

# The Edges of Trauma



The Edges of Trauma:  
Explorations in Visual Art and Literature

Edited by

Tamás Bényei and Alexandra Stara

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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Edited by Tamás Bényei and Alexandra Stara

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## INTRODUCTION: THE ARTS OF TRAUMA

TAMÁS BÉNYEI AND ALEXANDRA STARA

In a characteristically tongue-in-cheek manner, Martin Amis's 2010 novel *The Pregnant Widow*, an exploration of what is usually referred to as the sexual revolution, announces itself straightaway as a trauma novel:

This is the story of a sexual trauma. He wasn't at a tender age when it happened to him. He was by any definition an adult; and he consented—he comprehensively consented. Is *trauma*, then, really the word we want (from Gk. “wound”)? Because his wound, when it came—it didn't hurt a bit. It was the sensory opposite of torture. She loomed up on him unclothed and unarmed, with her pincers of bliss—her lips, her fingertips. Torture: from L. *torquere* “to twist”. It was the opposite of torture, yet it twisted. It ruined him for twenty-five years. (Amis 2011, 1)

Having it both ways, the passage situates the narrative that is to follow both inside the deluge of trauma narratives and outside it, posing the disingenuous question: “Is trauma, then, really the word we want?” Whether we want it or not, the word “trauma” has become shorthand for experiences (or non-experiences) treated in a large variety of fictional and non-fictional texts and visual works—as Kirby Farrell suggests, it is not only a clinical concept but also “a cultural trope that has met many needs” (Farrell 1998, 14). By defining the protagonist Keath Nearing's experience, a synecdoche for the sexual revolution, as at least potentially traumatic, Amis, with his accustomed provocativeness, manipulates and interrogates many of the presuppositions of “the culture of first-person writing” that, as Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw put it, “needs to be understood in relation to a desire for common grounds—if not an identity-bound shared experience, then one that is shareable through identification” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 2). In its emphasis on the mixture of trauma and sensual pleasure, Amis's novel also betrays an awareness of the paradoxical enjoyment factor behind the multitude of popular trauma stories appearing in several registers of contemporary culture and literature—Chris Cleave's

*The Other Hand* or Emma Donoghue's *Room* are two recent examples that are not necessarily easy to place—and the tendency to level out and flatten the trauma affect: if Keith Nearing's sexual wound deserves to be called a trauma, what about the survivors of child abuse or genocides? This is precisely what Amis is getting at: by referring to the sexual experience of a middle-class male character whose life clearly lacks experiences that are traumatic in a sense that would even remotely resemble the experiences of victims of historical traumas or domestic abuse, Amis might be making a wry comment on the contemporary "culture of trauma" (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 2) where accounts of experiences that are referred to as traumatic sell many books. By the same token, however, he is also questioning the kind of community of vicarious suffering and remembering that is forged by means of such narratives, practically suggesting that men whose sexual life was made difficult by the effects of the sexual revolution could be defined as a kind of traumatic community. "Trauma", however, is not only a cultural reference in *The Pregnant Widow*. Having identified itself as a trauma narrative, the text in fact begins to behave like one with its faltering, spiralling structure that seems to be circling around the traumatic core, dramatising the well-known paradox: while trauma resists narrativisation—or, as Ulrich Baer puts it, trauma resists "integration into larger contexts" (Baer 2002, 1), it generates narrative. In fact, it might be said to be *the* event that generates narrative, as Graham Swift's intergenerational trauma narrative *Waterland* suggests in a refrain-like phrase: "history begins only at the point where things go wrong, history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret" (Swift 1983, 92).

These are some, although by no means all, of the questions discussed in this collection, which is conceived as a modest contribution to the large number of theoretical and critical collections devoted to aspects of trauma. Rather than making grand claims about redefining trauma itself, the essays collected here look at some of the ways in which trauma appears in literary and artistic texts, working patiently with texts and visual representations, unravelling some implications of representing, narrating, testifying to trauma and of sharing or conveying traumatic non-experience. Most of the essays work with what has become the staple fare of trauma studies: First World War shell shock, the Holocaust, colonial trauma, AIDS, sexual abuse and, of course, 9/11. Some contributors explore neglected or underemphasised aspects of canonical trauma artifacts (*Maus*, W. G. Sebald, Virginia Woolf and abuse), trying to dislodge these well-known texts from all too familiar interpretative traditions. More radically, Catherine Barrette, creative artist as well as academic, explores her own

artwork as part of the working through of traumatic experiences. Other essays situate themselves on the edges of the vast cultural and discursive construction that trauma has become in recent decades. In some cases, trauma works as an interpretative device that allows us to see otherwise familiar texts in a new light—Bényei’s essay on Paul Scott’s *Raj Quartet* or Parenzan’s piece on Beckett and Agota Kristof are cases in point—while other contributors interrogate various aspects of the cultural constructedness of trauma referred to at the start of this introduction. Gibbs takes issue with the questionable and at least partly commercially inspired canonisation of trauma fiction, Boileau with the automatic and often facile linking of certain textual features and traumatic experiences, while Gorilovics’s account of the wartime experiences of Jean-Richard Bloch, more obliquely, with the community-creating role of trauma, its potentially false totalisation of collective traumatic experiences that fail to allow for occasionally widely different ways of experiencing these events.

