

Reid/Mullarkey Colloquium, October 24, 2018

Anne Golomb Hoffman

Talk Story: Narrative as/and Experience

To talk story: The phrase “talk story” comes from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, where it indicates the mother’s ability to “talk story,” to make things happen in narrative. Of course *Woman Warrior* itself is an excursion into narrative, a daughter and a mother, constantly spinning tales of a heroic feminine, while allowing for narrative accounts of painful inhibition, fear, and silences that are crippling. What can be spoken, and to whom?

To narrate, a verb that takes an object. One person tells a story to another person. What goes into that exchange? We participate in narrative acts as subjects who find ourselves in and through the stories we share. In our classrooms, we take narratives apart to see how they are made, working with students to develop skills of critical analysis. And so, exploring positions in narrative discourse, we can designate the writer as sender of a message that is conveyed through the mediation of a narrator, with characters and narratee as positions in the text, and readers at the other end of the exchange. But useful as these positions may be, we also know that they are never fully separable from one another.

When Mieke Bal revised her 1985 book, *Narratology*, she changed its whole organization to focus first on the narrative text itself, recognizing the text as the reader’s point of entry, rather than opening with the *fabula* (order of events in the plot), as she had in the first edition. In effect, Bal took the edge off her earlier structuralist confidence in the critic’s ability to extrapolate the *fabula* and grasp structure as an object of study. In a later more mellow mode, she came to regard theory as sharpening and focusing our ability to offer “a description of a

text, a proposal that can be presented to others” (4). Recognizing indeterminacies in our ability to delineate a text as such, this approach finds in theory a common language through which divergent readings can be explored among a community of readers. And common languages are what we need right now.

Theorists have taken note of “the impossible ethical moment which takes place in reading” (Toremans, 342). Impossible to theorize the moment without appropriating it. Consider rather the irreducible singularity of the moment of reading. We support a reader’s encounter with the text, and that imposes on us a degree of unknowing. We can never know everything that our students are thinking and feeling. But that doesn’t mean we should not recognize the possibility of seemingly random, yet meaningful encounters that occur in literary experience.¹

Recently I’ve been reading some of Kanchana Ugbabe’s stories—quiet narratives of women’s lives, attentive to small gestures of defiance, resistance, accommodation. In the world of these stories, Nigeria in the present moment, we bear witness to the constraints that govern women’s daily existence. Kanchana writes ordinariness (if I may borrow the term from Jordan): her discerning narratives catch the small movements some women make to address male dominance and alter the structure of power ever so slightly. Her stories explore the power of consciousness, perhaps in the reader even more than in her characters.

In *Heavy*, Kiese Laymon negotiates his understanding of himself through direct address to his mother. Through this use of second person, Laymon’s memoir reads as an extended

¹ Here I’m reminded of Anne Fernald’s account of Vera Brittain’s changes of mind: Anne uses the sociological concept of “weak ties” to describe the value of the seemingly trivial or incidental connections that may make it possible for a person, a reader, to conceptualize the kinds of changes that take one out of the familiar and into less charted terrain. (Fordham English Department Inaugural lecture, September 2018)

moment of speech in the present. Using direct address to dramatize utterance, Laymon opens up a potential space for recall of painful histories. What I find most brilliant in this memoir is the tension between knowing and not knowing: not wanting to know, wanting to forget, and yet persistently returning to the scene in the drive to understand what happened. The rhythm of the memoir is in the fraught movement among those options, enacted or represented in the writer's address to his mother and in his relationship to his own body (referred to in third person). These are the *memory acts* of a writer who moves through America in the present moment: south and north, classroom and police station, casino and grandmother's porch steps.²

As we position ourselves in language, we negotiate identity through narrative. The work that we do allows for identification, even as it opens up to critical analysis. In solitary reading and in shared discussion, we reflect on literary experience—important precisely because it is *not* us (and yet of course it always *is*). We can think of literary experience in terms of the *indirect* ways in which a writer's or a reader's experience finds expression. We work in the domain of representation and we have no way of knowing what the texts we teach may evoke in our students. That is the richness of literary experience, the inexhaustibility of the texts we study. We don't assume that a reader's circumstances align with the representation of

² In an earlier essay collection, Laymon anticipates this narrative mode in the form of a letter he addresses to a dead uncle, finding a reflection of himself in the moment of address: "When I wasn't writing things that you might have wanted or needed to read, hear, and see, I created fictive versions of you that were, sadly, more interesting and more loving than I ever allowed you to be in real life. You inspired thousands of paragraphs, hundreds of scenes, but I never showed you one single sentence. [...] Mostly, Uncle Jimmy, I wish you could have told me that we are fucked up, and much of the nation has always wanted it that way, but we owe it to our teachers and our children to imagine new routes into beauty, health, compassion, citizenry, and American imagination. We owe it to each other to love and insist on meaningful revision until the day we die" (ch. 1). Laymon's essays, collected in *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, invite us into a space that is made out of newspaper headlines and encounters in the present, even as they move backward and forward in time to ground the present in the past. The title, seemingly wordy or awkward, is actually straightforward, indicating the small ways in which we sabotage ourselves and respond to others with fear and anger.

experience in a literary text, and yet we know that some degree of felt connection to the manifest content of a text is valuable, even crucial.

