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Discontinuous Narrative : The Trace Dance

Abstract

I am working on a novel, which takes the form of a collection of interrelated stories. In each story, the narrative is framed by the idiosyncrasies, and prejudices, of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time, and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011). This paper explores Derrida's concept of alterity: specifically the 'trace' of 'otherness', as it corresponds to presence (Rivkin & Ryan 2004, p.278). I call this trace of otherness: The Trace Dance, because of the way alterity operates in discontinuous narrative. The playoff between the narrators' voices occurs in the shadowy place: in the realm of alterity. Derrida's concept of alterity explicates the gaps and disparity in discontinuous narrative: the process whereby reverberations simulate presence. I compare the act of narrative representation with the process of remembering. In particular, I compare the relationship between the historical event of the memory, and the rememberer's sense of that event. Idiosyncratic associations determine the shape of the memory and, crucially, these associations need not be either consciously determined or logical. I argue that remembering is an act of Experiential Representation; I formulate this concept to clarify the metaphorical manoeuvre that occurs in remembering: the attempt to capture the meaning of one thing in terms of the other. This metaphorical manoeuvre connects memory with narrative: which is the attempt to capture an idea in the context of a story. The concept of alterity allows for a new way of looking at discontinuous narrative, because it reconfigures gaps in narrative time, and disparity in narrative voice, as crucial rhythmic forces that give the narrative its shape.

DISCONTINUOUS NARRATIVE: THE TRACE DANCE

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Abstract: I am working on a novel, which takes the form of a collection of interrelated stories. In each story, the narrative is framed by the idiosyncrasies, and prejudices, of a different first-person voice. There are gaps in narrative time, and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011). This paper explores Derrida's concept of alterity: specifically the 'trace' of 'otherness', as it corresponds to presence (Rivkin & Ryan 2004, p.278). I call this trace of otherness: The Trace Dance, because of the way alterity operates in discontinuous narrative. The playoff between the narrators' voices occurs in the shadowy place: in the realm of alterity. Derrida's concept of alterity explicates the gaps and disparity in discontinuous narrative: the process whereby reverberations simulate presence. I compare the act of narrative representation with the process of remembering. In particular, I compare the relationship between the historical event of the memory, and the rememberer's sense of that event. Idiosyncratic associations determine the shape of the memory and, crucially, these associations need not be either consciously determined or logical. I argue that remembering is an act of Experiential Representation; I formulate this concept to clarify the metaphorical manoeuvre that occurs in remembering: the attempt to capture the meaning of one thing in terms of the other. This metaphorical manoeuvre connects memory with narrative: which is the attempt to capture an idea in the context of a story. The concept of alterity allows for a new way of looking at discontinuous narrative, because it reconfigures gaps in narrative time, and disparity in narrative voice, as crucial rhythmic forces that give the narrative its shape.

Keywords: *Discontinuous Narrative; Alterity.*

I am working on a novel, which takes the form of a collection of interrelated stories. In each story, the narrative is framed by the idiosyncrasies, and prejudices, of a different first-person voice: there are gaps in narrative time, and there is disparity between the narrators' voices. The result is a 'discontinuous narrative'; this term describes the early work of Frank Moorhouse: 'an innovative narrative method using interconnected stories' (Griffith University 2011).

My novel is kaleidoscopic: shifting continuously as different ways of seeing and knowing come together. Perhaps there is a pattern, but then it is gone; a new pattern seems to emerge, but that in turn shifts. The narrative is constantly reconstituted as the voices of the different narrators intersect: light and shade is cast and the narrative impression alters.

As I draft and re-draft the stories, I am forced to assess the interaction between the voices. I am aware of the disjuncture, and I ask myself: Why not tell the story through the eyes of one narrator? Why not choose a third-person perspective: an omniscient narrator, who might collect all of the voices together, in a coherent way?

As I second-guess my approach, I realise that I am unwaveringly attached to the style; the splintering of voices feels like the right way to tell the story, the only way to tell the story. It is when I ask myself why the fractured style feels right, that I seem to approach the question of methodology. I am aware that a sense of disjuncture arises out of the medley of voices, but I also realise that the disjuncture is carefully constructed; it is, in fact, crucial to the emotional structure of the narrative.

I would like to begin with an extract from three stories: to provide an example of the different voices and, perhaps, of the intersections between them.

Cockleshell is a story narrated from the perspective of Bullser – who tells us:

Probably I wasn't in love with her anyway. I was in love with the game, and the sex. The bottom line, the long and the short of it: I liked to be in control, and Annie prostituted herself to get dope for a deadshit.

