in her dreams, as much as research for enabling her to write about the Romanian experience. While Serea's poetry would not find a place in Forche's canon of poetic witnessing, in terms of the poet actually experiencing the trauma firsthand, the issue of how traumatic conditions and situations which span decades can be witnessed and by whom, is being extended into a new millennium, with its own crop of traumatic events and situations.

So the question remains: who really qualifies as a witness poet? Are there identifiable types of witness poetry that correspond, for instance, to the types of witness to trauma? If I am a witness poet, from what position is my lyric voice, the 'I', a witness? What are my ethical considerations if I occupy a range of types of witness? Do they remain the same or do they alter with the various positions I adopt as I write of my traumatic experiences in Zimbabwe?

That lyric poetry focuses on the 'I' is an attribute Thomas Vogler finds particularly suited to witness poetry (Vogler, 2003, 184). The poems with their often broken, fragmented style, mirroring the poet's own shattered emotional state, have the potential for the reader to bring more to the poem than the author ever intended. Even literary criticisms of such works are considered to be bearing witness to the 'event'. Here again, the boundaries between accepted exaggerations in the lyric form and authenticated witnessing of history cannot be easily drawn. However, as Jo Gill and Melanie Waters suggest, because of its ability 'to push and twist and test the language which is our first and only autobiographical tool, poetry may be precisely the place where concerns ... might be best crystallized and explored' (Gill and Waters, 2009, 5). The lyric mode of writing of and through the self, by means of the often unreliable vehicles of memory and reflection, pushes and pulls boundaries between realities and illusions, states of consciousness and dreaming.

As a result of the above research, I decided that the following were important identifiable notions with respect to the writing of witness poetry, and the role and ethical responsibilities of its poets: the subject matter of the poetry must be the portrayal of a traumatic event and/or situation or condition; the poets may or may not have witnessed the trauma firsthand and even if they did, the type of witness they identify with depends upon their proximity to the trauma experienced, either by themselves or others, and by the changing nature of their memories and perceptions of the trauma; the propensity for witness poets to select the lyric mode for writing their work is a testimony to the suitability of the lyric 'I' to accommodate a variety of viewpoints and positional slippages; the precise nature of an individual poet's responsibilities when writing witness poetry is shaped by her understanding of the unique set of complexities she identifies as pertaining to any particular experience she has with a particular trauma; and finally, the witness poet must be vigilant at all times

to the constantly changing positions and viewpoint of the eye and the lyrical 'I' witness.

With the above considerations in mind, in order to write my collection of poems concerning trauma associated with my experiences in Zimbabwe, I had to identify my various positions as a variety of witness poet and carefully monitor the slippages and various changes in the eye and 'I' witness positions I assumed.

Writing witness poetry: *The Flame in the Fire*

I identified my position as a witness poet, writing from the position of three different types of witness: a primary witness to the traumatic situation of AIDS affected orphans in Zimbabwe, a vicarious witness to the primary trauma of individual orphans; and a re-contextualised witness 'revisiting' what I experienced in Zimbabwe on my return to Australia. But I also wanted to learn from another poet, or poets, who had attempted to resolve this particular set of ethical issues relating to witness poetry.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, a Caribbean poet, wrote about the experience of being an eye witness to collective trauma in the West Indies and Africa, as well as what he encountered as personal trauma in his own life. Anne Collet explores the connections between personal and public biography and autobiography in Brathwaite's poetry. The juxtaposition of 'I' and 'eye' to describe three key phases in Brathwaite's poetry, defined by Collett as 'devoted to finding ways of 'coming to terms with trauma', clarified for me an important distinction between personal and public witnessing, and what happens when the two are combined to produce the public/private record of trauma (Collett, 2010, 97).

