

TRAUMA AND ROMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE

Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, eds.

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(by John Style. Universitat Rovira i Virgili)

john.style@urv.cat

At the beginning of his article, “Trauma and Temporality”, Robert D. Stolorow reflects current psychoanalytical understanding, in stating that “an essential dimension of psychological trauma is the breaking up of the unifying thread of temporality”. As a consequence “the clinical features usually described as dissociation and multiplicity”, seen so often in trauma sufferers, “can be understood in terms of the trauma’s impact in disrupting the sense of being-in-time” (158). The literary expression of trauma narratives in the form of the novel must therefore face the tension implicit between the form’s customary need to establish the identity of its characters in time, within the narrative’s chronology, and the same characters’ inability to experience their own “sense of being-in-time”, due to their being traumatized. Recent scholarship, including contributions by the editors of the volume under consideration, has identified a tendency among writers of trauma narratives towards introducing elements of Romance as a way of overcoming this essential contradiction.

Ganteau and Onega’s excellent introduction to *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Fiction* (in the *Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature* collection) presents a series of convincing arguments that make the pairing of Trauma literature and Romance seem obvious, even though this study is the first to analyze this pairing in depth in relation to contemporary British writers. By emphasizing Romance as a literary mode rather than a genre, the editors neatly

sidestep issues of hybridity, and problems with genre terminology, in order to focus on the elements of Romance that are frequently brought into play in works which address traumatic events, whether collective or individual. Contemporary trauma fiction has often employed a fragmentary, dispersed, non-linear narrative style. This corresponds to what authors since Freud have pointed out as the very nature of trauma, which is to remain, in part at least, unrepresentable to the conscious mind, as it is beyond that mind's comprehension. Given trauma's atemporal quality, Romance narrative can offer an anachronistic style of storytelling which allows it to be recounted or 'acted out', in a mode that readily accommodates intensification, dilation, contradiction and the presence of the spectral. Unlike historical events, the experience of which may be traumatizing for some participants but not for others, traumas themselves, by their very nature, are never fully experienced as they occur and reoccur. Trauma, in the words of Dominick LaCapra (in Ganteau and Onega 2013: 10), "does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience *that is not yet fully owned*" (original emphasis 110). It is in Romance's ability to offer a mode of discourse that allows some form of representation of the trauma to take place, in order to disrupt or disarticulate the traumatic structure, that the fictionalizing narrative can achieve a therapeutic value. It is here, the editors argue, that romance's "intrinsic ethical power" (11) resides.

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The book's division into four parts, with three or four essays in each part, groups contemporary British novelists into studies of ghosts and spectral revenants, of distress and individual trauma, of traumas set in more pronounced historical and ethical frameworks, and finally, trauma narrations and their therapeutic potential.

The impressive opening essay of part one is Ganteau's own, on Pat Barker's *Another World*, a work which other critics of trauma fiction have taken as a key example. By focussing on the presence of elements of Romance in the novel, the author shows convincingly how the novel goes beyond a realist treatment of its traumatized characters. Ganteau cites instances of descriptions where, in Romance fashion, time is warped, either fast-forwarding or rewinding rather than following the linear temporal requirements of the realist novel, of aspects of the novel for which there is a hermeneutic failure, in the sense that possible traumas are left unresolved. The essay argues that Barker uses these Romance strategies not just to relate the intertwining traumas of the plot but to perform them, frustrating a satisfying literary closure in the same way that trauma's resolution is never fully attained.

Georges Letissier's "Hauntology as Compromise" contextualizes Sarah Water's *The Little Stranger* (2009) within her oeuvre of novels with historical settings, but singles it out for its use of the phantom tale. While discussion of characters such as

a WW2 pilot suffering from PTSD and his equally traumatized family links easily to the main theme of this book, the author goes on to discuss the family house as not just a setting but as an ‘actor’ in the story. Through intertextual references to *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, he demonstrates how the *unheimlich* mode permeates the novel’s texture on all levels. In Letissier’s words, Waters “deliberately sets her fiction in the uneventful, historical vacuum of 1947-48, singularly devoid of ‘Here and Now’, in order to address the spectrality of an unhinged time period, totally emptied of the plenitude and substances of the Now” (49).

