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Wound and Voice

The cultural work of literary trauma narratives

Several times already, the relationship between a cultural ecology of literature and the experience of trauma has come up in different contexts. It therefore seems useful to address this relationship in a separate chapter. If literature can be described as the self-reflexive staging of complex dynamical life processes on the culture/nature boundary and thus as a particularly condensed, holistic form of “knowledge of life” (see above Chapter 13), this applies to trauma in particular, since trauma has been and is a part of human life and history both in its everyday and its extreme and spectacular forms. Indeed, it seems that imaginative literature has a special sensitivity and affinity to trauma, since one important way of describing its function from the perspective of cultural ecology is as a critical sensorium for civilizational pathologies, for states of psychic and social paralysis, for experiences of repression, victimization, and dehumanization, which literary texts typically take as a starting-point for their imaginative counter-discourses. It is therefore not surprising that theories of trauma rely so heavily on examples from imaginative literature—without, for the most time, explicitly reflecting on this circumstance.

It is useful here briefly to refer to the wider context of current trauma studies in order to elucidate the potential significance of literature and narrative in this transdisciplinary field of research and therapy. Trauma studies are characterized by a broad diversity of subjects, approaches, and directions, and by the contributions of various disciplines such as medicine, psychiatry, law, political science, history, and cultural studies. Nevertheless, a convenient starting point is the definition of trauma offered in Webster’s

Dictionary: "1. An injury or wound to a living body caused by the application of external force or violence. 2.a) a psychological or emotional stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior (trauma of being left by mother; trauma of Civil War; b) the state or condition of mental or emotional shock produced by such a stress or by a physical injury" (Webster 2432). Important aspects of trauma, accordingly, are its original meaning as a "wound";¹ the differences as well as the interconnections between physical and psychological, individual and collective, everyday and extreme forms of trauma; the disruptive effects of trauma on emotions, behaviors, values, and personal identities; and the potentially long-term consequences of the initial traumatic moment or experience for individuals as well as for cultures. Trauma involves experiences of fear, terror, and disempowerment that overwhelm the defenses and threaten to paralyze vital functions of a person or community.² Trauma invalidates habitual categories of order and sense-making systems, representing a non-integrated part of personal and collective memory that at once demands and resists integration and verbal-narrative representation.

There are manifold ways of professionally dealing with trauma, from local trauma centers to communal and global networks of trauma intervention and prevention. And it seems that these forms of direct medical, psychotherapeutic, economic, or sociopolitical help are much more obviously relevant to society than are narratives of trauma, which make trauma the subject of symbolic representation and storytelling. But perhaps this first impression has to be somewhat modified if one considers the ethical implications for the concepts of human personality, dignity, and integrity involved in different forms of therapy for traumatized individuals. One controversial but in a way logical direction within recent scientific trauma treatment is neurological research that aims at developing trauma pills, which help to erase and ultimately delete the memory of the traumatic experience altogether. There are serious attempts under way to achieve this goal, which aims at something like a reset-button for the brain to eliminate unpleasant and disruptive memories and thus to restore to the patient a coherently functioning personality. The implications may seem

¹ For a detailed cultural-historical analysis of trauma as bodily and psychic wound, see Luckhurst.

² The concepts of "communal" or "cultural trauma" are discussed in their controversial aspects e.g., in Alexander (2004) and Erikson (1995).

alarming, because the question here is whether the personality remains the same as before the treatment. But to its advocates, it does appear ethically justified in cases of particularly severe forms of suffering where no other cure or treatment appears possible.

On the other side of the spectrum, there is considerable evidence that it is of crucial importance for traumatized persons to find a way, whenever they are able to, to tell their story and to remember the past in order to psychologically and emotionally cope with trauma (Freud 1922). Following Freud, this view oscillates between the poles of “working-through” and “acting-out” the traumatic experience. “Working-through” means trying to come to terms with trauma as a thing of the past and finding ways into a liveable future, while “acting-out” means re-enacting the unresolved memories of the traumatic experience in a melancholic insistence on its unforgettability (LaCapra 2001). As Dominick LaCapra points out, both directions are not categorically opposed but rather complementary approaches to trauma and trauma narrative. Differently from techno-scientific medical interventions, the memory of trauma constitutes a defining element in these psycho-historical models of trauma narratives. Trauma narratives in this sense have an ethical relevance of their own in contributing to the representation and elucidation of personal biographies as well as of collective historical processes, whose catastrophes need to be confronted and remembered rather than repressed, both in terms of ethical respect for the victims and of preventing the blind repetition of mentalities leading into such catastrophes in the future. Memory and forgetting thus represent two contradictory but also complementary aspects of trauma and trauma theory, and trauma narratives are often responding to this double condition by providing stories that involve both suffering and survival, a liminal state between the threat of annihilation and the ability to live on after the trauma. In the words of Cathy Caruth, trauma oscillates “between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life; between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of the survival” (Caruth, 7). Narratives of trauma are stories of victims who are also survivors of catastrophes. They are both about remembering and overcoming the original experience, both about the memory of the wound and about possible ways of living with its long-term effects.

