

In Between Contemporary Approaches to Genre: The Case of the Trauma Novel

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Abstract

The elusive notion of genre has long been disputed in the field of literary studies, with certain voices going as far as to argue for disregarding the notion altogether in the study of literature. This article begins by going through the relevant schools of thought about genre and its functions, in order to find a suitable approach for the theory of genre in contemporary times. Finally, it settles on one contemporary approach devised by Amy Devitt, which it then upgrades and employs in the analysis of two of the most famed contemporary trauma novels: *On Earth, We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong and *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki. The paper hypothesises that the thorough and specialized knowledge about trauma which has been widely made available to society at large transpires in the writings of contemporary authors at the formal level of novel creation. If understood correctly, this formal level helps to uncover more meaning from the novels, producing a deeper level of philological understanding of the primary texts and resulting in a better close reading. Alongside this hypothesis, the article aims to prove that the formal characteristics of the contemporary trauma novels discussed appear to mimic psychotherapeutic and clinical trauma approaches.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of genre in the study of literature traces its roots as far back as literature itself, and it counts so many differing viewpoints and theories that it can easily be considered one of the most disputed topics of the field. This is largely due to genre's inherent dynamism, which causes it to change and evolve so frequently as time passes, as well as with the growth of literature. It is precisely this characteristic of dynamism which makes reasonable the continuous questioning of previous approaches, which, as time goes by, turn out to be seemingly insufficient, making the concept of literary genre an elusive notion.

In one of the most outstanding articles regarding the stretches of genre, Jacques Derrida famously poses the question "can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in any way?" (1980). Yet no longer than fourteen years later Thomas

Beebee seemingly counteracts the previous statement when he makes the argument that “basic disagreement over where to locate the markers of generic difference certainly weakens the claim that genre is an essential feature of literature.” (1994). This divergence stands as a clear example of the rapid progression and evolution of the concept of genre, and the difficulty of capturing its intricacies.

And then there is also the question of how one should approach defining genre as a concept, much before one can move on to locating it in the text or elsewhere. It was at first postulated, and for a long time maintained, that genre belongs in the prescriptive category, in the sense that each genre available provides a set of formal rules which must be followed by the author in order to create a certain type of literary work, thus binding genre into the category of tools for the classification of literature (novel, poem, drama and so forth) (Devitt, 1993). Many different approaches to the study of literature have followed, all of which emerged with different views upon what genre is and where it can be located, a few of which Beebee succinctly summarizes as follows: “These four stages of generic criticism – genre as rules, genre as species, genre as patterns of textual features, and genre as reader conventions – correspond to the four positions in the great debate about the location of textual meaning: in authorial intention, in the work’s historical or literary context, in the text itself, or in the reader.” (1994).

Contemporary views and theories on genre appear to complicate things even further, which is largely due to the influence of the literary market as a tool for profit in the capitalist society, which has led to the commodification of literature. Thematically grouping works of literature into niche genres and subgenres based either on their content (for example paranormal romance), or based on their form (flash poetry for instance), is a strategy used in the market for facilitated sales and a more rapid growth of income, as it influences the consumer of literature to reach for books similar to what they have successfully engaged with in the past. This is not to say that grouping literary works into these categories of genre is necessarily wrong or purely artificial, but rather to factually highlight the way in which genre has started to multiply in only as little as the past two decades. It must also be noted that while the term subgenre as seen in the example above presupposes and implies a higher degree of specificity, functionally speaking, from a philological point of view, both genres and subgenres have overlapping roles when it comes to their use in literary analysis.

This observed quality of ever-metamorphosis and multiplication of genre only serves to further prove that this construct is deeply rooted in the act of writing and the production of literature, which signals the fact that it must also then be preserved in the study of literature. The question therefore arises: how should one approach a theory of genre in the contemporary setting of literary studies and how can it improve the understanding of literary works of fiction? One possible answer to this question is presented by Amy Devitt in the following excerpt: “Our reception will require releasing old notions of genre as form and text type and embracing new notions of genre as dynamic patterning of human experience, as one of the concepts that enable us to construct our writing world. Basically, the new conception of genre shifts the focus from effects (formal features, text classification) to sources of these effects” (1993). Thus, the article at hand aims to make use of this approach, while simultaneously upgrading it one step further: it will analyze how the sources of the formal features (which Devitt refers to as “effects”) act

on said effects themselves, and furthermore, how these links between sources and effects can strengthen the close reading and therefore the philological and literary understanding of literary works.

