

Trauma and Creative Writing in the Light of Psychoanalytical Criticism

الصدمة النفسية والكتابة الإبداعية تحت ضوء التحليل النفسي للأدب

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Abstract :

With the rise of psychoanalytic criticism, the relationship between the author and his work has become one of the major fields of research. This article demonstrates the interplay between the author's trauma and his artistic sensibility. Far from being an autotelic artifact, the literary text provides a kind of therapy, which brings solace to a writer, who is psychically wretched. The traumatic times and the shattering and baffling experiences in the author's life sometimes have an impact on his psychological equilibrium. Hence, the author vents his pent-up feelings to experience a sense of catharsis. The paper relies on the recent psychoanalytical trends to evince the relationship between the author's trauma and his literary work.

Key words: trauma, creative writing, psychoanalytical criticism, catharsis.

الملخص:

مع ظهور النقد النفسي فإن العلاقة بين الأديب و عمله أصبح من أهم مجالات البحث. يبين هذا المقال التداخل بين الصدمة النفسية للأديب و حساسيته الفنية. فالنص الأدبي ليس عالما فنيا محضا بل هو نوع من العلاج للكاتب المشتت نفسيا. إن الصدمات النفسية والتجارب العصبية القاهرة في حياة الأديب لها تأثير كبير على توازنه النفسي. وبالتالي فهو يبوح بمشاعره الجياشة المكبوتة عن طريق الكتابة ليشعر بنوع من الارتياح. هذه الدراسة تقتبس من اتجاهات علم النفس الحديثة لتبيان مدى تناغم الصدمة النفسية للأديب مع عمله الأدبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة النفسية، الكتابة الإبداعية، التحليل النفسي للأدب، تنفيس.

The elucidation of the interrelationship between trauma and creative writing requires a due attention to the definition of the concept of trauma. It equally needs some emphasis on the psychoanalytical schools' interpretation of creativeness. Trauma can be conceptualized as a state of existence characterized mainly by a shock experience. As the Oxford Dictionary defines it, trauma is "a mental condition caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time."¹ In the words of Mark Crinson, the shock experience is

a key, if highly ambivalent, concept [...]. It is characteristic of the *fl neur*, the aimless stroller in the city for whom the anonymity, alienation and amnesia engendered by the swirling metropolitan crowd and the overstimulation of the human sensory system bring both pain and pleasure. Shock experience is the very fragmentation of experience itself and the concomitant diminution of memory.²

Person et.al define trauma as "An experience in which external events overwhelm the capacity of the ego to process and manage them, provoking intense feelings of helplessness. The meaning of the event, not its reality characteristics, defines it as traumatic."³ In this sense, trauma can be defined as a shock experience that often leads to neurosis and hysteria. To prevent trauma from being too acute, the individual resorts to some defense mechanisms like creative writing. The latter helps abate the trauma or eliminate it entirely.

The Romantic view of the poet as a psychologically healthy individual is daringly and recklessly abandoned by fin-de-siècle writers, who deem illness the motivating force behind all great achievements. In the words of Roy Porter, "[a]ssociating mental disturbance with other illnesses, [...], the avand-guard, notably in the Paris of Flaubert, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, held that true art[...] sprang from the morbid and pathological: sickness, and suffering fired and liberated the spirit, [...], and works of genius were hammered out on the anvil of pain."⁴ According to this view, it could be advanced that great artists are the ones who transmit their personal suffering into art. So, the motifs of alienation, fragmentation, dispossession and discordance that are pervasive in the modernists' writings can be traced back to some knots in their authors' psychic life. Along similar

lines, discussing the difference between the scientists and the artists, René Welleck and Austin Warren maintain that:

After the event, any success can be attributed to compensatory motivation, for every one has liabilities which may serve him as spurs. Dubious, certainly, is the widespread view that neuroticism-and compensation-differentiate scientists from artists and other 'contemplatives': the obvious distinction is that writers often document their own cases, turning their maladies into their thematic material⁵

This view is in tune with the Platonic conception that there is a kind of sickness inherent in art. The critic Peter Widdowson informs us that Plato "speaks of the 'divine madness' of the poet, i.e., his inspiration- in which transcendent state of mind a divine power speaks through the poet and puts him in touch with the 'ideas'(ultimate realities, archetypes) behind the material world."⁶

For many authors and critics, there is a correlation between creativity and mental disorder. In her discussion of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the critic Simten Gurac states that:

The immense love of losing the loved object by one's love for it, and the intense isolation that ensues from emotional withdrawal, the unbearable sense of loneliness, and the feeling of losing one's own self is *felt* as insanity. Creativity at least in part, originates...in a need to externalize insanity, to see one's own delirium in a more or less solid form. Creativity originates in madness-madness understood as fear and solitude.⁷

By the projection or expression of his/her intense feelings of madness, the author engages in a talking cure, which procures him pleasure. So, writing might be viewed as a defense mechanism that helps the author escape or exorcise his madness.

