

THE WRITING OF TRAUMA: TRAUMA THEORY AND THE LIBERTY OF READING

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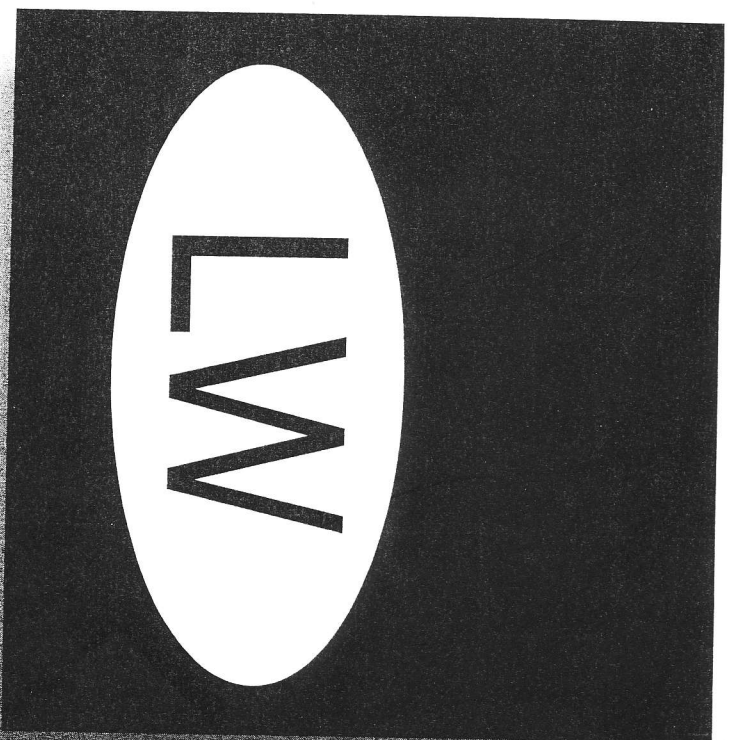
the impact of trauma as a concept and a category, if it has helped diagnosis, has done so only at the cost of a fundamental disruption in our received modes of understanding and cure, and a challenge to our very comprehension of what constitutes pathology. [...] psychoanalysis and medically oriented psychiatry, sociology, history, and even literature all seem called upon to explain, to cure, or to show why it is that we can no longer simply explain or simply cure.¹

1. Cathy Carruth (ed), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp.3-4.

When Cathy Carruth wrote this as part of her influential editorial for the collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, she could not have predicted that scholars would be so eager to meet the challenge set by trauma. Indeed, the development of trauma theory – if not the wholesale emergence of trauma studies – proceeds apace. Linked to the clinical inauguration of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and characterised by its emphasis on the incomprehensibility of traumatic events, trauma theory is being used to advance scholarship on the experience and survival of a range of historical, political and social injustices, including AIDS, Hiroshima, the Holocaust, sexual abuse, slavery and Vietnam and with contributions by George Baraille, Robert Jay Lifton, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Claude Lanzmann, and Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, the *Trauma* collection is itself an exemplar of this cross-disciplinary activity. Uniting the contributors and in keeping with the pathological structure of PTSD is a concern with the temporality of trauma. Whatever else it might be – and there is considerable debate – trauma theory highlights the ways in which trauma is not experienced at the time of its occurrence but later as a haunting presence. Trauma insists on a past that has never been present. Trauma is impossible to experience at the time and difficult to grasp in the here and now. At its simplest, then, the central insight of trauma theory is best captured by the notion that there is no experience, memory or history of trauma as such.

But, as Elizabeth Cowie points out, this poses a key problem: 'How can we come to know trauma, and can we know the other's trauma?'² Cowie's question returns us to the problematic established by Carruth – how do we explain what we cannot explain – and to the main concern of this article: why has trauma theory been so popular when it appears to offer little in the way of explanatory power? I want to take up that question as an opportunity to reflect on why scholars have welcomed the development of trauma theory. Central to my exploration will be a recognition that trauma theory is a

2. Elizabeth Cowie, 'Traumatic Memories of Remembering and Forgetting', in M. Rossington and A. Whitehead (eds), *Between the Psyche and the Politics: Refiguring History in Literature and Theory*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, p.191.



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synthesis of psychoanalysis and deconstruction and, as such, not only provides a radically revised concept of trauma, but also demands a new form of reading. Key to this line of inquiry will be my own reading of Caruth's work, whose influence has been credited with bringing 'the lessons of deconstruction to bear on a reflection about the conceptual status of trauma in Freudian psychoanalysis'.³