For all its diversity, this collection has at least one feature that distinguishes it from the multitude of similar volumes: gathering together essays on both literature and visual art, *Exploring the Edges of Trauma* places itself implicitly in what has been called “the potential space of trauma”, which is “that very domain that exists between the visual and the verbal, between that which is seen and that which is said” (Saltzman and Rosenberg 2006, xii). Thus, the essays are for the most part concerned with the relationship between trauma and art, between unutterable shock and the most elevated or supreme form of human communication and representation, between traumatic non-experience and aesthetic experience. In this Adornoian context, the interest of these essays is not chiefly in the psychological or therapeutic aspects of trauma, but primarily in how the non-experience of trauma finds its way into artistic representations. In their own ways, practically all the chapters interrogate the relationship between trauma and art, and what is brought out by the hybrid nature of the volume are the shared features, the “artistic” nature of the representations analysed therein—rather than, say, their “narrative” or “therapeutic” qualities. One important edge that is explored by some of the art essays is precisely that which divides art from other representations.

With art placed in the centre, perhaps it is not irrelevant to evoke the ancient story about the invention of the art of memory.<sup>1</sup> We remember

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<sup>1</sup> Versions of and commentaries on the anecdote can be found in Frances Yates. 1966. *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1–4. H. Weinrich. 1997. *Lethe: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*. Munich: C. H. Beck. Ch. 2., P Ramadanovic. 2001. *Forgetting Futures: On Memory, Trauma, and Identity*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

next to nothing about the ancient Greek poet Simonides, apart from the fact that he invented memory, the legend about the invention the art of memory—or of memory as art. When he was asked by a pugilist called Skopas to commemorate a boxing match for posterity, he devoted half of his celebratory encomium to the Dioscuri, thereby incurring the wrath of his employer, who chose to pay only half of the promised royalties, claiming that Simonides should expect the other half from the mythological heroes he was waxing so lyrical about. The commemorative feast ended in disaster: hit by an earthquake, the house collapsed, killing everyone except Simonides. The question, of course, is why Simonides is the only survivor of what can probably be called a traumatic disaster as well as the expression of divine wrath. On the one hand, he has to be the sole survivor, for, being a poet (an artist), only he has the ability to recall the sitting order of the guests—thus, he guarantees the possibility of proper mourning and cultural memory, restoring the symbolic identity of the dead erased by the catastrophe: they do not perish as anonymous corpses to be soon forgotten, but as individuals, each receiving a symbolic memorial site. On the other hand, the survival of Simonides is surely the result of divine will. During the feast, he was alone in acknowledging a debt to the gods, in humouring and propitiating them, reminding the mortals that no glory is exclusively human, that no human achievement or happiness is possible without the benevolence of the Olympians.

Thus, in his commemoration of human achievements, Simonides also commemorated the glory of the gods and, specifically, of the Dioscuri, figures of mourning themselves, who owe their deification precisely to their larger than human grief and inability to accept the loss of the other. One moral of the story is surely that the work of cultural memory cannot be successful without the recognition of what is here identified as the divine, something beyond the scope of human endeavour. All cultural remembering (and Simonides's act of remembering the seating order and identities of the dead is presented as the inaugurating act of cultural memory) is at least partly a commemoration of that which enables remembering in the first place. The two reasons—the practical and metaphysical—for Simonides's survival are thus inextricably linked: Simonides the poet can become the agent or figure of cultural memory precisely because his commemoration of human glory does not neglect the divine dimension.

One could argue that the invention and codification of the art of remembering, the sole point of this genealogical story in which remembering is supplied with an origin, is nothing but the reinvention or inscription of remembering as an imperative. From this moment, remembering is

something we have to remember. Simonides transformed remembering (a natural, almost automatic faculty of storing experience) into an art, in the sense of a mnemotechnics that can be learned and improved. Nevertheless, it is significant that the individual who is credited with the invention of memory was a poet, a figure of art in the post-Renaissance sense of the word; one senses that it is precisely the acknowledgement of the divine and the metaphysical dimensions—the gesture of the artist that is pointless or at least superfluous for Skopas—that elevates cultural remembering above an automatic process.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Simonides also suggests something important about the troubled relationship between trauma texts and community referred to earlier: according to the anecdote, the art of memory—that is, memory as art, cultural memory—was invented in the aftermath of a traumatic event that literally tore the community apart. Dominated by the image of ruins and corpses, two key tropes of decay, oblivion and remembering, the anecdote suggests that trauma cannot simply be erased, just as it cannot be properly remembered; however, with the help of art, it can be made into a culturally useful discourse, something that is indispensable for the restoration of what the disaster shattered into an inoperative community.