Trauma and the ecocultural dynamics of fictional texts

I am not dealing here, however, with autobiographical narratives of trauma victims, even though these can become part of the narrative material of literary treatments of trauma as well, but will look instead, from a cultural-ecological perspective, at some of the ways in which fictional literature is and has been dealing with the phenomenon of trauma. Literary narratives of trauma share with all literature its suspension of a direct reference to reality in the act of fictionalizing the traumatic experience. In the case of the holocaust as *the* collective traumatic event of the twentieth century, this has for a time resulted in a general verdict that the experience of the Shoah could only be legitimately narrated and authenticated by survivors as direct witnesses and that every other, and especially every non-documentary form of representation amounted to a betrayal of the victims and a distortion of the historical truth.

The creative response to the monstrous trauma of the Shoah, however, has been much more widespread throughout the later twentieth and into the twenty-first century than is often acknowledged. This is documented, for example, in the 2010 exhibition “Virtues of Memory: Six Decades of Holocaust Survivors Creativity” at Yad Vashem, where “creative works of close to 300 Holocaust survivors” were presented, “offering a look at the myriad ways Holocaust survivors have struggled to express themselves artistically after the Holocaust. Joining memoirs, testimonies and film, these artworks form a formidable expression of the Voice of the Survivors.” The exhibition “showcases the artistic expression of the individual, yet bestows a legacy to others” (Yad Vashem). The transformative effect of artistic creativity in the representation of trauma, and its importance for the spiritual, if not the actual, survival of artists, however, had already become evident in artworks composed at the time during and immediately following the Shoah, exposing the machinery of death in experimental forms of art as in Viktor Ullmann’s opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (*The Emperor of Atlantis*) composed in Theresienstadt, where death himself refuses to continue his work in the face of omnivorous destruction, or in Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge” (“Death Fugue”), in which elements of classical musical form and apocalyptic expressionism are exploding into shrill, all the more powerful metaphoric dissonances.

Cynthia Ozick takes her intertextual clue from this Celan poem in her story “The Shawl,” which likewise presents the holocaust experience as an encounter with an omnipresent death culture, whose traumatizing reality can only be indirectly confronted in its aesthetic transfiguration. It is the very absence of any life-sustaining environment that forms the shadowy matrix of these textual underworlds and that leaves only desperate traces of life and survival in their radical artistic destabilization of all artistic control. Like “The Shawl,” later narratives of the holocaust have deliberately used the literary imagination, including postmodern devices of metafiction and non-linear narration, for the purpose of representing ultimately unimaginable realities (Rohr, Donn). Robert Eaglestone especially has made the argument that postmodern aesthetics is most suited to expressing the trauma of the holocaust on account of its de-centering, deconstructive, and heterogenous forms of narration (Eaglestone). The uncanny presence of absence, and the destabilizing of ontology into hauntology (Derrida) become pervasive signatures of postmodern holocaust texts. On a more generalizing note, Danilo Kis maintains in his poetological theory *Homo Poeticus* that fiction can enhance the authenticity of the Real, bestowing what he calls a “deeper authenticity” to its representation than a merely documentary approach can achieve (Kis).

From a cultural-ecological perspective, the holocaust represents the most extreme case in history of a civilization destroyed by a systemic culture of death, which also threatens the death of art by depriving it of its very medium of creativity and survival in the living interconnectedness of all existence. However, even in view of this most monstrous historical challenge, art refuses to disappear, insisting on its responsibility to memory and shared life in the face of irreversible death and extinction. In Siri Hustvedt’s novel *What I Loved*, the narrator Leo Hertzberg, who has lost most of his relatives in the holocaust, remembers them in a ritual in which he is playing a game with objects and photographs that are memorabilia of his dead relatives. The game brings alive their shadows as imaginative energies of forgotten lives that deeply move and overwhelm the narrator with their absent presence.

[w]hen I play my game of mobile objects, I’m often tempted to move the photographs of my aunt, uncle, grandparents, and the twins near the knife and the fragment of the box. Then the game flirts with terror. It moves me so close to the edge that I have a sensation of falling, as if I had hurled myself

off the edge of a building. I plummet downward, and in the speed of the fall I lose myself in something formless but deafening. It's like entering a scream—being a scream.

And then I withdraw, backing away from the edge like a phobic. I make a different arrangement. Talismans, icons, incantations—these fragments are my frail shields of meaning. The game's moves must be rational, I force myself to make a coherent argument for every grouping, but at the bottom the game is magic. I'm its necromancer calling on the spirits of the dead, the missing, the imaginary. Like O painting a loaf of beef because he's hungry, I invoke ghosts that can't satisfy me. But the invocation has a power all its own. The objects become muses of memory. (Hustvedt 364–365)

This mobile game of memory exposes the individual self to ever new destabilizing confrontations with a transindividual traumatic past. It is a precarious combination of acting-out and working-through of trauma, since it aims at the repetition and imaginary re-enactment of the past as a way of living with it. The ritual takes place within the narrated world, but it is also a parable of the narrative process itself, which like the mobile game of objects unfolds in highly ambivalent force-fields between absence and presence, past and future, terror and magic, chaos and order, mind and matter, self and other, traumatic annihilation and imaginative survival.

