

Deceptive Fictions

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*Narrating Trauma and Violence
in Contemporary Writing*

By

Ulrike Tancke

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-7270-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7270-6

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For a long time, and for a number of reasons, it seemed that this book would remain an unfinished project. Seeing it in print is thus all the more satisfying and rewarding.

Most of the material in this book was compiled during my time as a Junior Professor of English at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Germany. In 2010/2011 I was granted six months sabbatical leave, funded by DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), to work at Brunel University, UK, and it was in those months that most of the book was written. Of course, as with all publications of this kind, the ideas I develop in *Deceptive Fictions* have taken shape in numerous discussions with colleagues and fellow academics. Special thanks are due to Professor Anja Müller-Wood, who has lent unceasing intellectual and practical support for this project. I also thank Professor Philip Tew for supporting me during my stay at Brunel University and giving me the opportunity to present my ideas to fellow scholars in the Modern Fiction Studies Network. For engaging discussions of my ideas, I am also grateful to Lena Steveker and Emily Horton.

More than anything, however, I owe thanks to my wonderful husband Jan Siml. This book is for him, and for our two sons, Jonathan and Konstantin.

Ulrike Tancke
Mainz, December 2014

INTRODUCTION

TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: THEORISING NARRATIVE DECEPTION AND NARRATIVE COMPLICITY

Contemporary fiction seems preoccupied with scenarios of trauma and violence. Literary characters suffer profound losses or are wrecked by overwhelming experiences of guilt. Authors treat individual and collective history and memory as prominent subject matters and explore apocalyptic anxieties. A brief glance at a sample of novels published around the Millennium may illustrate this point; it is a tendency discernible in the works of both the “big names” in British fiction as well as those of relative newcomers or first-time novelists. For instance, Pat Barker’s *Double Vision* (2003) explores the traumatic memories of former war journalist Stephen Sharkey, who is taking an extended period of sabbatical leave to recover from the cumulative experiences of atrocities in various war zones around the globe, combined—and intersecting—with a series of personal disasters: the break-up of his marriage, and his photographer friend Ben Frobisher’s death during a placement in Afghanistan. Stephen’s life is shown to be inevitably marred by the violence and death he has witnessed, which impact on his relationships and behaviours in disturbing ways. The mutual dependence charted in the novel between individual identity and concrete events of contemporary history can be traced in a great number of literary texts: Chris Cleave’s debut novel *Incendiary* (2005) tells the story of a fictive Al Qaeda suicide attack on a London football stadium, in which the narrator loses both her husband and small son; Cleave’s later novel *The Other Hand* (2008) weaves together the fate of a young Nigerian girl and a British couple, who embark on a marriage-saving holiday to Nigeria which goes horrifically wrong as they are caught up in the country’s oil-fuelled civil strife, and which later haunts them in the shape of the Nigerian girl, now an asylum seeker in Britain. In a similar vein, Iain Banks’s *Dead Air* (2002) fuses a set of London professionals’

experience of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 with the destructive sexual, intellectual, financial and political power struggles underlying their relationships and thus creates a nightmare vision of contemporary metropolitan Britain. Other texts merge personal experiences of trauma and guilt with the traumatic histories of global wars and genocides that have punctuated the twentieth century, thus creating associative parallels between the individual and collective levels. Michael Frayn's *Spies* (2002) exemplifies this trend, as it has its protagonist, Stephen Wheatley, narrate his childhood experiences during World War II: convinced that his friend Keith's mother is, in fact, a secret agent in the services of Nazi Germany, he engages on an increasingly obsessive quest to find out the 'truth' about her, which comes to wreak havoc on the families and ruptures the boys' friendship. The same motif of children's imagination getting destructively out of control is also at the core of Georgina Harding's *The Spy Game* (2009), set in the early 1960s' climate of Cold War paranoia, in which narrator-protagonist Anna Wyatt and her brother Peter try to come to terms with the death of their mother, from which they have been shielded to the point where it feels to them like a mere "disappearance". While she really is a refugee from the former German city of Königsberg, they suspect her to be an East German spy. The children's suspicion is eventually proved wrong, but for the adult Anna, this is linked in an even more sinister way to the totalitarian atrocities of the century, as she finds out that her mother was the daughter of an SS officer who changed her identity and started a new life in Britain. Similar variants of violent disruption and loss of identity on a personal and world historical scale also occur in novels such as Sadie Jones's *Small Wars* (2010), in which the British involvement in the 1950s onset of the Cypriot civil war and Britain's declining world political clout rupture the relationship between young army couple Sal and Clara; or Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002), which starts with the description of a near-fatal car accident and subsequently combines, among others, the stories of a young woman who discovers her accidental pregnancy and an asylum seeker who lost his wife in a burning house; or Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000), which pits the unravelling of Britain's East Asian Empire against the narrator-protagonist's loss of and later search for his parents.¹

While these trends and tendencies have not gone unnoticed by literary criticism, which since the 1990s has become increasingly interested in traumatic memory, their complex agendas and the way these are reflected in representational strategies are only beginning to be addressed. Critical assessments of recent literary texts and their fascination with issues like

violence and trauma typically situate them in the socio-political context of the post-9/11 era, in which “[t]he symbolic power of the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center reverberate[s] around the world” and “the possibility of global war has ... a significant effect on the cultural imagination” (Bentley 2005, 3). In a similar vein to Nick Bentley, Philip Tew argues that “much recent fiction senses and articulates a sense of a collective wound and injury as part of its essential narrative sensibility” (Tew 2007, xviii). Berthold Schoene equally recognises the embeddedness of contemporary fiction in a cultural context shaped by profound—and profoundly unsettling—geopolitical upheavals (see Schoene 2009, 6-9), and he argues that literature of necessity expresses the global interconnectedness that he regards as characteristic of twenty-first century culture,² a culture whose “world-political mood” manifests “traumatic shock, gross political disillusionment and cultural despondency in the aftermath of 2001” (Schoene 2009, 8).

