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The role of psychic distance in memoir writing

Thesis Outline
1. What is psychic distance?
   Definition and illustration through citing examples from literary works.
2. Why is psychic distance important: a first hand experience
3. Psychic distance and Virginia Satir’s concept of de-enmeshment
4. Psychic distance and Silverman’s voice of experience
5. The role of psychic distance in memoir writing

Introduction
The topic for this critical thesis arises from the writer’s personal need to negotiate a psychic distance from her own memoir writing experience. This critical thesis comprises five sections. The first section offers different definitions of psychic distance and cites examples from literary works to demonstrate how it works. In the second section, the writer demonstrates the importance of maintaining psychic distance through her first-hand experience in the Umbrella Movement which recently took place in Hong Kong. The close relationship between psychic distance and Virginia Satir’s concept of de-enmeshment is explored in the third section while the connection between psychic distance and Silverman’s Voice of Experience is examined in the fourth. The thesis ends with a discussion of the important role that psychic distance plays in memoir writing.

What is psychic distance?
Psychic distance is made up of the Greek word "psychikos - ψυχικός", an adjective referring to an individual's mind and soul” and "distance" which implies differences between two subjects or objects. Some therefore argue that the concept exists in the mind's eye of an individual and it is their subjective perception that determines the unique "psychic distance".

The concept “psychic distance” finds its origin in a paper written by Edward Bullough, entitled, *Psychical Distance as a factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle* which appeared in the British Journal of Psychology in 1912. In the paper, the concept of
psychic/psychical distance is examined in relation to the principle of “disinterested aesthetic contemplation”. The term then appears in John Gardner’s book *The Art of Fiction* in 1983. It is defined as “the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story” (Gardner: p.111). In *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Janet Burroway and Stuckey-French define this distance as “the degree to which we as readers feel on the one hand intimacy and identification with, or on the other hand detachment and alienation from, the characters in the story” (p.229).

Psychic distance determines how intimately the narrator is inserting himself into the character’s experience or whether he is watching the action from a distance. We can think of the narrator as having a movie camera that can zoom in and out at his will. Varying psychic distance allows the narrator to move either inside or outside of the characters, depending on how the author wants to handle any given moment.

In the article “Psychic Distance: what it is and how to use it” Emma Darwin sees psychic distance fundamentally as where the narrative (and the reader) stands in relation to a character. It is also how far the reader is taken by the narrator inside the character’s head. In her article, Darwin develops a spectrum of five separate levels or stages of psychic distance.

The first level is remote and objective. It works like an establishing shot or extremely wide angle shot in a film. It tells us where we are and what’s happening but it doesn’t offer any insights into one or more particular characters’ thoughts and feelings in the story. The second level brings in some particulars: the narrator is describing a place and an individual and their emotions. It can be compared to a wide-angle shot of a village or a voice-over. The third level is more particular and personalized. The narrator shortens the psychic distance between the reader and the characters by taking him into the experience of individual characters through description of their actions and speeches. It resembles a medium shot in which we can identify individuals. In the fourth level, the narrator’s voice begins to colour with the vocabulary and point-of-view of a certain character. A third-person narrator can take the reader into the head of the character through the use of free indirect speech while it may be technically impossible for a first person narrator to enter another character’s consciousness. It is similar to a close-up shot in a film in which we have a closer view of a particular character’s face and try to read what the character is feeling. The fifth and last level is an extreme close-up and very subjective. It resembles a brain download and operates like a stream of consciousness narrative approach. The character’s voice is fully present and the narrator’s voice has faded out. However, we
cannot stay at this level for too long or else we may never follow what is happening outside the narrator’s consciousness. A narrative told with such an intimate degree of psychic distance enables the reader to totally identify with the character’s thoughts and feelings but it can also limit the writer’s ability to move between different characters and their consciousness.

Elsewhere, Forche and Gerard define psychic distance as “how near or far the writer, and thus the reader, remains from the people and the events in the story.” To distinguish between the writer and narrator, it is worth noting that fiction writers can deliberately make use of a highly unreliable narrator to display ironic gaps and undercut what the characters say and do in the story. In the short story, The Yellow Wallpaper Gilman makes use of a mentally deluded first-person narrator to narrate the story not only to show her limited and distorted perspective, but also to win the reader’s sympathy for her plight. However, in the case of the writing of creative non-fiction like memoirs, the writer and the first-person narrator are essentially the same person, a complication that makes some writers give the subtitle ‘novel’ to what is a highly selective autobiographical narrative like V. S Naipaul’s The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel. But even though there is an overlap between the author and narrator in creative non-fiction, the narrative voice still undergoes subtle shifts as the narrative progresses. (These shifts in the narrator’s voice will be discussed in the section Psychic distance and Silverman’s voice of experience)

In the book, Writing Creative Nonfiction 2001 Forche and Gerard illustrate how psychic distance works by quoting from “The Darkness Crumbles” by BBC correspondent John Simpson. Varying degrees of psychic distance are shown through subtle shifts in the writer’s narrative stance. Psychic distance is created through the writer’s description of the setting in an objective manner.