I want to bring into this discussion the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit* that is associated with trauma. Commonly translated as ‘deferred action’ or *après coup*, *Nachträglichkeit* indicates a later experience of falling ill that is the consequence of the mind’s inability to process the impact of an earlier event in the moment of its occurrence. It’s worth recalling that the Greek root for trauma carries the meaning of a break or rupture. Indicating events that are unassimilable in the moment in which they occur, the psychoanalytic conception of trauma can be understood as “a failure in the system of representations constituting the psyche”—dementalisation (Hartke 271). In this context, trauma indicates a *breakdown* in precisely the ability of the mind to move freely, mingling past, present, and future in one’s inner world.

And yet the temporal structure of *Nachträglichkeit*, caught between past and present, can also help to understand a more general feature of the mind, the idea that mental life involves a constant return to and reworking of earlier experience. Precisely this ability of the mind to weave together past, present and future, drawing on events real and imagined, is central to literary experience. Literature is, after all, the imaginative domain that is not bound by the constraints of empirical experience, offering writers and readers alike precisely the ability to roam through time and space that quotidian life constrains and trauma interrupts. Acknowledging the damaging impact of trauma on the ability of the mind to move through time and space can make us more aware of *narrative* as a deeply rooted human capacity.

The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* arose first in the context of illness and impediment. Through the work of listening and verbal reconstruction, Freud came to see that the painful symptoms from which his patients were suffering could be understood as bodily enactments that represented unconscious repetitions of real and imagined scenes. “Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences,” he noted, recognizing the bodily symptom to be a dense text whose physical manifestations encoded memories and fantasies too overwhelming—too painful or exciting—to recall (7). The “talking cure” worked through verbal associations to sort out the layers of meaning that hysterical symptoms had accrued over time. Together, patient and doctor elicited events, feelings, and fantasies and gave them place in an emerging life story. Indeed, Freud remarked ruefully that his case studies of hysteria read more like short stories than science. I suggest that we take his observation as an unwitting insight into the scientific value of narrative itself, if we think of narrative as an activity through which we observe ourselves and others (real or fictional) in an ongoing intersubjective exchange.

Around the time that Freud was exploring the resources of narrative understanding in the method that Anna O. (Breuer’s patient) dubbed the “talking cure,” Freud was also starting to write down his own dreams, in response to an experience of depression following the death of his father in 1896. Out of impasse, creative breakthrough. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a milestone in the project of understanding mental life, is in part the outcome of Freud’s process of self-analysis, as he later came to understand it. We can read the dreambook as autobiography.

The solution comes out of the difficulty itself. The very expressiveness that we designate as literary may well originate in experiences of loss or impediment, as the contending forces of

mental life give rise to the figuration of language. Here is Kiese Laymon addressing his mother towards the end of the memoir: “There will always be scars on, and in, my body from where you harmed me. You will always have scars on, and in, your body from where we harmed you. You and I have nothing and everything to be ashamed of, but I am no longer ashamed of this heavy black body you helped create. *I know that our beautiful bruised black bodies are where we bend*” (239, emphasis added). The alliteration of “b’s” in that last sentence suggests and underscores an awareness of the figuration of language out of bodily experience. It’s just this sense of the body that imbues the memoir and gives us insight into the intimate connection between embodiment and textuality.

Laymon tells us that the key word “bend,” the title of his last section, may well have been his mishearing of his grandmother’s actual observation. Where Grandmama said “I was just trying to put y’all where I been,” he heard “I am just trying to put y’all where I bend” (237). His creative mishearing acknowledges the experiential narrative of his grandmother’s life that imprints her body. It suggests as well a storyteller’s drive to enlist readers or listeners and to “put y’all where I bend.”

Freud’s work with hysteria helped him to understand that language offers the medium through which traumatic events in the past might be revisited in words and integrated into personal history. From the start, then, Freud carried out a form of “memory work, the re-establishment of associative links” that allowed for reintegration of painful memories (Baranger et al., 115).³ It is true that the retrospective, *hermeneutic* direction of

³ Laplanche and Pontalis observe that the kind of experience that undergoes this deferred revision is one that was “impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context. The traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience” (112).

Nachträglichkeit opens up the liberating possibility of bringing experience into words and thus into historical time. And yet, we must recognize Freud's pessimism regarding the intractability of behavioral symptoms that represent unconscious reenactments (Laplanche 261). Only with that recognition can we take the measure of the psychoanalytic commitment to the possibility of change in relation to a traumatic history. The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* draws our attention to the painful *determinism* of a past that may impose blind repetition on the present. Recognizing repetition as a structural feature of mental life can deepen our understanding of the role of necessity in narrative economy as the grounding for causality.