What these critical assessments share is a view of fiction as a form of cultural expression that imaginatively reflects and comments on contemporary reality: literature narrates scenarios of trauma, violence, anxiety and the like because it originates in a social and political reality which is shaped by such phenomena, thus charting a straightforwardly mimetic move. Yet while this tentative explanation certainly points to a valid mechanism of art mirroring the cultural climate of its inception, it nevertheless remains partial and insufficient. The very vocabulary used in the above-quoted passages indicates that the contextual parallels thus established need to be further developed and their underlying implications and rationale explored. For instance, who or what lends “symbolic power” (Bentley 2005, 3) to the World Trade Center attacks, and to what ends? Why do scenarios of “collective wound and injury” (Tew 2007, xviii) exude fascination? What does it tell us about a culture’s self-image when it is defined—or defines itself—as suffering from “traumatic shock” and “cultural despondency” (Schoene 2009, 8), and what are the consequences of this view?

These questions may well seem provocative—after all, they cast doubt on the validity and relevance of the commonly held beliefs on which mainstream contemporary cultural and literary criticism is based. Correspondingly, my analysis takes as its starting point a profoundly sceptical attitude towards the notion that the present moment should be one of exceptional, individual and collective traumatising. After all, this perception can also be turned on its head: given the frequency and ritualistic predictability with which this claim is reiterated, there is a mechanism of self-victimisation at play which resembles what J.G. Ballard

has termed “elective psychopathy” in view of the contemporary “therapy culture” (Furedi 2004): “we’re entering a profoundly masochistic phase—everyone is a victim these days, of parents, doctors, pharmaceutical companies, even love itself. And how much we enjoy it. Our happiest moments are spent trying to think up new varieties of victimhood” (Ballard, in Baxter 2004, n.p.). In other words, trauma and violence are attractive to the extent that we are fascinated by gory scenarios and brutal excess. Moreover, this self-victimising obsession with perceived suffering has a dangerously hubristic ring to it: suffering can all too easily be misused in an apologetic fashion, so as to claim a heightened degree of moral authority. This is because traumatic shock or violent assault is taken to grant the subject a degree of authenticity that cannot be surpassed or questioned; “the figure of the victim” is “endowed with ultimate authority” (Huysen 2003, 16)—an attribution which may mean that responsibility for personal actions and choices is neglected or even eschewed. In this sense, trauma and violence boast an ethical dimension, and this is what makes the questions at the heart of this study so urgent. The literary texts that I analyse in this book entail a meta-critical perspective based on the conviction that literary artefacts do not merely *reflect* a current cultural climate of traumatic anxiety and ubiquitous violence, but also point to the ideological purposes behind the creation of that very climate and the underlying self-perception of a culture which defines itself along these lines. Rather than staging a neatly mimetic trajectory, they ask us to consider the ways in which the concern with trauma, violence and guilt may serve a particular rationale and may thus be employed to pursue an agenda of its own.

To investigate this agenda and to unearth this rationale is the main aim of my readings of contemporary novels from Britain and, in one case, Ireland. The ubiquitous literary treatment of issues such as trauma, violence, guilt, loss and the like is part of a broad discourse that has elevated trauma to one of the key concepts variably used as an explanatory tool to assess virtually every area of social and cultural concern.³ Trauma and violence both feature prominently in recent works of fiction and are, of course, causally related scenarios (without being each other’s necessary corollary), and are particularly salient in view of the materialist angle from which I approach the texts. It is telling that, out of these categories, it is trauma which has received the most extensive critical attention and has developed into an analytical buzzword with a clearly delineable genealogy and usage. My deliberately wider choice of thematic rubrics—violence and trauma—and my concern with narrative as indicated in the title of this study is therefore indicative of the general drift of my argument, which

aims to transcend the fashionable concern with trauma and to focus instead on the issues at stake in, and the rationale behind, such critical predilections. Asking where this fascination originates and what uncomfortable truths about human nature it may conceal, it thus seeks to critically assess widespread assumptions and their implications.

In order to approach the underlying motives of the contemporary trauma discourse, it is important to consider its genesis and key premises. Those who argue that trauma proliferates see the reason for this trend in a combination of factual historical events and broad cultural shifts. As E. Ann Kaplan points out, “[t]rauma is often seen as inherently linked to modernity” (Kaplan 2005, 24). In a philosophical sense, it signals the fragmentation of consciousness and perception that is characteristic of modern subjectivity. Moreover, the violent atrocities that have punctuated the twentieth and early twenty-first century—from the First World War, fascism, totalitarianism’s genocidal ventures, of which the Holocaust is the most emblematic example, to the Vietnam and Gulf Wars and the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington—constitute a chain of events that are literally destructive and evidently conducive to trauma. The academic study of trauma reflects this disciplinary parallelism: it centrally emerged from psychoanalytical work with Holocaust survivors, veterans of the Vietnam war and victims of sexual abuse, but it has now spread to a variety of other contexts, such as migration and postcolonialism, sexual abuse and illness, to name but a few.⁴ In other words, parallel to these identifiable historical, political and cultural reference points, trauma has also developed into an academic category that can be drawn upon to research a variety of cultural forms.