The relevance of this anecdote to contemporary discourses of trauma is brought out in an essay by expatriate Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić entitled “The Confiscation of Memory”, in which she continues the story of Simonides in the context of the Balkan war. In her version, Simonides is finally unable to fulfill the job he is commissioned with, for a second earthquake kills both him and the mourners. The witnesses of the disaster are able to identify the victims, but only those standing next to them. Thus, “each one remembers and mourns his own. The other victims—not to mention the original ones—do not exist” (Ugrešić 1996, 39). In his reading of Ugrešić’s essay, Petar Ramadanovic points out that with the death of the poet, the survivors are capable only of partial mourning and reconstruction, which results in the total disappearance from memory of the first disaster (Ramadanovic 2001, 68).

Ugrešić’s bleak sequel speculates on what would happen to the fabric of the community after a trauma if it weren’t for artists, while it might also be seen as a modern reinterpretation of the original story. The second catastrophe, striking down the poet who is no longer there to count and

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<sup>2</sup> According to the mythological tradition, when, at the wedding ceremony of Zeus and Mnemosyne, Zeus asked the gods whether there was anything they lacked or wanted, they replied that it would be nice to have someone who would sing their praises. Their want was, as it were, granted overnight: the nine muses were conceived then. Art—and artists like Simonides—were the answer to their prayers.

name the dead and thus define the parameters of collective remembering, may be a warning that concerns the pretentiousness of art in its dealing with traumatic experiences and its alleged authority in matters of cultural recall. Perhaps the modern Simonides is struck down because of his presumption, because he thinks that his art can put in order and process “the state of things under the collapsed roof” (Ramadanovic 2001, 72), that his orderly account is an authentic rendering of that which is buried under the ruins. Ramadanovic argues that Simonides’s art confuses its own meaning with the meaning of the past event and offers to substitute its aesthetic order for the traumatic past, but then he goes on to identify this order as that of history, disregarding the profession of Simonides. The story of Simonides, especially if read in the light of Ugrešić’s extension and interpretation of it, can be seen as a pessimistic allegory about trauma and art. On the hand, it reinforces the myth of the artist as a privileged agent of cultural recall, the figure to pay due respect not only to the dead but also to the gods, constructing art as a cultural and communal “site” where traumas can be, if not resolved, at least elevated into a higher sphere and used as grounds for identification. On the other hand, the fact that Simonides has an awareness of human insufficiency and failure suggests a more modern(ist) trauma aesthetics: instead of being pleased by the encomium, Simonides’s client is outraged, or at least irritated by it. This aspect of the anecdote might be seen as anticipating not the myth of art as a solution of the traumatic knot on a symbolic level, but the modernist myth of “art as trauma” or art as failure (not a representation but an embodiment of traumatic experience), and reconfiguring trauma as the incessant deconstruction of the structures of representation rather than the (im)possible object of representation, the very failure of representation. This is what is stressed by Saltzman and Rosenberg when they are speaking of the visual arts: “If trauma could have a proper visual form, it might very well be invisible” (2006, xiii). That is, a “successful” (authentic, honest) rendering of trauma entails the failure of representation. Such a conception of art and trauma, also suggested in the essays by Giovanni Parenzan and Catalina Botez, implies a Beckettian ethics of failure as an implied aesthetics of trauma.

One crucial aspect of the artistic rendering of trauma, explored by several of the contributors, is the “necessary” moment of fictionalising which, while it makes the trauma universal, also inevitably individualises the traumatic non-experience of collective disasters. In this sense, the artistic, fictionalising inflection of the rendering of trauma might be seen as a primarily ethical gesture, as in Georges Perec’s autobiographical half-fiction *W or the Memories of Childhood*, the narrator of which conceives



his trauma as a “lost world”, an imaginary place that is entirely his own, and thus he has full responsibility for whatever it contains. “Whatever may happen now, whatever I may do, I was the sole depository, the only living memory, the only vestige of that world” (Perec 2011, 4). This looks like the appropriation of one’s own experience; Perec’s text, however, indicates that the fictionalizing act is also a necessary dispossession that is partly self-inflicted, when he clarifies his role vis-à-vis the lost world:

I was a witness and not an actor. I am not the hero of my tale. Nor am I exactly its bard. Though the events I saw convulsed my previously insignificant existence, though their full weight still bears upon my conduct, upon my way of seeing, in recounting them I wish to adopt the cold, impassive tone of the ethnologist. (Perec 2011, 4)

If the first myth of art, suggested by the Simonides anecdote, is concerned with the way art elevates the failed experience of trauma into something that can be used by the community to make “trauma” a mediated construct and a factor of cohesion, modernism both challenged and perpetuated this general claim by suggesting that there might exist a possible connection between historical disasters and art. As Saltzman and Rosenberg argue, the ruptures of history

necessitated some of the forms of historical modernism. Abstraction, fragmentation, illegibility, disjunction [...] are all phenomena unto themselves, but each also answers a need for forms that hold, or fail to hold, modernity, in all its fullness. (Saltzman and Rosenberg 2006, ix)

The “failures” of modernist and avantgarde art might acquire a second-order referentiality as objective correlatives of a cultural plight, a sense of rupture and a failure to register the enormity of historical experience—or, as in the chapter by Barrette, individual experience. The modernist myth of the special relationship between trauma and art is based on the sometimes unacknowledged hypothesis that traumatic semiosis is analogous with the transgressive semiosis of art, and therefore art is the adequate rendering of a trauma which cannot be recalled, conveyed or redressed through ordinary language. This fits not only the Romantic and modernist myth about the essential difference between ordinary language and poetic language, discussed in Boileau’s essay on Woolf but also the core idea of continental modernist aesthetics: art itself as (traumatic) disruption.