The eye witness of Brathwaite's early poetry performs the role of public recorder or 'poet/drummer' who 'does not speak for himself, except by association with the group for whom he is spokesperson' (101). When used, the personal pronoun 'I' does not signify a discrete individual self but a voice for the group. After a series of personal traumatic events, including the loss of Brathwaite's wife and home, Collett notes a 'different kind of poetic utterance' with its emphasis on a different 'I'; in *The Zea Mexican Diary*, a collection of notes by Brathwaite describing the death of his wife from cancer, she argues that this 1993 collection gives 'an unparalleled public examination of hitherto unrevealed aspects of self' in his writing (102). Collet reflects that Brathwaite, in his early work as the 'tribal' poet 'without ego, without I, without arrogance', had been able to witness passionately but without intimacy (103). With the shift to the personal, the recovery of intimacy involved difficulties; for instance, the use of personal pronouns meant a shift to the singular/personal, rather than the former plural/public. The final phase, defined by Collett as the 'middle passage', is where 'connection might be made between the poetry that writes the public trauma of the imagined community and the poetry that writes the private trauma of an individual life' (104). Poetically, Brathwaite used the metaphor of the ocean between Africa and the Americas to connect notions of drowned slaves and an unreconciled collective unconscious, haunted by guilt and the need to un-bury in order to heal. This poetry is

typified by the use of vernacular English, a 'black' English that alternately unites and distances the voice and the reader/audience. Personal pronouns suggest intimacy but at the same time alienate, as the poet journeys into his own personal trauma in order to reconstruct a public experience. However, the importance of the reader/audience is acknowledged as it is only through the public airing of the 'I'/eye's journey that the recognition of the reappraisal and realignment of the communal/public with the personal can be achieved.

As a poet/guide about my experiences in Zimbabwe, portraying the pain of bereft orphans and bringing these into 'an intimate relationship' with my own personal grief (relating, for example, to loss of a parent), I had, like Brathwaite to 're-vocalise, re-scribe, re-contextualise' the trauma I experienced on returning to Australia (109). As a result, my subsequent poems were a more authentic representation of the traumatic situation of all concerned, including my own. Rereading my own earlier, unrevised poems about the Zimbabwean experience revealed a general scarcity of pronouns – a scattering of third person, especially 'they', - but where was the 'I'? I needed to rewrite them so there was a distinct lyric 'I': my voice. As a result, from the primary witness position I portrayed my own personal traumatic experience in Zimbabwe and from the vicarious witness position, I attempted to depict the traumatic situation of the orphans at the ranch. I used five year old photos as tools in an *ekphasiac* experiment which enabled me to include foreground, middle and background positionings. I wrote about my primary response to what I originally thought was contained in the photo, while other lines described what I now imagined the subjects of the photo to be thinking and feeling. Still other lines and verses adopted the position of the vicarious witness to the endemic invidious trauma of a small rural community, and then again within the larger framework of the social/political state of AIDS ravaged Zimbabwe. On every occasion I attempted to ensure the witnessing position was one I consciously realised and acknowledged, that I varied witness positions within the same poem and between poems. Written from the position of the witness revisiting with hindsight, the 'foreground' descriptions gained greater significance with revelations gained several years after the initial traumatic experience. As a result, the poetry was tighter, more controlled, with options for the vicarious viewer/audience to be more aware of the witnessing role of the poet, from both within and outside the landscape of the settings. The ethical responsibilities of the witness poet to her reader/audience are also complicated and as important as those of understanding the ethical position from which to write. However, discussion of such responsibilities is the subject of an entire study in its own right, and consequently beyond the boundaries of this paper to adequately explore.

The responsibilities of the witness poet are enormous. As Inga Clendinnen states in the concluding pages of her text, *Reading the Holocaust*: 'Whatever the virtues of novelists and historians, it is still the poets who say most, and most succinctly' (Clendinnen, 1998, 206).

Conclusion

The shift from eye witness to the 'I' and the merging of the two into the concept of the re-contextualised witness warrants more creative, if not critical attention. In my

own case, the complexities I encountered with shifting ethical responsibilities when dealing with more than one witness position at a time, revealed problems that no doubt other poets share, and would welcome further discourse of representation of trauma, particularly in cross-cultural settings.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this paper is with the poem which opens the Zimbabwean collection, *The Flame in the Fire: Reflections*. It encapsulates my journey to find an authentic ethical voice to write witness poetry, in which the eye witness and the lyrical 'I' work together, and complement each other's ways of seeing. It portrays my struggle to achieve ethical balances in this ever changing poetic paradigm.

Self Reflection in Mwenezi River

I see the bucket crashing
down the well

where the snake slid
over the rim into the chill
dark water.

You didn't look
until other winters
coiled more empty skins

around the rope. Now
you slip
behind these eyes that see

rooms of children
sleeping on pillows of broken glass;
my reflection you glimpse

in a river; but will you meet
us, a single shadow
on the other side? I feel you

inside me about to scream –
but first we must find

the coiled snake.

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