Beyond the academic context, the fascination with trauma has also become a phenomenon of popular culture. TV talk shows in the format of the notorious *Oprah Winfrey Show* draw their success from participants sharing experiences of abuse, violence or emotional wreckage.⁵ Bookshops boast entire sections devoted to “misfit”, popular (auto-) biographical fiction concerned with the protagonist’s traumatic experience (usually in childhood), their resilience and eventual triumph over adversity.⁶ Likewise, events such as the 1996 Dunblane primary school massacre, the death of Princess Diana in 1997 or the World Trade Centre attacks have all elicited public displays of grief, with recognisable paraphernalia of shared mourning such as cuddly toys, cards and flowers left at the site of the event.⁷ What these popular manifestations of the trauma discourse share is a fundamental confessional impulse—the desire to talk about oneself, one’s feelings and emotional reactions, and to lay bare experiences of physical and emotional plight and affliction, be they the result of direct or

vicarious exposure to suffering.⁸ Robert Luckhurst speaks of a “cross-media synergy of confessionalism” (Luckhurst 2008, 119) in this context, which emerges as there are no other available avenues of communication which could provide a forum for individual experiences. This is because, as Luckhurst points out, “intermediate structures of communality [that is, social networks in which such experiences could be communicated] have disappeared” in contemporary post-industrial societies (Luckhurst 2008, 131).

The confessional mode expressed in the phenomena listed above is also discernible in “trauma fiction”⁹ itself—literary works which can be classified as narrating a destructive experience that ruptures selfhood. That is, literature also reflects these popular concerns. Moreover, according to Anne Whitehead, there is a correlation between the emergence of trauma fiction and theoretical explorations of trauma: “trauma fiction is influenced and informed by recent developments in trauma theory concerning the nature of traumatic experience itself, the role and function of testimony, and the relation between trauma and place” (Whitehead 2004, 161). This is not to suggest a chronological sequence from theory to literature (that is, “practice”), but it indicates that “the rethinking of trauma has been absorbed into the current ideologies of history and memory” (Whitehead 2004, 161) which writers have amalgamated, consciously or unconsciously, and which they have adopted as key concerns of their writing.

At first glance it seems curious that trauma should have become a productive area of fiction. After all, traumatic experience characteristically eludes representation (see Radstone 2003, 117). Thus fictional representations of trauma essentially, paradoxically attempt “to narrate the unnarratable” (Whitehead 2004, 4). Of course, this pursuit has been a powerful literary motif in itself, but it becomes particularly salient in trauma fiction because traumatic events characteristically overwhelm the individual and resist linguistic representation. They are essentially corporeal in nature (see Whitehead 2004, 3) and hence not amenable to the cerebral processes of conscious thought and assignment of meaning. Initially, then, critical assessments of trauma fiction aim to unveil the processes by which “the unnarratable” is in fact narrated. On the other hand, the very fact that trauma is considered to be beyond representation also explains the key difficulty of its usage as a critical concept. Linda Belau astutely captures the danger inherent in the critical fascination with trauma:

[I]f trauma’s seeming incomprehensibility has been the paradoxical starting point for one of the most important avenues of its study, it has also invited a dangerous elevation of traumatic experience to the level of an

ideal. That is, insofar as it remains beyond our understanding and comprehension, trauma can easily be seen as a sort of exceptional experience. And victims or survivors of trauma, consequently, may be seen as ambassadors of an exceptional realm, bearers of a higher (albeit more terrible) knowledge than is available to the rest of us. (Belau 2001, n.p.)

In other words, in a perversely voyeuristic move, trauma becomes an exceptional experience that is almost enviable as it confers coveted victim status. It thereby gives rise to a self-obsessive gesture of claiming outstanding insight *qua* previously endured suffering.

Moreover, the interplay between writers experimenting with various methods of narrating trauma and literary criticism interested in trauma narratives has meant that critics credit trauma fiction with prominent relevance beyond its stylistic or technical features. Reading trauma narratives as paradigmatic accounts of experience in our time, contemporary criticism often manipulates this category as an overarching blanket paradigm. The ubiquity of the concept which results is not, crucially, a mere reflection of themes and issues dealt with in literature, but rather a self-affirmative critical venture that confirms the relevance of criticism's key concerns. Importantly, trauma is used primarily as a critical category, allegory or theoretical construct; a shift which facilitates its ubiquitous usage and draws attention away from the material immediacy and violent impact of genuine traumatic experience.

This stance is exacerbated by the curious position of the trauma discourse at the interface of psychology and literary studies. The origin of contemporary trauma studies is conventionally dated to the 1980s, when Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was first recognised as a valid psychiatric diagnosis, and was subsequently extended beyond the medical field to capture trauma as a culturally and ethically relevant category (see Whitehead 2004, 4). While the resulting disciplinary heterogeneity has been a fruitful ground for insightful readings of literary texts, the corresponding methodological duality has given rise to a highly problematic alliance: in psychological terms, traumatic experience shatters a person's identity, leaving a fragmented sense of self that cannot be rendered as a coherent narrative. Applied to literary criticism, this destructive effect on the self ties in with the postmodernist belief in the instability of identity and meaning, and the inadequacies of textual renditions of reality. The traumatised self thus becomes the epitome of postmodern identity.¹⁰

It is this assumption that my own research takes as its starting point and seeks to challenge. The texts at the heart of this study question key premises of the trauma discourse in that they stage a form of "backlash"

against the cherished postmodern credentials of the instability of meaning and the incoherent nature of identity and signification.¹¹ In other words, it is the literary texts themselves which expose the inadequacy of reading an allegedly shared sense of self at the present moment as analogous to traumatised selfhood. In so doing, the novels lay bare the inherent inadequacy of the postmodernist perspective in relation to trauma: it effectively covers over the pain, violence and corporeal immediacy of the traumatic experience, turning an exceptional, and exceptionally destructive event into a constitutive critical paradigm. Moreover, the texts that I study question the seemingly ubiquitous applicability of the trauma paradigm. They could all be approached from a “trauma studies” angle and have, in some cases, been categorised as “trauma fiction”, or the experiences of their characters have been labelled “traumatic”; yet, characteristically, they do not primarily deal with an individual’s traumatic experience in any narrow sense. In order to evade the circular critical argument that trauma can be discerned anywhere and everywhere in contemporary literature by virtue of its paradigmatic status, my research aims to bring together two strands of trauma theory which explicitly situate the trauma discourse in its historical and socio-political context and investigate its relation to real (social, political, economic, ...) events. At the same time, by consistently emphasising that trauma is also a critical category structures upon a psychoanalytic understanding of unprocessed and unprocessable grief, these approaches pinpoint the potentially manipulative usage that (literary) representations of trauma may be put to.

