

TRAUMA AS STABILIZER OF IDENTITY IN JOAN DIDION'S MEMOIRS

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Abstract: In this paper, I analyze Joan Didion 2005 memoir, The Year of Magical Thinking, through the lens of trauma theory. Didion's memoir recounts her attempt to overcome the death of her husband John Dunne. The aim of this paper is to analyze what shape the trauma narrative takes in autobiographical writing, in this case a memoir. I will start by describing the main tenets of trauma theory. Then I will prove that the memoir follows these tenets and show how the generic traits of autobiographical writing are used to convey a restructuring of identity in The Year of Magical Thinking.

Keywords: autobiography, identity, Joan Didion, narrative, trauma

Introduction

Trauma theory refers to a critical toolkit that became so influential at the end of the twentieth century that it was called by Susannah Radstone "a new critical orthodoxy." Traditional trauma theory takes its cue from Freud's work on trauma, using a psychological concept to explain cultural production. The rebirth of trauma studies at the end of the 20th century undoubtedly owes much to Holocaust studies as it was the Shoah that was the subject of many traditional works on trauma. In the U.S., 9/11 also had an impact on studies dealing with trauma, giving birth to the idea of cultural or collective trauma.

One of the most influential traditional trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth, defines trauma as

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, an possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (*Trauma* 4)

Beyond defining this psychological affliction, trauma theory is concerned with the representation of trauma. Caruth states that “trauma must be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary, a language that defies, even as it claims our understanding” (*Unclaimed Experience* 5). This remark points to ever-present moral dimension of trauma theory that stems from its roots in Holocaust negotiations. Advocates of morally normative representations of the Holocaust, such as Ellie Wiesel, have spoken about who has the right to represent trauma and how trauma should be represented. Most trauma theory follows in this vein, legitimizing a narrow trauma aesthetic. According to Alan Gibbs, such prescriptive ideas about the representation of trauma produce formulaic works (9), defined by modernist and especially postmodernist techniques which allow for the depiction of the belatedness, literality and unrepresentability which are supposedly defining traits for trauma.

The trouble with such ideas about how trauma should be represented is that it legitimizes an aesthetics that is decidedly Euro-American, silencing some trauma victims whose narratives do not conform to the prescriptive trauma model. In her extremely influential study, Caruth claims that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (*Trauma* 11) because sharing trauma stories causes identification with the narrator and empathy. This idea was taken up by Jeffrey Alexander who supplied the concept of cultural trauma, transferring a concept that was meant to refer to the individual psyche onto collective consciousness. His ideas are extensively quoted in studies that read 9/11 through the lens of trauma theory. What all this implies is that there is a universal manner in which individuals and communities react to distressing events. This is problematic because it obscures the context in which harmful events occur, smoothing over the political implications that they more often than not carry.

Recently, this effect of trauma theory has been intensely criticized (cf. Rothberg, Craps, Gibbs, Luckhurst). Newer trauma theory points to “the necessity of broadening and differentiating our understanding of what trauma is, along with our account of the conditions

under which it is produced” (XVII). Moreover, the techniques advocated by trauma theory have already become so conventionalized that they no longer have the effect of transmissibility for which trauma narratives should allegedly aim. Gibbs claims that for this reason trauma narratives have adopted a “return to realism, drawing in part upon certain techniques that have recently been (re)popularized through factual trauma memoirs” (36), which have become increasingly popular since the 1990s. In my paper, I want to find out what the techniques of trauma memoirs might be by analyzing Didion’s 2005 memoir. I will claim that certain generic traits of autobiography are used to reenact the reconfiguration of identity around trauma.

Trauma, Narrative and Identity in *The Year of Magical Thinking*

The Year of Magical Thinking is Joan Didion’s 2005 memoir in which the aftermath of John Dunne, the author’s husband, is depicted, as well as the narrator’s efforts to come to terms with that event in the midst of another crisis, i.e. the hospitalization of her daughter Quintana. Didion’s memoir is a trauma memoir because it follows the trauma pattern borrowed by Caruth from Freud and described in her seminal work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). Thus the narrator of the memoir is confronted with the sudden and overwhelming death of her husband from cardiac arrest at the dinner table. In the aftermath of the event she experiences numbness – she is referred to several times as a “cool customer” because of the way she is seemingly rational in handling herself. In fact, she is incapable of acknowledging the reality of her husband’s passing. His return is constantly referred to throughout the book. For example, in the scene where the Didion persona refuses to give away his clothes because he will need them when he returns or when she refuses a cornea transplant because that would make the reality of her husband’s death irrefutable. This belief in the reversibility of death is the “magical thinking” referenced in the title of the memoir.

