

## **Introduction**

**Beatriz Caballero Rodriguez and Caroline Verdier**

Trauma, just like other psychosomatic concepts in medical history such as shock and stress, has been subjected to a variety of interpretations across disciplines since it emerged in the nineteenth century as a notion to capture previously undiagnosed or misdiagnosed psychological experiences and conditions which became increasingly visible in modern societies and cultures. Yet, trauma remains a highly contested term that has seen numerous redefinitions as its place in popular and medical discourse is continually under scrutiny.

This special issue stems from the international conference *Trauma and Gender in 20<sup>th</sup> Century European Literature*, organised in March 2016 at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow under the aegis of the *Centre for the Social History of Health and Healthcare*, and with the kind support of the Wellcome Trust.<sup>1</sup> The studies it includes focus on cultural representation of trauma and gender in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe. The fact that the history of the concept of trauma is inextricably linked to war means that our understanding of trauma has traditionally been tinged by the patriarchal discourse. By taking gender specifically into account, this special issue aims to draw attention to the intersection between gender, literature and trauma, so that our understanding and our models of trauma become more nuanced, interdisciplinary and versatile.

In his influential book *Memory, War, and Trauma*, Nigel Hunt explains how "[i]n order to understand psychological trauma we have to understand traumatic memory".<sup>2</sup> What is more, literature plays a pivotal role in helping us to get a fuller understanding of traumatic memory. Following Hunt, this volume argues the usefulness of fiction - and the creation of narratives through literature, films or plays - as an effective way to help sufferers cope with their traumatic memories; as well as constituting a significant and untapped source of potential research data for psychologists.

Our premise is that the discussion of mental health in literature may constitute a symptomatic representation of existing views, but it may also constitute a subversive discourse and even a coping mechanism. The emphasis placed on verbalization by literature and psychoanalysis suggests the use of narration as a therapeutic tool. Trauma sufferers themselves may find their experiences echoed in the text, hence overcoming a common sense of isolation. Some trauma victims may have been given a voice in the text, despite perhaps having remained silent themselves. Moreover, the potential for healing in literature should not be underestimated, as the act of writing, but also reading may become a powerful instrument of recovery for

*Despite being published in 2016 vol 5:2, this article was accepted on 13/12/2017 and published 11/06/2018.*

some trauma sufferers. In fact, let us stop here for a moment and reconsider the word recovery, which suggests going back to a former stage. Hence, upon a closer look, recovery in this sense is not and should not be the aim of someone affected by trauma, as Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535 BC - 475 BC) already knew full well, everything is subject to change; nothing stays the same. Thus, the pursuit of recovering a former state of being, that is, of picking up life exactly where we left it before the traumatic experience is not just unrealistic, but more seriously, it means we are just setting ourselves up for failure. This is where literature can help again. As Hunt explains, the essence of drama in particular is recounting the story of a traumatic event and how the person or people involved dealt and coped with it. The idea is that through the power of stories, the ones we construct and tell ourselves and others as well as the ones we read, we create and shape our identity and, crucially, we also create meaning. In Hunt's words, "[i]n order to successfully process the traumatic recollections, trauma victims must recognise the meaning of their suffering. This is not a matter of reverting to a former state, but an acceptance that things are permanently changed, and thus a learning experience."<sup>3</sup> Healing after the experience of trauma should not be understood as recovery, but as growth.

However, although the existing research in various fields from medicine to psychoanalysis delivers a wide variety of interpretations and approaches to understanding and dealing with trauma, it does not generally account for the role of gender in the verbalization/writing of trauma consequently nor does it conceptualize trauma as a distinctively gendered experience only infrequently. In this context, it is useful to remind ourselves of Luce Irigaray's words in *Je, Tu, Nous*: "How could discourse not be sexed when language is? [...] Differences between men's and women's discourses are thus the effect of language and society, society and language."<sup>4</sup> In order to address this, some authors, like Lynne Hanley, have taken a novel approach to the subject by publishing a collection of various short stories about the experience of war from a woman's perspective alongside a series of critical essays about the wars, thus inviting the reader to reflect on the relationship between war, trauma, and gender.<sup>5</sup> We believe her work constitutes a leading example of the significance that addressing the intersection between trauma, gender and literature may have for the discipline of Trauma Studies. Yet, further research needs to be made in this area and we hope that this publication contributes to addressing this need.