...and *Bygones* is a story narrated from the perspective of Annie – who tells us:

I'm edgy about the sex quiz. What will I say? For me, sex is a routine: it's like brushing my teeth. I fuck shitheads, and then wish they weren't shitheads, but I fuck them because I know they're shitheads, and shitheads are what I know. I hope that, at least, they'll be a good, hard root, and console myself that, at least, with these assholes, I don't have to pretend life's pretty.

...and *Awry* is a story narrated from the perspective of Pelts – who tells us:

if I make a promise I'll keep it. That's why she told me, and me alone, where she was going. That's why she came to me for a bit of comfort, not because she had to.

The overarching narrative is kaleidoscopic: voices overlap and intersect, and the result is an interrupted, splintered style of telling. Stylistically, the narrative is messy: the stories skirt around the edges, pushing in and then retreating.

It is within the context of these observations that I arrive at a question that is both within, and outside, the narrative: Why all the voices? The obvious answer, within the context of the writing, is that the story is not so much Annie's story as a quest for Annie's story: the overarching narrative attempts to capture meaning as if it were being witnessed or remembered, and this story is told in discontinuous pieces, through different voices.

The other answer to the why of the voices, and one that exists outside the parameters of the text (in the context of a methodological examination), is that the narrative configures meaning as a discontinuous process: a process of successive additions. Discontinuous narrative is marked by 'characters and incidents [that]

recur in an apparently unstructured, but actually carefully planned, manner to allow the reader cumulative understanding' (Stringer 1996, p.462). This process relies heavily on connections between characters and incidents.

Discontinuous narrative celebrates the reverberations that lurk behind the words: it celebrates the ghostly rhythm that gives the narrative its shape. In this way, discontinuous narrative foregrounds Derrida's concept of alterity, or otherness.

Derrida set about demonstrating that ideas [...] have no substance apart from networks of differences [...] that generate them as effects [...] Another term for this operation of difference that shadows presence is "trace" [...] To bear the trace of other things is to be shadowed by "alterity," which literally means "otherness" (Rivkin & Ryan 2004, p.278).

Derrida came up with trace as a means of escaping the problem of 'effect without a cause'; he believed that this problem arose from Saussure's conception of the signified, where '[a]rbitrariness can occur only because the system of signs is constituted by the differences between the terms, and not by their fullness' (Derrida 1968, p.285). Because signs are, in themselves, constituted by emptiness, and yet they produce differences, as effects, Derrida was concerned that 'we would have to talk about an effect without a cause': a logically implausible position, which he believed would 'lead to no longer talking about effects' (Derrida 1968, p. 286).

The concept of alterity, specifically the trace of otherness, as it corresponds to presence, is a tool for talking about discontinuous narrative. The notion of trace gives a subliminal substance to the system of signs, as cause, and this in turn enables a dialogue about effect. I use the concept of alterity to understand the implications of using a discontinuous style.

The concept of alterity allows for a new way of looking at discontinuous narrative because it reconfigures gaps in narrative time, and disparity in narrative voice, as crucial rhythmic forces that give the narrative its shape. The operation of alterity in narrative is clarified further, in the context of what I have called Experiential Representation.

Exploring the narration as an act of experiential representation

Intriguing similarities exist between processes of representation, as they operate in the realm of memory, and processes of representation, operating within the realm of narrative.

In the case of narrative, the representation is a cognitive arrangement, produced in the context of connotative aspects of experience and understanding. In the case of memory, the representation is also produced in the context of connotation: the original event is inverted and supplemented, as it is arranged cognitively, in a particular way.

In the context of psychoanalysis, Dori Laub tells the story of a woman who, reflecting upon 'her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising', said she remembered 'four chimneys going up in flames, exploding' (Laub 1992, p.52). At a later time, historians noted that this woman's testimony was 'not accurate. The number of chimneys was misrepresented. Historically, only one chimney was blown

up, not all four' (Laub 1992, p.52). In an attempt to correlate image and experience, the number of chimneys is amplified in the remembered version.

The nature of inaccuracy and misrepresentation, in the context of memory, is intriguing. Janet Walker suggests that '[f]orgetting and mistakes in memory may actually stand [...] as testament to the genuine nature of the event a person is trying to recall' (Walker 2005, p.4). When she refers to the genuine nature of the event, Walker captures the sense in which the memory represents the event experientially.

The two images are at odds with one another: one chimney, in the historical version, and four chimneys, in the remembered version – the images contradict one another. Was it one, or was it all four? Which is true?