“It was humid and airless, and the streets around our hotel were empty. We had to set out for Tiananmen Square – reporter, producer, cameraman, sound-recordist, translator, lighting man, complete with gear. A cyclist rode past, shouting and pointing. What it meant we couldn’t tell.” Simpson, the reporter, is giving us a first person account, but he is focused on external details, not his own thoughts and feelings.

Soon this detachment dissolves when the psychic distance shrinks as Simpson himself gets involved in the events: “Now I was the one fighting, struggling to get through the crowd, pulling people back, pushing them out of my path, swearing, a big brutal Englishman stronger than any of them.” The reader is right inside his sensibility as he
gets caught up in the chaos and becomes an active participant in it. Against all his professional training as a journalist, Simpson leaves his observer’s stance and enters the narrative scene after witnessing how two crewmen have been beaten to death one after another by the mob. Simpson realizes that if he doesn’t intervene, the third crewman will suffer the same fate as his counterparts. “It seemed to me then that I couldn’t look on any longer, a passive observer, watching another man’s skin torn away or his head broken open and do nothing.” Simpson continues, “The ferocity of the crowd had entered me, but I felt it was the crowd that was the animal, that it wasn’t properly human.” The psychic distance closes in further as we are taken right inside Simpson’s consciousness.

Later Simpson relates how he and his colleagues rushed their film back to the hotel not to risk its being confiscated by the authorities when the army arrived. Then we hear the writer’s confession as he reflects on what happened with an unmistakable tone of moral judgment. “I now feel guilty about that decision; it was wrong: we ought to have stayed in the Square, even though the other camera crews had already left and it might have cost us our lives.” The psychic distance has closed in completely. Now we are not merely inside Simpson’s sensibility and judgment; we are looking not out but in, right inside Simpson’s psyche. He is no longer judging the events but himself. The writer continues, “Someone should have been there when the massacre took place, filming what happened, showing the courage of the students as they were surrounded by tanks and the army advancing, firing as it went.”

_The Darkness Crumbles_ is an excellent example which shows that even when there is an overlap between the writer and first-person narrator, the psychic distance between the reader and the characters shifts as the narrative voice moves from the past to the present and the writer weaves in and out of his own psyche.

**A first hand experience: Why is psychic distance important?**

Psychic distance is important because it enables the writer to see what has happened from multiple perspectives with greater emotional control. To illustrate the significance of maintaining psychic distance, I would like to share the emotional journey that I’ve been going through in the recent Umbrella Movement / Occupy Central Movement that took place in Hong Kong. For the past two months, like most Hong Kong citizens, my whole being has been hurled onto a roller-coaster for an extended ride as my feelings surged with the ebb and flow of the movement and my thoughts flashed far and near. In retrospect, I discover that I have maintained different degrees of psychic distance at different stages of the movement.
Towards the beginning of the umbrella movement, I sympathized with the students who strive for greater democracy and the implementation of universal suffrage in the election of the Chief Executive in 2017 through peaceful sit-in. I saw things from their perspective and easily identified with their feelings. I visited Admiralty, one of the occupied points and I was impressed by the caring and peaceful atmosphere and the respect for freedom of speech as shown in the creative design of the posters and slogans posted everywhere. The students’ passion and persistent pursuit for their ideals moved me deeply. I could see a younger version of myself in the rallies. Though I personally do not agree with the disruptive and radical strategy they adopted, I share these peaceful protesters’ yearning for a more democratic Hong Kong. I stood by my social worker friends who supported the students. I felt worried about their safety for fear of sudden crackdown by the Chinese government. During the very tense first week of the Umbrella Movement, I couldn’t sleep properly for fear of seeing the replication of June 4th Massacre in Hong Kong. I joined a special concern whatsapp group composed mainly of social workers and scrutinized what happened everyday. The psychic distance between me, the students and my social worker friends was very close. Every whatsapp message I received about the possibility of a crackdown brought a chill down my spine. Pictures of mini yellow umbrellas folded by students warmed my heart. Though I was not with them physically, my spirit was with them.