One of my points of reference is the notion of a “traumatological” aesthetic which, according to Philip Tew, pervades the fiction written around the Millennium and expresses the sense of collective trauma and broadly conceived menace that results from concrete events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and invites “social engagement and immersion” (Tew 2007, 202).¹² The traumatological is based on “immediate, attributable threats, neither playful nor inchoate” and “marked paradoxically by its tangibility, a distinctive meta-realism, a palpable sense of clear and present dangers” (Tew 2007, 220). It thus moves beyond the postmodern “abandonment of certainty and meaning, and its deconstructive dissolution of identities” (Tew 2007, 190) and emphasises instead the material reality of traumatic experience.

It is important to stress that for Tew, the traumatological aesthetic “*represents* an edgy, conflicted, fearful world” (Tew 2007, 202; emphasis added)—that is, the traumatological is not a necessary effect of real events and conditions, but a product of their imaginary reworking that gives rise to the perception of a particular cultural climate. This representational

function of the trauma discourse can be related to Kirby Farrell's earlier critical intervention, my second point of reference. Analysing the preoccupation with injury that he perceives in the 1990s (that is, prior to 9/11) as a result of profound upheavals in American culture and self-perception after WWII,¹³ Farrell stresses, importantly, that trauma is not simply a psychological fact or a literary trope, but that it can be instrumentalised: "trauma can be ideologically manipulated, reinforced, and exploited" (Farrell 1998, 7). This is because of the characteristically shifty position of trauma as a category in-between psychology and cultural studies: "When the idea of trauma moves out of the psychiatrist's office and into the surrounding culture, its clinical definition recedes and its explanatory powers come to the fore" (Farrell 1998, 16). With respect to terminology it is important to note that Farrell refers not to "trauma" per se, but to "the *idea* of trauma" (emphasis added), emphasising its disc

ursive function independent of any acute or concrete experience. The notion of trauma can be put to hermeneutic or even ideological use, as "a strategic fiction that a complex, stressful society is using to account for a world that seems threateningly out of control" (Farrell 1998, 2).¹⁴

Emphasising "strategy" in this way, Farrell's argument on trauma channels back to and potentially challenges Tew's notion of a "traumatological" aesthetic being at work in contemporary fiction, and it is this interplay between perceived disruptions and their literary representations that my work seeks to address. I examine the narrative *function* of trauma and violence, which are both thematic concerns and narrative devices in the novels that I study. My contention is that the literary texts are consciously aware of and even exploit the cultural proliferation of these issues, and hence use them to a particular effect. Thus, with a self-reflexive, meta-referential twist, the categories of trauma and violence are strategically employed by writers (or, on the textual level, narrators) to comment on the social and cultural conditions that have given rise to the very preoccupation with these concerns. This critical angle conditions my emphasis on the narrative strategies that are used by the texts, as they reveal the ideological uses that the novels' thematic emphasis on "traumatic" events is put to.

Hence my readings of recent fiction consistently foreground the narrative modes, structures, composition and layout that govern textual representations of trauma and violence. In methodological terms, I draw on narrative theory in order to systematically assess the novel's composition and its effect. Narrative theory offers a broad range of concepts and instruments to analyse the workings of literary texts.¹⁵ While traditional narratology drew largely on linguistic methodology to

conceptualise the structures and patterns that organise a text, studies of narrative since the deconstructive turn have been based on the assumption that narrative is a key mode of human understanding of the world, and that narrative pervades any human attempt at meaning-making.¹⁶ The ubiquity of narrative is the principal tenet of postmodern narratology, which is strongly reliant on deconstructive thought. It derives from the assumption that reality itself is textual, that is, it can only be accessed and represented by humans via texts and is therefore essentially constructed. This constructed nature entails postmodernism's core claim: if reality is created via text, it is also inherently unstable, since texts—or narratives—are fundamentally unreliable. In Zygmunt Bauman's words:

If the purpose or the effect of narration is to bring order into a semantically loaded yet confused space, to conjure up logical consistency where chaos would otherwise rule—any narrative aiming to serve well its *raison d'être* stands a risk of implying more coherence than the postmodern condition could possibly uphold. ... [W]e need to reconcile ourselves to the prospect that all narratives will be to a varying extent flawed. (Bauman 1992, xxiv)

In other words, narratives are potentially manipulative and can be used to ideological ends.