Caruth's work, while not synonymous with it, has driven the development of trauma theory. Of course, not everyone has welcomed the development of trauma theory or Caruth's brand of psychoanalysis. Indeed, for some, the advent of trauma theory summons up suspicion, not least because of the existence of a perceived wider 'trauma industry'. Critics have been keen to establish a relationship between the academic fascination with trauma and the interests of that industry, citing the popularity of confessional and reality TV, as well as a popular recourse to psychotherapeutic practices as evidence of its widespread existence. Broadly conceived, then the trauma industry is understood to be promoting a victim culture bent on legal, social and political recognition. Here, the development of PTSD is key, since it has allowed victims of traumatic events to claim recompense and recognition years after the event. Susannah Radstone, for example, is critical of the development of PTSD and trauma theory precisely because they privilege historical causality at a time when there has been an unprecedented rise in litigation.⁴ For Radstone, then trauma theory appears dangerously convenient, not least because the relationship between fantasy and trauma has been sidelined in the interests of legal (if not psychosocial) expediency.⁵ Radstone thus insists on the importance of fantasy for any psychoanalytic theory of trauma. Her complaint, however, is a desperately familiar one, once again raising the question of Freud's legacy and the orthodoxy of interpretation. Of course, the question of Freud's theoretical legacy has a long, controversial history. Ever since Jeffrey Masson published his *The Assault on Truth*,⁶ there has been continuing debate over the correct 'defence' of Freud to which Caruth only adds fuel. Given her commitment to deconstruction, it is then, no surprise that Caruth does not take the defence of Freud as given. As I shall argue, the significance of Caruth's work turns on the reading of Freud she performs, a reading that refuses to take Freud 'at his word'. To this end Caruth takes liberties with Freud's work, offering less a reading than a rewriting that allows us to think a future for trauma.

HISTORY BEYOND REPRESSION

Institutional interest in the relationship between trauma, power and violence started not with Caruth et al, but with identity politics and its theoretical development. Predicated on the idea that 'the personal is political' and associated with practices of 'breaking the silence' and 'speaking out', identity politics provided the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s with a rubric that validated the impact of violence. Key to these theoretical and political movements was the endorsement of experience as a means for

articulating and registering those forms of oppression previously denied, discredited or hidden. By making recourse to privately experienced trauma – which did not simply mean the 'domestic' trauma of incest for example, but all the traumas that failed to achieve public recognition – identity politics provided a logic for establishing the reality of homophobia, racism and sexual violence. This is a familiar history but no matter how contentious and incoherent it is now understood to be, the advent of identity politics insured a political and social viability for the traumatic experiences of sexual and racial oppression. Indeed, identity politics can be credited with the public credibility gained by the experiences of homophobia, racism and sexual violence.

However, with the development of antifoundational and anthropologist critiques, presumptions about the validity of these experiences have been put into question. The nature of these critiques is manifold and include concern with the 'allure' of personal testimony and its relationship to individualism which, it is argued, is encoded in the modernist, liberal conceit that the ability to speak out is an expression of freedom. Equally, the discursivity/textuality of experience has led critics to question, what might be usefully phrased, the 'authenticity of authenticity'.⁷ As a consequence of such critiques, it has become difficult to separate experience from its complicity with bourgeois individualism. The empirical claim of identity politics has been, at very least, undermined, if not discredited, and the 'authority of experience' dealt a theoretical blow. As a result, the future of identity politics has been beset by theoretical deadlocks, most notably how to mobilise a concept of experience that does not rely on principles of authenticity, immediacy and transparency. In the wake of the variously marshalled critiques of identity politics (attributed by Ball to 'North American adaptations of Derridan and de Manian deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation, poststructuralist feminisms, and Foucault's reformulations of power, knowledge and subjectification'⁸), trauma theory offers a concept of experience that does not repudiate its textuality. As Ball notes, trauma studies is characterised by a conceptual shift from experience to memory, thus drawing attention to the inherent distance between experience and representation; but at the same time this temporal focus retains theoretical space for the substantive claim of trauma. The turn to memory thus serves 'to redeem some tentative notion of the empirical subject', but without 'reaffirming the value of a dubious notion of immediacy that is attached to the concept of authentic experience', leading Ball to conclude that it is possible 'to validate the events that occasioned suffering while acknowledging the rhetorical function of memories as signs that are shaped by the contingencies of interpretation'.⁹ Ball's narrative is a partial one and, while my account borrows from it, I would want to argue for closer attention to the ways in which trauma actually disrupts memory and the reality of suffering to which its claim is made. As my initial commentary on trauma

3. Karyn Ball, 'Introduction: Trauma and its Institutional Destitute', *Cultural Critique* 46, Fall (2000), p.12.

4. Susannah Radstone, 'Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate', *Screen*, 42: 2, Summer (2001), p.191.

5. See for example Susannah Radstone, 'History and Trauma: Rereading *Formal Camp*', in M. Kossington and A. Whitehead (eds), *Between the Psychic and the Puke: Rereading History in Literature and Theory*, op. cit., pp.177-190; also Radstone, 'Social Bonds and Psychological Order: Testimonies', *Cultural Values*, 5, 1 (2001), 27-40.

6. Jeffrey Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud and Child Sexual Abuse*, London, Fontana, 1984.

7. See for example Linda Kaurine 'The Long Go Against Person Testimony or: Infant Carier Up', in Gwile Greco and Coppelia Kahn (eds), *Chicago Subjects: The Art of Feminist Theory*, Routledge, London, 1993.

8. Ball, 'Introduction: Trauma and its Institutional Destitute', op. cit. p.7.

9. *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.

theory indicated, the story of experience/trauma theorists tell is more complicated, and I would suggest, eventually more radical than that proposed by Ball. Indeed, to my mind, feminist poststructuralism has never ruled out the developments Ball attributes to trauma theory. Ball does not quite capture the radical contribution that trauma theory might make to the future of identity politics. To do this requires closer analysis of the contentious relationship between trauma theory and Freud. Interestingly, Ball does not list Freudian psychoanalysis as one of the usual suspects responsible for the critique of identity politics. A surprising omission, since the very possibility of antihumanist and antifoundational critiques owes considerable debt to Freudian psychoanalysis.

