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Reading the Suffering of Others
The Ethical Possibilities of ›Empathic Unsettlement‹

How can literature trigger us to take a critical attitude towards our own position in watching the other suffer? This essay explores the issue of what could constitute an ›ethical‹ response to literary representations of suffering, and which features in the literary work itself could be most conducive to such a response. This issue is explored using a poststructuralist perspective. While the debate around the ethics of representing suffering and cruelty is much wider than the poststructuralist framework can address, poststructuralism has been chosen as a theoretical point of departure because it has been dominant within literary scholarship addressing trauma in the last decades.

Within trauma studies, (post)structuralist critics like Caruth have typically claimed that trauma or suffering can only be represented, insofar as it can be represented at all, by the ›gap‹ or aporia, by language that defies referentiality. The question with aporetic narratives, however, is to what extent they still invite an empathic response. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra has given an eloquent critique of the poststructuralist idealization of aporia and of constitutive loss. When one is addressing a specific traumatic event, LaCapra argues that it would be preferable to use the type of writing that does not only embody ›acting out‹ but also ›working through‹, »developing articulations that are recognized as problematic but still function as limits and as possibly desirable resistances to undecidability« (La Capra 2001, 22). He expresses a fear that the type of writing that tries to stay faithful to trauma in its ›acting out‹ denies the distinction between the actual victim, the one who writes about the victim, and the one who reads about the victim; thus creating ›over-identification‹ with the victim.

While it could be said that radically aporetic narratives carry some inherent dangers when it comes to evoking an ethical reader response to suffering, this does not mean that the use of disruptive techniques like aporia should be relinquished altogether. On the contrary, distortion and disruption within a narrative can incite readers to start challenging normative ways of thinking and being. What is called for is a balance between disruption and engagement. If we cannot relate to the characters at all, how are we supposed to (critically) engage with their suffering, or their cruelty? Indeed, ›empathy‹ may mediate in not letting the aporetic text escape our understanding completely. LaCapra's argument for the notion of ›empathic unsettlement‹ can help point the way to a fruitful ›middle ground‹ between a ›conventional‹ engaging narrative which allows readers to understand the represented other, and disrupting techniques which make clear that understanding the other can never be complete.

Moreover, the distinction between ›sympathy‹ and ›empathy‹ is crucial when it comes to determining an ethical response to the suffering literary other. ›Sympathy‹ can be equated to »feeling sorry for you«, while empathy corresponds to »feeling your sorrow« (Eagleton 2003, 156). This means that at a metalevel, it is easier to take pleasure in our sympathy than in our empathy. Chismar, in fact, has argued that while sympathy may have the appearance of being the more ethical of the two, empathy has an underexplored ethical potential. Feeling empathy means that someone is »stimulated, disturbed, or even moved by the recipient [of the empathy], but she may not really care about him or agree with him« (Chismar 1988, 258). This means that we can empathize with others while respecting their difference from us. What we and the other have in common lies in the realm of physical and emotional pain. While everything that makes us different from the other leads us to have a different validation, interpretation and experience of that pain, our fundamental similarity is that we both are capable of experiencing pain: we are

both mortal and fragile human beings. Empathy allows us to feel for, or better: feel with, the other whom we do not know, may not understand, or even like.

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* functions as a case in point of ›empathic unsettlement‹. *Disgrace* simultaneously evokes and obstructs a desire to know more about Lucy's rape, ›forcing‹ readers to use their imagination but simultaneously addressing the limits of using one's imagination in ›feeling‹, and especially in understanding, the suffering of the other. The novel thus functions as an implicit inquisitor, asking us why we want to know about Lucy's suffering. The other is there, inescapable but unintelligible, bearing her wounds; and we are called upon not to look away, while also not allowed to indulge in this other's suffering. Ultimately, what literary fiction like Coetzee's can accomplish lies within its capacity to confront us with our desire to watch the suffering other while questioning this desire.

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