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**POSTSTRUCTU
RALIST
REDEMPTION:
THE
INFLUENCE OF
DE MAN ON
TRAUMA
THEORY**

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Introduction

Trauma is a term that comes from the ancient Greek word signifying a physical “wound.” While it has been in use for a long time, only comparatively recently it has entered the field of psychology to signify a mental wound¹. As Lucy Bond and Stef Craps argue, through the concept of trauma “we have found new ways to categorize, represent, and exploit distressing experiences” (2-3). Such a relevant subject to our daily lives also made its place in literature. This new way of expressing complex psychological situations caught the attention of many artists and, as a result, it became “the focus of numerous novels, artworks, films, songs, and video games” (Bond and Craps 3). Many literary works like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992) reflect the effects of trauma through literature. As Anne Whitehead contends, “[t]he desire among various cultural groups to represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma has given rise to numerous important works of contemporary fiction” (1).

The popularity of trauma is also apparent in everyday life. However, the “transition from professional to popular discourse has arguably led to a loss of specificity in its meaning and application” (Bond and Craps 4). The colloquial use of trauma serves to define different negative experiences as *traumatic* to underline the degree of impact it had on a person. As Micale and Lerner wrote “...trauma has become a metaphor for the struggles and challenges of late twentieth-century life, a touchstone in a society seemingly obsessed with suffering and victimization” (1). This usage has only grown since the beginning of the twenty-first century. For Ruth Leys, trauma is “one of the signal concepts of our time” (Leys 10). The aim of this thesis is to investigate trauma as a concept in literary theory.

¹ Oxford University Press. “Trauma, N., Etymology.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, July 2023, doi.org/10.1093/OED/1503923341.

The first official definition of trauma both inspired its definition in trauma theory and drew interest to this phenomenon from the field of literary theory. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) became a diagnosable disorder with the publication of the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980. In this edition of the DSM, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is described as a response to “a psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of usual human experience”(1980). The symptoms include “reexperiencing the traumatic event and numbing of responsiveness to ... the external world” (1980). While reexperiencing a traumatic event occurs as flashbacks, recurring nightmares or feeling and acting like the traumatic event is happening again in the present time, numbing occurs as detachment from the world and social affairs. These two core symptoms combined with two or more of the additional symptoms like getting startled easily, having trouble sleeping or concentrating, feeling guilty for surviving, difficulty in remembering things and avoiding events and environments that reminds of the traumatic event form the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. Even though the definition and the symptoms of PTSD have changed in the IV and V editions of DSM, the third edition of DSM was the most recent one while the founding works of literary trauma studies were being written. The definition of PTSD is important for the context of trauma theory because the general definition of trauma in trauma theory comes from *DSM-III*. This definition of trauma is a historical milestone as well as an important source for the conceptualisation of trauma.

Trauma studies is multidisciplinary in its nature. From psychology to literature and many other fields as well as daily life, trauma is in relation with many things and it is impossible to analyse this phenomenon from one point of view. As Luckhurst says

Without a multi-disciplinary knowledge, there can only be an unappetizing competition between disciplines to impose their specific conception of trauma. We

need another model for understanding the tortuous history and bewildering contemporary extent of a paradigm that is an intrinsically inter-disciplinary conjuncture. (Luckhurst 14)

In addition to the interdisciplinary nature of trauma studies, the definition of trauma and the diagnostic criteria of PTSD has changed multiple times over the years which requires the scholars to constantly review the works on trauma. While many new theories of trauma use updated information, Caruth's theory stayed practically the same. Caruth's theory is still at the center of trauma studies, not as a useful theoretical framework but as a point of reference. In many academic works the discussion on trauma starts with discussing the shortcomings and errors of trauma theory. *Trauma* (2020) by Lucy Bond and Stef Craps examines the shortcomings and limits of trauma theory. The editorial work of J. Roger Kurtz, *Trauma and Literature* (2018) involves essays that investigate the problems of trauma theory, such as "Problems in Representing Trauma" by Marinella Rodi-Risberg and "Trauma in Non-Western Contexts" by Irene Visser. In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Craps suggests that "a decolonized trauma theory can act as a catalyst for meaningful change" (8). Michelle Balaev's editorial work "broadens the parameters of literary trauma theory by suggesting that extreme experience cultivates multiple responses and values" (Balaev 4). These academic works refer to Caruth's theory to point out the problems and attempt to provide solutions.

The term and concept of trauma has transformed literary theory. An example of this transformation is the work of Cathy Caruth, through which the field of trauma theory emerges. This theory aimed "to examine the impact of the experience, and the notion, of trauma on psychoanalytic practice and theory, as well as on other aspects of culture such as literature and pedagogy, the construction of history in writing and film, and social or political activism" (Caruth 1995, 4). Caruth paved the way for a deeper understanding of the complex

dynamics of trauma and its effects on the human psyche and different aspects of culture while she herself became a leading figure in the field. Yet, even though her work on trauma is path-breaking, it has also been criticized. Caruth built on the psychoanalytical origins of trauma to work out a theory of textuality, which remains controversial.