Trauma theory allows an escape from the theoretical deadlocks established by antihumanist and antifoundational critiques of identity politics. It offers an account of trauma that carries specific implications for the empirical, carrying the concept of experience/memory beyond the impasse established by postmodern critique. In order to understand the specific contribution made by trauma theory, it is necessary to appreciate it 'as operating in a rich and complex dynamic between deconstruction and the work of Freud'.¹⁰ As Michael Rosington and Anne Whitehead argue, trauma theory combines 'a historicized reworking of deconstruction with psychoanalytical thought', with leading figures - Caruth and Felman - 'particularly indebted, in differing ways, to the work of de Man'.¹¹

As a synthesis of deconstruction and psychoanalysis, trauma theory works to produce a concept of trauma that itself represents a distinct departure from received understandings of Freud's work. Trauma theory does not constitute a simple return to the early work on hysteria, nor is it tied to his subsequent work on fantasy and repression. Rather, as a consequence of deconstructive readings of Freud's work, (most notably Caruth's reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Montheism*¹²), trauma theory offers an account of history free from sexual repression and the conceits typically taken to frame notions of the 'real event'. This is done, as I have indicated, via an emphasis on the belated impact of a trauma. According to Caruth, the impact of a traumatic event cannot simply be defined by 'the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatisé every one equally', but 'nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it'.¹³ The root of trauma is found 'in the structure of its experience, or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly'.¹⁴ Caruth writes, 'It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms the centre of its pathology or symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself'.¹⁵ Thus, a traumatic experience can only be historical if it can manifest itself at a later date.

Thomas Elsaesser also considers the temporal displacement wrought by an emphasis on structural latency to be the important contribution of trauma

theory. He concludes that what makes trauma theory an alternative to the thesis of repression 'is not only that trauma would no longer be a (version of the) return of the repressed', but that it 'would give the traumatic event the status of a (suspended) origin in the production of a representation, a discourse or a text, bracketed or suspended because marked by the absence of traces'.¹⁶ Trauma does not constitute the return of the repressed (which is structurally governed by primal desires and fantasies), nor does it simply constitute a spectral presence without the possibility of being. It is simultaneously less than historical and less than virtual. This formulation holds a distinct challenge for scholars. For, as Elsaesser argues, this understanding of trauma requires a method of accounting for history 'without "falling" into any crudely nominalist and realist positions or merely analysing it across narrative and rhetorical tropes'.¹⁷ To this end, Elsaesser maintains that trauma theory can open a space for:

thinking through the deadlocks of deconstruction in relation to extra-textuality and interpretation, as well as rethinking the hermeneutics of psychoanalysis. Extending it in this direction, trauma theory would be called upon to rescue interpretation and hermeneutics from the relativism of 'there is no hors-texte', from the fundamentalism of the 'authentic experience' but also from the (cynical) tyranny of the 'performative', since trauma poses the enigma of interpretation as a negative performative, while referring to a historicity and a temporality that acknowledges (deconstruction's) deferral and (psychoanalysis's) double time of *Nachträglichkeit*.¹⁸

Here, the success of trauma theory is the possibility it holds for interpretation, even if understood as a 'negative performative'. Indeed, Elsaesser acknowledges that a peculiar and daunting challenge of trauma – established by the fact that 'one of the signs of the presence of trauma is the absence of all signs of it' – is that it 'potentially suspends the normal categories of story-telling, making it necessary that we revise our traditional accounts of narrative and narration'.¹⁹ I will return to the significance of this later.

Elsaesser's point is well made even if his critique of identity politics is harsh and his characterisation of deconstruction somewhat dismissive. In the editorial to *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, Caruth maintains that deconstruction has been falsely identified with historical relativism and 'has accordingly been dismissed as denying memory, history, and all notions of truth'.²⁰ For Caruth what is key about the intervention of deconstruction into the debate about the status of history and memory is precisely that it searches for a way to think language, and specifically reference, in terms that do not fall prey to the dynamic in which every textual affirmation meets with a seemingly inevitable denial.²¹ Trauma theory is one outcome of this deconstructive search, such that trauma scholars have met the demand by arguing that the failure to represent the impact of

10. Michael Rosington and Anne Whitehead (eds), *Between the Psyche and the Pulse: Refiguring History in Literature and Theory*, op. cit., xxiii.

11. *Ibid.*, p.5.

12. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

13. Caruth, 1995a, op. cit., p.4.

14. *Ibid.*, p.5.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Thomas Elsaesser, *Postmodernism Mourning Work? Screen*, 42: 2, Summer (2001), pp.199-200.

17. *Ibid.*, p.200.

18. *Ibid.*, p.201.

19. *Ibid.*, p.199.

20. Cathy Caruth Introduction: 'The Instance of Reference', in Caruth and Debbe Esch (eds), *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1995b, p.2.

