Establishing Literary Authority: A Two-way Process.

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In the mid twentieth century, thousands of non-offending Anglo-Australian children were placed in Homes and foster ‘care’. The government, churches, and charities of the day saw this as a socially acceptable solution to the problem of what to do with children who were either unwanted or whose parents could not cope. These places were Dickensian, and all these children suffered.

I was one of these children; I had no authority over my own life but was subject to the authority of others. As an adult, my experience gives me the authority to write about the damaging childhood. But this counts for nothing if I cannot convey the child’s agony and the horror of the situation to the reader; it is not enough to simply tell my story. Jane Taylor McDonnell says ‘self-revelation without reflection or understanding is merely self-exposure’ and such a work ‘will quickly lose [the reader’s] interest’ (quoted in Phelan 66). So as a writer, through reflection and maturity, I can regain authority of my childhood.

How does a writer establish literary authority of the damaging childhood experience?

For the writer, establishing literary authority means being able to persuade the reader that the narrative is poetically true, and that what they are reading contains truth, and that the point of view is valid. Vivien Gornick writes: ‘Memoir writing shares with fiction the obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform an event, deliver wisdom’ (quoted in Phelan 66).

Writing with authority means gaining the reader’s attention and trust; David McCooey says ‘the production of truth and authority . . . is not so much an exercise in capturing the self as capturing the reader’; and ‘the notion of authority suggests a public domain within which to be authoritative’. He adds that genres that deal with literary and extra-literary forms of authority make the ‘following assumptions: that an individual’s experience is communicable, and that personal experience occurs within a public context. Even the most private and intimate experiences occur within the horizon of public understanding’ (3).

Writers who establish literary authority

Four books that serve as examples of the ways in which literate authors establish literary authority when dealing with the subject of the damaging childhood are: Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce, Angela’s Ashes by Frank McCourt, and Our Kate by Catherine Cookson. These four books differ one from the other in genre and writing technique, but the authors each use innovative techniques, and they each use an innocent young child as the focal point in the writing; they each invite the reader’s involvement and elicit the reader’s sympathetic emotional and ethical responses by creating images and atmospheres that enhance the quality of pathos and heighten the
emotional, ethical, and mimetic content in their narratives. They each imbue their child with a degree of apparent realism; they each use symbols and build images that connect to the reader's own actuality in some way; and they each bring their child to overcome the damaging childhood. As well, they all show their child as at once an individual and as a representative of children who experience similar damaging childhoods. What these writers all do, is establish authority in their texts by giving to the reader a literary experience which is honest to the experience but enjoyable and moving because vividly realised and convincing.

**Charles Dickens: Oliver Twist**

One way in which these authors establish authority is by creating within their texts a sense of the narratorial distance which H. Porter Abbott says is necessary because it ‘affects the extent to which we trust the information we get from the narrator’ (189). In *Oliver Twist* Dickens creates this sense of distance by his use of narrators and authorial intrusion. By opening his novel in first person narrative in a style reminiscent of the oral tradition, Dickens gives the reader notice that he is embarking upon an enjoyable story that involves serious subjects (17). After a brief introduction Dickens effortlessly glides into third person omniscient narrative; and then, without pause, ends the first chapter with an authorial intrusion that is a generalised assumption but which forms part of the story: the ‘parish child—the orphan of the workhouse’ is ‘despised by all, and pitied by none’ (19). This technique allows Dickens to provide some distancing between the first person story-teller and the intrusive author and the third person omniscient narrator while at the same time showing happy agreement between the three entities to enhance the illusion of truth; that is, the story flows smoothly from one to the other. This gives Dickens the opportunity to intervene at will in the narrative in his own voice in order to further convince the reader that his story contains literal truth.