In its exceptionality, John Dunne’s death disrupts Didion’s sense of continuous identity. Joan Didion, as a writer, is famous for her analytical thinking and her so-called objective style of writing, which are both traits of the New Journalism trend to which she belongs. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, both of these characteristics are disrupted by her husband’s death. Her analytical thinking is replaced by what she calls ‘magical thinking,’ i.e. her conviction that John would return. Although the memoir depicts Didion’s negotiation of grief retrospectively, she points out that from the beginning she was convinced that he would return, so that the

delimitation of the imbalance to one year is not only the objective retrospective quantification of how long the grieving process lasted, but expresses her expectation that her precarious situation would not last. After all, to her, Dunne's return would be as unexpected as his passing, which propels it within the realm of the possible (cf. Precup 108-109). Moreover, his supposed return would cancel out his passing, which leave Didion feeling that the period of disorder experienced after his death is a period of non-existence, or absence. Thus, in order for his return to be possible, she tries to recreate the necessary conditions for his return, namely to make herself as invisible/absent as possible:

People who have recently lost someone have a certain look, recognizable maybe only to those who have seen that look on their own faces. I have noticed it on my face and I notice it now on others. The look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness. It is the look of someone who walks from the ophtalmologist's office into the bright daylight with dilated eyes, or of someone who wears glasses and is suddenly made to take them off. These people who have lost someone look naked because they think themselves invisible. (74-75)

Apart from this, she also avoid being around other people. She and Dunne were alone the night of his demise, so she would need to be alone in order for him to return and things to go back to the way they were before.

In spite of her refusal to acknowledge it, the instant of Dunne's death intrusively crops up throughout the memoir in the form of thoughts as well as dreams. These thoughts and dreams are triggered by place or objects that Didion associates with her husband and their life together. For instance, while Didion is in L.A. caring for her daughter, she is reminded by the city scape of the time between 1967 and 1971 when Didion and Dunne lived on Franklin Avenue in L.A. Each conversation remembered includes a phrase that anticipates Dunne's death thus rehashing the scene of his passing. These scenes of remembrance are referred to as the vortex effect, triggered by stimuli related to the traumatic event. The narrator talks about being sideswiped by memories as the "incorrect track," suggesting thus that she wishes to avoid stimuli related to the traumatic event.

As I have shown, Didion's trauma narrative fulfills the belatedness in acknowledging the event and the avoidance criteria. It also partly fulfills the unrepresentability criterium. While

Dunne's death is related matter-of-factly and the account includes scientific details such as autopsy reports or security logs, the trauma caused by the event is represented metaphorically. For example, when the event recurs in her memory several shorthands are used: the date of Dunne's death (30 December 2003), the leitmotif "You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends" or Gawain's refrain: "I tell you I shall not live two days." Even the dreams that Didion has are not literal depictions of the event but metaphorical reinterpretations, as is the case with a dream she has of being abandoned by Dunne in an airport:

In another dream John and I are flying to Honolulu. Many other people are going, we have assembled at Santa Monica Airport. Paramount has arranged planes. Production assistants are distributing boarding passes. I board. There is confusion. Others are boarding but there is no sign of John. I worry that there is a problem with his boarding pass. I decide that I should leave the plane, wait for him in the car. While I am waiting in the car I realize that the planes are taking off, one by one. Finally there is no one but me on the tarmac. (161)

These dream sequences function as embedded micro-narratives in the memoir, inserted within the main storyline which recounts Joan Didion's life after her husband's death. The main narrative takes the form of a forensic uncovering of what happened. Didion approaches her grief as she would approach one of the topics she was investigating for a work of journalism, being especially concerned with establishing the proper chronology, i.e. the exact order in which minor events happened, so she can analyze the events and establish cause-and-effect relationships. As a result, she analyzes the events as well as her reactions through the lens scientific texts, such as the *Bereavement: Reactions, Consequences, and Care, a volume of the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine* or Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," as well as autobiographical accounts of mourning, such as C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed* or W. H. Auden's "Funeral Blues." In this manner, she not only explains her grief, but also tries to discover what is afflicting her daughter, Quintana, who is hospitalized because of fluke infection for the most of Didion's mourning period.