Many literary works use the dominant model of trauma to represent this paradoxical phenomenon's effects. The gaps, repetitions and fragmented temporalities are characteristics of the trauma novel. Anne Whitehead points out that "writers of trauma fiction found out that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (2004, 3). The conceptualisation of trauma and its symptoms is important sources for literature. Critics like Luckhurst have argued for a trauma aesthetic. Yet, Luckhurst himself isolates the main problem of this aesthetic, and that is, its overlap with what is commonly known as poststructuralism. For Luckhurst trauma aesthetic draws its inspiration from the works of "Lyotard, Derrida and Cathy Caruth's revision of Paul de Man" (Luckhurst 82). Aesthetic theory that is fuelled by poststructuralist ideas "reads trauma as an aporia of representation, placing emphasis on difficulty, rupture and impossibility, consistently privileging aesthetic experimentation" (Luckhurst 82-3). However, Luckhurst also points out that there are other ways of representing trauma in literature. In his words; "Beyond post-structuralist trauma theory and its trauma canon, a wide diversity of high, middle and low cultural forms have provided a repertoire of compelling ways to articulate that apparently paradoxical thing, the trauma narrative" (Luckhurst 83). So there are in fact ways to represent trauma which defy Caruth's theory.

This thesis is a study of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and consists in the analysis of Caruth's landmark works, such as *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative, and History* (1996) as well as other academic works.

It discusses how trauma theory emerged, its theoretical framework, its influences, the scholars whose work inspired and drove it, such as Paul de Man, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, the connection between trauma theory and deconstruction as well as the limits and critique of that connection. The chapters include the emergence of trauma theory, an explanation of Caruth's theory, an explanation of de Man's ideas on language, and the close reading of Caruth's chapter on de Man, Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), and *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). The thesis aims to show that Caruth's trauma theory is a theory of language and textuality which is highly influenced by Paul de Man's version of deconstruction. The study ultimately suggests that such a multidisciplinary concept like trauma needs a better approach than a language focused theory that aims to prove a point on something not necessarily related to the subject.

CHAPTER 1

CARUTH'S TRAUMA THEORY

The emergence of trauma theory in literary studies

Trauma theory has been influential in the field of literary theory. What started off with Cathy Caruth and her colleagues such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Geoffrey Hartman became an important source for the discussion of trauma in literature. Cultural memory studies, which emerged at a similar time, was highly influenced by trauma theory because of trauma's relation to memory and the focus on culturally significant traumatic events like the Holocaust. New concepts came about, like vicarious or secondary trauma which suggests that trauma is transmissible, and cultural or "collective trauma", which Kai Erikson defines as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality"(1976, 154).

Caruth's landmark work, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) is an edited volume consisting of essays by Caruth and her colleagues. Some of the essays were first published in the first and the fourth issues of *American Imago* in 1991, guest edited by Caruth. The foundations were laid in *American Imago* but the publication of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* is the undeniable starting point of trauma theory in literary studies. Contributions to Caruth's volume were by colleagues and scholars from Yale University, where Caruth graduated and worked as a professor. These scholars come from similar academic backgrounds and share a common understanding of trauma with each other. Among these scholars, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub wrote *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1991). Dori Laub is also the cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University along with Geoffrey Hartman, who was the supervisor of Caruth's doctoral dissertation. This group of

scholars from Yale comprised the central figures of the emergence of trauma theory. Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom were a part of the Yale School of deconstruction, a group of scholars who were influenced by poststructuralist and deconstructive ideas of language. Caruth, Felman and Laub were the next generation of scholars of this particular school of theory; they were students, colleagues and supporters of these scholars. The most prominent figure of this group was Paul de Man, who was a professor at Yale from 1971 until his death in 1983. De Man's ideas on language and referentiality, which build on the work of Jacques Derrida, greatly influenced the group and became central to poststructuralist thought. Some years after de Man's death, in 1988, it was revealed by Ortwin de Graef -who was a graduate student then- that he worked for a pro-Nazi newspaper and published antisemitic essays between 1941 and 1942 while Belgium was under the German occupation. He escaped to the US in 1948 and his past remained secret until 1988, five years after his death. This caused a commotion in the field of literary theory. Poststructuralism was already becoming unpopular and was criticised for being unethical and depoliticised so the revelation about de Man, who was the symbol of deconstruction in the American academy, was the last blow to "finish off a paradigm that was already in decline" (Bond and Craps 2020, 53). In addition to that, this prompted critics to go even further to suggest that deconstruction was "integrally bound to the worldview of national socialism" (Bond and Craps 53). Deconstruction was already being criticised for being unethical because of its tendency to reject human agency through the idea that language can never accurately transmit what it means. But the revelation about de Man's past gave him a bad reputation. Even though there were many critics of de Man he also had some loyal supporters, namely Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Shoshana Felman, who were either colleagues or students of de Man. Even though de Man was dead and discredited by the time trauma theory emerged, due to his influence on the most prominent figures who helped this theory emerge

he is one of the most important names for trauma theory. I would argue that without de Man Caruth's trauma theory would not have existed because his work laid the foundations of the methods of analysis that trauma theory utilizes as well as the framework for the conceptualisation of trauma's failure of linguistic representation.