At first glance, the novels I study appear to subscribe to the postmodernist preoccupation with narrative: they revolve around, in some way or other, the need, or wish, to make sense of the characters' experience with the help of stories, to recount experience in the form of a coherent storyline, or else to question the capacity of stories to do just that. Even so, it is important to note that their position vis-à-vis narrative differs in a fundamental sense from the postmodern approach: they turn on its head, or at least complicate in a decisive fashion, the belief that narrative shapes our perception of reality. Rather than buying in to the postmodern stock-in-trade of the "narrative construction of reality" (Bruner 1991), they persistently stress that reality strongly bears on its narrative rendition and hence question the latter's primacy. In other words, they suggest that there is a reality prior to and beyond representation. From a theoretical angle, this belief in the primary status of reality is expressed by the philosopher Edward Pols, who summarises it as follows: "we do not necessarily impose cognitive, linguistic, or merely experiential intermediaries between ourselves and what we wish to attend to" (Pols 1992, 153),¹⁷ that is, there is such a thing as a reality directly amenable to human understanding. This stance corresponds to Philip Tew's critical perspective on the interplay of reality and representation, as he explains their relationship from the point

of view of what he calls a “critical realist methodology for literary interpretation”¹⁸ (Tew 2001, 196):

[A]ll thoughts, all theories, are about something. All perceptions are of something. All texts have referents. These exist independently of our perceptions, thoughts and theories. All texts involve such thinking about our thinking about reality. This is so, however diffuse or complex the process becomes in the narrative and its relationship with the life-world. ... [T]here is a dialectical process [between reality and representation] that all texts require for placement, understanding and expression. (Tew 2001, 202)

The novels at the centre of my study even go beyond Tew’s dialectic, in that they not only assert the significance of reality, but even propagate its primacy over representation. Of course, reality is a notoriously slippery concept to define, because any statement we make about reality is inevitably mediated via language. However, it does not logically follow from this that there is no reality outside of its (linguistic) representation. Our bodies, material objects and the like still exist independent of our capacity to represent them. Thus in my usage of the term “reality” I follow Pols’s definition. For Pols, reality is whatever representation is not: “whatever in particulars and in the general nature of things is independent of our minds—whatever is in no sense dependent on any formative, or productive, powers rationality may also have” (Pols 1992, 1). In other words, reality is that which exists independent of our sense- and meaning-making mechanisms. Hence one of its most prominent modes of experience is the material. The novels that I study emphasise the primacy of the real in this precise fashion, consistently foregrounding material categories—violence, injury, biology, the body—that prove to be more powerful and enduring than any attempt to represent, amend or manipulate them by means of the narrative.

This is one key function of their thematic concern with traumatic experience and violence: because trauma and violence are characterised by a corporeal immediacy that is not directly amenable to narrative reconstruction, their tangible materiality is traceable in the text. The paradox here, of course, is that we are still inevitably dealing with literary texts, that is, *representations* of trauma, violence, injury and the like. However, in the case of the novels that I study, the narrative consistently emphasises that, in the narrated world, material factors override their textual rendition. This means, for example, that a narrator may attempt to represent his or her sense of self in accordance with a certain preconceived image or a coherent storyline, but that the material reality of physical pain,

disability, death, or physical drives and urges emerges predominant. Significantly, this trajectory is not merely a thematic one, but it is conveyed by means of the narrative, in that the textual structure—through narrative perspective, focalisation, choice of words and the like—reveals such underlying, uncomfortable realities. Thus the material is not merely a thematic concern at the level of content, but it also functions as a narrative (stylistic and/or structural) device. Moreover, the narrative may attempt to obfuscate what the narrator or a character in the text, for example, may be unwilling to acknowledge, while at the same time inviting the reader to discern this submerged layer at second glance and using complex decoding strategies. In other words, the privileging of reality at the expense of representation occurs *within* the narrative itself, so that the literary texts can be read as implicit interventions in the critical debate.

Because of the metacritical emphasis that is at the core of my readings, my approach to the texts that I study merges different strands of narratological analysis in a pragmatic fashion. It combines the commonplace observation that “narrative is everywhere” (see Currie 1998, 1-2)—in the sense that human modes of understanding display the desire to grasp reality in the form of a (coherent) narrative—with close attention to *how* narratives (in the more narrow sense of literary output) actually operate. In other words, rather than subscribing to any one theoretical approach as a blanket explanatory device applicable to every text alike, I draw on narrative theory as a tool for in-depth analysis and comprehensive understanding of the literary texts themselves and their cultural significance and discursive functions.

The meta-critical impetus that is thus traceable in the novels is a fundamental one: with their emphasis on tangibly material reality, the novels crystallise the inadequacies of the prevalent perception—central to Western culture since antiquity, cemented by the Cartesian Enlightenment and embraced by much contemporary theory¹⁹—of the material as a phenomenon outside of and apart from the self. This is another point at which the texts ask us to rethink dominant critical perspectives: they highlight the necessity to understand materiality as a quality intrinsic to and inseparable from the self—as “embodied materiality”, so to speak. This perspective

emphasises the difficulty, even impossibility, to separate the material and the spiritual, mind and matter. Such an embodied materiality performs us, as it were: we are at the mercy of an intricately complex organism of whose operations we are often not aware and which we are only now beginning to understand. (Müller-Wood 2009, 15)

Taking seriously this “embodied materiality” as the starting ground of any human activity means that we acknowledge the body as the basis from which we think. Human beings are a species whose bodies work according to the same principles than that of other animals,²⁰ and their ability to reflect on their status as beings in the world “is in itself a material capacity, which we possess *because of our bodies*” (Müller-Wood 2009, 15; emphasis in the original).²¹ In other words, the body is the very precondition of any human attempts to transcend it—narrative, of course, being one way of moving beyond and leaving behind the material, while at the same time exposing the limitations inherent in the very attempt.