As a consequence of her thorough analysis, the main plotline takes on the language and quality of a quasi-scientific text, whereas her metaphorical dream sequences stand out as distinctly literary. These, along with the above-mentioned leitmotifs and embedded micro-

narratives recounting memories, disrupt the scientific structure and language of the text. For example, Didion recalls the summer she and Dunne spent in Brentwood Park, recounting their work routine and the way they used to go out to dinner at night. The language she uses in this passage is very vivid, giving details about the texture of those days such as the food they would eat, what it tasted like and the emotions it would evoke. Interestingly, she also quotes bits of the conversations she had with her husband and reinterprets them through the lens of her current experience. She recounts, for instance, of the way he made her drive back home one evening, telling her that “I might take it a little slower.” Didion, at that time, interpreted this as a suggestion for her to drive slower, but in light of Dunne’s death she takes it as a warning on his part that he would die, causing her to feel guilty that she missed it.

By using literary language in flashbacks thus, a clear distinction is made in this manner between the writing self and the written self of the memoir. In theories of autobiography, this distinction is perhaps the most discussed characteristic of such texts. What this characteristic refers to is the fact that the past self is recreated by the self in the present which recalls it. As George Gusdorf puts it:

Confession of the self realizes itself as a work in the present: it effects a true creation of the self by the self. Under the guise of presenting myself as I was, I experience a sort of right to recover possession of my existence now and later. (44)

The main reason why it is possible for the present self to rewrite itself according to new experience is its perspective of anteriority. Moreover, the kind of experience that forces the present self to rewrite its identity is that of crisis, in which it questions its former assumptions. Karl Weintraub, in *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (1978), points this out, saying that identity “occurs beyond a moment of crisis or beyond an experience, or a cumulative set of experiences which can play the same function as a crisis” (74).

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the death of John Dunne represents such a crisis because of which identity is rewritten. When Didion writes her memoir, it is clear that she writes it from a position in which she experiences absence, which then reverberates through her memories. In them, her husband through what he says and his behavior, as well as the universe

itself, through coincidences and cryptic metaphors, is trying to warn her of his impending demise. Thus Didion's identity is reorganized around a core of absence.

This reorganization of identity is apparent at the textual level as well. Consider the following paragraph in which Joan Didion is told that her husband has passed away:

There was a silence. "He's dead, isn't he," I heard myself say to the doctor. The doctor looked at the social worker. "It's okay," the social worker said. "She's a pretty cool customer." They took me into the curtained cubicle where John lay, alone now. They asked if I wanted a priest. I said yes. A priest appeared and said the words. I thanked him. They gave me the silver clip in which John kept his driver's license and credit cards. They gave me the cash that had been in his pocket. They gave me his watch. They gave me his cell phone. They gave me a plastic bag in which they said I would find his clothes. I thanked them. The social worker asked if he could do anything more for me. I said he could put me in a taxi. He did. I thanked him. "Do you have money for the fare," he asked. I said I did, the cool customer. When I walked into the apartment and saw John's jacket and scarf still lying on the chair where he had dropped them when we came in from seeing Quintana at Beth Israel North (the red cashmere scarf, the Patagonia windbreaker that had been the crew jacket on *Up Close & Personal*) I wondered what an uncool customer would be allowed to do. Break down? Require sedation? Scream? (Didion, 2005: 15–16)

The paragraph starts with the acknowledgement of absence by the lack of sound which causes silence. The paragraph continues in a seemingly objective style in which Didion repetitively reports what happened in the for "they did X," "I said Y," without offering any insight into what she might be feeling. Thus she frustrates the reader's expectations who is curious to find out the kind of effects that the tragedy produced. The repetition of the above-mentioned structure makes the text also seem superfluous, as every minor detail is recorded and makes it appear as though no narrative voice is in charge of structuring experience. While this reportorial style is characteristic of Didion's previous writing – she is known for her objective, journalistic style, here this style seems callous and the reader is relieved when the tone shifts to interiority at the end of the paragraph. I would argue that this is the moment when the text is rewritten as a result of absence and the style changes towards subjectivity.

Conclusion

Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* is a trauma memoir because the narrator's reaction to the death follows the trauma pattern prescribed by traditional trauma theory, because it depicts a shocking event whose stimuli are avoided and yet is constantly rehashed metaphorically throughout the memoir in dreams, flashbacks and other embedded narratives. Moreover, trauma is shown as a crisis which restructures identity in the memoir. The generic traits of autobiographical writing, such as the difference between the writing self and the written self and the placement of the autobiographical between the scientific and the literary genre, permit the memoir to foreground how identity is restructured around a core of absence.

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