21. *Ibid.*, p.2.

trauma testifies to the reality of its impact. There are simply no images or words with which to capture the event. As Elsassser confirms, the referentiality made possible by trauma theory only proceeds on the premise that 'there is no there there'.²² As a political premise 'there is no there there' is, of course, a far cry from the empirical confidence that has underpinned identity politics, but this does not mean that it cannot sustain a future for trauma, at least in theory.

22. Elsassser, *Postmodernism as Mourning Work*, op.cit., p201.

PLEASURE AND ENVY AT WORK

As already noted, not everyone has welcomed the development of trauma theory; even Elsassser is quick to caution that the risk with a theory of absence is it establishes 'a potential affinity between trauma and fetish ("nothing there")'.²³ The danger is evident. To the extent to which trauma resists analysis, it lends itself to endless speculation. And indeed the idea that trauma - and trauma theory as its academic occasion - exerts a sublime fascination or obsessive preoccupation haunts almost all critical responses.

According to Mark Seltzer, in his book *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*,²⁴ there is a general fascination with the spectacle of trauma, a preoccupation that works to constitute what he calls a 'wound culture'. Indeed, for Seltzer, not only is there 'a public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons',²⁵ but 'the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body'.²⁶ As far as Seltzer is concerned, the fascination generated by trauma stands at the centre of social life. Indeed, he maintains that the very possibility of society turns on the spectacle of trauma. There is a compelling need to return to the site of violence/the scene of the crime, a basic pleasure to be had by witnessing the trauma of others. His account is provocative, not least because he understands the popularity of trauma theory to be an enactment of the same fascination. Seltzer argues that when trauma is figured as a conceptual enigma it 'enacts a version of theory as repetition compulsion', which 'urgently nullifies the particular "content" repeated and therefore immunizes itself to the ... differences that may make a difference (even as difference, the particular, and the unpredictable are rigorously acknowledged, albeit in resolutely abstract terms)'.²⁷ For Seltzer there is little concern for what might actually pass as the empirical or historical, but rather trauma theory repeats the scene of trauma as a means to establish its own future possibility. As such, it represents a failure of critical analysis. Seltzer does not directly name the theorists responsible for this uncritical activity, nevertheless, the inference is plain enough: the academic popularity of trauma represents the same crowd gathering mentality he identifies as core to the sociality of wound culture. As it stands, Seltzer's indictment of trauma theory as repetition compulsion does not necessarily encompass the work of Garuth, since her writing - and the theory it has inspired, work to emphasise and specify the very differences that

23. *Ibid.*, p.1.

24. *Ibid.*, p223.

27. *Ibid.*, pp82-3.

(presumably) concern Seltzer:

In his own detailed account of the rise of trauma theory, John Mowitt echoes and elaborates many of the concerns established by Seltzer, but he also works to situate this development in the context of liberalism. According to Mowitt the turn to trauma theory reflects the extent to which claims on, for and to trauma circulate as social and political commodities. At its simplest, the value of trauma is attached to the moral authority it can summon: those who speak in the name of trauma are understood to hold a certain power. As a consequence trauma becomes an object of 'envy' for those who do not possess a privileged relationship to it. To this end, Mowitt is able to argue, if somewhat surprisingly, that trauma theory as represented by the work of Zizek actually reflects the 'envy' of psychoanalysis towards identity politics. Mowitt is aware that Zizek is not normally taken as a referent for trauma theory, but like Seltzer he is content to critique trauma theory via Zizek, presumably because the object of critique is the psychoanalytic deployment of trauma and not trauma theory per se (a point that holds for Seltzer as well). Thus he argues:

When all is said and done, Zizek's appeal to trauma is not really driven by a theoretical need to clarify the concept of the Real, but instead by a political need to forge a link between the Real and trauma that allows psychoanalysis to have, as it were, the last word about trauma. That word is 'void' [...] Thus one might say, the quarrel with poststructuralism is a feint [...]. The 'real' enemies ... are those partisans of identity politics who, by insisting upon the traumatic character of racism, colonialism, and the countless quotidian violations that maintain the cultural and political hegemony of the West, have called into question both the analytical integrity and the political efficacy of psychoanalysis.²⁸

Determined to seize the political voice of identity politics, the turn to trauma theory is understood here to represent the effort of psychoanalysis to find 'within its own conceptual resources the "mother of all traumas"', the trauma that trumps the moral authority of all comers, the trauma that is the subject's relation to the Real itself.²⁹ This is not the place to dwell on Mowitt's analysis of Zizek, but to note that for Mowitt and Seltzer the turn to trauma raises the question of the effectiveness of psychoanalysis as a form of cultural analysis/critical inquiry. For Mowitt, in particular, the turn to trauma theory represents an instance of a widespread tendency to 'displace the political with the ethical',³⁰ where an attempt is made to capitalise on the ethical/moral authority held by the appeal to trauma. Trauma theory repeats the moral logic of identity politics. Thus, it works, as critics of identity politics have always maintained, within a framework established by liberalism. Drawing inspiration from Wendy Brown's *States of Injury*,³¹ Mowitt is unsettled by the failure of trauma theorists to reflect upon their common turf with

28. Mowitt, *op* p287.

29. *Ibid.*, p28

30. See Marie Garber, Bent Hansen and Walkowitz (ed) *Then 'No Ethics'* London, Routledge, 2000, for an excellent collection of essays on which Mowitt understands the turn to e

31. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1995.

liberalism leading him to argue that: 'if we are ever to find "the real killers," it will be because a movement has emerged that refuses to argue with the Right on its own terms'.³²

For Mowitz, the popularity of trauma theory represents the continued failure of politics to secure an effective critique of liberalism. Moreover, the turn to ethics and trauma is problematic because it obscures the 'work' that is done by politics. Concerning the ethical trump held by what is deemed the obvious and self-evident appeal of trauma, he writes:

When the political is conceived as a matter of taking sides, specifically sides separated along the fault between good and evil (whether banal or not), its link to the labour of 'making' sides, of producing and advancing positions, is obscured. What is risked in this obscurity is not just the elaboration of the ethical as such (its production as 'that which matters most'), but the importance of the political as the field within which groups struggle in and for power. Here, I would submit, the vital question is not 'whose trauma provides one with greater moral capital' ... but 'what kind of institutions, relations, practices need to be forged so that the trauma of capital accumulation can be abated?'³³

This is a compelling critique. Mowitz offers an acute analysis of the political 'cost' of the turn to trauma theory if and when read as a psychoanalytic effort to make itself count as cultural critique. Heard as an echo of the critique of identity politics, which drew attention to the logic of hierarchy and enumeration said to structure it, his analysis is an astute reckoning of trauma theory. This said however, his earlier appeal to 'the real killers' and his reference, here, to the trauma of capital accumulation reminds me that the 'original' contribution of identity politics was that it provided an alternative - experientially based - calculus for determining oppression (as opposed to the calculus of distribution offered by traditional Marxism). Following Ball once again, the current preoccupation with trauma might be said to represent nothing more or less than a certain recalcitrance on the part of 'those [...] who, for historical and personal reasons, [are] not willing to toss out the empirical basis of identity politics so quickly'³⁴ - no matter how elusive the empirical basis might be.

(READING CARUTH) READING FREUD

So far, I have taken what stands as 'trauma theory' to be dictated by Caruth's early publications. These texts involved a key reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the influence of which stemmed from Caruth's analysis of the soldiers' recurring nightmares of war. With the publication of her recent article 'Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival',³⁵ Caruth returns to Freud's text but this time pays closer attention to Freud's analysis of the child's fort/da game, where the child stages his mother's disappearance

and return by throwing and drawing back a cotton reel accompanied by the enunciation 'fort' and 'da'. Her reading represents a new point of departure for trauma theory. Of course, the fort/da game has already garnered significant attention, not least because the child playing the game of 'gone/here' is Freud's grandson Ernst. For many commentators, Freud's analysis of his grandson's game represents a major shift in his thinking. Taken as a game that represents the response to the trauma of real separation, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* renders the reality principle as central to psychic life (displacing the pleasure principle as central force). Indeed, fort/da is understood to be a game of mourning. Eric L. Santner argues that:

Bereft by the mother's absence, and more generally by the drawing awareness that the interval between himself and his mother opens up a range of unpredictable and potentially treacherous possibilities, he re-enacts the opening of that abysmal interval within the controlled space of a primitive ritual. The child is translating, as it were, his fragmented narcissism into the formalised rhythms of symbolic behaviour; thanks to this procedure, he is able to administer in controlled doses the absence he is mourning.³⁶

As Santner goes on to argue, not only does this process empower the child, but it is an empowerment won as a cultural achievement; as he puts it: 'This empowerment is called creativity; it is the capacity for play, for symbolic behaviour in accordance with rules and forms.'³⁷

Returning, then, to Freud's key text, Caruth seeks to explore the significance of the child's game for trauma theory. Noting the formal juxtaposition of the soldiers' recurring nightmares of battle and the child's repetitive game of fort/da, she argues that their relationship has been ignored. Trauma theory has typically focused on the nightmare and neglected consideration of the child's game, while on the other hand commentary on the child's game has ignored the soldiers' nightmare. For Caruth, however, their relationship is crucial for understanding Freud's insight. By reading Freud's analysis of the fort/da in the context of trauma theory, Caruth is not only concerned to establish a place for the child/subject in psychoanalysis free from the dictates of the Oedipal complex (achieving, as I have already noted, an account of traumatic history beyond the reach of repression), she is also keen to illuminate the contribution made by the child's play to trauma theory. Departing from the convention of reading the fort/da game in terms of mourning and mastery, Caruth begins by identifying in Freud's own oscillating analysis an inability to clearly read the significance of the fort in relation to the da. At times she argues the places much greater emphasis on the pleasure afforded by making things disappear from view. This leads Caruth to maintain that:

The creative activity of the child's game ... does not ultimately involve a symbolic representation of the mother's pleasurable return, but repeats,

32. Ball, Introduction: Trauma and its Institutional Destinies', op. cit., pp28-9.

33. Ibid., p294.

34. Ball, Introduction: Trauma and its Institutional Destinies', op. cit., pp28-9.

35. Caruth, Caruth, 'Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival', *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January (2001), pp 7-27.