This methodology will be applied to two selected contemporary works: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, and *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki. Both of the novels belong to the contemporary Asian-American tradition and their subject is deeply focused on trauma, relating both to experiences of collective trauma and how they affect the individual person or family (the Vietnam war and respectively the Japanese tsunami of 2011), as well as experiences of individual trauma derived from the personal environment, among which can be counted depictions of physical and sexual abuse, childhood trauma, or mental illness and trauma in the family (also known under the name of generational trauma). What is of particular interest for the article at hand is how both of the novels are constructed from the formal standpoint, which sets them apart from other trauma novels belonging both in contemporary times and further back in time, a topic which will be explored and discussed at large in the pages that follow.

For these purposes, the article will unfold in three directions. It will first seek to find what Devitt terms the source of the effects (which will be argued to be the trauma-aware societal context), moving then in the second phase to the analysis of said effects (the formal features and devices characteristic of the trauma novel). Finally, in the third part, the article will present how the source acts on the effects (by showing how authors who live in a trauma-aware social environment approach the writing of trauma). By following this format, the article seeks to demonstrate that, in contemporary times, and particularly in the case of the trauma novel, the source which led to the apparition of this genre has a direct influence on its construction from a formal level, which is highlighted through the fact that both novels appear to mimic in their formal characteristics certain particularities of psychotherapeutic treatment of trauma, something which will be discussed at large in the analysis portion of the article. Thus, the article shows how genre theory remains relevant even in the contemporary approach to literary analysis, and how it can be integrated with the close reading for a better understanding of the primary texts.

By following Devitt's proposal as a methodology and switching the approach by initially turning away from form to first determine where the genre originates, one can then return to the formal construction of said genre and learn more about its intricacies. This is useful in the philological act of studying literature, because it offers a deeper understanding and reading of the novels, proving that understanding the form can facilitate also understanding the themes and messages, and in this particular case, the psyche of the traumatized individual from a functional perspective.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin with, it is necessary to define a paradigm of genre through the lens proposed in the chosen methodology. Devitt writes that "genre is a dynamic response to and construction of recurring situations, one that changes historically and in different social groups, that adapts and grows as the social context changes" (1993). Such an outlook appears to draw a correlation between genre, the environment, and times of writing ("recurring situations"), only

strengthened by the statement that “being part of society enables individuals to change society, and hence to change genres” (Devitt, 1993). Therefore, utilizing the two-way link which exists between genre and situations, the conclusion can be drawn that genres are not only sensitive to societal changes but a mirror of certain aspects of society itself. This is of course reflected in the fact that, since the dawn of literature, authors have been writing stories that reflect the societies and times they belong to. It stands then to reason that, as our present society is deemed by the specialists themselves to be more trauma-informed than ever before (Becker-Blease, 2017), with the average individual harnessing a lot more specialized knowledge about mental illness, symptoms and traumas than they ever had in the past, the rise of the genre of trauma novel would be something that comes naturally from these circumstances.

Ronald Granofsky defines the trauma novel as such: “(...) the exploration through the agency of literary symbolism of the individual experience of collective trauma, either actual events of the past, alarming tendencies of the present, or imagined horrors of the future (...) not all novels dealing with trauma are symbolic, nor do all symbolic novels deal centrally with collective trauma.” (1995). In the realm of genre theory, this is an all-encompassing definition, as it refers both to formal attributes (the literary device of symbolism) and the content of the novels described, satisfying Bakhtin’s axiom that “form and content in discourse are one” (1981).

One of the only facts which has remained undisputed throughout the debates surrounding genre is the idea that every single genre produces expectations. Devitt touches briefly on this when she refers to genre as a “template”, explaining that when an author chooses one genre, said genre represents, at least partially, what the author views as the ideal text: “if a writer has chosen to write a particular genre, then the writer has chosen a template, a situation and an appropriate reflection of that situation in sets of forms.” (1993). To a certain extent, this is reminiscent of the prescriptive genre theories of the older times, where the genre was viewed as a set of rules; yet the view is nevertheless updated, as it appears to be explained as less of a recipe for the author, and more as a pattern for the author to explore and grow within and outside of. When the writer chooses a certain genre, they do so to signal to the reader what the work might loosely entail, more so content-wise than form-wise, as the form is, more often than not, experimental or at least atypical when it comes to contemporary works. In other words, genre is then not prescriptive in the formulaic sense of how to arrange the content and the action, as seen in what Beebe calls genre as rules (1994), but rather more so as a thematic prescription.