However as the protests dragged on and the dark intentions of certain local politicians unfolded, I started to perceive this “democratic student movement” from a greater psychic distance. It seems that the original intentions of seeking greater democracy through peaceful sit-in have been distorted, hijacked and manipulated by a handful of subversive, self-seeking politicians. I became aware of the selfish motives of those who tried to take advantage of the chaotic situation to fuel antagonism and hatred between the protesters and the police. Fake messages and photos were circulated and unsubstantiated claims made that the police was in cahoots with triads to suppress peaceful protesters. Pictures of fatigued policemen sleeping on the streets at midnight and messages I received in which policemen shared their struggles brought my heart closer to the police who were put under tremendous stress having to cope with this prolonged plight. As not every protester is peaceful, the police had to handle the provocation of some aggressive demonstrators with both alertness and restraint. I left my close-up view of the protests and moved into a wide shot mode as I gauged what happened from a wider angle. I gradually adopt an observer’s stance as I distance myself psychologically from the protesters.
The government’s delaying strategy and refusal to address the protesters’ demands has not only forced the demonstrators and the police into a tense confrontation mode, but has also deepened the conflicts between everyday road users and the protesters who blocked the roads in various parts of the city. Unfortunately, the lack of strong leadership and the protesters’ divergent views resulted in the lack of direction as well as a state of stagnancy. As the impact of the movement sank in, the silent majority who might initially have been sympathetic towards the students began to lose patience with the occupy movement. Businesses in affected areas have dropped drastically. The common people suffer as they have to spend twice or thrice as long the time to get to work because of traffic redirection. What is more worrying is that Hong Kong was pushed to the edge of social disorder as self-initiated crowds continued to occupy strategic places in Mongkok and refused to clear the road blocks. The lawful foundation of the city is severely shaken. As I lend my ears to the voices and feelings of different social sectors, I begin to evaluate the movement from a more critical distance.

The deadlock continued as protesters and the Hong Kong government refused to compromise. Sympathy once shifted to the students as one provocative protester was shown to be beaten up by seven policemen in a dark corner on TV. But that did not last long. The peaceful nature of the movement was destroyed when a group of aggressive protesters smashed the glass door of the Legislative Council Building and the demonstrators turned into a riotous crowd and rushed into the Government Central Office in Central, resulting in severe confrontation between the protesters and the police. This violent gesture not only ruined the peaceful movement but also turned public opinion totally against the protesters. I stand at an even greater psychic distance as I scan the ulterior motives and intentions of some of the protesters. Although various public figures have urged the students and protesters to convey their views in a different way and leave the occupied places, the protesters still refuse to accept the reality that their push for instant democracy is too radical for the Chinese government. It seems that they are fighting to deny the harsh reality that as part of China, the ultimate sovereignty of Hong Kong rests in the hands of the Chinese Central Government.

At the very beginning of the movement, the Chinese Government has made it crystal clear that she will not yield to the protesters’ demands that the Chief Executive should step down. CY Leung would continue to receive Beijing’s blessings in his office as the Chief Executive. Moreover, what was passed in the National Congress of the
Republic of China would not be refuted. The students’ naïve demand to negotiate with the Central government was flatly turned down. They were not granted entry to Mainland China. The door for the form of democracy they expected is closed.

As I take a bird’s eye view of the current situation, I begin to examine the movement from an even greater psychic distance. There are a number of tough questions to which answers seem to be obvious. Would the Chinese government be able to tolerate political differences and embrace opposing viewpoints? Would she compromise her political stance by lending an understanding ear to Hong Kong’s howl for democracy? The answer is a definite “no”. The ripple effects of any compromise could be far-reaching and serious in China. The Chinese government would never take such a risk. How would she interpret and handle this militant gesture? The answer is again clear. Spokesmen from the Chinese government label this rebellious movement as one stirred up by subversive foreign powers. What has the umbrella movement done to Hong Kong? Many believe that it has torn Hong Kong apart and family and friends turned into enemies because of their divergent views about the movement. Not only has this prolonged occupation ruined Hong Kong’s reputation for being a law-abiding city, it has also exposed the government’s inability to communicate with the youngsters who formed the majority of the protesters.

What I have learned from my first hand experience of the umbrella movement is invaluable to my writing of this Critical Thesis. Emotional entanglement often blinds us. This is exactly the case with the protesters. They are so emotionally enmeshed and over-focused that they fail to see the big picture with wide-angle lenses. They can only see things from their particular perspective. Their definition and interpretation of democracy is the absolute truth. Any other views are considered biased, invalid or wrong. Their stubborn adherence to their beliefs and inability to maintain a psychic distance blinds them to other alternatives to perceiving the situation and handling this complex political issue. Hopefully in twenty years’ time, when these young protesters look back on what they did, they would be able to understand the meaning behind their militant gesture more fully and gain insights that they lack at the present moment.