Caruth's concept of trauma

It is necessary to explain Caruth's concept of trauma which combines different elements like scientific findings, literary theory, Freudian psychoanalysis and the history of the Holocaust to present a distinct understanding of trauma. Caruth defines post-traumatic stress as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (1995, 5). This notion of belatedness is related to Freud's *nachträglichkeit* (afterwardness, latency) which he mentions in relation to his theory of traumatic neurosis. Trauma does not show its symptoms until some time has passed from the traumatic event. The belatedness occurs because "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time" and repeatedly possesses the person (Caruth 1995, 4). The failure to assimilate the event results in the dissociation of the traumatic memory from consciousness; trauma is not available to conscious recall. Between the traumatic event and surfacing of the symptoms there "is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory. The force of this experience would appear to arise [...] in the collapse of its understanding" (7). The traumatic event is considered unknowable and incomprehensible because it was not assimilated in the mind and is not accessible. Not being able to

consciously recall the event prevents the person who suffers from trauma to know or understand the event.

The belated character of traumatic experience is also connected to history because the unassimilated event which comes back to *haunt* the person at another time and another place disrupts the relation between the event and the place and time it happened: “since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (8). When trauma returns belatedly through flashback and nightmares it returns as the exact replication of the event because traumatic event is unassimilated:

modern analysts as well have remarked on the surprising *literality* and nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal. It is this *literality* and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points toward its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event. [...] it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself. If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. (5, emphasis in the original)

Unlike a regular event which can be distorted as it is integrated into the memory traumatic experience is *literal*. Since trauma is not assimilated into memory, it is literal and therefore it is an objective truth of an event which relates it to history. This suggests that an objective history can only exist in the traumatic experience. Paradoxically, trauma both disrupts the relation of the event to the place and time but at the same time preserves it as a *literal* and objective copy of the event. The *literality* of trauma is considered by Caruth to be stemming from trauma being a literal imprint of the event in the mind:

the literal registration of an event [...] appears to be connected, in traumatic experience, precisely with the way it *escapes* full consciousness as it occurs. Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring “engraving” on the mind, the “etching into the brain” of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory. (1995, 152-3; emphasis in the original)

The literality of trauma is interrelated with the inaccessibility of the traumatic memory because integration as a regular memory necessitates elision or distortion of an event or in Caruth’s words “the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort” (152), which is why Caruth is against integration of trauma into “narrative memory”. Narrative memory is the name Pierre Janet, who influenced both Freud and van der Kolk, gave to ordinary memories which are integrated into the mind as memories one can consciously recall, to distinguish them from “traumatic memories” which are memories that are unassimilated and dissociated from the mind thus cannot be remembered wilfully:

Narrative memory consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience (e.g., Janet, 1928). Janet thought that the ease with which current experience is integrated into existing mental structures depends on the subjective assessment of what is happening [...] Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it become dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control (Janet, 1889, 1919-25).² (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995, 160)

² Janet, Pierre. 1889 (1973). *L'automatisme psychologique*. Paris: Société Pierre Janet.
 --- 1919-25 (1984). *Les médications psychologiques*. 3 vols. Paris: Société Pierre Janet.
 --- 1928. *révolution de la mémoire et la notion du temps*. Paris: Cahine.

Narrative memory fundamentally works by interpreting what one experiences according to the past experiences without any attention to details, hence the process of turning events into memory distorts the events. Traumatic memories on the other hand are not interpreted; they are stored in the brain with exact details and cannot be recalled consciously. Despite the fact that traumatic memories cannot be consciously recalled, trauma demands to be witnessed by other people according to Caruth. Answering this demand is not a choice because in trauma theory listening to traumatic experiences is posed as a moral obligation:

trauma opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, *of impossibility*. How does one listen to what is impossible? Certainly one challenge of this listening is that it may no longer be simply a choice: to be able to listen to the impossible, that is, is also to have been *chosen* by it, *before* the possibility of mastering it with knowledge. (Caruth 1995, 10)

So to listen to trauma is a listening of impossibility; it obliges the person to listen to the impossibility without being able to understand it. In addition to that, by promoting listening to the trauma of a person, Caruth promotes a moral obligation which I consider to be an effort to be ethical. The position of the witness is central to trauma theory because it involves transmission and communication which are done either through language or interpreting the failures of language. Trauma theory not only promotes individual listening but it also promotes cross-cultural exchange as well: “This speaking and this listening—a speaking and a listening *from the site of trauma*— does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don’t yet know of our own traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (Caruth 1995, 10). Therefore trauma theory seems to have a “promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement” (Craps 2).

To summarize this section, trauma theory considers trauma as a response to an overwhelming/catastrophic event which results in the failure of integration into the mind as a regular memory and the traumatic memory is stored in the mind without mediation, that is, preserving its exact details, without the ability to consciously recall the event. Traumatic memories present themselves after some time has passed from the event through flashbacks, nightmares and unconscious reenactments which happen against will. Hence, trauma is incomprehensible and irrepresentable because the person who went through the traumatic event does not remember it. Not being able to remember the event and its unassimilated nature, which means that it has not been mediated by meaning making processes, makes trauma a challenging phenomenon in terms of comprehension and representation. The incomprehension and irrepresentability pose a problem for history as well because trauma puts the idea of objective history in question by being the most accurate form of the past but at the same time being inaccessible without being distorted and trauma theory is interested in the connection between trauma and history. The impossibility of telling one's story without having the knowledge of it is one of the central subjects of trauma theory. Caruth highlights the need for a new mode of accessing the impossible truth of trauma and poststructuralist ideas on language and textuality become the key to this new mode. Furthermore, trauma theory claims that trauma demands to be witnessed by other people and it may serve to link different through the new understanding that arises from the impossibility. These elements constitute the general understanding of trauma by Caruth, and the following sections will dive into this understanding in greater detail.