Heavy: An American Memoir is striking in the depth of its appreciation for the resistance to intervention that fuels traumatic repetition. Kiese Laymon makes us see and feel that intractability at all levels, from his depiction of the pervasive violence of systemic racism to the most intimate details of painfully repetitive behaviors in the relationship he and his mother have to his body. It's there in the negotiation among pronouns that is so striking a feature of this memoir: the "I" of the writer, the "you" addressed to his mother, and "it" in reference to his body. "It," the body, takes over towards the end, communicating his body's assertion of its own physical being in response to violent assaults, that are both external and internal. In the memoir's closing sections, Laymon writes over and over that "my body knew," as he documents his collapse:

"My body knew in three weeks I would still be unable to walk..."

"My body knew I would make appointments for the procedure and therapy, but skip

them both. **It knew** I would gorge it for weeks until I was 206 pounds...”

“**My body would remember** when I had 3 percent body fat, ran thirteen miles a day, ate vegan, had lots of visible veins and fainted a lot.”

“**My body knew** that my weight, the exact number, became an emotional, psychological, and spiritual destination a long time ago.” (pp. 206-207; emphasis added)

The narrative becomes the register of the body that is the target of abuse. The body is the scene of the action, the violent scene of remembering and forgetting.

And so, a grammar of embodiment grounds the narrative. “The tenses in my body were colliding,” Laymon writes (205). He lies on the floor, “listening to the tenses in my body” (207). This point of collapse, so vividly narrated, is the logical culmination of the book and marks the joining in the sentence, in the tenses of the verbs and in the pronouns, of all that he had tried to ignore. It is thus the starting point for the memoir as an act of memory, carried out in writing those pronouns, nouns, and verbs.

An act of recomposition: “That Thursday, the first day in eight years I did not push my body to exhaustion, my body knew what was going to happen, **because it, and only it, knew what I’d made it do, and what I hoped it would forget. I sat on the floor knowing my body broke because I carried and created secrets that were way too heavy**” (p. 206; emphasis added).

Laplanche takes *après-coup*, the French term for *Nachträglichkeit*, and translates it into English as ‘afterwardsness.’ We can think of language itself as a function of afterwardsness: the ability to use words and to reflect on experiences and objects, including the self, generally comes later than the experiences themselves. Drawing on *Nachträglichkeit*, we might consider literary experience as the occasion for something of a muted return on the part of writer or reader to the locus of desire, the pain of loss, the violence of trauma. We can use the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* to consider reading and writing as forms of *deferred action* in language: they allow earlier experiences or fantasies to reach expression *indirectly*, via the displacements and substitutions that comprise literary expression.

Insisting on the centrality of *Nachträglichkeit* to psychoanalytic process, Gerhard Dahl underscores Freud’s deep appreciation for the impact of experiences that occur so early in life that they are experienced only as “affective traces” without ideational content. His observation is suggestive for the ways in which literary experience links affect “to metaphors or symbols” (740) and might prompt us to expand our sense of what happens in narrative experience to include the resonances of unconscious or pre-linguistic experiences in teller and listener, writer and reader. Verbal narrative carries traces of experiences for which there were no words at the time. Whatever other claims we make for its utility, literary experience brings writer and reader into a space that is neither wholly outside of nor wholly inside the self. In that uniquely constituted space, language offers the replay of early or lost experience in ways that *do not require full recognition* on the part of either reader or writer.

Works Cited

- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd edition. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Baranger, Madeleine, Willy Baranger, and Jorge Mario Mom. "The Infantile Psychic Trauma from Us to Freud: Pure Trauma, Retroactivity and Reconstruction." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 69 (1988): 113–28.
- Dahl, Gerhard. "The Two Time Vectors of *Nachträglichkeit* in the Development of Ego Organization: Significance of the Concept for the Symbolization of Nameless Traumas and Anxieties." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 91.4 (2010): 727–44.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Trans. James Strachey, with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson. *Standard Edition*, vols. 4-5. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1971.
- Freud, Sigmund and Josef Breuer. "Studies on Hysteria" (1893-1895). Trans. James Strachey, with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson. *Standard Edition*, vol. 2 London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1971.
- Hartke, Raul. "The Basic Traumatic Situation in the Analytical Relationship." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86 (2005): 267–290.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Laplanche, Jean. "Notes on Afterwardsness." In *Essays on Otherness*, Translated by John Fletcher. Pp. 260-65. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Laplanche, J. and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Translated by Donald
Nicolson-Smith. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1973.

Laymon, Kiese. *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America: Essays*. New York: Agate
Bolden, 2013.

Laymon, Kiese. *Heavy: An American Memoir*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.

Toremans, Tom. "Trauma: Theory—Reading (and) Literary Theory in the Wake of Trauma."
European Journal of English Studies 7.3 (2003): 333-351.

Ugbabe, Kanchana. *Soulmates*. New York and London: Penguin, 2011.