It is only when one develops a healthy psychic distance that one is able to put things into perspective and re-interpret what has happened from other angles and as a result gain greater insights. This is exactly what I have tried to do with my memoir writing experience. Feeling emotionally overwhelmed in my memoir writing experience, I have stopped writing for one whole year and enrolled for a Family Therapy Program...
so as to navigate a greater emotional distance.

**Psychic distance and Virginia Satir’s concept of de-enmeshment:**

After taking a one-year Virginia Satir’s Transformational Programme, I discover that psychic distance is closely related to the concept of de-enmeshment, a crucial concept in family therapy. It is interesting to note that in the article, *Towards a Pedagogy of psychic distance*, Ellis remarks that psychic distance offers readers the two attitudes that Carl Rogers claimed can foster creative thinking: psychological safety and psychological freedom.

Ellis then quotes William Zeigler, “Psychological safety means that one feels one’s own worth is unconditionally assured, that one fears no judgment or criticism, and that one is understood empathetically. Psychological freedom means that one feels free to express oneself symbolically.” (p.464) It is my belief that psychic distance offers psychological safety and freedom not only to the readers, but also to the writer, especially memoirists. Very often when a memoirist takes the courage to revisit his past, he can become so enmeshed with his feelings that he and his feelings become knotted as one. His feelings could sometimes overpower and overwhelm him. It is therefore of crucial importance for the memoirist to maintain a degree of psychic distance from his past.

Virginia Satir develops the concept of de-enmeshment in her family reconstruction therapy. De-enmeshment is a therapeutic process of helping the client to “separate the impact of the past from situations in the present.” (Satir p.133) It aims to differentiate people’s “past-contaminated” materials from their present experiences. Individuals undergoing therapy are provided with a psychologically safe environment to revisit their past, get in touch with and release their repressed feelings. However therapy doesn’t end there. De-enmeshment occurs when the client returns to the present as an empowered adult to reinterpret what has happened. As a child, the client’s perception is often limited and his interpretations of events based on incomplete information. It is, therefore, helpful to expand the client’s limited perception and add new information that the client might not be aware of as a child.

Besides separating past experiences from the present situation, clients very often need to de-enmesh themselves from their family members, especially their parents on whom they were emotionally dependent on as a child. This “relational de-enmeshment” enables the client to negotiate a healthy distance between himself and the feelings, viewpoints and judgment of authoritative figures in his life. As a mature adult, he can let go of his former co-dependent interactive patterns. Beliefs
that used to enslave him like “I am OK if you say I am” no longer has any power over him. (Eisenman: The Secret Garden) With this inner freedom and strength he gains from relational de-enmeshment, he becomes more able to dis-entangle himself from his damaged emotions, which are often strongly past-based and the results of control and manipulation. Some of the damaged emotions may be intense and suppressed feelings of hurt, anger, disappointment and even betrayal.

In the past few decades, new forms of therapy have evolved. Art, dance and music have been developed into therapeutic tools through which individuals artistically express repressed anger and hurt, which they find difficult to verbalize. Through the use of colours, movements and music, the creative process has morphed into a therapeutic process as individuals express their feelings symbolically. The artist stands at a safe psychic distance from the work of art or the piece of music created which represents the artist’s experience. While the artists’ creative medium is art, writers’ creative medium is language or words. The writing process creates a safe distance between the writer and his past-contaminated experience and repressed feelings, which the writer may find emotionally overwhelming when the events took place.

**Psychic distance and Silverman’s voice of experience**

Psychic distance seems to be closely connected with Silverman’s Voice of Experience in her book *Fearless Confessions*. Silverman believes that the memoirist can write with two distinct voices. One is the Voice of Innocence which describes the raw, not-yet-understood emotions portraying the writer as he was and what he felt as the events took place. The other is the Voice of Experience, the voice of a more mature persona, which “explains and deepens the Voice of Innocence with metaphor, spirituality, irony and reflection.” (Silverman: p.52). The Voice of Innocence is often that of a scared child as emotions are still raw and unprocessed. On the other hand, the Voice of Experience is a sober voice that seeks to interpret, reflect upon and understand what has happened with a fuller awareness of the underlying reasons behind the behaviour and actions taken, offering both hindsight and insights, which might be lacking when the events actually took place. Reflection moves beyond simply recollecting and remembering the past. The memoirist is on a quest to see his life story in a new and metaphorical light.

