

Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, eds. 2014. *Contemporary Trauma Narratives. Liminality and the Ethics of Form*. New York: Routledge. 253 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-02449-6.

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Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega's latest edited volume, *Contemporary Trauma Narratives. Liminality and the Ethics of Form* (2014), shares with its predecessors a similar interest in the relationship between the literary and the testimonial representation of atrocity, as well as in the ethical demands placed upon trauma witnesses. Its greatest merit, however, is a commitment to engaging "the ceaseless struggle" (Laub 1992, 61) that the representation of trauma demands by "performing the void instead of anatomizing it" (Onega and Ganteau, 10). The idea of performativity suggests the possibility for literature to embrace the liminal nature of trauma—its *in-betweenness*—as a means to enact or stage this representational crisis and facilitate an encounter with the Other—"the Other of trauma and [...] the traumatized Other" (11)—in a way that does not obliterate its Otherness, its traumatic dimension.

Based on what Dori Laub and Daniel Podell call "the art of trauma" (1995), the volume provides a theoretically sophisticated and innovative analysis of a variety of hybrid or liminal contemporary fictions, and of the various narrative strategies to which they appeal, with the purpose of delving into trauma not only to relive it, but also to live it from a further, deepening perspective, reshaping its connection to narration by both "react[ing] to the openness of the wound" as well as "perform[ing] an openness to the wound" (Onega and Ganteau, 11). Since the unpredictable and ungraspable nature of trauma only allows for similarly elusive and indirect treatment, Onega and Ganteau advocate the "study of these narratives' ethical position from the perspective of the 'liminal ethics'" (10). This approach not only sheds greater light on the complexity of trauma narratives as a literary subgenre, but also gives, very much in line with Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement" (2001), "insights into the formal and stylistic devices privileged by trauma narratives to secure an ethical distance from overidentification while ensuring an ethical empathic relation to the story and the protagonist" (2001, 41; quoted in Onega and Ganteau, 13).

For those who are looking for an introduction to trauma theory and its relevance to literature, the editors provide an enlightening initial chapter as well as a useful bibliography with references to the most important classical and contemporary studies in the field. They review the scholarship, starting with Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's formulations on the "talking cure" ([1893] 2001), and stressing the significance of Emmanuel Lévinas's concept of "excendance" ([1935] 1982) and of Leigh Gilmore's "limit-case paradigm" (2001), as well as the notion of "discursive ethics" brought about by the ethical turn in the 1980s and 1990s. These theoretical-conceptual frameworks are thereafter recalled, endorsed or confronted in the different essays of the volume—a volume whose ultimate goal is to determine whether the hybrid texts under study succeed in offering a faithful and ethical depiction of the various traumatic experiences represented within them.

Given the connection between formal experimentation and ethics throughout the volume, as well as the importance of this connection in the articulation of trauma, the book is divided into three sections (four essays in each): "Ethics and Generic Hybridity"; "Ethics and the Aesthetics of Excess"; and "Ethics and Structural Experimentation." This division seems appropriate as it structures the diversity of approaches in which the contributors discuss hybrid narrative strategies according to how this formal-ethical connection is verbalized in the texts.

Part I, "Ethics and Generic Hybridity," explores generic transgression and border crossing as the immediate consequences of the emptiness at the core of the traumatic event. The essays contained in this section explore the ethics involved in the relationship between trauma and self-narration, in line with what Leigh Gilmore calls "limit-case" trauma narratives, that is, "contemporary self-representational texts about trauma [that] reveal and test the limits of autobiography" (2001, 14). Gilmore herself inaugurates the section with a discussion on issues of truth and reliability and on the ethical implications raised by the fake memoir. Her chapter considers a variety of examples of false memoirs to expose "the vulnerabilities at the heart of the memoir" (23). The significance of such an approach becomes apparent in its demonstration that "fakery exists whenever it is possible to tell the truth" (23) and that the severe boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are, to some degree, to blame for the ways in which writers incorporate lies and fabrications in the confrontation of traumatic memories. In the second chapter of the volume, Maria Grazia Nicolosi analyzes two of Jenny Diski's "fables," the fictional memoir *Skating to Antarctica* (1997) and the autobiographical novel *Like Mother* (1998), to convincingly illustrate how traditional autobiographical forms are both resisted and challenged when tackling the trope of maternal loss. In her view, Diski's ethical dimension lies in "the aesthetic failure occasioned by trauma" (40). Dwelling on Emmanuel Lévinas's notion of the "meanwhile" ([1987] 1998, 11) and on Cathy Caruth's "belatedness" (1995, 8), Nicolosi claims that Diski's ethical encounter with the mother comes to light as "an 'intermittent' aesthetic form" that allows for trauma to emerge in the text