The scientific roots of trauma theory

It is necessary to give the context of Caruth's theory from a scientific perspective to understand how this theory was formed. Since trauma was defined by medical professionals -

such as the diagnostic criteria- Caruth contextualised her understanding of trauma by using scientific findings of Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart as well as Freud's psychoanalytical concept of 'traumatic neurosis'.

Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart's contribution to this theory is providing the scientific basis of trauma as a paradoxical phenomenon which leaves a literal mark on the psyche and is unreachable by conscious recall. Van der Kolk's ideas are taken from important figures of psychoanalysis like Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud; he expands upon the existing literature on trauma. Even though Freud's idea on 'traumatic neurosis' is central to trauma theory, van der Kolk's ideas come in to help when certain ideas of Freud can undermine Caruthian understanding of trauma.

Van der Kolk supports Caruth's claim that trauma is a literal imprint on the mind which failed to be registered as a normal memory. Leys describes this as: "traumatic memory, in its literality, is not integrated into ordinary awareness but is cut off or "dissociated" from consciousness and hence is unavailable for normal recollection." (2000, 239). What van der Kolk's ideas suggest is very important for developing Caruth's trauma theory which is why they circularly support each other. Van der Kolk even quotes Caruth in one of his books titled *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (1996) which he wrote together with two other scholars (Leys 2000, 230). It is interesting to see that a literary theorist made her way into the field of psychiatry.

The impossibility of representation and comprehension lies at the core of the traumatic experience. Since traumatic memory is not registered or "not precisely grasped" and incomprehensible, it becomes impossible to represent or understand and yet, it presents itself through flashbacks and nightmares. Traumatic memory resists conscious recall and comprehension according to the Freudian trauma model. While Caruth acknowledges the fact that trauma needs to be integrated into "narrative memory" to be able to have a testimony and

to cure trauma, she is against the narrativization of trauma because transforming trauma “into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others, knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall” (1995, 153). Following up on the ideas of Pierre Janet, Freud, van der Kolk and van der Hart, Caruth suggests that trauma is a literal imprint on the brain that fails to be registered as a regular memory, because of this elision of being recorded as a regular memory the traumatic memory stays unchanged, uninterpreted or unintegrated.

Paul de Man

This section will briefly introduce Paul de Man’s ideas on deconstruction to give a context of its influence. Paul de Man is a literary critic and theorist whose work on deconstruction was highly influential in the field of literary theory. His works such as *Blindness and Insight* (1971), *Allegories of Reading* (1979) and *Resistance to Theory* (1986) helped him build a legacy as a literary theorist. He belongs to a strand of literary theory called poststructuralism. Poststructuralism refuses the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure who is known for establishing structuralism. Saussure claimed that language works with attaching certain meanings to words. The terms he used for this purpose were signifier and signified. Signifier refers to the words in a language and signified is the object or concept that the signifier refers to, which can also be called the referent. Deconstruction on the other hand “is concerned with the ways in which texts resist being reduced to a coherent and consistent meaning that is *the* meaning of the text” and it focuses on “the resistant materiality of the text” which “produces [...] a number of strictly incompatible meanings that leave the reader faced with the experience of undecidability.” (Bond and Craps, 2020, 50-51). De Man, as well as other poststructuralist theorists like Derrida, theorized that language cannot refer to anything in the external world to create a fixed meaning. Instead the text is undecidable because the meaning

of the word depends on the context and the interpretation of the reader. Therefore a referential failure occurs. De Man claimed that the only realm in which language comes close to referentiality is literature and the related discourse of and literary theory.

Aporia in Caruth's trauma theory and the Ethical Turn

As it will be shown in this section, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory is a theory of language heavily influenced by literary theorist Paul de Man and his deconstructive views. Caruth makes the connection with deconstruction explicit from the beginning in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996). She opens chapter 1 saying that her notion of trauma responds to accusations that poststructuralist criticism is unethical:

Recent literary criticism has shown an increasing concern that the epistemological problems raised by poststructuralist criticism necessarily lead to political and ethical paralysis. The possibility that reference is indirect, and that consequently we may not have direct access to others', or even our own, histories, seems to imply the impossibility of access to other cultures and hence of any means of making political or ethical judgments. To such an argument I would like to contrast a phenomenon that not only arises in the reading of literary or philosophical texts but emerges most prominently within the wider historical and political realms, that is, the peculiar and paradoxical experience of trauma. (11)

After establishing that poststructuralist criticism is criticised for being unethical she claims that the experience of trauma is a "phenomenon" that counters this criticism. According to Caruth, trauma is the proof that poststructuralist criticism can be ethical and political.