If, as Boileau paraphrases Woolf’s modernist aesthetic, “the banal words of the trivial side of life are a screen that is more difficult to break than one would think, which results in silencing the event that caused the

shock” (Boileau 2013, 52), we might begin to speculate about the crucial difference between literature and the visual arts in their relation to trauma. What we do not really have in visual culture is precisely the “screen” of ordinary words that would stand between trauma and art. While in language, there are several non-literary registers and kinds of discourse, including confession and autobiography, that attempt to render a traumatic non-experience, such a distinction is much more difficult to make in the case of the visual arts: a drawing or a painting, no matter how crude, is immediately seen as “art”. This is dramatised by Anthony Burgess’s excellent 1971 novel *MF*, in which the protagonist is obsessed with the paintings and other works of art of a mysterious artist called Sib Legeru. The paintings turn out to be products of a “therapeutic experiment” with mental patients including trauma victims. Zoon Fonanta, the character who enlightens protagonist Miles Faber, claims that this creative process provides “a spurious joy in spurious creation”, resulting in “pseudoworks”, and adds:

Art takes the raw material of the world about us and attempts to shape it into signification. Anti-art takes the same material and seeks insignification. (Burgess 1973, 201)

If “insignification” is taken to mean anti-signification rather than insignificance, most trauma art might be said to belong to the second category. This episode of Burgess’s novel also suggests that the relationship between trauma and art is reciprocal: trauma art—as is evident from the chapter by Barrette—inevitably probes the limits of the very concept of art.

The opening essay, Jonathan Black’s “‘Broken Warriors, Tortured Souls’: Constructions of Physical and Psychological Trauma in British Art of the First World War, c. 1916-1919”, is a revealing exploration of the origins of official artistic representations of a collective traumatic experience. In contrast to, for instance, Goya’s unsolicited war art, the First World War saw the appointment of official war artists (in several countries), and, as Black shows, the representations of the atrocities manifest symptoms of a conflict between the official “court artist” status and the impulse to record the inglorious reality of the war, sometimes through avant-garde techniques far removed from the academic and heroic styles that had dominated the painterly representation of war. Black’s essay, which also addresses contemporary reception, charts the trajectories of three British painters—C. R. W. Nevinson, William Orpen and Eric Kennington—with very different backgrounds and artistic inclinations explores how the trauma of the war affected their later lives and work.

What makes the essay particularly relevant for this collection is that it allows us to see early twentieth-century reactions to something that has become banalised by now, the (artistic) representation of trauma and suffering. In the light of the contemporary culture of trauma writing or the implied pornography of graphic representations of violence and suffering, we become aware of the long way we have travelled since the prevalence of opinions like those provoked by Nevinson's pictures in the *British Architect*, which dismissed his images of war graves as singularly "macabre" or even melodramatically "Gothick", and rejected Nevinson's soldiers as "mechanical puppets" who "present us with a picture of stark, unmitigated horror [...] we may fairly ask what is the end gained by such portrayals?" (Black 2013, 22). One answer to this rhetorical question from almost a century ago is surely that the end gained by such portrayals is the possibility of "ways of seeing that might be considered testimonial" (Baer 2002, 2).

Tivadar Gorilovics's article about French writer Jean-Richard Bloch ("An Explosion That Led to Paradise: Jean-Richard Bloch's *Le paradis des conditions humaines*"), an obvious companion piece for Black's chapter, is a particularly instructive case study inasmuch as it implicitly warns against ignoring the differences between individual experiences of traumatic upheavals in history. Gorilovics describes war in general and the First World War in particular as "a vast space of trauma of all kinds" (Gorilovics 2013, 36), suggesting that it is a mistake to subsume the widely different individual experiences under the convenient umbrella term of trauma without acknowledging the differences: war trauma—even the war trauma of combatants in trench warfare—is not a homogeneous experience. Gorilovics patiently unravels the way a nasty experience, involving cranial trauma and the witnessing of gory slaughter, is worked through by Bloch in a series of writings belonging to several different genres: notes, letters and the fictionalised narrative, *Le Paradis des conditions humaines*, a singular eye-witness account. The aestheticised event is mediated through literary reminiscences, and reworked in different types of texts. By the end of the war, Bloch succeeds in assimilating his experience to his philosophy, and his trauma is transmogrified into a near-death experience that elevates the individual out of the limitations of earthly existence, a jouissance-like moment in which he was allowed to feel "the sweetness of being no longer" (Gorilovics 2013, 44).

