TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND THE ETHICAL, POLITICAL AND TRANSHISTORICAL FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE

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Interest in trauma has increased substantially since PTSD was included in the American Psychological Association's diagnostic manual in 1980, partly as a result of years of work from US veterans' associations (Whitehead 2004: 4). Trauma theory, especially literary trauma theory, can be traced to the Yale school and the landmark volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) edited by Cathy Caruth, though later scholars have been sceptical about Caruth's particular reading of psychoanalysis (Leys 2000) and the Eurocentric focus of much early trauma theory. In terms of literary theory, the editors of the present volume note parallels between postmodern scepticism as regards grand narratives and the stylistic and rhetorical experimentation frequently found in both postmodern and trauma literature. It borrows theoretical frameworks from the likes of Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and Caruth, in addition to cultural studies and theories of affect —according to the back cover description. With some justification, much is also made of the interdisciplinarity of the collection. Caruth and the "school of Deconstructive Trauma Studies" (2), however, do come in for some criticism in the introduction, with suggestions that Caruth's focus on the "unrepresentable" and "unspeakable" (3) seems to lack a basis for political action and risks placing a block against the potential of narrative for healing trauma, as suggested by some psychotherapists (2-3). The introduction also echoes Dominick LaCapra's warning against conflating "generalised

structural transhistorical trauma" and "specific historical traumas that may affect specific people in different ways" (3), which LaCapra identifies as a problematic tendency in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's book on testimony (LaCapra 2014: 76).

Anne Whitehead has noted that there is an intertwining between trauma theory and fiction (2004: 161), and, as the title of the volume being reviewed makes clear, the stakes of a collection such as this are therefore considerable. Trauma, and the way it may be (re)presented or worked through in literature, is a difficult enough question on its own without the addition of questions of history, transgenerational trauma and the ethical and political functions of literature — though these are undoubtedly inextricably linked. Inevitably, we meet competing political demands: the potential to represent individual trauma or "generalised structural transhistorical trauma" (3) or indeed to "be witnesses to the unpresentable", as Jean-François Lyotard claims we have an ethical imperative to do (1984: 82), may indeed contrast with the therapeutic needs of specific individuals or groups.

The first of the collection's four sections includes two essays focused on ideology and aesthetics in 20th-century literature and their relation to the "(Re)construction of Cultural Memory" (19). The first contribution from Martin Elsky provides an interesting case study of the importance of literary history for the construction of imagined communities and narratives of national identities (Anderson 1991). Elsky gives an impressively detailed account of the competing attempts to co-opt Dante Alighieri, by Protestant Germany and Catholicism in Germany, around the sexcentenary of Dante's death. David Lloyd then gives us an intriguing Walter Benjamin-inflected close reading of César Vallejo's "Vusco volvvver de golpe el golpe" (1922) and investigates some parallels with "policing violence" (48) and how this relates to poetic or lyric violence. Lloyd's essay on (post)colonial trauma (2000) is much cited in trauma theory; here, however, he focuses on how the "pure language" (51) —in the sense Benjamin gave it in "The Task of the Translator", which includes both the extinguishing and renewal of language— potentially found in Vallejo's poetry offers an unusual and politically-loaded reading of the unexpected parallels between Vallejo and Keats.

In the first chapter of Part 2, which focuses on the ethical and aesthetic challenges related to representing and teaching the Holocaust, Larissa Allwork provides one of the most practical and nuanced chapters of the book, heavily influenced by her work as a historian and highlighting how trauma literature has gone "beyond" analysing Holocaust survivors' emotional damage (78) and the ways in which this literature has reshaped the writing of Holocaust historiography. Allwork analyses a number of cultural examples, including Daniel Libeskind's architecture and

Marcelo Brodsky's photography, and provides a sophisticated critique of the weaknesses of some strands of trauma theory. She also revisits Felman's chapter in the Caruth collection on the question of teaching the Holocaust, and links this to very practical questions about how teaching trauma literature can potentially bring up unrelated trauma for the students.

Silvia Pellicer-Ortín's contribution deals with Jewish memory, especially for the second and third generations following the Holocaust, and therefore transhistorical trauma, in British-Jewish author Linda Grant's fiction. Pellicer-Ortín provides a nuanced analysis of three of Grant's novels and how their generic hybridity relates to the construction of (Jewish) memory; however, drawing on other major thinkers on Jewish identity, such as Derrida or Yosef Yerushalmi could perhaps have helped Pellicer-Ortín develop her argument even further.

Rudolf Freiburg then provides a fascinating account of Alan Scott Haft's transcription of his father's life. Harry Haft was an illiterate Holocaust survivor whose boxing ability kept him alive, at the cost of killing others. In contrast to Primo Levi or Paul Celan, Haft had only an everyday language that was not his own —English— when he finally told his story to his son. The usual association of trauma fiction with fragmentation and rhetorical excess is consequently inverted. Freiburg makes the interesting proposal that the bareness of the narrative and Haft's murder of others in the boxing ring in order to survive "destroys the *grand narrative* of the exceptionally virtuous and heroic Holocaust survivor" (147).