Likewise, violence is one of the most salient points at which the “embodied materiality” of the human becomes manifest. Violence, in a materialist sense, affects bodies and is exerted on bodies. Thus my approach departs from poststructuralist understandings of violence as a discursive phenomenon. By way of example, Karen Houle’s definition of violence is exemplary of this “linguistified”, disembodied notion of violence: “Violence ... can accomplish ... a double movement of becoming a subject through being subjected to the normative effects of discursively produced identities” (Houle 2006, 186). This definition is predicated on the premise that “[a]s social beings, our negotiation of the world and our selves is through the symbolic: here is where we are hurt and might refuse hurt” (Houle 2006, 187). Houle’s view is problematic in more than one way, erasing as it does the fundamental difference between violence of a merely discursive nature—that is, verbal, ideological and the like—and violence that inflicts physical wounds and is hence graspable in a material sense. The latter is a central dimension of violence that is crucial precisely because it is often overlooked, negated or conflated with other forms of constraint, infringement and coercion. Although it has been legally sanctioned (or at least confined to strictly regulated contexts) and morally condemned in our culture (to varying degrees historically), in evolutionary terms violence is an integral part of the human condition: “the potential for physical aggression is a normal part of our species-typical psychology rather than a psychological aberration” (Müller-Wood and Wood 2010, n.p.).²² Or, as John Gray puts it, “the human animal will stay the same: a highly inventive species that is also one of the most predatory and destructive” (Gray, *Straw Dogs* 4). Because this is so, “fictional representations of violence ... indicate underlying continuities in human culture that point to its biological roots” (Müller-Wood and Wood, ‘Violence’ n.p.). Fiction shows violence as elemental and intrinsic to human lives. This connection is not merely a thematic one, which would simply mean that literature recounting violent events mirrors real-life

instances of violence. More importantly, the key question is “*how* violence is represented” (Müller-Wood and Wood 2010, n.p.; emphasis in the original). In the novels at the heart of this study, violence figures as an essential capacity of individuals which, in spite of any professed moral convictions, they cannot entirely evade. Significantly, this insight is presented as a concealed and uncomfortable truth—an innate capacity of human beings that they do not like to be reminded of, and the texts construct this as a denial in which readers and narrators are complicit.

This trajectory is part of a larger narrative structure which applies to the novels’ emphasis on material reality (in the guise of violence, trauma and the body) in general: it is not immediately made manifest, but their narratives are strategically constructed to obfuscate the realities at their core. For instance, while the texts appear to latch on to the critical fascination with the trauma discourse—for example, by alluding to fashionable buzzwords such as “9/11”, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” and the like—their narrative structures and strategies point to the tangible materiality of trauma and violence. Taking seriously this corporeal dimension suggests that the surface expression of diffusely felt and easily categorised anxieties exposes a set of uncomfortable (and unfashionable) truths: the random eruption of violence into everyday lives, the destructive nature of coincidence, the human capacity to inflict violence on others, the inescapable impact of biology and the corporeal, and the uncontrollability of human actions and the human psyche. Boasting this underlying narrative layer, the novels unveil the simplistic interpretive patterns we easily fall prey to. They do so by seemingly inviting us to replicate them, but at the same time exposing their reductive and insufficient qualities. In this sense, they engage in a form of narrative deception that is both strategy and subject of the texts.²³

My study focuses on such mechanisms of narrative deception, that is, the processes by which narratives are able to deceive readers as to their own rationale, and even make them complicit in this stratagem—in other words, how texts can pursue a different agenda than the one they ostensibly promote, and allow or even invite readers to fall prey to these very mechanisms. This narrative complicity is the flip side of the narrative deception staged by the texts. My understanding of narrative complicity draws on and develops Dennis A. Foster’s ideas of readers’ desires and obligations vis-à-vis a text. Foster has conceptualised narrative complicity with reference to confessional literature²⁴—or texts that can be loosely categorised as such—but his central ideas also apply to the novels that I study. Foster states, importantly, that “[i]n the activity of interpretation, a reader will almost inevitably find the text to be a confirmation of his own

thoughts” (Foster 1987, 12-13). This does not primarily mean, as one might expect, that there is a basic human inclination to read what we want to read, and to bend the text so as to fit our own desires and expectations. Rather, the readers are drawn into the writer’s agenda to such an extent that they identify it as their own:

If the activity of the writer is motivated by a desire to confess his [*sic*] own sense of loss and desire, the reader will find himself engaged in the same motivations, though he may not recognize that the history he strives to comprehend becomes increasingly his own, not the writer’s. The writer’s work, in short, becomes the field on which the reader attempts to realize himself[.] (Foster 1987, 13)

According to Foster, this also means that the reader is engaged in a “narcissistic” (Foster 1987, 13) quest to see their own preconceptions confirmed by the text. By buying in to this setup, readers effectively deceive themselves as to the manipulative nature of the text—a quality that they are hesitant to acknowledge: “most readers will show [resistance] to the idea that interpretation requires readers to become complicit with the motivations of the writer”²⁵ (Foster 1987, 13). In the case of confessional literature, Foster’s point of reference, the writer’s and reader’s desires are two sides of the same coin, even if this goes unacknowledged:

[I]t is precisely through the exploitation of common sense and common sympathy, which are nothing less than the languages we use without thinking, that these books [texts loosely grouped under the heading of ‘confessional literature’] find the faults in us that turn virtuous readers into complicit confessors. (Foster 1987, 18)

The literary texts that I study do not (with the partial exception of Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*) boast the confessor-confessant scenario of confessional narrative, nor do all of them share its first-person point of view. Yet, the scenario of the reader’s complicity applies in an extended sense and to similar effect. The narrative appears to neatly reflect the reader’s concerns and expectations—by representing familiar scenarios, drawing on widespread concerns and seemingly reiterating widely shared perceptions—so that the writer’s motivation appears to match that of the reader. At a closer look, however, the text’s agenda lies elsewhere; in other words, its motivation is different from what it purports to be and the reader is made complicit in a deceptive venture that veils the text’s genuine rationale. The novels’ thematic concerns, plot devices, characters and the like assume a functional role in this scenario: they have to be

understood as deliberately constructed so as to guide—or misguide—the reader’s attitudes and sympathies.²⁶ We are presented with different narrative layers vying for predominance; the texts are constructed in such a way that the surface, immediately recognisable ones make the reader complicit in their seemingly straightforward rationale. This argument is not meant to homogenise or even patronise readers; its starting point lies very firmly with the text itself. What I have simply referred to as “the reader” means, in more precise terms, the implicit recipient²⁷ of the text: the text itself—through its plot, character constellation, focalisation, perspective and the like—contains numerous hints at how it is designed to be understood,²⁸ and these are what I want to uncover in the present study.

