

Between Experience and Representation: Towards a Semiotics of Trauma

Robert Weiss

An initial question: What is represented when we represent trauma?

To think about this would be to think about some of the intricacies of the relations between representations and the event itself. How, in other words, is trauma given meaning? Might meaning, in fact, be essentially empty: empty of the thing itself—becoming unspeakable? Today we are asking *why* we need to talk about trauma and what might happen if we don't. I want to ask, a second, alternative question: *How* is trauma represented? And what if trauma was, in many ways, unrepresentable? What can be said when the event, or experience is liable to “escape”, in Maurice Blanchot's words, “the very possibility of experience” (1980: 7)? What might be said about trauma if nothing can be said about trauma?

In chapter seven of his paper, ‘The Unconscious’, published in 1915 at a key period in the development of his metapsychology, Freud suggests that the presentation of memory-traces—the way memories are processed and represented consciously—occurs as a result of two elements coming together. This is a confluence between the presentation of “the thing”—which is always inaccessible and remote from the direct memory image—“plus a presentation of the word belonging to it” (see Freud, 1915: 201). Freud maintains that in consciousness memory traces cannot be processed directly, they can only be re-presented, can only be a *derivation* of this source memory. Memory traces are made manifest through language, but words only represent something that is always already a representation, always at a distance from its origin. In the unconscious, perhaps in a dream, or in some psychotic states, the abstract might take the place of the concrete, Freud implies, but at the level of representation, memory traces are inadequately rendered through a language that can only make a stab at its referents. It is this gap—between representation and the thing itself—that I want to think about in relation to the traumatic event.

If, as analysts, we're entrusted in our work to be alive to the most opaque of traces, we do so because they are always a derivation of something else, of *somewhere* else, of another time. Something is pointed to, or approached, but remains unreachable. But traces that point to nothing, might still say *something* about that absence. The trace, then, might be thought of in terms of a kind of evidence; evidence of something absent, in that which was left behind. A representation that has a form, but whose content is always elsewhere.

When he was a child the war photographer, Don McCullin, would have a piece of paper tacked to the kitchen wall on which he would be allowed to draw. He remembers, in a television interview from the 1970s, how after the drawing was taken down, a space remained, framed by spikes of many-coloured crayon: “empty pictures”, he recalls, “with marvellous edges” (see Morris & Morris, 2013). A substitution had been made, not the picture, but its absence was being pointed to—framed up—what is usually filled in, remains uncannily empty. What is implied here, and what's underlined in some of the other childhood experiences alluded to in Jacqui and David Morris's film about McCullin, is that he was compelled to take up a position of one who is concerned with filling the frame, to replace emptiness with content and meaning. But why war? Why not portraiture? Why not as a watercolourist, for that matter? After all, these would also fill the frame, symbolically compensate for the emptiness he describes. The photographs McCullin made point to a type of representation that Roland Barthes describes as occupying both “spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority”, an uncanny meeting “between the here-now and the there-then” (Barthes, 1964: 44). Although Barthes speaks here about a photographic text, this temporal disjuncture might also describe something of how trauma operates. The young McCullin, in the spectral absences his drawings left behind, was confronted with the traumatic distance between experience and representation. He was to repeatedly place himself in the dark, traumatic heart of battle not only in an attempt to

represent something of the suffering of others, but also to experience something of it himself.

The empty space, then, might be a traumatic, unfillable one, but inevitably all loss leaves its mark, becomes, somehow, re-presented. McCullin's spidery crayon marks trace out an absence and a presence at the same time; the object is absent, but a part of the materiality of that object—an *affective* trace—remains. Seamus Heaney alludes to the potency of a space that can act as a marker of something absent when he speaks of a photograph of his uncle in an early poem (Heaney, 1966: 15). Removed from the wall, bound for the attic, it left: *...a faded patch where he had been—/as if a bandage had been ripped from skin—/ Empty plaque to a house's rise and fall*. For Heaney, too, empty space traces out a memorial to traumatic loss.

This lacuna between experience and representation, particularly in relation to infantile trauma was something that Freud, in an 1896 letter to Fleiss, might have thought of in terms of those untranslated infantile memory traces, which, rather than marking a *failure* of translation, as had been observed in repression, point to a translation that's *yet to be made*, yet to be elaborated (see Freud, 1950 [1896]: 235). To attempt a translation (more accurately a *re-translation*, as Laplanche would say) of these traces, involves a representation that has always been subject to a deferral: from the untranslatable to an event, a representation, a symptom. This is an encounter with Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, to which I might want to add Derrida's ideas on deferral and the supplement, and Laplanche's understanding of Freud's term as *après-coup*, afterwardsness. The encounter shows itself in traces of what Derrida thinks of as a 'non-origin which is originary', that is in an earlier trace—for Derrida, the "laborious trace"—itself never perceived, always missing the originary encounter (see Derrida, 1978: 203, 214). For Laplanche, too, the leaving of traces is an *initial* moment in childhood, and corresponds to a "two-phase trauma", the actions of *après coup* (Laplanche, 1993: 96), that supplement, distort and rearrange memory. Language struggles to adequately describe these traces, there is no intrinsic connection between word and thing. This is something that Freud pointed to in his 1915 paper, and something Lacan notably elaborated on by connecting Saussure's notion of the arbitrariness of the sign with Freudian metapsychology. But rather than a Saussurian/Lacanian notion of the flow of signifiers, I want to think of a semiotics of trauma that engages with the idea of the indexical sign, as formulated by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, which, unlike speech, always carries with it an affective trace of that which was once inscribed, which always carries with it the mark of trauma.