In her Commentary on Virginia Woolf's writings, the critic Jeffrey Meyers writes: "[her] creativity and genius were closely connected to her fantasies and insanity, and the terrible strain of completing a book would always drive her to the verge of a mental breakdown."⁸ Since creativity and insanity are interrelated, decoding a literary text requires knowledge about

the circumstances of its creation, because the psyche of the author is unavoidably linked to his craft. To use Goethe's dictum, poetry consists of "fragments of a great confession".

Along similar lines, the scientist Albert Einstein conceives of the act of writing as a means to construct an order out of disorder, a more beautiful world out of an uglier and more sordid one. He writes:

Man tries to form for himself a clear, simplified image of the world in which in the way best suited to him... This is what the painter, the speculative philosopher and the natural scientist all do, each in his own way. He locates the center of gravity of his emotional life inside this image and its formation in order to attain the peace and serenity he cannot find within the narrow confines of his ever changing personal experience.⁹

Hence, because he fails to find solace in the outside world, the artist attempts through his artistic creation to find a shelter, to construct a world in this world. The main force that pushes the authors to write is the necessity to resolve their internal conflicts. Each work of art captures and carries within it the story of its creation and the life of its creator.

Psychology and literature are always viewed as interrelated disciplines. In this respect, Thomas Mann writes:

On what authority can a poet be the orator of a ceremony in honor of a great scientist? [...] Literature and psychoanalysis have both been conscious of the close relations between them for some time. But the solemnity of this moment lies, in my view at least, in what is the first public meeting between these two spheres, in the open acknowledgement of that consciousness of affinity. As I said, for a long time both sides were unaware of these connections, these deep-lying sympathies.

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The development of psychology in the 20th century has reshaped and revolutionized critics' old-established perception of artistic creation. Like psychology, whose main concern is the individual's emotional and mental processes, modern poetry emphasizes the internal experiences of the human beings. Twentieth century psychoanalytic theories, mainly those of Sigmund

Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Jung, stress the affinities between madness and art. That is, they come to view art as a symptom of madness. According to the critic David Daiches, "The notion that the artist is neurotic, sick, maladjusted, that art is somehow a by-product of this sickness and maladjustment, has become immensely popular during the last hundred and fifty years and modern psychology seems to have justified it."¹¹ Likewise, the poet W.H. Auden states:

The psychologist maintains that poetry is a neurotic symptom, an attempt to compensate by phantasy for a failure to meet reality. We must tell him that phantasy is only the beginning of writing; that on the contrary, like psychology, poetry is a struggle to reconcile the unwilling subject and object; in fact, that since psychological truth depends so largely on context, poetry, the parabolic approach, is the only adequate medium for psychology.¹²

Hence, in psychoanalytic criticism, poetry is deemed as a means to offer comfort and solace to a burdened and over-wrought mind. Thus, it erodes the sharp distinction between the artist and his work that is established by the formalistic approaches. As the critics Welleck and Warren observe: "The most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, the author, and an explanation in terms of the personality and the life of the writer has been one of the oldest and best-established methods of literary study" (Welleck and Warren 71). Metaphor and metonymy, for instance, are poetic versions of condensation and displacement. In another instance, the author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, are traceable in the behaviours of the characters in a literary text. According to the feminist critic Eva Martin Sartori, characters in a literary text are assumed to represent the author's psyche. As she puts it: "literary characters and voices may evince primitive defense mechanisms like splitting, in which the contradictory love object is alternately good and bad, giving and withholding, mirroring or fragmenting."¹³

Freud's account of madness has been pervasively influential. He suggests that art contains traces of the author's life and repressed personality traits. Thus, to look at the author from a Freudian hermeneutic lens, one must try to decrypt his traces in the text, as well as the psychogenesis of his work. The American literary critic and author Lionel Trilling points out:

“For, of all mental systems, the Freudian psychology is the one which makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind. Indeed, the mind as Freud sees it, is in the greatest part of its tendency exactly a poetry-making organ [...] for it seems to make the workings of the unconscious mind equivalent to poetry.”¹⁴

In Trilling’s view, the mind is an organ that gives vent to emotions that flow in the form of a poem. Trilling’s quote can be recapitulated as follows: “I write, therefore I am.”

Central to the Freudian school of thought is the conception of art as a defense mechanism whereby the artist, or the dreaming self, escapes and flees reality to re-create his own world. In “The Loss of Reality in Neurosis”, Freud describes the ego’s ability to escape the outer reality and to reconstruct another alternative that is not objectional for the ego. Psychosis, he maintains, is an art form, for it “literally remodels reality by creating a new outer world that it attempts to set in place of external reality.”¹⁵ Hence, the role of art is to compensate a lack of self-fulfillment in the artist and mitigates the pain of being by creating a world that is pleasing to him. In “Creative Writers and Day-dreamers”, Sigmund Freud makes an interesting analogy between creative writing and the child whose play apes reality:

Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which please him? It would be wrong to think that he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. In spite of all the emotion with which he cathects his world of play, the child distinguishes it quite well from reality; and he likes to link his imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world. This linking is all that differentiates the child’s ‘play’ from ‘fantasy’” The work of art is a fantasy. “The motive forces of fantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality”¹⁶

So, according to Freud, poetry is a sort of a child's play that apes a reality that is not accessible. The artist takes life as the raw material of his work to create a utopia where he can realize all his desires and wishes that are not accomplished in the up-side down reality he lives in. The critic M.A.R. Habib considers the work of art as a fantasy and maintains that:

Freud's argument concerning art is fundamental: the human psyche, frustrated in its attempts to mold the world in a self-comforting image, resorts to art to create its world in fantasy. Art [...] is the highest form of such an impulse, and is the embodiment of civilization itself, whose foundations are erected on the graveyard of repressed instincts.¹⁷

For the artist, who loses his foothold in reality and feels depressed, the only way out is to fabricate a new world. This function of art is what makes the artist survive and thrive.