38 Caruth, 2001, op. cit., p9.

in a kind of stammer that interrupts its story, the painful memory of her departure. Like the soldiers' dreams, the game thus re-enacts the very memory of a painful reality. What is most surprising in the child's game, however, is that this re-enactment of reality in the game places repetition at the very heart of childhood, and links the repetition to a creative act of invention.³⁸

39 Ibid., p12.

Here, there is a crucial difference between the repetition at the heart of the child's play and that at the centre of the soldiers' dreams, namely, 'the game remains, still, an act of creation that, unlike the dream of the war veterans, does not simply compulsively repeat a history it doesn't own but creates, in its repetition, something new'.³⁹ Caruth reads the game of *fort/da* as a form of play that does not blindly repeat the past, but is rather a creative performance that represents a move toward life. Thus, the 'departure into life is not simply the awakening that repeats an original death, but an act of parting that distinguishes, precisely, between death and life'.⁴⁰ The game of *fort/da* thereby links repetition to a creative act of invention, and as such draws a line between life and death, between a present dominated by the past and one dominated by a future horizon. As Whitehead notes,

While the act of throwing out the reel may be read as a gesture of compulsive return, the overlaying of the child's language in the sounds of 'o-o-o' (*fort*) and 'a-a-a' (*da*) links the repetition to a creative act of invention. It is this juxtaposition of the death drive – the enactment of compulsive return – and the life drive – a creative act of parting – which is located by Caruth as central to trauma theory.⁴¹

41. Anne Whitehead, 'A Still, Small Voice: Letter-writing, Testimony and the Project of Address in Ery Hillisam's *Letters from Westerbork: Cultural Values*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January (2001), p87.

Caruth's turn to the child thus makes a significant difference to the framework of trauma theory, which typically takes the soldiers' adult response to trauma as the model for the human mind. By displacing the emphasis on the adult survivor, she not only introduces a model of the traumatised mind which is not predicated on the notion of childhood as the site of the pleasure principle, but also places the creative/playful energy of the life drive in juxtaposition to the death drive. Here, the play (*of language*) constituting the child's game allows the child to distinguish life from death, and is, in a sense, a refusal to follow the mother into the void of non-existence.

As already noted, Caruth arrives at this conclusion by departing from the usual ways of reading the game of *fort/da*, accounts that generally take their leave from Freud's own substantive analysis. In keeping with her commitment to deconstruction, Caruth offers a reading of Freud's text that moves beyond the terms of his own explicit analysis and focuses instead on the aporias, gaps and silences that structure his writing. Drawing a line between the worked through concepts of Freud's analysis and the textuality of his oeuvre, Caruth insists on listening to Freud at the literary level. Explaining her general approach in *Unclaimed Experience*, she writes

In my own endeavour at interpretation ... I attempt not just to follow each author's argument in its explicit reference to traumatic experience ... My main endeavour is, rather, to trace in each of these texts a different story, the story or the textual itinerary of insistently recurring words or figures. The key figures my analysis uncovers and highlights - in their insistence, here engender stories that in fact emerge out of the rhetorical potential and the literary resonance of these figures, a literary dimension that cannot be reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes, and that, beyond what we can know or theorize about it, stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound.⁴²

42 Caruth, 1996 op. cit., p5.

Arguably, Caruth's reading of Freud – which insists on the child's creative freedom - works to figure the silent becoming of history as the 'forgotten wound' of psychoanalysis. But as the terms of her analysis suggest, registering this 'forgotten' history requires creative reading in itself. Thus Caruth discovers the theoretical importance of the child's play 'not as a concept but as a kind of language'.⁴³ Here, Caruth finds the efficacy of Freud and psychoanalysis in a 'not fully articulated language of theory', and argues that the future of psychoanalysis must take into account the 'individual's capacity for play', for this is the condition by which the 'possibilities of Freud's not yet articulated insight are handed over to us'.⁴⁴ Caruth argues,

44. Ibid., p21.

I would suggest that it is only in listening to this second and literally creative element in Freud's own writing, that the theory of trauma, now so prevalent in numerous disciplines, can extend itself beyond the theory of repetition and catastrophe, beyond the insight of the death drive, into the insight enigmatically passed on in the new notion of the drive to life. As such the theory of trauma does not limit itself to a theoretical formulation of the centrality of death in culture, but constitutes – in Freud's, and our own, historical experience of modernity – an act of parting that itself creates and passes on a different history of survival.⁴⁵

45. Ibid.

Here, it is possible to argue that in order for insights of psychoanalysis to survive, trauma scholars must be prepared to read Freud outside the explicit terms set by his own writing. And, indeed, Caruth exploits the opportunity this provides by focusing on Freud's footnote reference to the death of his daughter – Sophie, the mother of Ernst. Using its status as a structural supplement as well as its actual content – which works also to bury the fact that he is referring to his own daughter's death - Caruth is able to argue that Freud's 'real' insight into trauma is not likely to exist as a worked through concept. As a result, Freud cannot be taken 'as read', but must be worked through, if not analysed with all the liberty formally attributed to psychoanalysis.