What such textual examples indicate is that fictional narratives of trauma have their own potential of representing and communicating trauma, which is different from other media and forms of discourse. Again, this potential can be contextualized within the framework of a cultural ecology of texts. One much-cited example in recent trauma studies is a scene from the Italian Renaissance writer Torquato Tasso's epic *Jerusalem Liberated*, which Freud summarizes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in the following way:

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy's knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusader's army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (Freud quoted in Caruth, 2)

This is something like a *locus classicus* of psychoanalytically oriented trauma studies, which is mentioned by Freud to point out the repetition compulsion

that goes along with trauma and which has been taken up by recent trauma theorists to position themselves in continuity with but also in distinction from Freud. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, proposes that “the literary resonance of Freud’s example goes beyond this dramatic illustration of repetition compulsion, and exceeds, perhaps, the limits of Freud’s conceptual or conscious theory of trauma,” and she extends his theory by emphasizing the voice of the speaking wound as an aspect of traumatic narrative, “the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out . . . , a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*” (Caruth 2). Laura DiPrete in turn extends Caruth’s reading of this scene by adding the aspect of the *corporeality* of the traumatic experience. “This relationship [between trauma and voice] could be rethought and revised, expanded and complicated, once we add to the binary—voice and trauma—the element of corporeality” (DiPrete 9). Referring to a remark by Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* on trauma as a “Fremdkörper”, a “foreign body” in the individual’s consciousness and memory, DiPrete contends that traumatic memories escape mental representation and instead are written in and onto the body. “For a number of writers, bearing witness to traumatic experience means to articulate the complicated process from traumatic memory to conscious memory by attending not only to verbal signs but also to that nonverbal, sensorial, and perceptual experience that remains locked within the body” (DiPrete 10).

What I would especially highlight here is that the textual example that these theorists are relying upon to elucidate the nature of trauma is an example from *fictional* literature, which appears to provide an especially rich source of knowledge for trauma studies. A psychoanalytical theory of trauma, it seems, would thus have to be supplemented by a literary poetics of trauma. The cognitive richness and suggestive power of Tasso’s scene is clearly linked to its status as imaginative literature, which functions as a complex medium of trauma representation not in spite of, but because of its fictional, metaphorical, and narrative form of textualizing human experience. The story provides an imaginative space of multiple conceptual blendings and metamorphoses, which allows Tasso’s narrative to represent and interrelate the aspects of repetition compulsion, of giving voice to voiceless suffering, and of the corporeality of the traumatic experience that are described by trauma theorists. The scene contains core elements of a literary trauma narrative by

merging heterogeneous domains into a story-line in which the strange and the familiar, violence and love, self and other, subject and object, soul and body, conscious and unconscious forces, culture and nature, anthropomorphic and biomorphic forms are brought together in unexpected ways. What appears ethically relevant in this scene is that even though the perspective is that of the agent of traumatization, the crusading knight, the narrative attention and the reader's empathy are drawn to the fate and voice of the victim. Human agency is contextualized in the light of its unintended and unpredictable consequences.

What is equally remarkable—and has virtually gone unnoticed in trauma research—is that the traumatizing event affects not only the human but the nonhuman world, which in the image of the bleeding tree is shown to be violated here as well. The tree becomes a metamorphic other of the female heroine, and the wound of the human body merges with the wound of the tree in giving voice to otherwise silent suffering. It would therefore seem to make sense to extend the “corporeal” aspect of trauma pointed out by DiPrete toward the “trans-corporeal” (Alaimo 2010) aspect of the ecocultural and material connectivity with more-than-human life, in which human trauma and suffering are embedded, and which is specifically evoked in imaginative stagings of traumatic experiences. Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality describes “interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures,” highlighting the “material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo 2). Trans-corporeality accounts “for the ways in which nature, the environment, and the material world itself signify, act upon, or otherwise affect human bodies, knowledges, and practices” (Alaimo 7–8). Thus one fundamental eco-ethical implication of this ur-scene of Freudian trauma theory from Tasso's epic poem seems to be that human acts and experiences of traumatization are presented as intrinsically linked with the violation of a fundamental biophilic embeddedness of human beings in the vital force-fields and ecological interrelatedness of all life. A literary poetics of trauma, this classical example of trauma research suggest, would have to be connected on some significant level with a cultural ecology of trauma.