Nicolas Pierre Boileau's "Trauma and 'Ordinary Words': Virginia Woolf's Play on Words" sets out to challenge what seems to have become the dominant strategy of reading Woolf in terms of trauma. Woolf is often

seen as a typical case study, and the stylistic features of her writings are correlated with her life traumas. Many critics, suggests Boileau, simply

posit these traumas, and fail to recognize that Woolf challenges our assumptions concerning them, for example by refusing to see rape as a determining factor in her life. In other words, sometimes trauma is in the eyes of the beholder(s). (Boileau 2013, 49-50)

Rather than using the available panels of trauma theory, Boileau starts out from the details of Woolf's autobiographical texts and claims that these writings allow us to reconstruct a kind of implied Woolfian theory of trauma, subjectivity and language, a "theory of small things" that, however, in many ways "anticipates current ideas on traumatic experience" (Boileau 2013, 58-9). Woolf, Boileau suggests, "invites us to re-think trauma not as external but as a construction of the subject which is located between the event/referent and its verbalisation" (Boileau 2013, 50).

The narrative rendering of the interrelationship between historical and personal trauma is the subject of Tamás Bényei's essay: departing from the dominant reading of Scott's quartet, "The Psychopathology of Colonial Life: Collective Colonial Trauma in Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*" uses trauma as an interpretative lever to open up a text in an attempt to free it from the kind of critical quarantine into which it has been relegated. Although Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*, with its apparently seamless epic flow, might seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion in a volume on trauma, Bényei unpacks the many motivic and narrative elements that identify the quartet as a text preoccupied with the rendering of collective trauma: thus, the dysfunctional relationships within the Anglo-Indian community may be seen as symptoms of an essentially traumatic non-experience. Making trauma the master trope of the interpretation enables Bényei to reinterpret many of the narrative idiosyncrasies of the quartet (for instance, its obsessively repetitive nature), while also testing the interpretative potential of the metaphor of collective trauma. Bényei concludes that, in Scott's work, traumatic, unmasterable repetitions and dissociations "deprive presence and individual experience of its uniqueness without assigning to it a reassuring typological meaning" (Bényei 2013, 75).

In "Lying For Company: Devising Trauma in Beckett and Kristof", Giovanni Parenzan tackles the non-dialectical dynamics of intersubjectivity as it appears in the late work of Samuel Beckett, taking his cue from ethical theory and from the shifting emphasis in Beckett criticism induced largely by Levinasian criticism, a move that amounts to

“a specular reversal—the mirror image—of the existentialist ontology insofar as it consists in the inversion of its temporal order: primary in the latter, solitude becomes, in the former, secondary to the interlocutory scene”. (Parenzan 2013, 97)

The ethical approach necessarily focuses on testimony, on the communicating or passing on of trauma, something which, as Parenzan argues, may be seen as the very consequence of the fact that it cannot be remembered: “the Other is not only the receiver and receptacle of truth, but the very condition of its coming into being, the only *site* where it can finally take place” (Parenzan 2013, 87). Parenzan’s interest, evoking Ugrešić’s reworking of the Simonides legend, is in “what happens when there is no other, when there is no one else to listen to our story, when trauma is abandonment”. Beckett’s *Company* and Agota Kristof’s *Trilogy of the Twins* are texts which “offer us a scenario where the only way to bear one’s loneliness is to *make up*, to invent the Other, but where, by the same token, the narrator’s reliability and the very truth of his traumatic stories are dramatically called into question” (Parenzan 2013, 88). In an exciting move from the Beckettian “grammar of persons” (Parenzan 2013, 92) to history, the essay uses Kristof’s brilliant trilogy as an intervention into the reading of Beckett, as a kind of lever with which to loosen and broaden our reading of Beckett’s “pronominal play” (Parenzan 2013, 96) towards history.

In “Trauma Obscura in W.G Sebald’s *Austerlitz*: The Return of the Repressed”, Catalina Botez analyses a novel that has become a classic of trauma fiction with extraordinary rapidity. Exploring the dissociative textual dynamics of the novel, Botez continues the analysis started in Parenzan’s article, inasmuch as both chapters are interested in the interplay of the internal and the external. However, whereas Parenzan discusses the intersubjective dynamism that is the context for traumatized subjectivity, Botez traces the externalized, extrapolated carriers of memory and trauma, the memories and traumas stored in objects. At one point in the novel, Austerlitz photographs the capital of a cast-iron column

which had touched some chord of recognition in me. What made me uneasy at the sight of it, however, was not the question of whether the complex form of the capital, now covered with a puce-tinged encrustation, had really impressed itself on my mind when I passed through Pilsen with the children’s transport in the summer of 1939, but the idea, ridiculous in itself, that this cast-iron column, which with its scaly surface seemed almost to approach the nature of a living being, might remember me and was, if I may so put it, said Austerlitz, a witness to what I could no longer recollect for myself. (Sebald 2002, 311)

This passage is typical of the non-dialectical slippages between the psyche and the world of (built) objects, a process that always—as in the quote above—stops just short of full-fledged prosopopeia, indicating the interminable nature of the process. As Botez charts the interplay between a wounded, dysfunctional individual memory and the externalised institutional and prosthetic kinds of memory machines like the archive, photography, propaganda documentaries and, primarily, built spaces and architectural sites of memory, the most disturbing finding of her essay is revealed, as it were, cumulatively: this is the realisation that Austerlitz's defence mechanisms, his strategies of dealing or failing to deal with the past display an uncanny resemblance to the strategies of the Nazis to consciously falsify, distort and appropriate the past.