The "ethical turn" is a term given to the increasing tendency of literary theory to focus on ethical issues as a response to the criticism that poststructuralism was unethical as well as the revelation of de Man's antisemitic work published in Belgium during the German

occupation, which further fuelled these criticisms because de Man was the most prominent name in poststructuralism. This ethical turn can be the explanation of the ethical and political concerns of trauma theory which employs poststructuralist ideas to “‘read the wound’ with the aid of literature (Hartman 1995, 537)” (Toremans 52). Toremans considers Caruth’s trauma theory as “a response to the challenge of reading “after” de Man – both chronologically and following his example” and he links this view with the challenge that “was formulated by de Man himself at the moment when his critique of linguistic referentiality had reached a point that appeared to signal the end of literary theory” (2018, 52). Toremans points out that towards the end of his life de Man’s writing “persistently foregrounded the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of continuing beyond a radically negative point that appeared to make a systematic theory of literature impossible” (Toremans 56). In the preface of *Rhetoric of Romanticism* de Man says: “The only place where I come close to facing some of these questions about history and fragmentation is in the essay on Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*. [“Shelley Disfigured”] How and where one goes on from there is far from clear” (1984, viii). I would argue that the last sentence from the quote by de Man is answered by Caruth’s trauma theory because trauma theory signalled a new beginning for deconstruction as a mode of accessing the inaccessible. The resistance of trauma to understanding and meaning and yet, still providing meaning from that impossibility of understanding is the solution that Caruth figured out for the *end* of theory. Caruth frames her argument that deconstruction is useful in understanding trauma by using the terminology of deconstruction in building her argument:

we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma, I will argue, we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our

understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (Caruth 1996, 11)

The criticism of deconstruction for being unethical and depoliticised decreased its popularity. The absence of referentiality which denies the connection between the external world and the words in the text was interpreted as a disregard for the real world and thus poststructuralism was “criticized for ignoring or overlooking due to its allegedly excessive emphasis on language” (Bond and Craps 2020, 51). As Colin Davis says:

Their interest in flux, slippages, ambiguities, ambivalence and indeterminacy, and their repudiation of absolute truth claims or immutable values could be portrayed as undermining the very foundations of ethics. ... , their assault on the autonomy of the human subject – leading to the so-called “death of Man”, the destruction or decentring of the subject – seemed to some to reject the possibility of human agency on which ethical choice and action depend. (2020, 36-37)

The *ambivalence and indeterminacy* comes from the rejection of an absolute truth or meaning in the text, since the meaning of the text depends on the interpretation of the reader, the text is undecidable. This undecidability and predisposition of the text is deemed by deconstruction’s detractors as a way of disregarding ethics because ethics depends on a fixed set of values. Such criticism combined with the revelation that de Man was a journalist for a pro-nazi newspaper in Belgium between 1941-1942 and wrote antisemitic articles, was used against poststructuralism “to attempt to discredit and finish off a paradigm that was already in decline. Deconstruction was alleged to have been exposed as integrally bound to the worldview of national socialism” (Bond and Craps, 52). These allegations and criticisms called for a counter move to redeem poststructuralism and de Man’s legacy. This task was taken on by Caruth and her colleagues from Yale School of deconstruction who were either

students or friends with late de Man. Therefore, trauma theory champions an “ethical turn” in literary theory because it aims to redeem poststructuralism and de Manian deconstruction.

As a scholar of literature, Caruth’s perspective is not only heavily influenced by language, but also by de Man’s understanding of language. Caruth’s theory of trauma is essentially a theory of language because it “combined the insights of psychoanalysis and deconstruction to explore the linguistic markers, including gaps and absences in language, that characterized survivor testimonies, literature and film that sought to bear witness to and remember the Holocaust” (Kennedy 2020, 54). Trauma theory aims to provide a language model which would serve as a basis for the deconstructive understanding of language and referentiality. As Bond and Craps contend, it can be seen “as an attempt to reclaim an ethical space for deconstruction by stressing its usefulness as a critical tool for interrogating the relationship between referentiality and historical violence” (Bond and Craps 8). Even though de Man never wrote about trauma, Caruth’s second book on the subject, *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), includes a chapter devoted to the analysis of de Man’s ideas and his analysis of Kant and Kleist which tries to establish a connection between de Man’s work and trauma. This proves not only de Man’s influence, but also the attempt to incorporate de Man himself (who died 12 years before Caruth’s first book on trauma theory *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (1995) was published) into the theory. Caruth incorporated de Man into her theory by using his ideas on language to develop her understanding of trauma as a problem of reference. In doing so, she aims to create a new de Man who is influenced by her. This incorporation is realised by the usage of de Manian deconstruction. As respected trauma scholar Ruth Leys writes, Caruth “assimilate[s] trauma theory to a version of the “deconstructive” views on language and meaning of the literary critic and theorist Paul de Man” (Leys 304). Caruth’s reconceptualization of de Man’s deconstruction in terms of trauma will be further analysed in the next chapter.