*Oliver Twist* has the startling effect of a fairy story, that is, it upsets the reader’s own psychology. In his 1867 Preface, Dickens states that his purpose in writing *Oliver Twist* is to create within the reader an awareness of the social disasters being born from the inherent evil in the Benthamite ideologies of the then ruling parliamentary party, and the damage being inflicted upon the innocents caught up in the system (13-16). John Bayley suggests that Fagin’s evil world—Oliver’s old world—and the ideal world of Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow—Oliver’s new world—are not intended by Dickens to represent ‘two real places that exist separately in life’, but, rather, two places that ‘co-exist in consciousness: they are twin sides of the same coin of fantasy’ (quoted in Horne xl-xl). Thus Dickens establishes literary authority in *Oliver Twist* by creating a single world that consists of nightmare and dream—a literary landscape which lives in the reader’s imagination. David Malouf points out that ‘reading is an interiorising activity’; ‘it is one of the ways . . . by which we come . . . into full possession of a place’ (36, 39).

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1 References to *Oliver Twist* are to the Horne edition, 2002.
Joyce establishes literary authority in his stream of consciousness autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by using the thought stream of a single character, Stephen Dedalus. Through Stephen, Joyce shows the relationship between the damaging childhood and the practices of 20th century Catholic Ireland, and exposes the Irish religion, language, and nationality as oppressive forces that act as restraints on the young, aspiring artist. Joyce’s book is a practical demonstration of his aesthetic theories; he uses Stephen to give his theories concrete form. Harry Levin points out that Joyce’s inclusion of differing genres allows him to use the novelist’s ‘more normal procedure of applying the methods of art to the subject of reality’, while applying ‘the methods of realism to the subject of art’ (“The Artist” 84). By using these techniques, Joyce increases the mimetic illusion that Stephen and his damaging childhood are real.

Joyce’s unusual techniques allow him to capture the reader by holding the reader close to Stephen and his damaging childhood while providing the narratorial distance necessary to establishing authority; Joyce gives Stephen a surname symbolic of flight and great distance, and at the same time limits the reader to one perspective—Stephen’s. Even though the voice shifts at times, Joyce makes all voices ultimately relate only to Stephen’s point of view. Thus, in determining that his story can only be seen and heard from one angle Joyce forces the reader to climb inside the mind of a single person who experiences a damaging childhood which nevertheless has an effect upon the protagonist psychologically. In fact, so far does the reader enter Stephen’s world it is almost as if the reader is involved in a type of film action wherein the reader is a private inner ‘ear’ on Stephen’s thought stream, and sees events through Stephen at the moment of happening. What Abbott says about narration on screen and stage, could, in a sense, be applied to Joyce’s methods: the ‘narration is most frequently voice-over narration in which’ a narrating voice is ‘heard in tandem with imagery which is often conveying in its own way incidents of the story’ (72). In Joyce’s novel, as with dramatic action which uses ‘voice-over’, the narrating voice fades from the viewer’s awareness as a separate voice because it shares, to borrow Abbott’s words, ‘the sensory arena with the visual’ (72). The difference is that in film the narrating voice is heard by the viewer’s ‘outer’ ear whilst being absorbed along with the visual stimuli into the viewer’s consciousness, and in Joyce’s novel the narrating voice is read by the reader’s ‘inner’ ear whilst being unified in the consciousness with the verbal imagery and processed at once in the imagination. In this way, Joyce forces the reader to be party to Stephen’s ‘reality’.

*Frank McCourt: Angela’s Ashes*

McCourt establishes authority in his memoir, *Angela’s Ashes*, in a different way to both Dickens and Joyce. After introducing the book from his present day self, McCourt continues for the remainder of the work from the point of view of his younger, ever-growing self. The apparent linearity of the story-line is deceptive in
that the book ends with the young adult McCourt docking in America and begins with an introduction by the older McCourt who lives in America; thus, the story which ends with the author looking forward to a life of freedom from the damaging childhood, by implication turns back and meets up with the beginning in which the survivor McCourt introduces his damaging childhood. McCourt encapsulates his childhood—traps it in a bubble, as it were. This circular movement of the memoir is an implied continuance of Frankie’s life and dreams—birth, death, and the promise of rebirth. Hence, in the memoir the sense of freedom and hope and promise overrides ‘the miserable Irish Catholic childhood’. In this way, McCourt cleverly conveys the truths of his childhood to his reader, and instils in his reader an understanding of existence in the Irish slums and a keen sense of horror for the miseries he endured as a child growing up in Ireland, while at the same time distancing it from his present reality by placing it in the past.