If we look from here into literary history at large, the scene from Tasso's epic represents no exceptional case, since in a broad sense, much of literary narrative has always been a post-traumatic form of narrative that is embedded in a holistic-dynamic field of “intra-action” (Barad) between human and

more-than-human, corporeal and trans-corporeal dimensions. The examples discussed so far, especially in the context of the triadic model of cultural ecology, all involve such stories of trauma and its collective, personal, psychosomatic, and material consequences. More generally speaking, Tasso's epic poem is part of a rich tradition of narratives of symbiogenetic co-evolution and human-nature-metamorphosis since the beginnings of literature (see Westling, Wheeler). A pivotal point in this tradition is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which assimilates ancient mythological tales, but also previous forms of metamorphosis poetry in the Hellenistic tradition such as Boios' *Ornithogonia*, one of the first collections of myths of metamorphoses of humans into animals, in this case, into birds. In its 250 narratives and fifteen books, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* mixes various genres ranging from epic and elegy to tragedy and pastoral in a mythico-historical account of culture-nature evolution from the creation of the world to Ovid's own time, featuring numerous characters but no unifying human hero. The collection rather amounts to a discontinuous assemblage of distinct but mutually entangled stories whose primary connecting agency is the overarching meta-narrative of geo-cultural history on the one hand, and the force of love on the other, personified in the God Amor, which signifies the motivating energies and strange attractor-fields linking human and non-human beings, the worlds of animate bodies and of inanimate matter in an overall process of continual emergence and shape-changing.

With these mythopoetic yet culturally self-explorative stories of co-evolutionary genesis and transformation, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* became one of the most influential intertexts in literary history (Miller). The motif of the heroine Clorinda's metamorphosis into a tree in Tasso's epic poem, for example, is prefigured in the Daphne episode in *Metamorphoses*, Book I, which in turn links up with the ancient mythological motif of sea-nymphs that are transformed into trees, a motif which resurfaces in literary modernism, for example, in H.D.'s imagist-vorticist poem "Oread" (297):

Whirl up, sea—
 Whirl your pointed pines,
 Splash your great pines
 On our rocks,
 Hurl your green over us—
 Cover us with your pools of fir.

Oread, the speaker of the poem, is a sea nymph transformed into a tree, hoping for the turbulent energies of water to restore the life-sustaining contact of her immobilized existence with the vital forces of elemental change and movement. In the poetic process, figurations of sea and land, fluid and solid, chaos and order, vortex and form violently collide in ways that nevertheless convey their underlying connectivity within its shape-shifting metamorphoses.

Other frequently circulated myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that seem particularly pertinent in the context of trauma narratives are the myths of the Medusa and the Minotaur, both also frequently associated with autopoietic meanings. Medusa is a mesmerizing death-in-life figure, in which erotic traumatization transforms the human face into the shape of a monstrous serpentine hybrid, displacing beauty into a lethal attractor of regressive metamorphosis which turns the unwitting observer into stone. As Baumbach has demonstrated, the Medusa myth in its many ramifications has remained a powerful source of literary and cultural narratives up to the present (Baumbach). This is also true of the myth of the Minotaur, another man-animal hybrid with a human body and the head of a bull, which has become one of the archetypal stories of cultural trauma and of the dark undercurrents of art and society in both classical and modern literatures. The Cretan cult of the Minotaur as the center of secret power and sacrificial rites provides a narrative about the cultural evolution as being inseparably co-extensive with the evolution of nature. It is a core narrative of the literary imagination in which the symbiogenetic emergence of human and nonhuman life is part of its own foundational code, and in which the unconscious knowledge of biocentric origins is inscribed into the genesis of human culture—and, by autopoietic implication, into the generative matrix of imaginative texts. The transgressive excess of desire expressed in the sexual encounter of the Cretan King Minos' wife Pasiphae's with the sacred bull, from which the Minotaur is born, is coupled with the technological device of the architect, artisan, and artist Daedalus, whose designing of an artificial cow makes the fulfillment of that transgression possible. It is also the task of Daedalus to build an elaborate labyrinth as the central edifice of society, an ambivalent structure in which the Minotaur, as the traumatic bodily trace of that transgression, is both hidden away and venerated. In the labyrinth, the transgressive act is systemically repressed yet also memorialized in institutionalized form. The

labyrinth is also the ceremonial dancing ground of Ariadne, half-sister of the Minotaur, who on the one hand participates in the secret knowledge of the labyrinth and on the other hand helps Theseus in deciphering the mystery and slaying the Minotaur, before later becoming the bride of Dionysus. In the continual retelling, retracing, and reinterpreting of this monstrous secret of culture-nature and trans-species connectivity as an inescapable part of deep cultural history, the Minotaur myth is an exemplary parable of the cultural-ecological dynamics of literary texts. It provides an imaginative space between the institutionalization and the violation of civilizational taboos, between anthropocentric repression and ecocentric transgressivity. Human and animal, cultural and corporeal, physiological and technological agencies are uncannily intertwined in the labyrinth of a cultural prison-house constructed by an artist who is both part of and detached from the grotesque civilizational tragedies unfolding within its walls. The myth has influenced numerous authors, at first and for a long time as an example of human aberration, but especially since the twentieth century also as a parable of the modern artist's traumatic alienation from and yet inescapable dependence on society. In these modern texts and artifacts, as Theodore Ziolkowski points out in examples ranging from Picasso to Dürrenmatt, the Minotaur becomes a second, darker self of the artist, while the labyrinth in its infinite and inescapable subsections suggests the threatening sociopolitical realities of the twentieth century (Ziolkowski).