Poststructuralism rejects the idea of a language that has direct references, however, trauma is seen as the concept where direct reference can happen. Words do not have a connection with the thing they refer to in the external world just like trauma's absence of connection with consciousness. Trauma is literal, "nonsymbolic and nonrepresentational" (Leys 2000, 272). This literality is preserved as long as trauma is unreachable to our "usual modes of access" (Caruth 1995, 151). As a way of accessing the previously unknown meaning of texts, deconstruction is seen as a suitable tool for this job. Thus, literality of trauma is the most important part of trauma for deconstructive thought, which is why it must be backed by evidence that supports this idea. This is where van der Kolk comes in handy. The notion of "aporia" is the most explicit connection between Caruth's concept of trauma and deconstruction. Aporia means puzzlement or paradox. This was a frequently used term by poststructuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida who "figured the aporia as a blocking of passage, a stalling or hesitation, a foot hovering on the threshold, caught between advancing and falling back, between the possible and the impossible" (Luckhurst 2008, 6). As Luckhurst writes, "De Man's errings and slippages between reference and representation clearly informed Caruth's formulation of the paradoxes of traumatic representation" (2008, 6). Thus the aporia of representation is connected to deconstruction. In the Freudian model and consequently Caruth's understanding of trauma, aporia characterizes the traumatic experience because trauma is paradoxical; it is a memory that cannot be recalled which only shows itself through flashbacks and nightmares and when trauma is recalled it is rendered inaccurate by the meaning making processes of the mind. Thus, traumatic memory is inaccessible by will but accessible with symptoms such as nightmares. Leys refers to this as "*the gap or aporia* in consciousness and representation that is held to characterize the individual traumatic experience." Aporia, Leys explains, "comes to stand for the materiality of the signifier in the sense given the concept by the critic Paul de Man, who theorized a "moment" of materiality

that on the one hand belongs to language but on the other is aporetically severed from the (speech) act of signification or meaning”³ (Leys 266; emphasis added). Luckhurst also draws attention to this characteristic of Caruth’s theory (2008, 6). Aporia not only establishes a connection between deconstruction and trauma but also solidifies its place in trauma theory by constantly keeping an ambiguity or a paradox which can only be interpreted by deconstruction. Therefore, the conceptualisation of trauma as the aporia of representation necessitates the constant use of deconstruction. As it will be shown more evidently in the following chapters, Caruth’s theory usually elaborates on the paradoxes of the traumatic experience, the psychoanalytical definition of trauma is only useful to her as long as it keeps the idea of aporia as the main characteristic of trauma. The problem here is not the paradoxical characteristic of trauma but rather how and why it is used by Caruth.

Being a theory of language, Caruth’s theory fails to create an understanding of the phenomenon of trauma and rather assimilates trauma to a deconstructive framework. Therefore trauma theory aims to prove the point of a certain perspective on language created by de Man.

Concepts related to trauma

This section will introduce, concepts of trauma which emphasise certain characteristics of trauma theory or serve as clarifications for that were deemed necessary by the scholars who proposed them. These concepts are necessary for understanding the problems of trauma theory and will provide further clarification for the discussions in the next chapters. Caruth’s conceptualisation of trauma in trauma theory resulted in other

³ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, 1979); idem, *Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, 1986); idem, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1984).

concepts of trauma either to emphasise certain features, like vicarious trauma which is the transmissibility of trauma to other people, or to clarify certain distinctions that were not made in Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma, such as the difference between victim and perpetrator trauma to clarify the problem of attaining victim status to every person who suffers from trauma. Therefore these concepts highlight certain features of trauma in trauma theory as well as pointing out the need for conceptual clarification which trauma theory failed to address.

Vicarious trauma suggests that being a witness of someone else's trauma may traumatize the witness which is a feature of Caruth's trauma theory. The concepts of "witness" and "testimony" are very important for trauma theory. Since the traumatised subject cannot witness the traumatic experience and thus cannot know their own 'history', trauma theory emphasizes the importance of a listener who becomes the witness of the traumatized subject's testimony. Through this transmission of a history unknown to the person who experienced it, trauma itself is transmitted as well. The narration of trauma is both considered inaccurate and *contagious*, which is confusing and controversial. On this subject, Caruth says:

How does one listen to what is impossible? Certainly one challenge of this listening is that it may no longer be simply a choice: to be able to listen to the impossible, that is, is also to have been chosen by it, before the possibility of mastering it with knowledge. This is its danger—the danger, as some have put it, of the traumas "contagion," of the traumatization of the ones who listen (Terr, 1988). But it is also its only possibility for transmission. (1995, 10)

According to this view, the 'listener' of the recounting of a traumatic event also becomes traumatized and furthermore, this person has no choice but to listen. In Caruth's passage there is no choice but to listen to and, in Laub's words "be a participant and a co-owner of the

traumatic event” (Felman and Laub, 1992, 57). This idea can be considered as overidentification and appropriation of someone else’s trauma. LaCapra presents his concerns over the subject and proposes “emphatic unsettlement” instead of identification to keep a certain distance and protect oneself from the secondary trauma(2014). The main problem with Caruth’s approach is that it dictates the obligation to listen to the trauma and become traumatised in turn. Thus, there is an obligation or inescapability of overidentification with the traumatised person. Furthermore, the nature of secondary trauma is not very clear. Trauma theory is based on event-based trauma but in secondary trauma the event is not experienced by the listener and the traumatising depends on the ability to represent trauma which becomes inaccurate by narrativization and loses its true effect. Lastly, if trauma was as contagious as trauma theory suggests, then everyone who came into contact with representations of trauma are traumatised, which is almost everyone given the amount of trauma representations in literature and film. Through this controversial idea trauma becomes the defining feature of humanity. The effects of witnessing trauma through different mediums such as news, literature, film and even videogames is still a current debate.