The trauma of AIDS is fundamentally different from other traumas inasmuch as the sufferers are usually stigmatised by mainstream society; the discourses that were generated around AIDS tended to conceive of AIDS sufferers as traumatic for the social body. This is precisely what makes the rendering of the trauma of AIDS particularly difficult. In “The Body and Community in Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ Candy Spills *or* Towards a Positive Metaphor of Illness”, Elizabeth Maynard discusses works of art that try “to articulate the trauma of the illness afflicting both the individual and social body” (Maynard 2013, 122). The call for representation of People with AIDS (PWAs) wanted to give a “face to AIDS”, “making the illness visible and therefore more difficult to ignore” (Maynard 2013, 122), but these images, for all their honesty, “nonetheless generate and propagate an image of the Othered sick body” (Maynard 2013, 123). Thus, straightforward representations seem to be inadequate. Instead of resorting to the strategy of fictionalising, Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills, besides staging the mechanism of transforming suffering into a “sweet” object of consumption, work as non-representational, participatory installations. By reading these installations, Maynard maps a complex interaction that will inevitably stage the politics of AIDS and thus force the spectator-participant to reflect upon the implied politics of relating to AIDS victims. Drawing upon Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of the inoperative community, Maynard explores the dynamism and allegorical potential of literally consuming the candy spills.

Although María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro’s essay, “Caught in the Grip of an Inherited Past: (Post)Memory and Holocaust Representation in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*”, is mainly concerned with the complex intersubjective dynamics of testimony, in the context of this introduction it is worth emphasising a single aspect of his piece, one which connects his chapter with a thread that has been running through this introduction.

According to Martínez-Alfaro, *Maus* foregrounds the problem of representation in several ways: through its genre, by dramatising the act of giving testimony, and, most blatantly and provocatively, by means of the animated animal figures. Since the only way these figures make any kind of sense is in terms of allegory, *Maus* might be said to be a sustained meditation on the problem also raised by several other contributions: the use of blatantly allegorical figures indicates the necessary act of fictionalisation, the gesture of untruth that seems to be indispensable in any rendering of traumatic non-experience. Art resurfaces here as artfulness. In Martínez-Alfaro's essay, this act of fictionalisation acquires an ethical significance that becomes perceptible in the light of Marianne Hirsch's suggestion: being responsive to the traumas of our parents "is productive only if the experience and feelings of the other are not subsumed in an appropriative identification". By employing the animal figures,

Artie finds a way of dealing with his family's past, coping with this feeling of estrangement but maintaining the required distance: his parents' traumas are not his own, he does not lay claim to them, but he does lay claim to their after-effects. (Martínez-Alfaro 2013, 140)

Here, art as artfulness is seen as an ethically relevant gesture of representation as appropriation.

In "The problem is, I'm not sure I believe in the thunderclap of trauma': Aesthetics of Trauma in Contemporary American Literature", Alan Gibbs discusses some of the backlashes of the recent vogue for trauma. Taking his cue from Roger Luckhurst's worries about the commodification of trauma as a theme, Gibbs investigates one of the consequences of the fact that the cultural phenomenon called trauma "has so fully entered public discourse, has begun to influence both writers and, interdependently, critics and theorists" (Gibbs 2013, 148). The problem, he suggests, is not simply that certain narrative devices and strategies have become all too familiar, easily recognisable conventions, but also that, in a tacit collusion between theorists, critics and writers, much recent fiction has been instrumental in "reifying" contemporary trauma theory "into an often prescriptive aesthetic" (Gibbs 2013, 148). Through a discussion of the reception of Jonathan Safran Foer's work, Gibbs identifies a hermeneutic circle born out of the symbiotic relationship between theory and fiction: theory-based criticism all too conveniently recognises itself in the mirror of theory-based fiction. Since much of this development has to do with the cultural currency and visibility enjoyed by these theories, one wonders whether the less conventional nature of East and Central

European trauma novels (the fiction of Imre Kertész, Herta Müller, even Sofi Oksanen) could at least partly be attributed to the fact that, in these countries, trauma theory has not really become an academic staple. Gibbs identifies possible ways out of this impasse via realism (Carol Shields) or by means of what he calls “traumatic metafiction” (Doctorow, Mark Z. Danielewski or Tim O’Brien):

writing which is more likely to undermine conventions of trauma writing and to challenge accepted theories regarding the representation of trauma and its effects. (Gibbs 2013, 149)