It is striking to observe how many of Peirce's observations about the indexical sign chime with some of Freud's ideas about the representation of memory traces. Peirce formulates his thoughts on semiotics between 1893 and 1910, publishing in fragments, a few years before Freud published his *Papers on Metapsychology*. For Peirce, the index is a type of sign that has a quality in common with the object, a quality which is also always the modification of it by the object (see Peirce, 1955 [1893–1910]: 102). A direct link to the object—which, of course, is never present—in the trace that describes it: a footprint is the index of a foot. Peirce understands that the qualities of the indexical sign work in a relationship between this dynamic relation to the object itself and the "senses" and memories for the person for whom it appears as a sign (1955 [1893–1910]: 107). The paradigm of the index, for Peirce, a bullet-hole in a piece of mould, refers to this relation. It is a sign of a shot: "without the shot", he says, "there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anyone has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not" (1955 [1893–1910]: 104). The index brings absence to the fore as wound, as rupture, and as trauma. To describe the index is to define the wound of trauma.

Here then, we have a spatial model of the representation of trauma as operating in a dialectic between presence and absence, emptiness and fullness, or interiority and exteriority. Breuer and Freud, attempting to conceptualise hysterical symptomology, understood trauma as a foreign body that is internalised, before reappearing as symptom (see Breuer & Freud, 1893–

5:6). The traumatic comes from the other and becomes part of the self; what Laplanche and Pontalis in their well-known paper, ‘Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality’ think of as an “internalised exteriority”. This uncanny amalgam of exterior and interior breaks out from within, before reappearing again as representation, as memory: as symptom. But we note here that what is encysted, to use Laplanche and Pontalis’ term, is not in itself traumatic, but becomes so after a second event, when a glimpse of the first event, the inner foreign body, as they say, reveals itself (see Laplanche & Pontalis, 1964: 4). So the index of trauma is to be understood in a temporal as well as a spatial way, through the actions of *Nachträglichkeit*—afterwardsness and deferral. Peirce, too, is aware in his semiotic investigations that the index is that which *startles* us, marking the “junction of two portions of experience” (1955 [1893–1910]: 109): a knock on the door, a peal of thunder—a secondary, deferred event is always pointed to. Peirce’s own *nachträglich* moment is, like Freud’s, intimately concerned with an unrepresented traumatic absence.

The end result of the meeting between Freud’s thing presentation and word presentation is a sign that has a relation to speech that is similar to a pictorial or a hieroglyphic sign; something needs to be decoded, interpretation is dependent on context and the thing itself is always one step removed, impossible to formulate without something supplementary. In this sense, the traumatic representation cannot be spoken, but is nevertheless something that has been *inscribed*, the *there-then* inherent in the *here-now*. It has made an impression, but one which has never been conscious, never been subject to experience, but is, rather, a fresh registration. For Derrida these two hypotheses; the functional and the topographical can be combined in a writing machine combining “freshness of surface and depth of retention” (Derrida, 1978: 217). This “two-handed” (1978: 226) machine is best exemplified by Freud’s wax writing tablet from his 1925 paper, ‘A Note Upon the “Mystic Writing Pad”’. The way memories operate can be *supplemented* through mark-making, Freud says; a note made in pen in a notebook, say—laying down a *permanent trace*—or they can be erased to make room for further marks, as a chalkboard, for example, can. They cannot do both. The pad, a child’s toy, known often as a magic slate, allows the marks on the pad to be erased, while retaining a permanent trace. This is effected through the lifting of a celluloid covering sheet from the wax lower level, which as well as causing the traces to disappear, allow earlier traces to be made out on the wax surface (see Freud, 1925 [1924]). The metaphor of the writing pad allows Derrida to imagine the sort of machine that might describe a writing that *represents* psychological content, to show that “we are written as we write” (1978: 226). For Derrida the trace acts as an “erasure of selfhood”, the erasure of a self that is in anguish about its own disappearance (1978: 230); a trace, too, of the obscene emptiness of trauma.