In different traditions of folklore and popular myths as well, the metamorphic trauma narrative appears in various shapes, such as in many of the fairy-tales collected by the brothers Grimm. *Hansel and Gretel*, to take one frequently cited example, relates the traumatic loss of parental love and anxieties of cannibalism, which are embedded in highly ambivalent force-fields between village and forest, society and wilderness, familiarity and strangeness, the death of emotions and the life of material things. In Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, the tale of *Hansel and Gretel* is combined with various figments from the Medusa and Minotaur myths in an intricate texture, in which these and other myths representing "different versions of Homo monstrosus ... cyclops, humanoid giraffe, centaur" (Ziolkowski 82) are signifiers of an eco-cultural unconscious that is enmeshed in the labyrinths of modern civilization. In Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* as well, the tale of *Hansel and Gretel* is integrated into a complex process combining narrative and visual

art, shaping the ways in which the novel tries to come to terms with both collective and personal traumas.

In a mythico-religious context, another highly relevant cultural trauma narrative, which has likewise been reactivated in many modern and postmodern versions, is provided by the medieval Celtic-Christian Grail myth of the wounded fisher-king and the corresponding wasteland motif. Here again, the human wound corresponds to the wounded land, and the corporeal suffering to a trans-corporeal crisis of life, which can only be overcome by retracing in narrative the wound to its source, and by atoning for the anthropocentric violation of life's balance through a new sense of communal and ecocultural connectivity. In the context of romantic literature, the ecological trauma narrative reaches a high point in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in which the anthropocentric hubris of the protagonist toward nonhuman life results in large-scale catastrophe and environmental apocalypse that can only be survived by sharing this painfully gained knowledge and experience in the compulsory repetition of magical story-telling.

In the twentieth century, among the most radical examples of modernist trauma narratives are Kafka's stories of traumatic alienation both in the anonymous labyrinths of modern bureaucracies and in the grotesque deformities of personal family constellations. Kafka's "Die Verwandlung" ("The Metamorphosis") is an especially illuminating case in this context. In the story, Gregor Samsa's monstrous self-alienation is manifested not only in his metamorphosis into a giant cockroach, but very pointedly in the painful and never-healing wound in his back caused by an apple that his angry father threw at him and that remains sticking in his body. Gregor's wound is a psychosomatic symptom of the broken father-son relationship and, more generally, of the victimizing forces that determine Gregor's life "behind his back." The story contains the essential elements of trauma narratives in a condensed form: the repetition compulsion in the repeated acts of Gregor's victimization; the voice of the victim in the focalization of the third-person narrative on Gregor; the uncanny connectivity of all life in the hybridity of human and insect; the corporeality of trauma in Gregor's never-healing wound; and the trans-corporeal implications of this wound signifying the perverted relationship to nature in the apple thrown at Gregor by his father. As a product of fertile nature, the use of the apple as an object of aggressive

dominance points to the alienated form of civilizational power personified by the father, from which Gregor's social trauma originates.³ It thus also points to the ecocultural framework of trauma narratives mentioned above: Like the other examples cited here, the story positions the dynamics of trauma, alienation, and human isolation within a biophobic civilizational context that denies the vital interconnectedness of the human with the nonhuman sphere, of mind with body, self with other, culture with nature. It is this very denial that is counteracted in the imaginative dynamics of literary texts, which reconnect the culturally separated domains not only on a thematic plane but as a generative matrix of their multi-layered aesthetic processes.

Trauma narratives in American literature

Within American literature as well, trauma has been an important conditioning context and frame of reference for its fictional scenarios. As has been seen, in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the legacy of puritanism in American society appears as traumatizing prison-house of a biophobic civilization; in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's suicidal mood on land motivates him to his sea-journey; Bartleby is deeply traumatized by the capitalist world of nineteenth century Wall Street; Hemingway's Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* is only one of the author's wounded heroes who are traumatized by World War I; and the wasteland motif of T.S. Eliot's eponymous poem recurs in Hemingway's story "Big Two-Hearted River" in the burnt-down country which reflects the protagonist's scarred memory, or in Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, in which the hectic pursuit of happiness in the Jazz Age contrasts with the industrial underworld of the Valley of the Ashes;⁴ in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, not only the mentally retarded narrator of the first chapter, Benjy, is heavily traumatized by an inescapable past, but his brothers, too, are entangled in vicious circles of

³ Of course, the motif of the apple here also points to the Biblical myth of the Fall, turning the parable of transgressive seduction and knowledge into a menacing satire and grotesque parody.