Part 3 focuses on "Romance Strategies and Spectrality" (153) in fictionalised traumatic memories. Justin Paul Brumit analyses Dennis Cooper's *My Loose Thread* (2002) in terms of romance and "postmodernist aesthetics" (159). Brumit's attribution of "nihilistic playfulness" and the "abandonment of affect and authenticity" (161) to the postmodern might fit with some of Frederic Jameson's more critical moments, but does not really accord with Jean-François Lyotard's reading of the postmodern —as Brumit seems to suggest. Lyotard contrasts his conception of the postmodern sublime to the nostalgia and demand for (false) reality of the modern (Lyotard 1984: 80-82), effectively arguing against such a loss of affect. In the end, Brumit provides a detailed reading that convincingly claims that (arguably postmodern) reformulations of medieval romance are an important response to the changes AIDS wrought on gay subjectivity (178) —a reading that Lyotard might well have agreed with.

Jean-Michel Ganteau analyses Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) in terms of Constanza del Río's adaptation of Toni Morrison's "re-memoring" —"the continued presence of that which has disappeared or been forgotten"— and *Nachträglichkeit* (181-82). It features some sophisticated analysis of the stylistic features of Enright's novel in relation to the narration of memory, and some

rather more provocative statements about testimony and fiction. He cites Whitehead's question, "if trauma comprises an event […] which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how can it then be narrativised […]"? (187) as being particularly applicable to *The Gathering* as "precarious testimony". Arguably, Ganteau slightly misrepresents Felman's position on testimony, claiming it appears when "accuracy is in doubt" (187-88) when the context was actually testimony and *historical* accuracy in trials (Felman 1995: 17). A very interesting meditation on what Ganteau calls "fictional testimony" (188) and its interrelation with the characters' memories and questions of inter-generational transmission of memory follows —essentially asking in what ways fiction can be said to bear witness.

Susana Onega's contribution is one of the strongest in the volume. She analyses Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009), a neo-gothic novel that plays with the ghost story genre to ask questions about class and inherited trauma. Partly as a contrast to Derrida's spectres, Onega takes her starting point from Colin Davis's reading of Abraham and Torok's transgenerational phantoms, in which they "are not the spirits of the dead, but 'lacunae left inside us by the secrets of others'" (207). She analyses how the vengeful phantoms, in Abraham and Torok's sense, of Waters's novel have apparently been generated by the past trauma of the menial classes in a country house. Onega's deft hand with the theoretical framework in this chapter is also a good model for researchers —both those in their early careers and the more experienced ones— to follow.

The fourth and final section focuses on postcolonial manifestations of traumatic memory. Anna Maria Tomczak gives us a sophisticated analysis of Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's *The Settler's Cookbook* (2010), which tells the oft-excluded story of British "twice migrant" (231) East African Asians through the prism of a recipe book. Bárbara Arizti analyses Jamaica Kincaid's "ongoing self-representational project" (253) and provides an interesting account of the ways in which Kincaid's narrative strategies push the conventions of life writing to their limits.

In their investigation of Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012), Katrina Harack and Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz provide some of the most theoretically sophisticated analysis in the volume. Judith Butler's and Sam Durrant's interpretations of ethical mourning are used to interpret Morrison's novel, in an attempt to go some way towards unpicking the complex relationship between individual and collective trauma —as well as how Morrison's work might disrupt some of the Eurocentrism found in earlier trauma theory. In their conclusion they flag up Felman and Laub's important observation that the "critical demand for contextualisation" also necessitates "textualization of the context" (306-307).

In the conclusion to the volume the editors cite deconstructivist and Yale school critic J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*, saying that "the rhetorical study of literature has crucial practical implications for our moral, social and political lives" (315). Clearly this is never truer than when dealing with questions of trauma both in its individual forms and as societal phantoms in Abraham and Torok's sense. This volume manages to find a good range of examples to continue attempts to decolonize trauma theory and to show the reader how literature may illuminate transhistorical trauma and traumatic memory. Indeed, one of the book's strengths is the focus on close reading. As a result, sections 3 and 4 do actually go a fair way towards making good on the ambitious promise of the title.

However, the ethical imperative for a volume like this is evidently greater than for a less politically and ethically fraught area of literary theory; hence Ruth Leys's fairly vituperative criticism of Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, echoed by the editors. The introduction talks of affect theory as an antidote to "the obsessive and paranoid theorising of deconstructive approaches" to trauma theory (5-6), in this context meaning Caruth —and potentially some other Yale scholars, though which is not clear— rather than Derrida or indeed Paul de Man. However, only two of the chapters actually make use of affect theory. This is not really a problem with the contributions *per se* given the (fairly) interdisciplinary approach, rather that the interactions with affect theory, memory studies, Derrida, Butler, and Abraham and Torok promised in the blurb and introduction appear in a more limited fashion than one might have expected.

Overall, while the volume is indeed interdisciplinary, perspectives from further outside the bounds of literary theory might have provided added insight. The fourth section in particular does some important work towards decolonizing trauma theory, a necessary task given its beginnings in Vietnam veterans' PTSD and the trauma of the Holocaust (Rothberg 2008; Visser 2015). However, it is noticeable that some of the most successful contributions make use of reformulations of trauma theory with Derridean deconstructive heritage rather than via Yale, or of alternative reconfigurations of psychoanalysis like Abraham and Torok. Borrowing from Deleuzian theories of affect, neuropsychoanalysis, medical humanities or indeed clinical psychology might well have given the volume an extra push to take literary trauma theory yet further in its quest for a nuanced and effective postcolonial approach. That said, the volume makes a very welcome contribution to the growing field of postcolonial trauma theory with a number of excellent individual contributions, well-supported by a focus on detailed close reading.

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