At the heart of the Freudian psychoanalytical school of criticism is the notion of the art as dream. According to this school, "[l]iterature, and the other arts, like dreams and neurotic symptoms, consist of the imagined or fantasized, fulfillment of wishes that are either denied by reality or are prohibited by social standards of morality and propriety."¹⁸ The similarity of art to a dream lies in the former's ability to afford the mind relief and refreshment by fulfilling all the artist's repressed wishes and desires and by creating a fanciful world pleasing to his mind.

In the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, poets are always called dreamers because poetry is a fantasy construct, where the repressed fears and wishes find release. This position is echoed by the psychoanalytic critic Özlem Özen, who draws an analogy between poetry and dreams as follows:

[P]oetry is a means of recreation that relieves the overburdened mind; it is a channel through which emotions find expression, a safe and regulated expression. In addition to keeping mental balance, the dream and the poetry are alike in having their source in the emotions and in being concrete in their expression. As the dream is a result of a compromise between two elements-the repressed wish and the censor that keeps the wish to be hidden-so poetry is a result of a conflict between

the poet's inspiration and external world-his unconscious desires which do not conform with poetic conventions of his time¹⁹

Thus, because it affords the mind imaginary satisfactions of unconscious wishes, poetry might be seen as a kind of therapy, which helps the poet keep his psychological equilibrium and enhance his mental health. The Freudian concept of the poet as dreamer becomes pertinent in decoding a literary text, where the author masks and shrouds his secret unconscious desires and anxieties with an artistic form. Imagery and symbols in a text, for instance, stand for the unconscious.

Like Freud, the psychiatrist Carl Jung brings a great contribution to the understanding of creative writing. He considers the psyche of the artist as a battle field in which many psychic and creative forces are at conflict. In "Psychology and Literature", he writes: "The artist's life cannot be otherwise than full of conflicts, for two forces are at war within him-on the one hand the common human longing for happiness, satisfaction, and security in life, and on the other-ruthless passion for creation which may go as far as to override every personal desire."²⁰ Jungian psychoanalysis is built on the assumption that everything in a text reflects an essentially imagined reality pertinent to an aspect of the writer's inner world and, by extension, to his personality. Thus, characters in a work of art, for instance, can be viewed as personifications of the divergent aspects of the writers' personality.

Jungian psychology places much emphasis on the nature and implication of archetypal and mythical imagery. For Jung, the contents of the unconscious compensate an aspect of the subject's conscious attitudes. Though the concept of collective unconscious is fundamental to his theory, Jung does not deny the existence of a personal unconscious. The latter refers to the author's unique and very individual relation to his literary work. To put it differently, the archetypal material encountered in the work of art has a specific and personal significance for the author.²¹

Jaques Lacan also brings a great contribution to the understanding of creative writing. Like Freud, Lacan conceives art as a talking cure that procures health to the artist. As he points out: "it was because the putting into words of the event (in the patient's" stories") determined the lifting of the symptom."²² To overcome their trauma, narration for the traumatised is required. This act of creative writing, which is analogous to that of the patient's narration, contains traces of the author's traumatic incidents. In the words of Lacan, the "neurotic symptom acts as a language that enables

repression to be expressed. This is precisely what enables us to grasp the fact that repression and the return of the repressed are one and the same thing, the front and back of a single process.”²³ Put in another way, the author’s text is but an exteriorization of what is repressed.

Cathy Caruth, who is a leading figure in trauma studies, researches the intrinsic relationship between trauma and creative writing. Her description of trauma shows her debt to Sigmund Freud. For Caruth, literature is the best outlet of the author’s trauma. In her words, “it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet”²⁴. In fact, Caruth relies on Freud’s theory of trauma as elaborated in *Moses and Monotheism* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the dialogic relationship between trauma and artistic creation. The literary text is a mirror of the author’s cravings and his personal concerns. In other words, the author’s psychic life leaves indelible traces on his creative sensibility. Through art, the writer reveals and portrays the warp and weft of his mind because the materials of a work of art are drawn from emotional shocks, the experience of passion and real life in general. The author transposes his painful feelings and memories into artistic forms. The text conveys his psychological insights and his scathing indictment of the external world through a harmonious, yet so obscure orchestration of techniques. The work of art might be read as a means of escape, which removes the individual from the labyrinth he is sunk into; but it is also a portrayal of the self’s struggle to survive his trauma and the seamy side of life.

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