⁴ As Christopher Schmidt has demonstrated, a "poetics of waste" pervades much of experimental modern and postmodern poetry (Schmidt). Susan Morrison has extended the historical scope of such a poetics of waste to include examples from medieval to modern literature, elucidating conceptual interferences between nonhuman and human "waste" as an issue of both a material poetics and an ethics of matter (S. Morrison).

depression and mutual isolation. These are traumas of everyday life, but also symptoms of a deeper crisis of the larger culture, which manifests itself on the level of individual consciousness and personal communication.

Novels like those of Faulkner impressively demonstrate the possibilities of experimental fictional writing about trauma, as well as its cultural-ecological potential. They illuminate the connections between internal suffering and external fate, mind and body, conscious and unconscious forces within the self, between the disruption of personal order and identity and the desperate attempt at reconstructing such order. Faulkner's novels invite readers to share experiences with fictional characters that they couldn't share in other modes of discourse; to feel empathy or, as LaCapra has it, "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra XI) toward helpless outsiders of society like Benjy, whose unarticulated bellowing is like the undecipherable sound of "all voiceless misery under the sun" (Faulkner 1971: 280). Benjy embodies the place of humans within the larger scale of living creatures, whose wounds and voices remain silent within the official language and discourses of civilization but which are articulated in the narrative processes of imaginative texts. Readers are enabled to follow the fragmented, achronological stream of Benjy's unarticulated sensations and emotions and symbolically to share in the "pain of others" (Sontag) without being able to distance themselves into illusionary linguistic or intellectual control or escaping into melodramatic voyeurism.

Trauma has thus been a surprisingly widespread issue and aesthetic challenge in American literature, reflecting disruptions in cultural history and a radical critique of the American Dream as a shaping myth of American culture, in which there seemed to be no place for historical and personal trauma. Literary trauma narratives gained renewed urgency in the later twentieth century in novels about the global catastrophes of World War II, such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and about the holocaust, such as Isaac Bashevi Singer's *Enemies: A Love Story*, Walter Abish's *How German Is It?*, or Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*. Experiences of cultural and personal trauma also shape the literatures of cultural minorities within the U.S., in which trauma became a defining aspect of the ways in which these minorities recuperated their political history and their cultural traditions. The historical traumas of the displacement of indigenous peoples, as well as the long years of Black slavery, came to be seen as shaping events

of the histories and cultures of Native Americans and of African Americans, respectively, providing a narrative source and paradigm for the imaginative reconstruction of long-term experiences of humiliation, victimization, and disempowerment, but also for processes of rediscovery, re-empowerment, and personal and cultural regeneration.

Historical trauma and imaginative regeneration: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

An example in which the ecocultural implications of trauma narratives become especially visible is Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. In the novel, several traumatic experiences are interwoven, taking as a starting point the situation of the protagonist Tayo, who has returned from World War II:

Tayo didn't sleep well that night. He tossed in the old iron bed, and the coiled springs kept squeaking even after he lay still again, calling up humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood. Tonight the singing had come first, squeaking out of the iron bed, a man singing in Spanish, the melody of a familiar love song, two words again and again, "Y volveré." Sometimes the Japanese voices came first, angry and loud, pushing the song far away, and then he could hear the shift in his dreaming, like a slight afternoon wind changing its direction, coming less and less from the south, moving into the west, and the voices would become Laguna voices, and he could hear Uncle Josiah calling to him, Josiah bringing him the fever medicine when he had been sick a long time ago. But before Josiah could come, the fever voices would drift and whirl and emerge again—Japanese soldiers shouting orders to him, suffocating damp voices that drifted out in the jungle steam, and he heard the women's voices then; they faded in and out until he was frantic because he thought the Laguna words were his mother's, but when he was about to make out the meaning of the words, the voice suddenly broke into a language he could not understand; and it was then that all the voices were drowned by the music—loud, loud music from a big juke box, its flashing red and blue lights pulling the darkness closer. (5–6)

This opening passage of the novel, which shows the protagonist in a hospital bed, describes characteristic symptoms of a post-traumatic stress disorder—

sleeplessness, severe anxiety, fragmented perception and self-perception, a breakdown of psychological defenses in an uncontrolled flood of memories, and an inability to interpret and understand the meaning of what has been happening to him. The passage conveys a subjectivity disintegrating under the pressure of overwhelming memories, and exposed to chaotic feelings of disorientation and powerlessness, which are expressed in the imagery of breaking waves and near-drowning. In its blurred and shifting focus on fragmented sounds, visions, and memories, the scene creates the effect of a “white noise” in the brain, reflecting a chaotic collapse of the boundaries between past and present, internal and external worlds, conscious and unconscious self. As a result of heavy medication, the substance of his personality seems to dissolve into unreality, making him feel like “white smoke” (Silko 14). “Their medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes” (15). Self and environment become one blurred field of perception and self-perception, which fuses waking moments with memories of the past, the material environment with fragments of mental processes. Mixed with his war memories of Japanese soldiers is the memory of his uncle Josiah and of the voice of his mother—who has left him orphaned as a child—and this memory is in turn extinguished by the juke box with its red and blue lights as an empty signifier of a trivialized American Dream of happiness. One conspicuous symptom alongside sleeplessness, alcoholism, aimless passivity, and the inability to communicate, is Tayo’s repeated and uncontrollable vomiting, which triggers the return of memories that continue to bring back extremely painful scenes from the past. The strongest of these memories is the shooting of captured Japanese soldiers, one of whom Tayo believes to be his own uncle Josiah:

When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave with their hands on their heads, Tayo could not pull the trigger. The fever made him shiver, and the sweat was stinging his eyes and he couldn’t see clearly; in that instant he saw Josiah standing there; the face was dark from the sun, and the eyes were squinting as though he were about to smile at Tayo. So Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he knew it was Josiah; and even after Rocky [his brother, who is much more patriotic than Tayo and is wounded and killed soon afterwards] pushed him toward the corpses and

told him to look, look past the blood that was already dark like the jungle mud, with only flecks of bright red still shimmering in it. Rocky made him look at the corpse and said, “Tayo, this is a *Jap*! this is a *Jap* uniform!” And then he rolled the body over with his boot and said, “Look, Tayo, look at the face,” and that was when Tayo started screaming because it wasn’t a *Jap*, it was Josiah, eyes shrinking back into the skull and all their shining black light glazed over by death. (8–9)

In the chaotic flow of his semi-conscious stream of memories, Tayo again and again returns to this scene which he desperately tries to avoid. It is the scene in which his “madness” began as a shock reaction to the horrors of war, a mental disturbance and hallucinatory hyper-awareness in which the unknown Japanese soldier is merging into Tayo’s beloved uncle Josiah, who initiated him into the beauty and the mysteries of nature and of Indian traditions. As Tayo learns later, Josiah did indeed die at home during those shocking experiences of Tayo in the war. Symbolically speaking, the killing of the Japanese soldier by the Americans amounts to killing Tayo’s own life and culture; destroying the “enemy” becomes a self-destructive act which leads Tayo into the death-in-life state in which he finds himself, after his return from the war, at the beginning of the novel. In his madness and hypersensitive misunderstanding of the situation, Tayo nevertheless reacts to a truthful signal from his unconscious, displaying a deeper understanding of the interconnections between the foreign war scene and his own cultural identity. Two apparently separate events—the shooting of the Japanese soldier in the Pacific, and the traumatic experience of Indians on reservations in America—are brought together here in such a way that the destructive forces of the war and the destructive forces which lead to the loss of Indian identity and traditions are linked to each other.⁵

Since Tayo’s reactions are at first primarily unconscious and uncontrolled, he does not fully realize this connection before he is dismissed from hospital and starts on his quest for the lost Laguna traditions in the healing ceremony which constitutes the process of the novel. After a time of aimless and futile existence, during which he spends his life as a jobless drifter and alcoholic with other war veterans in bars, Tayo consults a traditional healer, who, however,

⁵ A cultural-historical perspective on such interdependencies of traumatic memories is provided in Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, 2009.

is unable to help him. Tayo subsequently turns to the modern-day shamanist Bretonie, who advises him to search for a new ceremony which does not simply repeat the past but must combine the virtues of tradition and the regenerative force of nature with the realities of modern life to be effective. It is only when Tayo performs this ceremonial journey, which both activates and reinvents ancient Indian tales and rituals about nature and landscape, love and eros, as well as the imaginative power of story-telling, that his paralyzed vital functions are gradually restored (Sarkowsky).

But Tayo's personal therapy and healing through the ceremony of story-telling remains tied to the more general theme of war, trauma, and violence that is introduced at the novel's beginning. The vicious circle of violence can only be broken when its origins are traced back to the exploitation of natural resources by the technological war machinery of white civilization, to be replaced with a renewed vision of culture and nature evolving from the shared ecossemiotic space of a planetary ethics and consciousness. As Tayo is approaching the uranium mines in Los Alamos, the site of the development and first testing of the atomic bomb which was dropped on Japan soon after, he consciously recognizes the connection he had made in his traumatized unconscious:

There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries, and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid ... He walked to the mine shaft slowly, and the feeling became overwhelming: the pattern of the ceremony was completed there ... He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time. (246)

The process of the protagonist's quest, which culminates in this moment of insight, is reflected and communicated in the narrative structure of the novel. Starting out in the chaotic, disruptive, achronological mode of trauma narrative, it gradually shifts toward a more coherent mythopoetic rhythm of story-telling that is prefigured in the metatextual frame of the novel, the myth of the spiderwoman as aboriginal story-teller and creator of the world (cf. Sarkowsky). Her narrative power precedes the writing of the modern novel,

signifying a mythopoetic source of the imagination that brings forth always new worlds, including the world of the novel and the reality that it depicts (Silko 1):

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them
they appeared.

She is sitting in her room
thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story
she is thinking.

The transformative power of traditional story-telling is brought together in the novel with modern and postmodern techniques of self-reflexivity, with intertextual webs of signification and associative stream-of-consciousness writing, conveying the complexities of a trauma narrative that is also a narrative of therapy and regeneration.