In Caruth’s trauma theory the victim and the perpetrator cannot be separated and the Freudian model of trauma is punctual or event-based trauma “according to which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event” (Craps 31). The Freudian model of trauma is exemplified in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) by a hypothetical story of a train accident and this example was quoted by Caruth in both *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* as an exemplary story of trauma:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the

time of the accident. He has developed a “traumatic neurosis.” This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period,” a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease (Freud 1939, 84)

The event-based conceptualisation of trauma is also related to the definition of PTSD in DSM for which it was criticized for.

One of the theories that makes the distinction between event-based traumas and trauma that do not occur from one single event was formulated by historian Dominick LaCapra. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* LaCapra proposes two new terms, “historical trauma” and “structural trauma.” Historical trauma refers to the event-based model of trauma and structural trauma refers to traumas that are not caused by a single event. Before proposing these terms LaCapra talks about absence and loss. He explains “losses are specific and involve particular events, such as the death of loved ones” (LaCapra 2014, 48) which corresponds to historical trauma and thus absence is related to structural trauma which is caused by foundational absences. However absence and loss are not binary oppositions because “the opposite of absence is presence and that of loss is gain” (LaCapra 2014, 48). This distinction was not seen adequate for capturing different kinds of trauma but a distinction had to be made because trauma does not only depend on a single event. The exact moment in time that a single traumatic event happened can be determined but for a systematic and traumatizing process one cannot determine a certain point of time where the failure of the registration of the traumatic memory happens or in LaCapra’s words “it may not be possible to locate or localize the experience of trauma that is not dated or, in a sense, punctual” (LaCapra 2014, 81). Therefore the non-event-based trauma challenges the findings of van der Kolk that the trauma is a literal imprint on the mind which happens when the traumatic experience fails to register as a regular memory. On the matter the inadequacy

of LaCapra's distinction, Alan Gibbs says that structural trauma "is so vaguely defined that it fails to designate a phenomenon that may be described as traumatic in any recognised sense." (2014, 206) because the absence at the core of structural trauma has not been clearly explained.

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Laura S. Brown, a feminist psychotherapist, opposes the idea that trauma is caused by a single event that is "outside the range of human experience"-hence the title of her chapter in the book "Not Outside the Range"- and talks about "insidious trauma"(a term borrowed from Maria Root), which refers "to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit."(1995, 107). These are the traumas that result from ongoing processes or many seemingly normal or common instances over time like oppression, racism or feeling under the threat of being sexually assaulted at any moment in a community where rape is high-base rate crime. It is like "a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event." (Brown 1995, 103). Brown's ideas occur in the same book that Caruth builds her trauma theory and yet no one else in the book take her ideas into account and conversely, use the even-based because Caruth's theory revolves around it. How can one claim ethical and political engagement without touching upon such an important issue?

Furthermore, the most commonly used example of trauma or traumatic event which is the Holocaust was not a single event but consisted of many events and lasted for years, this is another example of the aforementioned confusion. Caruth's insistence on punctual trauma is surprising to Gibbs "given certain roots of Caruth's trauma theory in Holocaust Studies, and the generally insidious nature of trauma suffered by victims of the Shoah"(2014, 15-16). The problem here is not a misunderstanding or a misguidance by not entirely accurate theories of neurobiologists, certain choices were made while constituting the trauma theory and these

choices had drawn the limits of this theory. These limits are so narrow that even the examples given by Caruth do not fit in it, (in one way or another they transcend the boundaries of this theory to reveal that they cannot be confined to these limits). Therefore the confusion does not belong to Caruth, but the theory itself which was constructed by deliberately omitting some challenges to the general understanding of trauma.

The dominant model of trauma and consequently trauma theory has a narrow scope because the definition of PTSD emerged as a response to the needs of Vietnam War veterans and despite this, trauma is considered universal and timeless. Laura Brown criticises the narrow scope of the definition of trauma in her essay titled “Not Outside the Range” in *Trauma: Unclaimed Experience* by saying “The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men.” (1995). Some scholars refuse the timelessness and universality of trauma (Young 1995, Craps 2013, Micale, Lerner 2001). Simply because of the fact that the way that people from different cultures respond to their experiences and the way they express their feelings is different. One of those scholars is Allan Young, who refuses the idea of timelessness by saying “The disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources.” (1995, 5). The examples used by DSM which defined trauma leaves out the experiences of minorities and non-western communities, except for Laura Brown, the scholars who partook in the emergence of trauma theory have failed to address this issue. The examples that are used in the works of Caruth conform to the Eurocentric definition of trauma and she never proposes to challenge the limits of this definition even though the trauma theory is said to be concerned with being ethical and political.

One of the problems of trauma theory that needs conceptual clarification is considering everyone who is traumatised a victim. This is simply not true. The idea that perpetrators can suffer from trauma may seem absurd to some but trauma is “a morally neutral psychological category” which does not separate between victim or perpetrator and thus it does not provide moral superiority to the person when they are called a victim or survivor of trauma (Bond and Craps 119). As LaCapra contends ““Victim” is not a psychological category. It is, in variable ways, a social, political, and ethical category. Victims of certain events will in all likelihood be traumatized by them ... But not everyone traumatized by events is a victim.” (2014, 79). The concept of victim cannot be used as a substitute for referring to trauma sufferers because that would create certain problems, such as a bias towards the traumatised subject. This assumption and conflation of victimhood blurs the lines between victims and perpetrators and takes the agency away from the guilty.