The answer is both: both are true; one is logically and historically true, and the other is true in the context of an attempt to represent the genuine nature of the event. The logically true image is insufficient in this capacity because it fails, says Laub, to testify 'to something [...] more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence' (Laub 1992, p.52). In the remembered image, we see a process of supplementation and augmentation: a representation that attempts to capture meaning in the idiosyncratic world of experience. I call this process *Experiential Representation*.

It is within this context of *Experiential Representation* that the activity of memory correlates with the activity of narrative. In narrative, we encounter a trope-like chain of signifiers, configured like an incident remembered, a representation that aims to capture the genuine experiential nature of an idea. In the case of both memory and narrative, the signifier stands for more than it is.

Nietzsche unpacks this process, whereby a signifier represents an idea:

every idea originates by equating the equal with the unequal [...] every word becomes at once an idea not by having [...] to serve as a reminder for the original experience [...] but by having simultaneously to fit innumerable, more or less similar (which really means never equal, therefore altogether unequal) cases (Nietzsche 1873, p.263).

The process Nietzsche is describing, whereby an idea in language simultaneously fits countless different cases, is a metaphorical manoeuvre, a process whereby language captures meaning imaginatively and non-literally and, in doing so, represents an idea. The signifier is able to fit unequal others because the signifier has presence in trace, because it is shadowed by alterity, by otherness.

The relationship between the idea and the representation is metaphorical. It is based upon a process of inversion and supplementation, a play of light and shadow within the context of unequal others. So the idea is a ghostly presence of the narrative, lurking as other, outside the realm of the tangible text.

The idea that informs my writing is not fully and consciously conjured. I become aware of this idea, when I second-guess the splintered narration. For the sake of continuity I could rewrite the narrative from the perspective of one narrator; I could discard the messy bits; I could silence the disjuncture between the disparate voices -

but I choose not to, and when I assess why I choose not to, I realise that I am unequivocally attached to this interrupted, splintered style of telling.

I am attracted to this discontinuous style because it foregrounds meaning as process; it foregrounds the ghostly payoff between otherwise empty signs, and it foregrounds the idiosyncratic nature of meaning attribution. It celebrates the sense in which language is alive, the very magical sense in which an otherwise empty sign becomes full of meaning.

It is this celebration of alterity that lurks, as idea, beneath the surface of my discontinuous narrative. Alterity reminds us that narrative is an act of representation, the idea is a ghostly presence of the narrative, constituted by all that the text says, and does not say. As an assemblage of signs, the narrative is a surface milieu for ideas that lurk as other, outside the tangible text.

Milieu comes 'from Old French, *center* : *mi*, *middle* [...] + *lieu*, *place* (from Latin *locus*)' (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2009). *Lieu* is commonly associated with the phrase: in lieu of (in place of) where one thing stands for the other. Milieu, as middle place, captures the sense in which meaning in narrative arises out of the kaleidoscopic play of light and shadow. Narrative meaning is a Trace Dance, a ghostly payoff between otherwise empty signs.

The signs have presence because they are shadowed by alterity, because they bear the trace of otherness. Experiential Representation is the attempt to capture an idea in the context of the other, so the move toward meaning is a metaphorical manoeuvre. Experiential Representation is attentive to the Trace Dance that shadows the assemblage. Meaning, as idea, lurks between illumination and darkness, in the middle place, where the gaps, biases and silences of the narrative intersect.

My novel involves a kaleidoscopic intersection of voices; light and shade collide, the narrative image changes, and changes again; seeing and knowing are constantly called into question. In the middle place of the intersecting voices lies an idea, an ontological and epistemological inquiry that is problematised by the narration itself: Why do we see what we see and not something else, how do we know what we know, and, why do we see and know this, and not the other?

The payoff between the narrators' voices says as much as the voices themselves and this payoff occurs in the shadowy place, in the realm of alterity, where reverberations simulate presence. The rhythm behind the voices is the Trace Dance and this rhythm gives the narrative its shape.

The rhythm is an indirect expression lurking in the connection between the voices, in the gaps and the disparity. The notion of indirect expression captures the operation of alterity in narrative. Indirect expression is the rhythm that underpins the process of Experiential Representation and links narrative representation with processes of remembering.

Bakhtin explores the issue of indirect expression, suggesting that: 'the refracted (indirect) expression of [the author's] intentions and values' are, nevertheless, 'artistically organized [...] shot through with intentions' (Bakhtin 1934-5, p.674, 676). In this way, Bakhtin seems to argue that intentions are the determining factor in the artistic organisation of the novel. The argument from Experiential Representation

emphasises that these intentions may not be fully, consciously determined. They are propelled by the desire to capture the genuine nature of an experience or an idea, in the context of a metaphorical other.