without losing its alterity (42). Next, Maria-Louise Kohlke's appealing consideration of Margaret Atwood's post-apocalyptic novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), takes limit-case narratives further into the realm of the dystopian. Kohlke's chapter explores the "(im) possibility of witness-bearing in the absence of an Other" (55). In what seems to be a rather hopeful reading of the apocalypse, Kohlke suggests that Atwood's narrative strategies broaden the categories of both witnessing and trauma by encouraging a concern for others and for the world (66). Rudolf Freiburg's essay concludes the section with a highly persuasive and original analysis of the representation of Irish historical trauma in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008). His reading of the novel further complicates the debates on objectivity and truthfulness built upon the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy. Barry's liminal historical narrative, as Freiburg interprets it, adopts a particular kind of humanism, both historical and postmodern, which is in keeping with the "multilayered complexity" of Ireland's troubled past and, in some measure, with the post-modern genre of historiographic metafiction (80). In Freiburg's words, "Barry presents an alternative to the grands récits of official Irish history" (83), an alternative that not only provides a platform for a dialogic relationship between fiction and first- and second-hand testimony, but also for hybridity to permeate through the shaping of characters and the palimpsestic fabric of the novel.

Central to part II, "Ethics and the Aesthetics of Excess," is formal excessiveness in the understanding, and hence representation, of trauma, particularly in connection with the performance of alterity and vulnerability, as described by Levinasian ethics. Jean-Michel Ganteau persuasively explores the excessive aesthetics of Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (2010) in some of its recognizable ingredients: the spectral voices of the narrators, the use of amorphous temporality, and the instances of "vulnerable form" in the novel's "poetic choices" (97). Ganteau reads McGregor's obscene exposition of the world of drug addicts, alcoholics and vagrants as a limit-case trauma narrative and as a move towards a politics of care which is not only limited to a shift in the treatment of traumatized subjects "from the status of suspects to that of victims," as described in *The Empire of Trauma* by Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009), but also incorporates an "openness to the Other's trauma and to the cultural and political trauma of society's Others" (100). In her analysis of Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet* (1985), Dianne Vipond takes up this idea of openness to otherness in order to offer an interesting discussion of the novel as an "act of social conscience" (116). Citing Wittgenstein's well-known line, "ethics and aesthetics are one and the same" (104), as an inspirational starting point, Vipond singles out the novel's "metafictional devices, metarealistic style and characterisation" (115) as the most suitable ethical framework for addressing war and death in the context of the German occupation of France and of the Holocaust. She argues that the proliferation of aesthetic effects is meant to destabilize and question the relationship between the self and the Other, both within the narrative itself and in "the encounter with

the Other of the text as a whole” (115) in the pursuit of an ethics of care that, in line with Arendt’s thinking, should be regarded as an incipient, and especially human morality. Drawing on Freud and Breuer’s “talking cure,” Gerd Bayer reads David Mitchell’s *Number9Dream* (2001) as “a dreamlike alternative” (120) through which trauma victims verbalize their repressed traumatic experiences. It comes as no surprise that Bayer highlights what seems to be the great protagonist of Mitchell’s novel: the text itself. In an interesting argument, Bayer claims that the linearity of the family romance breaks to let other narrative forms—“dreams, achronicity, cross mediality, and interior monologue”—fill in the gaps left by the characters’ “unspoken desire” and “intense emotional turmoil” (120). To conclude this section, George Letissier also calls upon the therapeutic power of talking and self-disclosure to deliver an engaging analysis of Will Self’s *Umbrella* (2012). By contending that the narrative choice of “High Modernism as an aesthetic model” is clear evidence “of excess as the incontrovertible condition of fiction writing in a traumatic age” (137), the essay offers a fascinating discussion of how the use of uninterrupted stream of consciousness, recurrently associated with the concept of “the knot,” renders the tangled nature of post-World War I trauma palpable and enables the text to represent an interplay among different realms of experience: “a state of internalised chaos” (139); the topic of EL (Encephalitic Lethargica); “the transhistorical parallels” between the madness of the contemporary world and the Troglodyte World of the trenches (152); and finally, the possibility of re-establishing an empathic bond, in LaCapra’s sense, between the characters’ streams of consciousness and the reader of the text.

The chapters in part III, “Ethics and Structural Experimentation,” demonstrate, through the consideration of formal experimentation, that the disruption in perception or the alteration of consciousness elicited by traumatic experiences might shed light on the dynamics of individual and collective memory and identity. The original French title of the novel—*Mal d’archive*—describes Marc Amfreville’s main concern when analyzing Daniel Mendelsohn’s *The Lost* (2006), namely, how the memories of the Holocaust are constructed, not only by direct witnesses but also by post-Holocaust generations. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “post-memory” (1992) and on Eva Hoffman’s assessment of the condition of “post-ness” well beyond the offspring of survivors (2004, 185-186), Amfreville considers *The Lost* as a post-memory rethinking of the Holocaust, which mediates the past in the present in “an act of sympathy in the strongest sense of the word” (161). What establishes his framework of analysis is, firstly, Mendelsohn’s desire to go beyond the fate of his own family and touch deeper truths about the collective trauma of the *Shoah*, and secondly, the unrestrictive, spiralling nature of the text based on “two jointly present meanings of the word ‘story’: fiction and/or facts, united by the infinitely challenging Freudian concept of ‘psychical reality’” (160). The chapter also finds an ethical interpretation of Mendelsohn’s quest, as both writer and narrator, “along the