In “Trauma: Mourning and Healing Processes Through Artistic Practice”, Catherine Barrette, artist, academic and survivor of a traumatic accident, writes about her own work, borrowing the term “artworking” from Bracha Ettinger to characterize her own practice “at this threshold between trauma and representation” (Barrette 2013, 169). The focus of both her artworking and her chapter is the fraught relationship between trauma and representation. Instead of dismissing current theories of trauma out of hand, claiming that they cannot address the uniqueness of traumatic experience, Barrette analyses her artistic practice in psychoanalytic terms, testing the theory against her own art and her story, and also evoking inspiring artistic forerunners like Frida Kahlo. Barrette’s contribution is a narrative representation of her attempted representations of trauma—accordingly, the status and mode of the text constantly wavers between the confessional and the scholarly, or rather redefines the scholarly as always already confessional. In this therapeutic context, the scholarly text is both outside the trauma and its artistic reworkings and inside it, simply a further stage of the same process of working through. Connecting to the preoccupations of other essays in the volume, Barrette argues—following Jill Bennett—that trauma art is

ill served by a theoretical framework that privileges “meaning” (i.e., the object of representation, outside art) over “form” (the inherent qualities or *modus operandi* of art). (Barrette 2013, 175)

Barrette’s difficulties also remind us that the impossibility of representing trauma is due not only to reasons inherent in the nature of traumatic non-experience but also to that fact that the moment representation gets under way it follows certain existing cultural patterns that deprive it of uniqueness, thus, the act of representation is necessarily a dispossession. This evokes the impossibility of a realistic, documentary rendering of trauma and the necessity of fictionalising as the admission of untruth.



In “Traces of Trauma: The Photography of Ori Gersht”, Alexandra Stara explores an issue that is in the centre not only of the Simonides anecdote about the origin of the art of memory but also of many of the essays collected in the present volume, including those of Bényei, Parenzan, Barrette and Maynard: the relationship between the non-experience of trauma and the testimony of trauma as a possible ground for a kind of community, or at least intersubjectivity. Stara analyses the work of a contemporary artist working with photography and film in order to discuss concealment and ellipsis as devices for the exploration of trauma and the (im)possibility of its communication. Although Gersht’s family history is interwoven with the persecutions of WWII and the Holocaust, he, himself, has had access to these events second-hand; thus, his attempts to engage with the events and their aftermath are already mediated. The inherent paradox involved in the visualisation of the unrepresentable underlies all of Gersht’s work. As Stara argues, it is his investment in devices such as the idea of trace and the abstraction of the schema of art history that allows his work to transcend such impasses and operate as an opening of the realm of trauma to the intersubjective that does not challenge the authenticity of the original event but enhances its relevance.

The trauma meant in Thomas Waitz’s “The Trauma of Suburbia: Images of the Fringe” is the most general and “theoretical” in the entire volume. Taking his cue from Walter Benjamin and Paul Virilio, Waitz discusses a spatial allegory of what he calls the trauma of modernity. Reading a photograph of the first public motorway in Germany and the multimedial work of 1930s German photographer and artist Peter Piller, Waitz reconceives the “green fringe”, the landscape interface between town and country, a semi-rural and semi-suburban hinterland as a traumatic space or experience of spatiality. If modernity, as he asserts, fails to deliver its promises, what is traumatic for the modern subject is to be confronted with that which is left behind, “and needs to be extinguished from perception” (Waitz 2013, 194). These nondescript, elided or “deflated” spaces, passed all too quickly, convey this trauma. Waitz also suggests that the link between photography and modernity might be rethought in terms of trauma: not in the sense that photography is the representation of trauma, but through the hypothesis that photography as such is inherently related to trauma: “one purpose of photography could be that of making the trauma explicit and consumable” (Waitz 2013, 197).

9/11, mediated even as it was happening and immediately smothered by a multitude of discourses and representational patterns, is the obvious endpoint of any collection concerned with trauma and representation. Reading episodes of *South Park*, *Family Guy*, and *The Boondocks*, Philip

Scepanski's "9/11, Television Comedy, and the Ideology of 'National Trauma'" discusses the vicissitudes of what Scepanski calls this "immense discursive knot" (Scepanski 2013, 200) in which the representations of the event were inextricably entangled with debates about these representations. Trauma ("the ideology of trauma" [Scepanski 2013, 201]) has been perhaps the most important node of this knot; since the event was overdetermined as the carrier of enormous symbolic significance, trauma was taken for granted; as Scepanski writes, the "repetitive narration of the event assumed the individual subject to be traumatized and thus positioned him/her as such" (Scepanski 2013, 200). This would seem automatically to lead to theorising trauma as a posterior construction that retrospectively makes sense of an event, although Scepanski warns against "blithely accepting the discursive construction of collective trauma" (Scepanski 2013, 202), and urges an examination of "how such subject positions and ideologies are created and negotiated in mass culture" (Scepanski 2013, 202).

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“BROKEN WARRIORS, TORTURED SOULS”:  
CONSTRUCTIONS OF PHYSICAL  
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN BRITISH  
ART OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR,  
c. 1916-1919.