Obviously, this method of reading requires taking liberties with the

43 Caruth, 2001 op. cit., p24, in 1

'original' text. Peggy Phelan argues in her own critical response to Caruth's reworking of Freud's analysis of the fort/da game that,

the repetitions citing of the Fort/Da game throughout the critical literature has transformed the game in ways that Freud could not have anticipated. When Ernst repeated himself, and Freud wrote about Ernst's repetitions, something was born that outlives all the 'original' players. This supplement within the act is always veiled, screened, from the 'original' performance. The act of publishing the analysis invites an encounter with an unknown other, with an eye beyond one's own ability to see.⁴⁶

The 'original' game is always transformed through reading, yet the departure brings the possibility of new insight. There is no way of following the 'original'.

Needless to say that the liberty taken by Caruth has met with critique. In her accomplished text, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys launches a sustained critique of Caruth's arrogation of Freud. Leys is critical of the manner in which Caruth 'participates in a general tendency to appropriate psychoanalysis for discussions of the Holocaust and the post-Holocaust condition',⁴⁷ as well as appropriating the 'notion of trauma as a *critical concept* in order to support her performative theory of language'.⁴⁸ Leys is critical of what she understands as the fundamental reorientation of Freud's work since this can only proceed by stripping his key concepts of their substantive meaning. In the hands of Caruth, Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is 'stripped of the idea of the retroactive conferral of meaning on past experiences and [is] reduced instead to the idea of a literal if belated repetition of the traumatic event'.⁴⁹ Ultimately, this leaves Leys feeling an:

impatience with the sloppiness of [Caruth's] theoretical arguments; in the name of close reading she produces interpretations that are so arbitrary, willful, and tendentious as to forfeit all claim to believability. Finally, I am unsympathetic to the way in which she tends to dilute and generalise the notion of trauma: in her account the experience (or nonexperience) of trauma is characterised as something that can be shared by victims and nonvictims alike, and the unbearable sufferings of the survivor as a pathos that can and must be appropriated by others.⁵⁰

In order to expose the 'sloppiness' of Caruth's arguments, Leys carefully tracks Caruth's use of citations and - in what amounts to a game of textual trumping - Leys cites Caruth citing Freud only then to cite the 'original' text in full. She thus seeks to demonstrate how, through strategic omissions, Caruth alters the meaning of the passages she draws from Freud. If, as I suggested earlier, trauma theory represents the effort of deconstruction to find a way to think language and reference in terms that do not fall prey to

the dynamic in which every textual affirmation meets with a denial, then it is the case that Leys is not convinced by Caruth's labour. It is not my concern here to meet Leys's impressive scholarly effort with a further effort to trump her moves, except on one technical point. As far as I know, Caruth has never advanced her analysis 'in the name of close reading'. Indeed, it might be better to read Caruth's method as a kind of 'strong misreading', a strategy associated with the work of Harold Bloom (who is one of the contributors to the *Trauma* collection). According to Dominick LaCapra, Bloom's notion of 'strong misreading' can be understood as a supplement to the method of deconstruction usually associated with Derrida and de Man.⁵¹ Denoting a specific relationship between reader and text, LaCapra likens the practice of a strong misreading 'to the "riff" in jazz, wherein one musician improvises on a tune or on the style of an earlier musician'.⁵² In practice, however, a strong misreading translates as 'disseminatory writing'. 'Dissemination in general', as LaCapra argues,

supplements deconstruction through an active intervention in which a text is indeed rewritten in terms of possibilities that were underexploited or even unexplored by its author and perhaps remain submerged in the text. At its most extreme this rewriting is a ludic improvisation that follows associative processes of a waking dream, making more or less regulated and lucid use of the processes Freud disclosed in dream-work. [...] Reading that follows associative processes is thus a procedure that emulates psychoanalytic mechanisms. Its performative quality indicates that it does not simply copy or imitate the manifest content of the text being read but actually makes something happen (or makes history in its own way) through associations and improvisations.⁵³

If Leys reaction is anything to go by, Caruth's reading of Freud is a distinct riff, a departure that works as a writing of Freud and not a reading. More provocatively, if a strong misreading emulates psychoanalytic mechanisms then Caruth's reading is Freud's writing. Pace Leys, Caruth is not duty bound to be a faithful reader of Freud; she, like any reader, is, indeed, free to play with his words, his writing, his language. As Phelan puts it, 'The game is about finding something one cannot see by finding other ways to establish its identity'.⁵⁴ And even if Leys finds Caruth theoretically clumsy and inarticulate, as Phelan also argues here, 'The wager of critical writing is that one's stuttering insight will be extended beyond oneself'.⁵⁵

My argument hardly allows for reading Caruth's work as sacrosanct, thus I find problematic those attempts that try to rescue her work from popular accounts of trauma. Elsaesser, for example, takes Caruth's work as an example of the 'more academically respectable form' of trauma theory and utterly condemns those theorists who have reduced trauma theory to a 'theory of victimhood and a politics of blame, in which various ethnic, gender or sexual preference groups vie (sometimes with each other) for a place in the sun of

46. Peggy Phelan,

'Converging Glances: A Response to Cathy N. Davidson's "Parting Words", *Cultural Values*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January, 2001, p31.

47. Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p270.

48. *Ibid.*, p276.

49. *Ibid.*, pp270-1.

50. *Ibid.*, p305.

51. Dominick LaCapra, *History & Reading: Inquittal Events, Unsettling*

Studies, University Toronto Press, Toronto 2000, p4

52. *Ibid.*, p46.