Elena Ferrante talks about genres as being “safe areas, solid platforms” (2021), but she goes on to explain that real creation happens when “the rules – learned, applied – give way and the hand pulls out of the bran pie not what is useful but, precisely, whatever comes, faster and faster, throwing me out of balance” (2021). A similar example is postmodernism, which also saw the opportunity of taking a formula and breaking it intentionally, seeing thus the authors grow from the *within* to the *outside* of the boundaries of recognized patterns. As Anis Bawarshi explains “a genre conceptually frames what its users generally imagine as possible within a given situation, predisposing them to act in certain ways by rhetorically framing how they come to know and respond to certain situations.” (2003). It seems then to be a commonly accepted truth that genres facilitate an authorial inclination towards certain instruments of framing their

subject. Therefore, when one questions the source of a genre or subgenre, it is not enough to wonder how and why it came to be, but also how that source affects the rhetorical framing of the situation it proposes. Since form and content are one, the form cannot (or rather said, *should* not) be entirely lost in the study of genre, which will be evident in this case study and the way the genre of the trauma novel forms itself and sets itself apart from other works of literature.

Granofsky goes on to highlight that “connections between the individual and society are inevitable if one believes that a culture may resort to some of the same defensive strategies as an individual in times of stress.” (1995). Yet it is within reason that one could make the argument that connections between the author and society are also inevitable, and more so, that the author’s outside knowledge easily influences the content and its portrayal at a formal level. Reverting to Devitt’s terminology of formal effects of the genre and sources of these effects, wherein the source has already been defined as the trauma-informed era that the authors live in, the focus can now be shifted once more to the formal aspect of the trauma novel genre, posing yet another question: can and does the widespread scientific and psychological knowledge about trauma and psychotherapy affect the formal features of the trauma novel? As explained before, the scope of the article is to demonstrate that indeed the knowledge about how trauma manifests in real life does affect the writing process for the novels belonging to this particular genre, and also that awareness about real-life symptoms of trauma and how they are treated in therapy and counselling is transmuted by authors into the formal and narrative features and devices which become characteristics of the contemporary trauma novel.

3.GENERIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY TRAUMA NOVEL

With all these facts taken into consideration, the form of the two chosen novels shall constitute the beginning of the analysis. Both of the novels share the epistolary form, a formal subgenre of the novel, which stands out as a choice of particular interest considering the content of the novels. Vuong’s novel is written in the shape of letters, while Nao’s portion of Ozeki’s novel (the novel is split between two narrative voices, Nao and Ruth) is written in the form of diary entries intended for an imagined reader (who ends up being Ruth, as the reader knows), entries which are in fact very similar to a letter, if not almost indistinguishably so.

When defining the characteristics of the epistolary novel, Janet Altman highlights that “the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works.” (1982). By using the form of letters, the authors of the novels invest the two homodiegetic characters with authorial powers of their own: they become now the authors of their narrative, and the choices in narration and sequencing seemingly belong to them (Little Dog and Nao), and not to Vuong or Ozeki. This serves as a sort of optical illusion, which puts another layer between the reader and the writer, strengthening the intended fantasy that the character is the author of the story, and therefore removing the actual author from the background. “To look at the matter in another light, the

novelist is the god of his fictional universe, observing and controlling his characters from above.” (Shroder, 1963).

Another layer which the epistolary novel brings, when the character writing the letter is observing and controlling the narrative, is that the character is now invested with the power and the control that they originally lacked at the point when the trauma occurred. This supports the notion of catharsis through writing and represents a way for the characters to process, elaborate, place in time and heal their trauma. Journaling about one’s trauma and documenting it in a place inaccessible to the outside world, where the memories can be ordered and safely accessed is a patented and frequently advised way of healing patients who suffer from traumatic memories and experiences. These journals can then willingly be brought into therapy and read alongside the therapist, to process and make sense of the writings and memories they depict, or they can simply serve as an outlet for the individual to derive catharsis from.

As the story progresses, the reader can see how Little Dog and Nao respectively evolve in sharing their traumas, and what effect this has on their psyches, deriving information about their mental state through the style and evolution of the letters. For instance, towards the end of the novel, Little Dog appears much freer than the reader meets him in the beginning: “I race through the field as if my cliff was never written into this story, as if I was no heavier than the words in my name. And like a word, I hold no weight in this world yet still carry my own life. And I throw it ahead of me until what I left behind becomes exactly what I’m running toward – like I’m part of a family.” (Vuong, 2019). It can be seen in the passage that, in writing his story, Little Dog has realized his power of writing out and healing.