In order for the memoirist to develop his Voice of Experience, he needs to navigate a psychic distance from what happened as he journeys into his psyche to explore the deeper meanings of the events and to understand the decisions he has made and why he has responded to life’s circumstances in a certain way. This emotional distance is necessary because the memoirist was too emotionally involved to fully understand
what’s happening within himself. Moreover, as a younger person, he might not have adequate information and depth of maturity to understand his needs and yearnings or the ramifications of events.

Silverman illustrates the development of this Voice of Experience and the subtle interplay between the two voices through her own experience of writing the memoir, *Love Sick*. She weaves the narrative between the two voices when she describes a maroon scarf that once belonged to her married lover, which he gave to her: (Silverman p.53)

“I press the scarf against my nose and mouth. I take a deep breath. The scent is of him – leaves smoldering in autumn dusk – and I believe it is a scent I have always craved, one I will always want. I don’t understand why the scent of the scarf… seems more knowable, more tangible than the rest of him.”

Silverman begins her narrative with the Voice of Innocence, the addict’s voice, providing factual and sensory details about the maroon scarf, romanticizing its scent by associating it with smoldering dusk. As a young girl who hungers for affection and romance, the memoirist, in her Voice of Innocence, interprets this man’s gesture of wrapping such a scarf around her neck as one of love. But the Voice of Experience, the sober voice, discovers deeper meanings her Voice of Innocence wasn’t aware of. In her eyes as a sober, mature adult, this only reflects her former addiction to the yearning or euphoria of romance. In the last sentence, the scarf ironically embodies a strong sense of alienation and loneliness, as well as a yearning for comfort in the heart of the memoirist.

It is interesting to note that when describing the Voice of Experience, Silverman has coined her own phrase, “different depths of view” to replace the term “different points of view” as in fiction. Silverman believes that memoir writing is an inward journey of self-discovery. Through writing and contemplative reflections, the memoirist is taking an in-depth inward look at the multiple and mysterious facets of his personality at different stages of his life. In the recurrent patterns that emerge during the writing process, the memoirist might be able to discover metaphors and themes which help him make meaning of his life story. Memoir writing is a journey into the human psyche and hence the mystery of one’s complex personality. To journey inward, the memoirist needs to stand at different degrees of psychic distance to make sense of what happened as he peels and peers at the layers of his own personality.
The role of psychic distance in memoir writing

Many writers believe that the act of writing itself creates psychic distance. This resonates with Elbow’s belief that the principal value of language is “it permits you to distance yourself from your own perceptions, feelings and thoughts.” (Elbow p.55) Elbow argues that putting words to paper not only helps the writer maintain “some distance and control” over what he’s writing, but also enables him to feel those feelings more by making the writer feel less helpless and lost. Silverman echoes Elbow’s views in her book Fearless Confessions. She believes that it is through both undergoing therapy and writing that the writer attains psychic distance from what has happened and develops his Voice of experience. (Silverman p.56-57)

Psychic distance enables a memoirist to write with greater emotional detachment and hence psychological freedom. As mentioned earlier, the memoirist needs to maintain a psychic distance in order to make meaning of what happened with more information and hindsight. This re-interpretation allows hidden layers of meaning to unfold and offers the memoirist insights into what he or she might not have been able to see. The memoirist’s mastery of the different psychic distances enables him to not only de-enmesh himself from his emotions and his past experience, but also helps him control the reader’s involvement with the characters and the narrative. It also helps sharpen the memoirist’s instinct as to when to stand back and when to close in during the writing process. As a result he will be quicker at spotting things when they are not working.

Memoirists can literally distance themselves from their materials by deliberately setting aside initial drafts for a period of time and returning to the materials. This time lapse can provide them with the personal space to disentangle themselves emotionally as recalling and reliving past events might trigger strong feelings buried deep within their psyche. Psychic distance can also be achieved when the writer deliberately detaches himself from the events and sees himself as a “character” in the narrative. This increased emotional distance can give the writer the personal space and objectivity to re-examine what happened in his life, interpret it from a fresh perspective and gain insights out of it. It is crucial for the writer to establish himself firmly in the “here-and-now” in order to feel empowered to write in the Voice of Experience as a mature adult.

If we perceive memoir writing as the memoirist’s inward quest into his own personality and psyche, psychic distance is a must in this journey of self-discovery as it is only when we are able to maintain different degrees of distance that we can see
from “different depths of view” and understand who we are in the very core of our being as well as why we respond to the challenges and invitations of life’s circumstances in particular ways in different stages of our lives. (Silverman p.52) “Psychic distance” therefore provides a safe psychological distance for memoirists to discover emerging themes when they re-interpret the past in this journey towards self-discovery.
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