53. *Ibid.*, p45.

54. Phelan, 'Converging Glances', op. cit., p37.

55. *Ibid.*, p38.

56. Elsaesser, 'Traumodernism as Mourning Work', op. cit., p.194.

57. Mowitz, op. cit., p.277.

58. Phelan, 'Converging Glances', op. cit., p.88.

59. *Ibid.*, p.85.

60. Caruth, 1995, op. cit., p.5.

61. I am grateful to Graeme Gilloch for this analogy and the question it generated.

righteous indignation (or lucrative litigation)⁵⁶. Similarly, Mowitz refers to the "trauma industry" that has risen up around [Caruth's] work, depriving it, in a certain sense, of its ontological dignity⁵⁷. Both critics write as if the 'fall' of trauma theory into mass production amounts to the loss of a sacred object. My argument is that Caruth's work, like Freud's, does not exist as an ontologically integral object, it is simply destined to be read. Moreover, as Phelan argues, Caruth invites us to read her work within its own creative register. Thus, although Phelan applauds Caruth's attempt to link the story of the soldiers' nightmares to the story of the child's game, this process of assimilating and understanding the soldiers' reliving of trauma 'robs the 'game of seeing/reading' trauma.⁵⁸ For Phelan there is a limit to the Caruth. Indeed, mindful of the fact that Caruth's article was dedicated to the recent death of her mother - a practicing psychoanalyst - Phelan reads Caruth's creativity once again in the tradition of mastery and mourning. But this critical turn is the point of reading. Indeed, Caruth offers this counsel herself when she advocates 'a respectful ingratitude, an ingratitude that in Maurice Blanchot's words "turns away" in order to listen better'.⁶⁰ Following Phelan following Caruth following Freud, trauma theory is predicated on the possibility of insight. This then is a game of 'follow my reader'⁶¹ and it leads us to my opening quotation and the manner in which Caruth appointed the challenge set by trauma. According to Caruth, the disciplines of psychoanalysis, medical psychiatry, sociology and history are called upon to understand the intellectual affront caused by trauma. This is an impossible task: intellectual disciplines cannot think their limit, which is why Caruth supplements her list with the idea that 'even literature' is called upon to explain what we cannot explain. Reading trauma requires the creative and endless possibilities held by writing, which is the point made by Elsaesser. To this end, then, the liberty of reading is writing.

BE ALARMED!

Michael Calderbank

Surrealism: Desire Unbound, Tate Modern, London, 2001.

'To give people courage', wrote the young Karl Marx in a strikingly surrealist vein, 'we must teach them to be alarmed by themselves'.¹ The Surrealists, too, demonstrated that the more we try to grasp our own 'nature', the more inexorably we are struck by the absence, at once alarming and liberatory, of a fixed core of identity. Instead, we discover the scandalous truth that what underpins this subjectivity is the most disturbingly 'other', the most outrageously unthinkable. Deeply influenced by the discoveries of psychoanalysis, the Surrealists believed that, like dreams, their art was geared to the expression of 'desire' in all its delirious and irrational forms. Surrealism was understood as a revelatory glimpse of the possible, in contrast to an aesthetic that seeks only to mirror that which is immediately given. The Surrealists deeply resented attempts to reduce their status to that of a literary or artistic movement, claiming instead that of a revolutionary project aimed at the transformation of existing reality. In this light, the term 'desire' is extraordinarily polyvalent: capable of providing a strong thematic coherence to Tate Modern's exhibition, whilst at the same time being sufficiently flexible to allow the full magnitude of Surrealism's concerns to be properly apprehended. Yet for the exhibition to be adequate to the Surrealist conception of 'desire', it must be capable of evoking the 'interpretive delirium' of which André Breton speaks, when we are taken 'ill prepared ... by a sudden fear in the forest of symbols'.² Can their art evoke, as they intended, a sense of alarm so profound as to be capable of shaking the very foundations of our lives?

Although this is perhaps the most prominent exhibition of Surrealist works in Britain since the International Surrealist Exhibition held in 1936, it is by no means an isolated phenomenon. Since the 1980s there has been a resurgence of interest in Surrealism. This is a remarkable turn-around for a movement that had achieved near-pariah status: rejected alike by the austere modernist formalism of Clement Greenberg, Parisian existentialism; a strain of feminism that saw in Surrealism both the idealisation and the exploitation of 'woman'; and even, on occasion, by the, otherwise more sympathetic Situationists. Raoul Vaneigem, for instance, speaks of the spectacular-capitalist recuperation of surrealist imagery.³ For many years Surrealism went either condemned or neglected. So why the sudden re-emergence of interest in a vanguard whose leadership had for so long been regarded as a failure? One reason for its reappraisal, it might be ventured, is the entrenchment of poststructuralist discourse within the Anglophone

1. Karl Marx, Contribution Critique of I Philosophy & Right', cited Koldakowski, *Carutts of M* Vol.1, Oshfor Oxford Univ Press, 1978.

2. André Bre *Elamant Form*, translated by Ann Caws as *Late*, Lincol University of Nebraska Pn 1987.

3. See Raoul Vaneigem, *A History of Sur* Donald Nich Smith (trans. Edinburgh, J Press, 2000.