So to pause for a moment and return to our alternative question: how is trauma represented? I’ve suggested that trauma is represented in a relation to absence; trauma is represented in traces; trauma has specific relations to temporality and deferral, to exteriority and interiority. And that these relations and representations can be thought about in terms of the index, and its particular concerns with deferral, absence and inscription.

The question that remains is my very first one: *what* is represented when we represent trauma? And if this representation would be of an unregistered encounter between something happening and *knowledge* of something happening, between the trace and the thing itself, what could be said? Maurice Blanchot explores this epistemological/phenomenological space in relation to the disaster—interrogating both knowledge and the event—in his book, *The Writing of the Disaster*, a meditation on trauma, memory, loss, and their representations. Between knowledge and event, between trauma and dream, Blanchot’s fragments address the spaces between the registered and imagined; always alive to the notion that “the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it” (1980: 28). So there isn’t anything in this representation that we could assign to *experience*. For Blanchot,

trauma seems to be represented by something missed, an erasure that can't be written, something that *can't* be adequately re-presented. Silence.

In her translator's remarks in Blanchot's book, Ann Smock alerts us to the author's stresses on the reversibility of expressions and reminds us that this is never a random word-play. 'The writing of the disaster' is not only referring to the ways in which the disaster is written, in other words, communicated, expressed, etc., but also, and crucially, it means the writing done *by* the disaster, by the traumatic event itself, by the self-same event that destroys, incapacitates and renders silent, by the trauma that erases and destroys language. 'The writing of the disaster' is the writing that the disaster *is*—writing *as* disaster. The disaster, the traumatic event is spoken in a language that is a semblance of language, nothing is said. That is not to say that nothing is spoken; silence itself is spoken, "silence speaks," Smock explains, "nothing is said." (1986: xii). Blanchot asserts that the disaster is at the limit of writing, it "describes" (1980: 7) in that it escapes the possibility of experience in its retelling. At the same time, however, Blanchot is at pains to point out that silence is impossible, that "to be silent is still to speak". (1980: 11) The silence of the disaster, for Blanchot is not ordinary silence, it "replaces" it in the space where speech lacks, with a silence that is separate, set apart, a silence where, in a nod to Levinas, the other "announces himself". (1980: 13).

And to speak of trauma? To approach something of what the traumatic text might provoke? Well, this would be to pronounce the unpronounceable in a language without referent, or rather in a language where the referent cannot be represented (see Blanchot, 1980: 72). The unrepresentable, however, for Blanchot, is *present* in the representation which it exceeds (1980, 111) and this, to return to the index, can be understood in Peirce's paradigm of the bullet-hole. The unrepresented shot's presence is *beyond* the indexical sign of the bullet-hole, beyond representation—but it's a presence nevertheless. Narcissus, according to Blanchot's re-imagining of Ovid's tale, when encountering an image in the water fails to recognise *himself*, but sees, rather, an image that resembles nothing (see Blanchot, 1980: 125). Rather than a seductive mirroring, Narcissus encounters the traumatic "unknown of a representation without presence" (1980: 134), which can be thought of in relation to Derrida's unerasable trace; the traumatic "full presence" of death. It is this that can't be encountered in an unmediated way, can't be spoken, or written—or heard in our consulting rooms.

The knowledge of trauma must remain as an "un-knowledge", to be the "un-manifest", to be uneventful. This is not, according to Blanchot: "a lack of knowledge; it is not even knowledge of the lack but that which is hidden by knowledge and ignorance alike: the neutral" (1980: 63). It is beyond the remit of this paper to trace the intricacies of Blanchot's use of this term, but possible, for our purposes, to think of the neutral in relation to knowledge and experience. The neutral is what happens between the epistemological and the phenomenological, the representation and the event, and the neutral dictates how trauma is spoken about. This is not to imply that the neutral *defines* language, it will forever remain, for Blanchot, as the ungraspable "trace of what has not occurred" (1980: 135). Uneventfulness is one of the translations of Blanchot's expression, *Le désœuvrement* and means the *oeuvre*, the work, as being defined via its own lack; not present or absent. The unevenfulness of the neutral refers to what's *between*: the neutral space between activity and passivity; between speech and silence; between being and not being (see Blanchot, 1980: 14, n.4).

Could the *oeuvre* part of *désœuvrement* refer somehow to analytic work? To be alive to the opacity of language, the psychoanalyst knows that speech is always deferred, mediated and removed from the thing itself, oscillating between representing and experiencing, silence and loquaciousness, presence and absence. What sort of work might this be? What might the psychoanalyst listen out for? With this in mind, I'll end with a quote from Michel Foucault, writing about Maurice Blanchot's writing, from 1966.

And it becomes attentiveness to what in language already exists, has already been said,

imprinted, manifested—a listening less to what is articulated in language than to the void circulating between its words, to the murmur that is forever taking it apart; a discourse on the non-discourse of all language; the fiction of the invisible space in which it appears. (Foucault, 1966: 25)

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