The act of Experiential Representation is informed by the absent presence of the other (as idea), although it need not be preceded by a conscious awareness of that other. Experiential Representation argues for a primal moment of narrative composition, but it does not assume that this moment is either consciously determined, or logical. The meaning is ascribed to the sign as shadow; it is not prescriptive.

Kafka unpacks the operation of these unstable processes, when he says:

My feeling when I write something that is wrong might be depicted as follows [...] A man stands before two holes in the ground [...] he is waiting for something that can only rise up out of the hole to the right. Instead, apparitions rise, one after the other, from the left; they try to attract his attention and finally even succeed in covering up the right hand hole (Corngold 1988, p.84).

Kafka identifies a constant deviation and distraction in the form of apparitions. In trying to write the right thing, he only ever achieves an apparition of the original idea. In this way, Kafka captures the sense in which narrative relies upon the operation of metaphor; the sense in which narrative, as an act of representation, relies upon the writer's understanding of the sign as a symbol of perception, a sign that stands for more than it is.

When we remember that signs are symbols of perception, we open our minds to new possibilities for meaning. We may still approach narrative with the expectation of continuity, but when we are confronted with fractured or splintered meaning, we might be encouraged to take a step back, and ask: is our expectation of continuity relevant to our understanding of discontinuous narrative per se, or only to our understanding of discontinuous narrative, in the context of continuity and logic?

Nietzsche gets right to the heart of this question when he speaks about the seeking and finding of truth, within the realm of reason. He says: 'If somebody hides a thing behind a bush, seeks it again and finds it in the self-same place, then there is not much to boast of, respecting this seeking and finding' (Nietzsche 1873, p.264). To my mind, this hide and seek process mimics the methodology of our search for seamless continuity, in the context of discontinuous narrative.

Nietzsche's underlying premise is that if we find only what we set out to find, the process ceases to be an inquiry, because we have forgotten 'that the original metaphors of perception are metaphors, and take[n] them for the things themselves' (Nietzsche 1873, p. 264). We have put the cart before the horse, so to speak.

When I accept that discontinuous narrative is an intentional stylistic choice, I am no longer concerned with expectations of seamless continuity, but with the operation of discontinuity itself; so I begin from the perspective of what the narrative achieves, as opposed to what it fails to achieve, in the context of logic. This approach takes the narrative itself as the starting point of inquiry. The suggestion that we might begin a theoretical analysis of a narrative from within that narrative, is captured by Hillis

Miller, who claims that:

To follow the motif of the [narrative] line will not be to simplify the knotted problems of narrative form but to retrace the whole tangle from the starting place of a certain point of entry (Hillis Miller 1992, p.231).

In the case of my novel, the starting place is the configuration of meaning as a discontinuous process; the point of entry is a sequence of successive additions.

When we disentangle our inquiry from the trappings of logic, we can reason about the riddle of discontinuity in other ways. When elements of discontinuity are understood methodologically, to be the point and the play, then any attempt to resolve them constitutes an attack on that methodology.

Discontinuity in narrative may, indeed, be a rhythm we cannot readily understand, and yet this does not mean that a logical approach is the best means to our comprehension of it. Perhaps by suspending rules of logic, we open new opportunities for meaning. Opportunities for new meaning exist when we remember that signs are symbols of perception, for example, in their extensive work on metaphor Lakoff and Johnson describe how:

An Iranian student shortly after his arrival in Berkeley, took a seminar on metaphor from one of us [...] he found [...] an expression that he had heard over and over and understood as a beautifully sane metaphor. The expression was "the solution of my problems" – which he took to be a large volume of liquid, bubbling and smoking, containing all of your problems [...] He was terribly disillusioned to find that the residents of Berkeley had no such chemical metaphor in mind. And well he might be, for the chemical metaphor is both beautiful and insightful. It gives us a view of problems that never disappear utterly and that cannot be solved once and for all. All of your problems are always present [...] And [...] you are constantly finding old and new problems precipitating out and present problems dissolving, partly because of your efforts and partly despite anything you do (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp.143-4).

Fundamentally, Lakoff and Johnson see the manner in which the Iranian student comprehends the metaphor as 'a clear case of the power of a metaphor to create a reality' rather than simply giving us 'a way of conceptualizing a pre-existing reality' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp.144-5). Perhaps creating a new reality is the very privilege that narrative affords, because discontinuity reminds us that meaning is unstable, that meaning is shadowed by alterity at every turn.

The image of the solution, bubbling and smoking, mimics the Trace Dance in narrative. Signs, like problems, have presence in the simmering smoke of the assemblage, in relation to all of the other ingredients. The dynamic of the assemblage is altered at every turn as the narrative signs interact.