And yet another layer of this type of novel comes from it resembling a therapeutic confession: the letters are addressed to *someone* – in Vuong’s novel, they are addressed to the character’s mother, while in Ozeki’s novel, the diary entries are not intended for a specific individual, but to anyone who might come across the diary in the future, a hope expressed by Nao from the very beginning. As Bakhtin notes “it is highly significant for rhetoric that this relationship toward the concrete listener, taking him into account, is a relationship that enters into the very internal construction of rhetorical discourse.” (1981). It is then almost as if the character is the patient, and the intended reader is the therapist listening to the confession, which becomes apparent when the characters make frequent remarks to the person they are addressing, mimicking a conversation and anticipating a response they might receive from the other side: “As you know (...)” (Vuong, 2019); “Are you still there?” (Ozeki, 2013). It might be argued that in writing down their experiences, the characters are not only going through a process of remembering and processing the trauma but also fantasizing about how it could be if someone heard them, which is proven at multiple points in the novels through these frequent check-ins that the characters extend to their imagined readers.

The idea of this form resembling a therapeutic setting is only exacerbated in the portion where the characters talk directly to those who caused their trauma. A strong instance of this is seen when the character in Vuong’s novel, Little Dog, addresses the childhood traumas his mother caused him, and takes to opportunity to tell her things he could not have voiced as a child: “‘You’re not a monster,’ I said. But I lied. What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a horrible thing to be. (...) You’re a mother, Ma. You’re also a monster. But so am

I – which is why I can't turn away from you. Which is why I have taken god's loneliest creation and put you inside it. Look." (2019). Talking to the abuser in ways one could not at the time of the abuse (either because they were a child or for other reasons) is a technique often used in psychotherapy for healing and processing painful memories. (Van der Kolk, 2015), employing empty chairs that the patient is encouraged to address as if the perpetrator stood there and was forced to hear them. Bawarshi explains that "(...) genre does not simply regulate a pre-existing social activity; instead, it constitutes the activity by making it possible by way of its ideological and discursive conventions. Genre reproduces the activity by providing individuals with the conventions for enacting it." (2003). The excerpt above shows a clear intention from *Little Dog*: he "*put his mother inside*" the writing, because of the monstrous things she has done to him. It is an attempt at bringing her forth and reconciling with the past, a symbolic reenactment of a therapeutic exercise, which deepens the already existing layers of catharsis in the art of writing, by healing the real trauma of his childhood by making use of real therapeutic techniques.

Memory is of course at the foreground of any discussion or narrative about trauma, because trauma forms when an event resists being processed by the brain and assimilated into memory. Cathy Caruth explains that "the traumatized (...) carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess," (1995) and that "central to the very immediacy of this experience (...) is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory." (1995). A pitfall of the epistolary form (and arguably, an intentional one), as for any other homodiegetic narrative, is the subjectivity, but also the limits of memory, which both play well with the main narrative device of the trauma novel – anachrony.

Gerard Genette defines the term as a "discordance between two temporal orders of story and narrative." (1983). Anachrony disrupts the text, blurring the linear structure, and opening up multiple narratives within the main narrative, either to fill out information previously undisclosed (analepsis) or to hint at future events not yet encountered (prolepsis) (1983). The effect achieved is similar to the flashbacks in traumatized individuals diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is defined by Caruth as such: "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event (...)" (1995). The flashbacks in PTSD are involuntary, caused by what is referred to as triggers of which the individual can be aware or not, and they are a (perpetual) return to the site of the traumatic event. In fact, these perpetual returns and the impossibility of assimilation trick the brain into believing that the event is not a memory, not something that happened in the past, but in fact, something that is happening in the present moment, which causes the traumatized individual to feel in constant danger, living in what the specialized literature terms the "survival mode" (Barry, 2023).

Even just the first twenty pages of *Vuong's* novel count 17 episodes of what can only be viewed as severe flashbacks to instances of abuse in *Little Dog's* life, all of which begin with the formula "that time" which then launches into a straightforward description of the traumatic event, for example: "That time with the kitchen knife – the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying quietly, 'Get out. Get out.' And I ran out the door, down the black

summer streets. I ran until I forgot I was ten until my heartbeat was all I could hear of myself.” (Vuong, 2019). Then the text continues either by launching into another event, triggered by something from the previous episode, or by simply carrying on as if nothing happened. This causes the narrative to lack a clear structure because of the disjointed time, creating, therefore, a fast-paced and alert string of episodes which bear seemingly no connection, but which put together the puzzle pieces of the character’s past. The narrative is disregulated because the memory of the traumatized is in itself disregulated and chaotic.