James Phelan says that McCourt’s memoir has the ‘distinctive quality of the nonstandard technique’, and that in *Angela’s Ashes* ‘Identity and design are closely related . . . in part because of the technique’ (67, 75). Phelan says McCourt’s use of the art of indirection and his humorous approach in his treatment of the damaging childhood shows that, as an author, McCourt ‘is sophisticated and clear-visioned, able to guide his audience to an understanding of his former self’ (71). McCourt’s literary maturity and apparent honesty allow him to create a sense of history and convey to the reader a sense of truth—that he was only one of many children who struggled for existence in the Irish slums.

**Catherine Cookson: Our Kate**

In her autobiography *Our Kate*, Cookson creates a space within which to be authoritative. She reveals how her illegitimacy affected her personally. But illegitimacy is not rare; therefore, Cookson’s type of experiences would not be unfamiliar to some people. McCooey says ‘autobiography is a kind of transaction, a telling of others’ stories as much as one’s own’ (1).

Cookson establishes authority in *Our Kate* by shaping her text in a way that will capture her readers, and convince them that what they are reading contains a truth. One way in which she does this is by re-imagining certain incidents even though she gives the appearance that she is being entirely honest. For example, Cookson gives the impression that her doting grandma, Rose, died when Cookson was about eight, and that ‘someone’ made her view the body: ‘the sight . . . frightened me to death’ (113). Kathleen Jones says Rose died when Katie was an angry, upset eleven-year-old, and that it was ‘our’ Kate who forced her to view the decomposing body (81-3). But since Cookson’s grandma did die when Cookson was a child, and her grandma’s death did cause her enormous grief and fear, Cookson’s ‘lie’ is a kind of truth. Abbott says that

when you narrate you construct . . . constructing is not the same thing as lying . . . narrative is always a matter of selecting from a great arsenal of pre-existing devices and using them to synthesize our effects (64).
Phelan expands on this. He says all writers . . . use devices, features and components that will enhance the narrative’s mimetic content, and hence raise the emotional and ethical effects in their narratives: Effects, whether cognitive, emotive, or ethical always have multiple causes because effects always depend on both microlevel (e.g., diction and syntax) and macrolevel features (e.g., the pattern of progression, and the genre of the narrative) (68).

To borrow from Phelan’s analysis of McCourt’s book and turn his words to Cookson’s highly emotive narrative, Our Kate produces complex effects that ‘depend largely on the interactions’ between the emotional and ethical effects in the narrative and the reader’s understanding and values, ‘and then, in turn, on the consequences of that interaction’ for the reader’s ‘emotional and ethical response’ (68-71). Thus, in the context of a damaging childhood narrative like Cookson’s, the image and thoughts of a suffering, innocent young child are more likely to evoke the reader’s emotional and sympathetic response than those of an angry, and more aware, older child (113).

Cookson’s readers are aware that what they are reading is memoir rather than fiction. In order to further convince the reader that the text is poetically true she imbues her child with apparent realism; she filters her story through her mother—the ‘our’ Kate of the title—and she places her seven or eight year old self in the centre of her picture of the damaging incidents that plagued her childhood: ‘These painful times would seem to dominate the memories of my childhood’ (49). All incidents in the book connect, in some way, to this time; thus, this temporal aspect continually refers the reader back to the hurt little illegitimate child, and strengthens Cookson’s bid for the reader’s ethical and emotional response. Abbott discusses how St Augustine’s Confessions confirms its own authenticity (133). His explanation could be applied to Our Kate: the narrative ‘confirms the authenticity’ of the work by keeping ‘its narrative eye focused’ on ‘our’ Kate’s actions as the cause of Katie McMullen-Cookson’s unhappiness (49). Thus the reader is led to take Cookson at her word, that her illegitimacy, and Kate’s actions and behaviour, are the causes of her damaging childhood and hence the source of all her problems. McCooy says ‘trust is an important feature of such autobiographical transactions. The element of trust required in a reader is also central’ (1).