The fictional representation of trauma in *Ceremony* thus helps to achieve several things: the mimesis of a complex, life-threatening experience of radical human self-alienation; the contextualization of the symptoms of this experience as relevant for the state of modern civilization; the process of cultural self-renewal through the creative reactivation of a forgotten awareness of culture-nature interdependency in a ritual journey in which the initial state of traumatization is symbolically overcome in the search for a new beginning; and the imaginative sharing of this experience by the reader, which implies the paradox of a transcultural openness and translatability of the fundamentally untranslatable trauma narrative.

American trauma literature in the twenty-first century

In the early twenty-first century, trauma continues to be a conspicuous focus of American literature, which on the one hand seems to respond to and co-evolve with the development in trauma studies in science, medicine, and psychology,

and on the other hand to reflect the deeply felt impact of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 on the American imagination. In Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, for example, multiple traumas structure the novel's plot and the psychology of the characters: the trauma of racial identity in the male protagonist Coleman Silk; traumas of childhood abuse, domestic violence, and the loss of her children in a fire in the female protagonist Faunia Farley; as well as veritable PTSD in her husband and Vietnam war veteran Lester Farley, which is depicted in all its characteristic clinical symptoms in a highly unsettling interior monologue. All of the characters respond to their traumas by adopting the roles of imaginary second selves as a strategy of self-protection and survival: Coleman Silk the role of the Jewish intellectual; Faunia Farley the role of the illiterate underclass woman; Lester Farley the role of a mad war victim and bizarre Thoreauvean natural man. In the crisis of these roles that the novel unfolds, the divisions and ideological fault lines of American society are revealed. Once again, this crisis is also a chance for an at least temporary revitalization of the characters' quietly desperate lives, which is primarily expressed in the love affair of Coleman Silk with Faunia Farley; not only is her name reminiscent of the nature spirits of Greek mythology, but in her erotic power and intimate contact to nature and animals she represents an inspirational dionysian energy and ecotherapeutic counterforce to the brutal experiences of mutual aggression and traumatization.

The attacks of 9/11 have probably been the most spectacular event that has shaped the literary response to trauma in the early twenty-first century. I am not dealing here with this response in any representative way but only look briefly at how this collective national shock and global media event is related to writing about trauma as we have discussed it so far. Like every traumatic event, 9/11 was experienced as exceptional, unheard of, and unimaginable, raising the fundamental question of its representability in language and art. In political and media reactions, this initial sense of shock and incomprehensibility, however, was soon replaced by a new moral-ideological purpose and belligerent national self-assertion, and the crisis of the most deeply-held beliefs about America as a land of invulnerable power and limitless opportunity was repressed in the openly declared crusade against an external enemy, the war on terror. In literary reactions, however, the trauma was confronted in its disturbing psychocultural and ethical complexities, and

this different attitude and response to the traumatic event went hand in hand with an explicit or implicit critique of its moral-ideological simplification and political instrumentalization.

From a perspective close to his autobiographical self, Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* tries to capture in a collage-like use of the genre of comics or "comix," as he calls it, an event which clearly resists any conventional visual and textual appropriation by art. And yet this self-reflexive, multigeneric, and metatextual gesture indicates one way in which this paradox of necessary yet impossible representation of trauma can be aesthetically approached. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* likewise decenters the response to trauma into different perspectives, linking 9/11 to earlier forms of collective traumatization, e.g., the bombing of the cities of Dresden and of Hiroshima in World War II. Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* as well deals with the traumatizing effects of 9/11 on survivors and the question of its artistic representability. The narrative follows no clear or coherent plot line, deliberately confuses the identity of the individual characters, and includes disruptive as well as repetitive and circular elements that indicate the loss of personal and narrative control over the material. In the blurring of the relationship between reality and fiction, between identity and otherness, internal and external world, the novel approaches the complexities of trauma without reducing them to any easy aesthetic and ethical solutions. Even the terrorists are included in this shifting of perspectives, which conveys the sense of a shared common humanity that becomes even more urgent and evident at the moment of its most terrible violation.

The missing links, open gaps, and indeterminacies of DeLillo's *Falling Man* are the sources for the readers' interpretation of the events, allowing them access to deeper dynamics and complexities of trauma but at the same time confronting them with the limits and indeed the impossibility of any definitive discursive knowledge and textual appropriation of trauma. A cultural-ecological view of this and other fictional narratives of trauma as a cultural pathology of modern civilization specifically focuses on the correlation between mental and physical, personal and collective, cognitive and affective features of trauma, which can be brought together in imaginative literature in non-appropriative ways precisely through the aesthetic transformation of cultural knowledge and discourse. In a cultural ecology of trauma narratives,

therefore, the aesthetic dimension of texts is not a negligible redundancy but a vital part of their discursive force, which makes possible the complex, multi-layered, and multiperspectival exploration of trauma that they perform. Imaginative trauma literature is not just a vivid illustration of otherwise available scientific trauma knowledge but a particularly rich and culturally relevant form of trauma knowledge in its own right.