In Ozeki’s novel, Nao states her goal clearly and from the very few pages: to tell the story of her grandmother. Yet time and time again in the process of writing said story she reverts back and forth between episodes of her own life, which bear no connection to the narrative she claims she wants to produce; yet in trying to remember her grandmother, she can’t help but also remember episodes of her own life: “My old Jiko says that everything happens because of your karma, which is a kind of subtle energy that you cause by the stuff you do or say or even just think (...) So maybe it’s just my dad’s karma to end up on a park bench feeding crows in this lifetime, and really you can’t blame him for causing a human incident and wanting to move along to the next lifetime pretty quick. Anyway, Jiko says that (...)” (2013).

Shroder speaks about the events of the novel, which he calls the continuous “going forth” towards the point of the story which may be “metaphorical rather than actual; but the voyage often provides the novelistic framework, and the protagonists movement is always from a narrow environment to a broader one.” (1963). The trauma novel preserves more than anything the metaphorical aspect of this going forth, yet the movement seems to be from narrow to broad to narrower and so on. The final goal is healing, and catharsis, but in order to reach that point, the characters must go on a voyage through their own memories, exploring their pasts, and their presents, and making assumptions and hopes about the future. In order to assimilate the memories, they have to relive them first, as explained previously through journaling and confessions, but they can only do so through these anachronistic time jumps and movements, which are the only way their psyches have learned to function and cope with the trauma.

Another symbol which transpires through the use of anachronism is the difficulty of speaking. Genette famously analyzes anachrony in Proust’s novel by describing how the novel is seemingly restarted three different times in three different ways, which he then concludes to be “(...) mimicking, as it were, the unavoidable *difficulty of beginning*, the better to exorcise it (...)” (1983). The same is true for both of the novels at hand. Ozeki’s first beginning on the first page is a direct presentation of the character, which only two pages later is scrapped and thrown out for a second attempt at the beginning, whereas Vuong’s first sentence is “Let me begin again”, implying that he had already begun at least once before, which he references again pages later: “in a previous draft of this letter, one I’ve since deleted (...)” (2019). Yet, in the trauma novel, it is not only the beginning that is difficult but also turning back and forth.

The narratives which begin and then are put on pause are a symbol of how difficult it is to approach talking about one’s trauma. Therefore, the non-linearity and the time jump serve to demonstrate, symbolically, the most well-known axiom about trauma, that “trauma disrupts the survivor’s ability to attach words to the experience.” (Goldsmith & Satterlee, 2004). Such

a statement raises fundamental questions for the construction of the trauma novel, which is comprised solely of language and writing: how can one write a trauma novel if trauma presupposes the inability to voice itself? Yet such formal and narrative devices as described previously in this paper provide a way of conceptualizing experiences that are so unspeakable that one does not know where to begin with them while managing at the same time to fully emanate the hardships and setbacks that survivors of trauma have to consistently live with. It is a testament of authenticity which can only derive from real-life knowledge about real the healing of trauma.

4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

As shown above, the main characteristic that the genre of the trauma novel holds, both form-wise and content-wise, is fragmentariness. The content is put together through the pieces of a puzzle. The narrative is a series of episodes, of flashes and movements through time, which comprise the life of the characters and the journey to the endpoint, by use of formal devices which facilitate such a disjointed storyline. Therefore, form and content are one because they so fully support one another that they could not exist in any other shape.

The form has a metaphorical and symbolical role in delivering the content, and the content calls for such a form that can depict its inherent chaos. In using such instruments in the text as epistolary and anachronic, the authors mimic the real-life symptoms and experiences of the traumatized, not only by describing them but by endowing the text itself with them. The result is a veridical account of the situation, patterned humanely, through the use of formal devices which construct the narrative itself to be fragmented, fast-paced at times and slow-paced at other times, almost as if the reader can then fully and viscerally experience the gaps in memory, the random flashbacks which move the characters arbitrarily through time, and all the other elements which constitute the real life of survivors.

Thus, to revert back to Devitt's terminology as used throughout the entire paper, the source of the generic effects directly acts directly on them, and the effects directly represent the sources they come from. And, as Samuel Beckett attested, "the only thing we can't do without, in literature and any other place, is form" (Beckett, 1961 as cited in Ferrante, 2022).

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