lines of proximity [empathy] and distance [critical reflection]" (160). The next essay, Ivan Stacy's analysis of W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), sticks fairly close to Amfreville's ethics in its consideration of the Holocaust from this identification-distance perspective. Starting from Caruth's view that literature can give voice to traumatic experience "*through the wound*" (1996, 2; emphasis in original) and from Roger Luckhurst's claim that there is "an implicit aesthetic for the trauma novel" (2008, 87), Stacy describes Sebald's novel as orbiting within "the Roche limit," that is "between the centripetal drive to return to the memory of traumatic events, as identified by Cathy Caruth and Roger Luckhurst, and the centrifugal energies produced by magnitudes of suffering" (176). In Stacy's view, the idea of writing at the Roche limit works on three distinct levels of analysis: the position of Sebald as belated witness, that is, as a German writer coming to terms with the aftermath of the Second World War; secondly, the novel as a limit-case narrative mixing "apparently veracious historical material with a fictionalised account of the narrator's travels around Suffolk" and a view of non-linear history as described by Walter Benjamin in his notion of "constellation" ([1968] 1999: 255); and finally, the need for the reader as a mediator to complete the act of witnessing. The title of Silvia Pellicer-Ortín's next chapter, "Separateness and Connectedness" is eloquent in its account of the role performed by the second generation of trauma survivors in relation to their parents' experience. Her analysis of Anne Karpf's *The War After: Living with the Holocaust* (1996) reveals much about the author simultaneously approaching and distancing herself from her subject, as the novel contains both a remarkably passionate personal narrative and a scholar's objective analysis of historical events. Most importantly, Pellicer-Ortín claims that the liminality of *The War After* results from the writer's ethical "need to fill the gap, to create a bridge connecting her story to that of her parents and, by extension, to that of Holocaust survivors in general" (197). In the last chapter of the volume, the consonance between title and narrative choice plays a crucial role. Susana Onega's reflection on Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) departs from an illuminating analysis of the relationship between the title's "intertextual complexity, contradictoriness and self-consciousness" and the excessiveness of romance as the most significant formal feature of the novel (212). Based on generic hybridity, structural duplicity and stylistic homogeneity, as well as on the collapsing of linear time, Onega connects the two narrative voices, one a survivor of and the other a witness to the Holocaust, suggesting that they converge to give shape to a collective Holocaust narrative. The chapter also contributes to a further exploration of the ethical responsibility of "the absolute Other," as described by Lévinas ([1947] 1987), which is exemplified in the abnegation and warmth of the Jewish woman.

The essays in this volume are an enlightening and up-to-date contribution to Trauma Studies, disclosing as much about formal experimentation as about ethics, and vindicating a critical approach to trauma narratives that values, as an ethical

imperative, the necessity to define new ways of representing, or rather, performing “the wounded self’s vision of the void” (5) and of the traumatic events or experiences that have caused it. Speaking in connection to *El impostor* (2014), his recently published non-fiction novel about Enric Marco, the Spanish unionist who invented for himself a fake Holocaust-survivor identity, Javier Cercas claims:

La novela no es el género de las respuestas, sino el de las preguntas: escribir una novela consiste en plantearse una pregunta compleja para formularla de la manera más compleja posible, no para contestarla; consiste en sumergirse en un enigma para volverlo irresoluble, no para descifrarlo. Ese enigma es el punto ciego, y todo lo que tienen que decir muchas grandes novelas (y relatos) lo dicen a través de él: a través de ese silencio pletórico de significado, de esa ceguera visionaria, de esa oscuridad radiante, de esa ambigüedad sin solución. Ese punto ciego es lo que somos. (Cercas 2014, 8)<sup>1</sup>

In line with Cercas’s understanding of literature as an endless and fulfilling attempt to confront this ‘punto ciego’ [blind spot], this ‘enigma’ for which there are no answers, the texts analyzed here open up a horizon of innumerable possibilities that is far wider than the texts’ capacity to encompass the questions they evoke. By attempting to perform rather than represent the unrepresentability of trauma, the visions offered by the editors and contributors to this volume accrue a transformative ethical framework, often overlooked in Trauma Studies, and successfully find responsive and innovative ways to link various forms of hybridization—generic transgression and border crossing, formal excessiveness and experimentation, among others—to tackle a subject that resists one-dimensional characterizations.

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<sup>1</sup> The following translation is my own: “The novel is not the genre of answers, but rather the genre of questions: to write a novel means posing a complex question to formulate it in the most intractable manner possible; it is not about answering it. It means submerging yourself in an enigma in order to turn it once again into something unsolvable; it is not about deciphering it. This enigma is the blind spot, and everything that many of the great novels (and tales) have to say, they say through this: through a silence charged with meaning, through this visionary blindness, through this brilliant darkness, through this irresolvable ambiguity. This blind spot is us; it is what we are.”

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