JONATHAN BLACK

This essay will focus upon the front-line experiences of three British artists who were later appointed official war artists by the Department of Information, founded February 1917 and then expanded to a full Ministry in February the following year. Why focus on these three particular artists? They all served in uniform during the war but at different ranks, in different capacities and with different outcomes. All three became official war artists but at different stages of the war; two—C. R. W. Nevinson and Eric Kennington—were recruited as war artists after they had been invalided out of the army as privates on medical grounds; the third, a much more established pre-war artist, William Orpen, deftly manipulated his extensive connections to first become an officer and then secure an official war artist post. His pre-war contacts and wealth then allowed him to pursue his duties in some comfort—though he was to come under fire and suffer maladies similar to those experienced by numerous ordinary British soldiers. All three experienced the war as a life-changing event; service as a war artist secured Orpen’s already impressive pre-war reputation as one of Britain’s leading portraitists while it helped launch the careers of Nevinson and Kennington. However, Nevinson found it difficult to cope with the physical and emotional scars that the war inflicted upon him while Kennington found a way of channelling his memories of the Western Front into a successful post-war career as a sculptor and carver of impressive war memorials.

### C.R.W. Nevinson (1889-1946)

Nevinson was in the south of France, on holiday with his mother, when war broke out early in August 1914. As England's sole self-proclaimed Futurist he believed he must behave accordingly and get involved in the struggle as soon as humanly possible. However, much to his chagrin and embarrassment, he was twice turned down for military service on health grounds (Black 1999, 28).

He eventually reached the front in France through his father, who arranged for him to serve as an ambulance driver and medical orderly with a volunteer ambulance unit organised in London by the Society of Friends. During the morning of 13 November 1914, Nevinson was abruptly plunged into the horrifying reality of war when he arrived in Dunkirk and was immediately put to work by the Friends Ambulance Unit [FAU] as an orderly, "nurse, water-carrier, stretcher-bearer, driver and interpreter" in a makeshift dressing station in a railway goods yard shed grimly nicknamed "The Shambles" (Black 1999, 28-29).

Nevinson later wrote in his autobiography, published in 1937, of

working in a shed full of dead, wounded and dying. It was a sudden transition from peaceful England and I thought then that the people at home could never be expected to realise what war was ... [the wounded in 'The Shambles'] had been roughly bandaged ... they lay, men with every form of terrible wound, swelling and festering, watching their comrades die ... There was a strong smell of gangrene, wine and French cigarettes ... They lay on dirty straw, foul with old bandages and filth, these gaunt bearded men, some white and still with only a faint movement of their chests to distinguish them from the dead by their side. (Nevinson 1938, 96-98)

The gruesome sights he witnessed there were branded on his memory and feature in his powerful 1916 oil *La Patrie* [Birmingham Art Gallery], first exhibited with the London Group early in June 1916—from whence it was bought by the celebrated author Arnold Bennett. After two-to-three days working in the dreadful conditions of "The Shambles", the FAU assigned Nevinson to his own motor ambulance which could carry 4-6 wounded men from a FAU forward dressing station at Woesten, close to the front north of Ypres, back to the Unit's main hospital at Malo-les-Bains on the outskirts of Dunkirk. After only nine days (15-23<sup>rd</sup> November) of driving his ambulance, its back axle and suspension were wrecked by a heavy calibre German shell while it was parked outside the dressing station at Woesten. Nevinson was not actually driving the vehicle, which was the impression he gave at the time and subsequently in

his autobiography. Nevinson was assigned another ambulance, for the Malo-les-Bains/Ypres run, but had to give up driving a fortnight later when he experienced unspecified trouble with his hands and legs, preventing him from operating the heavy controls of his Mors Ambulance (Nevinson 1938, 99).

By mid-December 1914, Henry Nevinson found his son working as a ward orderly at the Malo-les-Bains hospital in charge of a ward of 40 or so wounded French and Belgian soldiers and civilians; he also was expected to lend a hand in the operating theatre. Some of the soldiers had hideous wounds caused by shrapnel and bullets. The artist later wrote of the period in his autobiography:

After a month had passed [at the Malo-les-Bains Hospital] I felt I had been born in a nightmare. I had seen sights so revolting that man seldom conceives them in his mind [...] there was no shrinking even among the most sensitive of us. We could only help and ignore [the] shrieks, pus, gangrene and the disembowelled. (Walsh 2008, 99)

On 30 January 1915 Nevinson left Dunkirk for a month’s leave in London. The FAU was evidently expecting him back and was most displeased when he made no effort to return until April 1915. It was obvious that pursuing his career was his priority, painting new images of the war and ensuring they were exhibited in London. Just a few days later, Nevinson was interviewed by the *Daily Express* in an article titled: “Painter of Smells at the Front. A Futurists Views on the War?”. According to the paper, Nevinson’s

Futurist sensibility was not trained in the same school as the iron nerve of a Marinetti. His [Nevinson’s] nerves gave way, his health broke down and he had to return. (Wilenski 1915, 6)

Stung by the insinuation of a nervous collapse, the artist wrote that very day to the editor to strenuously deny this claim:

My nerves did not give way ... Beyond a severe attack of rheumatism, my health is better than before the war and I am in absolutely in no way suffering from any form of nerve trouble. (Nevinson 1915, 8)

After a couple of unsuccessful attempts to return to the FAU, on 1 June 1915 Nevinson surprised many of his friends, and his father, by enlisting as a private in the Royal Army Medical Corps at the Third London General Hospital, Wandsworth (Black 1999, 29). The artist certainly did not enjoy the experience of being at the bottom of the Army hierarchy as a