



Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud

Cathy Caruth

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In the prevailing account of English empiricism, Locke conceived of self-understanding as a matter of mere observation, bound closely to the laws of physical perception. English Romantic poets and German critical philosophers challenged Locke's conception, arguing that it failed to account adequately for the power of thought to turn upon itself—to detach itself from the laws of the physical world. Cathy Caruth reinterprets questions at the heart of empiricism by treating Locke's text not simply as philosophical doctrine but also as a narrative in which "experience" plays an unexpected and uncanny role. Rediscovering traces and transformations of this narrative in Wordsworth, Kant, and Freud, Caruth argues that these authors must not be read only as rejecting or overcoming empirical doctrine but also as reencountering in their own narratives the complex and difficult relation between language and experience.

Beginning her inquiry with the moment of empirical self-reflection in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*—when a mad mother mourns her dead child—Caruth asks what it means that empiricism represents itself as an act of mourning and explores why scenes of mourning reappear in later texts such as Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, and Freud's *Civilization*. From these readings Caruth traces a recurring narrative of radical loss and the continual displacement of the object or the agent of loss. In Locke it is the mother who mourns her dead child, while in Wordsworth it is the child who mourns the dead mother. In Kant the father murders the son, while in Freud the sons murder the father.

As she traces this pattern, Caruth shows that the conceptual claims of each text to move beyond empiricism are implicit claims to move beyond reference. Yet the narrative of death in each text, she argues, leaves a referential residue that cannot be reclaimed by empirical or conceptual logic. Caruth thus reveals, in each of these authors, a tension between the abstraction of a conceptual language freed from reference and the compelling referential resistance of particular stories to abstraction.

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