A novel in multiple first-person voices foregrounds the assemblage as an act of representation. In this instance, the narrative is configured like an incident remembered; idiosyncratic associations lead the Trace Dance, laying bare the tenuous world of meaning attribution.

Lakoff and Johnson's account of metaphor, as a discourse that has the power to create a new reality, accounts for misrepresentation in the context of memory and explains unstable processes of meaning attribution in language. In both of these cases, it explicates this dynamic in Nietzsche's terms, that is, in the context of finding something new behind a bush, something one could scarcely have believed possible.

Crucially, Lakoff and Johnson emphasise the 'experiential' component of metaphorical thinking (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p.154). It is the notion of the experiential that links narrative with memory because, in both cases, the representation is underpinned by processes of inversion and supplementation; in both cases subjective, idiosyncratic and unstable processes of meaning-attribution are foregrounded.

Lakoff and Johnson's work relies upon the premise that '[m]etaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p.153). Intriguingly, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that 'the primary function of a metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p.154). It is this relationship of unequal others, in the form of another kind of experience, that ties Lakoff and Johnson's ideas to Nietzsche's work on metaphors of perception, more than one hundred years earlier.

Conclusion

As we tackle discontinuity in narrative, the knotting, splintering and fracturing of meaning, we need to move away from the concept of continuity and toward an evaluation of discontinuity in the context of metaphor and imagination, as a methodological milieu.

Alterity allows for a new way of looking at discontinuous narrative because alterity explicates the ghosting effect in narrative, the absent-presence of a displaced, exterior logic. Absent presence is the process whereby an exterior, and perhaps illogical, logic gives meaning its shape. This is the Trace Dance, the relationship between the seen and the unseen. It explains how the Auschwitz survivor's testimony is ghosted by the original historical event; it explains how metaphor is capable of creating a new reality; it explains how the ghostly playoff between multiple first-person voices might be crucial to the emotional structure of the narrative.

It is on this point, and in conclusion, that I return to the questions that underpin this investigation, as practice-based inquiry: Why do I find processes that foreground alterity so appealing? Why am I attracted to what might be described as an interrupted style of storytelling, particularly when I am aware that this style rattles expectations of continuity and logic?

As I draft the individual stories, I realise that each story reaches a point of resolution – however the moment of resolution, as a point of knowing, is undermined by the next story, and the next – overall then, knowing is shadowed by a different way of knowing. The narrative image, as representation, is constantly shifting.

...And so we read Bullser's voice, in the story *Cockleshell*, in the context of a constantly shifting other. Bullser says:

That's the story, in a nutshell - or a cockleshell. That is the nothingness of her absence. It is the smell of the rain on the road when she left, and the smell of her skin. Some people say that rain has no smell but that's bullshit: only the rain smells like what was, and what might have been.

... And we read Annie's voice, in the story *Bygones*, in the context of a constantly shifting other. Annie says:

I'll just leave it at that then, ay: leave well enough alone. No one wants to grow up knowing they were the product of a rape [...] so [...] I'll sleep on it: again, and again [...] until I don't know if it's real, until I'm not sure if it ever really happened, until it's a baby in a bucket Bygone.

...And we read Pelts' voice, in the story *Awry*, in the context of a constantly shifting other. Pelts says:

I'd like to think I did everything I could, but I loved her like there was a time limit on it, because I was scared fuckless I would lose her. That's how it is with angels. Sorry... Give me a sec. Sorry. We were all desperate for a piece of her, and we all used-her-up, in our way. Sorry, but that's the bottom of the barrel of the fucken truth.

This is the Trace Dance. This is Derrida's concept of alterity operating within the realm of narrative. In this context, continuity is shadowed by its own undoing, resolution is shadowed by its own unraveling, the known is undercut by a different way of knowing and, perhaps, by an inability to know. Knowing is a shifting kaleidoscope with truth constituted experientially, in the milieu of what it means to be and to know.

An analysis of discontinuity in the context of alterity is liberating. To say that discontinuity is a problem is just another way of saying that alterity is a methodological manoeuvre. Derrida's concept of alterity reminds me that a representation is always shadowed by otherness.

I realise that a novel in multiple first-person voices is a representation that imitates the immediacy of the spoken voice, aiming toward the genuine experiential nature of an idea, where meaning takes shape in the rhythm of the Trace Dance. I realise that discontinuous narrative configures meaning as a process of successive additions. I realise that I'm down with discontinuity, for better, for worse, I like the sound of its impertinent beat. Perhaps most importantly, I realise that I am trying to show you a story, rather than to tell you a story.

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