To this effect, this special issue will explore how the axis between trauma and gender intersects in a range of narratives by men and women

writers and film makers across Europe. It will discuss the ill-effects of war as experienced by soldiers, but also of its long-lasting impact on civilians as manifested in different forms of trauma. In other words, it will look, from the perspective of gender, into the expression of trauma caused either by the historical context (World War I, World War II, Francoism...) but also caused by personal events. In so doing, it is significant to notice that some recurrent themes emerge, such as silence, rape, illness, death and, indeed, the trauma of gender itself.

Regarding structure, it should be noted that given the many overlapping themes and time-span, as well as the transnational nature of many of the contributions, no single criteria has been used to order them, other than to attain a sense of coherence through the different explorations of trauma and gender presented here, as detailed below.

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The volume opens with the contributions of Anna Branach-Kallas and France Grenaudier-Klijn which centre on the silence surrounding trauma from both World War I and World War II. On the one hand, Anna Branach-Kallas offers a comparative study of the quiet trauma in novels in four British and French First World War novels focussing in particular on the trauma suffered by women and families during the conflict. Her article shows how three women writers explore various facets of trauma during the Great War, pointing out similarities between the distress of their female protagonists and the combat stress experienced by their male protagonists at the front, yet also highlighting important differences and thus showing that trauma and war are gendered experiences. On the other hand, France Grenaudier-Klijn provides an interesting perspective on gender in the work of the recipient of the 2014 Nobel Prize in Literature Patrick Modiano; she explores how, in some of his narratives, female silence associated to trauma can be perceived as symptom of the traumatic past, as evidence of (female) resilience and agency, and as an aesthetically- and ethically-informed response to the aporia of the unspeakable.

Following on this, Beatriz Caballero Rodriguez' study entitled "Gender as Trauma in Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*" engages with a surrealist reply to the trauma and atrocities of World War I. Her article shifts our focus from literature to visual representation as she discusses Buñuel's and Dali's influential masterpiece and, to borrow Andrew Webber's term,<sup>6</sup> its traumatophilic tendencies with specific relation to gender. She argues that this film proposes a subversive reading of traditional gender divisions, as illustrated by various scenes of sexual desire and violence, as well as through the provocative representation of gender-blending and transgender characters. Keeping a link with Spain, Caragh Wells' focus on Carmen

Laforet's 1952 *La isla y los demonios* offers a consideration of the relation between love and trauma and whether the experience of love functions as an antidote to trauma or has the potential to exacerbate existing psychological suffering.

The last section of this special issue is devoted to articles all considering trauma that is not necessarily or not only linked to war or conflict but also to personal events and memories such as rape, loss of a child, of a parent and illness, to name but a few themes dealt with by our contributors.

Mark Lee's analysis of prolific Belgian author Amélie Nothomb's representation of trauma investigates to what degree the silenced trauma of her rape as a teenager contributes to an erasure, if not a confusion of gender representation in her literary imagination. This refusal of gender is notably expressed through anorexia, one of the aspects associated with trauma and gender that also runs through the next article of this volume, in which Caroline Verdier explores illness, both as a trigger for and as a consequence of trauma. She emphasises how, for French contemporary author Delphine de Vigan, writing can be viewed as a response to traumatic family and childhood memories as well as to the illness they subsequently triggered for herself and for her mother.

There are many other ways to overcome trauma, and Enda McCaffrey's original contribution looks into turning to nature as a strategy for some authors. Thus, in his article entitled "The Eco-poetics of Reparation: Sebald, Darrieussecq and Barthes", he explores the displacement of the effects of trauma to the eco-poetics of reparation and examines the ways in which a textual turn to nature serves a reparative function, irrespective of gender.

Finally, by way of "Postscript", Lucia Aiello concludes this special issue with a contribution by the same name, in a reference to the title of the final chapter of Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) which constitutes the main object of her analysis. Here, Aiello provides a much-needed overview and critique of the existing theoretical approaches to trauma and gender in literature and trauma studies, while also pointing out the need to consider gender analysis as an essential, constituent component in the study of trauma.

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<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank the Wellcome Trust for supporting this project, and also Professors Jim Mills and Matthew Smith at the University of Strathclyde for their invaluable advice.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel C Hunt, *Memory, War, and Trauma* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 165

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, *Memory, War, and Trauma* , 163

<sup>4</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25

<sup>5</sup> Lynne Hanley, *Writing war: Fiction, Gender and Memory* (United States: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991)

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Webber, "Cut and Laced: Traumatism and Fetishism in Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*," in *Projected Shadows: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Representation of Loss in European Cinema*, ed. A. Sabbadini (Hove; New York: Routledge, 2007), 92-101 (96, 98)