The point of my readings of these literary texts is thus to draw attention to the uncomfortable and unacknowledged truths that the narrative conceals, and that it renders the reader complicit in concealing. The novels at the centre of this study clearly tie in with the widespread concern with trauma and violence and their inflections with identity, meaning, ethics, history, memory and related issues and thus appear to reflect the prevalent cultural climate of insecurity and anxiety. Yet their narrative mechanisms reveal that this parallel only holds true on the surface: it is also a convenient explanation of a diffusely felt sense of threat that cannot really be pinned down, and whose narrative negotiation reiterates existing modes of thinking and leaves intact automatic associations and projections. Thus, at a closer look, the novels reveal that trauma and violence are concerns that easily lend themselves to manipulation or simplification, and they explore the agenda and rationale behind such misrepresentations and misperceptions.

My study develops this argument in the form of five distinct essays, which together chart a clear intellectual trajectory. The texts I discuss—Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* (2005), Pat Barker’s *Border Crossing* (2001), Jon McGregor’s *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006) and Ann Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007)—reflect the ways in which contemporary fiction combines personal, individual experience and public, collective concerns in its approach to trauma and violence. While the novels as such do not delineate a distinct developmental trajectory, this book is nevertheless structured by a deliberate critical movement: it proceeds from novels in which narrative deception is instigated by the thematic content, to texts which ostensibly situate the narrative’s deceptive venture at the level of narrative set-up and procedure—a shift of emphasis from content to form, as it were. My discussion of each text follows a tripartite analytical procedure, which identifies the text’s surface preoccupations, investigates the narrative

strategies by which these are represented and eventually examines the underlying shift of narrative emphasis that points to the uncomfortable truths that the surface narrative conceals.

The overarching aim of my study is to develop a paradigmatic account of narrative deception and complicity. It seeks to outline the concerns of recent fiction which, this is my contention, is moving towards a pragmatic realism that resituates trauma and violence as universal human potentials and tangible material realities and thus transcends an understanding of these issues as representational categories or interpretive constructs. In so doing, my book addresses the ways in which narrative representations of trauma and violence may be deceptive but, at a closer look, open up broadly applicable critical perspectives that may ask us to rethink our understanding of ourselves, our cultural moment and the role of fiction within it. Ultimately, then, this study fuses the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of literature and literary studies as it draws attention to the mechanisms through which narrative may be manipulated in order to conceal, but must ultimately expose, the genuine nature and impact of trauma and violence.

CHAPTER ONE

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AS NARRATIVE RED HERRING: IAN MCEWAN'S *SATURDAY*

“Humanity” does not exist. There are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and illusions, and subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgement. (Gray 2002, 12)

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* is regularly categorised as a “post-9/11” novel which expresses a sense of vulnerability and threat. While this categorisation undeniably has some thematic legitimacy, in this chapter I will argue that this is ultimately a reductive designation which covers over the novel's more pressing, and more ethically demanding concerns.

My argument takes its cue from the distinctly mixed criticism that *Saturday* has been met with. While a number of critics have applauded McEwan for what they see as his skilful capturing of the cultural zeitgeist and shared consciousness in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing War on Terror,¹ others have accused him of failing to do justice to the cultural moment at which the novel is consciously situated. Critics in the latter camp have typically taken issue with *Saturday*'s very set-up, which recounts a single day in the life² of well-off, successful London neurosurgeon Henry Perowne and thus centres on, as they see it, an exceptionally privileged protagonist and his alleged luxury concerns. John Banville, whose review of *Saturday* for the *New York Review of Books* contains some of the most scathing indictments of the novel, accuses McEwan of “thinking small” (Banville 2005, 12), by focusing on the life of a single, and singularly advantaged, individual at a moment of global uncertainty and world-wide political activism, whose preoccupation with the demands and rewards of his job, his frequent musings on his contented home life and his plans for the family reunion he is organising that evening contrasts sharply with the novel's setting on 15 February 2003, the day of world-wide mass protests against the impending Iraq War and the ubiquitous climate of fear as a result of the War on Terror and the

generally perceived terrorist threat. Given this distinct context and zeitgeist, Banville accuses the novel of presenting a plot that is overly reliant on unlikely coincidences and contrived scenarios (see Banville 2005, 13-14) and, more importantly, of displaying objectionable “arrogance” and “self-satisfied” complacency (Banville 2005, 14). For him, *Saturday*’s notable focus on the protagonist’s individual perspective and his personal concerns—integrated though they are in a broader, world-political context—smacks of hubristic isolationism and disregard for larger concerns. My contention is, however, that this juxtaposition of individual perception and world political import is at the core of the novel’s message, and that it is precisely its emphasis on small-scale concerns that offers highly significant and refreshingly sobering commentary on post-9/11 culture.