The long passage which forms the heart of the book is an example of how Cookson uses her techniques to structure her story in a way that will allow the reader to recognise illegitimacy as a troubling issue on both a personal and social level, and hence convince the reader that her narrative point of view is valid. In this central passage, little Katie is determined to go to a party to which she has not been invited, but to which all her friends are going. The party child blocks little Katie at the door and refuses her entry on the grounds that Katie is illegitimate, and Katie is suddenly brought face-to-face with the social stigma surrounding her birth; and the unsuspecting (and by now emotional) reader is shocked into awareness along with little Katie (116-118). In this first section of the passage, Cookson paces her anecdote; she slowly adds to the physical description of the child and her actions as she builds the pathos in her story, and, as a result, the narrative’s ethical and emotional effects steadily mount up. The mimetic content is
further heightened because the images and pathos and intensity of feelings that Cookson builds into the passage, almost cause the voice of the narrator, Katie McMullen-Cookson, to fade from the reader’s consciousness as a separate entity to the child that was. Thus, to again take from Phelan’s words on McCourt and apply them to Cookson (72); Cookson’s technique heightens the mimetic content in the passage because it ‘erases any temporal distance’ between Katie McMullen-Cookson, as the narrator, and her younger self, Katie, as the character. At the same time, Cookson infuses the passage with poignancy to form a connection between the narrative’s ethical and emotional effects and the reader’s emotional and ethical response.

In the line following the party child’s cruel announcement Cookson jumps straight to a brief reflection on the vagaries of children: ‘Children need no preliminary lead-up to vital statements, they simply make them’ (118). Thus, Cookson structures her narrative to focus the reader’s attention on the problem of illegitimacy. She says: ‘I was now no longer alone in my aloneness . . . the whole world’ was in on the ‘secret’ (118-119). After this, Cookson does not return to the devastated child but quickly moves the narrative to memories of herself as a belligerent, older child, then as a surly young woman who is bitter towards ‘our’ Kate (119-121). Thus, at the climax to the heart of the book, when she has called the readers’ ethical responses into full play and has them at a heightened emotional peak, Cookson suddenly axes the heart-rending atmosphere of a young, innocent child in pain and replaces it, firstly, with the dark atmosphere of hopelessness in an older child; and, secondly, with the cold atmosphere of a bitter young woman, and which repels the reader: ‘this being had a kind of cold aloofness which I couldn’t get at’ (121). Cookson is a crafty writer. She uses first person narrative, a reflexive voice, and a conversational tone to engage her readers on a personal level and make them party to her story. When Cookson has her readers hooked, she slowly reels them in; then, when they are most involved and most unsuspecting, she pulls the ground from under their feet and sends them tumbling into a void, as it were. Thus Cookson does not forewarn her readers; instead, she allows them to ‘live’ experience as it unravels. In this way, she brings her reader to experience feelings similar to those of little Katie. Cookson establishes literary authority of the damaging childhood experience by allowing her reader a vicarious sense of what it is like to be an illegitimate child, of what it feels like to face the social stigma surrounding illegitimacy.

**Constructing and reconstructing**

Establishing literary authority is a two-way process in which the more elusive authority of the literate author provides the reader with an enjoyable literary experience that allows the reader authority over the imaginative experience.

What Dickens, Joyce, Cookson, and McCourt all do is create a sense of history. They construct a formal picture of the accepted, but inadequate, practices of their times in combination with the subjective thoughts and feelings and personal experiences of the suffering child; and in so doing they give to the reader a convincing and rounded picture of the horrors of the damaging childhood.
within a social context. They create a space in which to be authoritative; that is, they take the raw material of the experience and re-imagine it in such a way that enables the reader to reconstruct the experience as their own.