Rosario Arias’ discussion of Picardie’s *Daphne* brings together insights of other critics, particularly into the relationship between sexuality and writing in Daphne Du Maurier’s case and in Picardie’s too. Picardie’s multilayered work of biofiction covers Du Maurier’s writing of a biography on Branwell Brontë with the help of Brontë curator Alexander Symington, and interpolates these two voices with a third, that of Jane, a PhD student writing a thesis on Branwell. Arias deftly points out how the Romance motif of the quest runs through all the narratives, as well as through the author’s own biographical investigations into Du Maurier and the Brontës. As well as the quest motif, Arias provides a thorough discussion of how the act of writing about the elements of incest and ghostly traces becomes a means through which the subject searches for their identity, and comes to terms with the haunting presence of the traumatic past.

The second section of the book on ‘Narratives of Distress and Individual Trauma’ opens with Lynne Pearce’s piece concerning a central contradiction in Romance, that of love’s unrepeatability set against the lover’s experience after the moment of *ravissement*, which tends to become something closely akin to the post-traumatic repetition described elsewhere in this book. Pearce uses Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain*, Jackie Kay’s *Wish I Was Here* and Sarah Waters’ *The Night Watch* as representative of contemporary fiction to propose that perhaps the ‘tragic-redemptive’ model of love traced by De Rougement is showing signs of having run its 900 year-long course.

As one might expect from such a highly reputed critic, J. Hillis Miller’s chapter, on Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, is a star turn. As other contributors do with their respective authors, he analyzes how trauma and romance interweave in the lives of McEwan’s characters. But he goes a step further than the rest of his co-authors, by considering the reader’s experience as traumatic. Of McEwan’s protagonist, he writes,

If Briony [...] misreads events because she expected them to fall into a preconceived narrative pattern, which of us readers can deny doing the same, for example, when we make certain assumptions about *Atonement* during a first reading? These assumptions turn out to be grotesquely mistaken, as the reader discovers at the end.

The reader, I as reader at least, is led to become like Catherine Morland or like Briony Tallis. Our error also triggers trauma by deferred action when we are disillusioned. This might be called 'Reader's Trauma'. (96)

Such an argument is clever, but it encapsulates a concern this reviewer has in reading through these essays, with the question of scale. Trauma narratives initially emerged in the aftermath of large-scale historical catastrophes of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust, in the form of testimonial writing. While critics have insisted on the essential difference between such autobiographical writing on the one hand and trauma fiction on the other, the two genres share narrative techniques and strategies which are not miles apart, as they tend to set individual experience against the context of a larger collective one. The essays in the current volume work hard to negotiate the tension between the collective and (yet) individual experience of trauma, calling on a range of terms in order to do so. Andrés Romero-Jódar rehearses some of these, "political trauma", "structural trauma", "punctual trauma", "historical trauma", "cultural trauma", "collective trauma", etc., (181) in his welcome essay on *Watchmen*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' series for DC comics, which he argues convincingly deserves to be taken as a graphic novel, and thus merits inclusion in this collection. And yet, to apply the same term, trauma, to the reader's experience of narrative doubling and lack of closure, as in Hillis Miller's *Reader's Trauma*, implies a loss of sense of scale, arising from postmodern criticism's tendency towards, perhaps playful, over-relativization. I would add, thankfully, that the final part of this volume, on the therapeutic possibilities of such narratives, grounds the collection firmly on the ethical purpose that the authors proposed in their introduction.

In reviewing this collection as a whole, one ends with the feeling that some of the essays here do not quite grasp the distinction between Romance as genre and as mode as firmly as the introduction does, and therefore sometimes fail to show how that distinction plays out in practice. However, by bringing together Trauma and Romance, two fields of study till now largely dealt with separately, Ganteau and Onega have undoubtedly opened up a whole new area for research.

Works cited

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