Situating *Saturday* (I): post-9/11 culture

Saturday appears to lend itself to be read as a testing ground for standard critical-approaches to 9/11. A recently published essay on post-9/11 literature in the US, in the German literary studies journal *Amerikastudien*, opens on a brief reference to McEwan’s *Saturday*. Summarising the novel’s theme and plot in a footnote, the author states that “this novel describes the violent intrusion of world politics in the domestic sphere after 9/11” (Däwes 2007, 517). Birgit Däwes uses *Saturday* as a way in to her discussion of the cultural impact of 9/11 by discussing the one scene from the novel that reviewers and critics have most readily picked up on: the protagonist happens to observe a burning plane descending for emergency landing at Heathrow airport, a scenario uncannily reminiscent of the images of 11 September 2001. It is this scene—together with the dating of the plot on 15 February 2003—from which critics have commonly taken their thematic cue, reading the novel as McEwan’s timely commentary on the state of a post-9/11 world that fears the incalculable risks of new and daunting geopolitical alliances and ideological constellations and is collectively traumatised by the possibility of large-scale destruction.³

In a similar way, the novel’s publishers have obviously latched on to the 9/11 allusion. The Vintage paperback edition—the one with the largest print run, which could be seen on the bestsellers shelves at most bookshops for months and is the first and most frequently listed edition that appears when you search *Saturday* on *Amazon*—also draws on this element from the novel. Its cover shows London’s Post Office Tower at night, with an indistinct object, looking like a flash of light rather than any identifiable item, seemingly approaching the tower in mid-flight.⁴ A

picture that, pre-9/11, we would simply have seen as something that looks like a comet against a nightly city skyline now conjures up a host of related images of the attacks and their aftermath: planes crashing into the towers, clouds of smoke, bodies falling from the sky, and the devastation of "Ground Zero". At the same time, the very fact that this is the cover picture of a bestselling novel and hence geared towards attracting potential buyers' attention should give us pause. Is this a case of the commercialisation of an assumed fear and collective trauma? As a consequence, is the idea of collective trauma that these pictures evoke the product of a media hype, rather than a genuine expression of widespread perceptions and feelings? After all, much of the titillating nature of these images stems from the fact that they ultimately keep the disaster and its genuine impact remote. That said, what is it that is being kept hidden behind immediately recognisable, easily categorisable associations like "9/11"?

These observations suggest that 9/11 sheds light on disturbing aspects of our culture in a complex manner that all too easily retreats behind clichéd perceptions and jargonistic rhetoric. What my remarks on *Saturday's* cover picture revolve around is that the alleged omnipresence of 9/11 in the collective psyche stems, to a large extent, from the fact that it was, for most of us, primarily a visual event: the images of the planes crashing into the towers and the collapse of the buildings were replayed again and again on all TV networks on the day of the attack and the days and weeks after. The impact of these pictures is a thoroughly ambiguous one: for most of the world, that is, those watching on TV, the pictures kept us—the viewers—at a safe distance. As Ian McEwan observed in a *Guardian* comment on 12 September 2001, "[t]his was an obscenity. We were watching death on an unbelievable scale, but we saw no one die" (McEwan 2001, n.p.). Instead, as has often been noted, the images of the attack have a certain aesthetic quality, albeit a disturbing one. The German avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen triggered a huge controversy when he called the attacks "the biggest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos" (see Lentricchia and McAuliffe 2002, 350).⁵ Ill-advised though this comment might have been, it points the finger at the fascination with destruction and the horrific that seems to be part of our nature. Importantly, this aesthetisation is a direct function of the remoteness of the images. As Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe observe, "for many of us—the very greatest majority of us—the thousands slaughtered are abstract. ... This is our fascination: the transformation of the World Trade Center into a narrative of spectacular images. Terrorism for the camera" (Lentricchia and McAuliffe 2002, 349-50). Importantly, it is only "in our contemplative security from the real [that] the images

trigger pleasure” (Lentricchia and McAuliffe 2002, 352).⁶ Violence and devastation have a certain affect allure⁷—we felt compelled to watch as a scenario was being played out that resembled the stuff of catastrophe movies. In a sense, reality became an imitation of fiction as it was “weave[d] into pre-existing fantasy scenes” (Radstone 2003, 120) long anticipated in Hollywood movies.⁸

Saturday explores the desires and motivations behind this complex cultural reception of the 9/11 attacks. Significantly, the debates I have summarised do not revolve around, first and foremost, the actual events of 9/11, the loss of lives and tangible political implications, but they foreground *representations* of 9/11. Of course, what is commonly referred to as “post-9/11 literature”—an emergent genre that *Saturday* is often counted among—necessarily presents us with the latter. The novel can usefully be situated in the trajectory outlined by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, who define literature after 9/11 as moving along an axis that stretches from “attempts to represent the events themselves” to “self-reflexive[] [engagements] with frameworks for interpreting 9/11” (Keniston and Quinn 2008, 3). This is because,

while the initial experience of 9/11 seemed unprecedented and cataclysmic, the experience of incommensurability generated a culture-wide need for explanatory narratives, not simply as a means for countering the trauma, but as a means for refusing incommensurability... We might say, then, that the history of literary representations of 9/11 can be characterized by the *transition* from narratives of rupture to narratives of continuity. (Keniston and Quinn 2003, 3; emphasis in the original)

Saturday can arguably be read as such a “narrative of continuity”, albeit in a different sense to the one outlined by Keniston and Quinn. Rather than attempting to bridge the ontological void created by the attacks, the novel exposes continuities of human nature and disposition, virulent independent of the particular socio-cultural context of the post-9/11 era. True, the novel does use the events of 9/11 and their aftermath as a pivotal reference point. Yet, while 9/11 is one of its starting points, the event soon fades into the background as our attention is drawn to something quite different: the random eruption of violence into everyday lives, the destructive nature of coincidence, and the uncontrollability of human actions, biology and the human psyche. With this distinct shift of emphasis, the novel moves beyond post-9/11 discourse. It juxtaposes the idea of collective trauma with individual experience and hence problematises the detachment that underpins such immediate identifications and visual associations as seen in the reception of the images of the attacks. Its characters are not simply