It is a known fact that the emergence of PTSD is due to the activism for the rights of Vietnam War veterans “and thus focuses to a large degree upon perpetrator trauma” and “PTSD amongst American Vietnam veterans is linked to guilt at their culpable role in the horrors they witnessed” (Gibbs 2014: 18). Despite this, the idea of perpetrator trauma was never explored by Caruth and her colleagues because Caruth’s trauma theory is mainly concerned with Holocaust as a prototype of trauma which brings an ethical dilemma to the issue. Gibbs as well, points to “the roots of trauma theory in Holocaust studies” as the main reason, talking about the refusal of understanding the perspective of the perpetrator he says “[w]hile this is a perfectly understandable position for Holocaust survivors and scholars to take, it does produce a problem when contemporary trauma theorists and critics attempt to assimilate or conflate the concept of PTSD with a trauma theory heavily influenced by Holocaust Studies” (Gibbs 2014, 19). This results in the “incorporation of a moral dimension

absent from PTSD” (Gibbs 2014, 19). When a neutral psychological term meets morality it becomes one-sided.

The moral dilemma behind the refusal of perpetrator trauma to be considered as a thing is an ethical and moral problem because there are no boundaries between the guilty and the innocent. The assumption that perpetrator’s cannot suffer from trauma fails on every count because even the examples given by Caruth and the defining historical reason for the emergence of PTSD involves perpetrator trauma. Which begs the question of “whether the strenuous ethical denial of interest in the perpetrator in cultural trauma studies represents an attempt to deny Americans’ possible status as perpetrators” (Gibbs 2014, 159).

If trauma provides moral superiority then this could easily be manipulated with incorporating victim narratives to the perpetrator’s actions. The case of Vietnam war veterans is an example of this. Another example is American government’s identification as a traumatic subject after the 9/11 attacks which provided them a justification for their attacks and invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this case collective trauma was used in order to “decontextualise” and “depoliticise” the reasons for the attack; then the collective trauma “transformed into a sense of collective victimhood ” which was used “to provide spurious justification for undesirable political action” (Gibbs 2014). Furthermore, accepting the phenomenon of perpetrator trauma humanizes the perpetrators, which gives agency to the human subject to be bad and people do not want to feel like a part of evil acts. Considering the perpetrator as a monster is always the easily accepted idea. In Caruth’s works on trauma every traumatised person is considered a victim of trauma. Hence, there is no distinction between the victim/survivor, the perpetrator and “the gray zone of perpetrator-victims” (LaCapra 2014). To sum up, by ignoring the distinction between the victim and the perpetrator and by attributing victimhood to anyone who suffers from trauma, trauma theory generalizes the concept of victimhood to the sufferers of a psychological disorder in

seemingly ethical concerns while it does the exact opposite of what is intended or as Rothberg says “[p]recisely because it has the potential to cloud ethical and political judgments, trauma should not be a category that confirms moral value” (2009, 90). Therefore the distinction between the perpetrator and the victim is necessary.

Criticism

Caruth’s trauma theory was highly criticised by many scholars such as Ruth Leys but it remained as a point of reference for many academic works that aimed to correct or expand Caruth’s theory, such as Stef Craps who sets out to “decolonize” trauma studies in his book *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013) as well as other scholars some of which can be seen in the examples given later on in this thesis. Regarding Leys’ criticism, Luckhurst describes the situation by saying “After this mauling, it might be tempting to discard Caruth, were it not that the length of Leys’ critique acts as a strange sort of monument to its importance.” (2008, 13). Therefore Caruth’s trauma theory remains as a point of departure for the new theories and ideas on the field of trauma studies.

The neurobiological strand of scholarship her theory subscribes to, which is represented by van der Kolk who follows the footsteps of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, provide the scientific basis for the idea of the “literality” of trauma. The traumatic memory stays true only insofar as it stays unreachable to conscious recall because in Caruth’s words “the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort” (1995, 153-4). What this idea suggests is that traumatic memory being integrated into the narrative memory makes it lose its truth. Consequently, the traumatic memory needs to stay irrepresentable and incomprehensible both for the sake of truth and Caruth’s theory. Caruth even goes as far to suggest that narrating trauma may be a sacrilege by quoting from van der Kolk and van der Hart’s chapter in the same book which asks “whether it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic

experience to play with the reality of the past?" (Caruth 1995, 154). Thus, this view of trauma as a literal imprint "provides an essentially ethical solution to the crisis of representation posed by trauma" and trauma's "literality, muteness, and unavailability for representation becomes a sacred object or "icon" that it would be a "sacrilege" to misappropriate or tamper with in anyway" (Leys 2000, 252-3). As a result, trauma is not only irrepresentable by nature but also any attempt to narrativize or make sense of it would make something that it is not and count as an act of sacrilege. The irrepresentability and incomprehensibility of trauma is central to Caruth's theory because it supports her deconstructive ideas. The absence of reference in the meaning of trauma comes from the deconstructive ideas of de Man. By preserving the impossibility of understanding by considering the effort to represent and understand it through narrativization a sacrilege Caruth protects deconstruction as the only mode of analysing trauma which is the main objective of Caruthian trauma theory.

Leys has a lengthy critique of the psychoanalytical claims of van der Kolk and its relation to Caruth's theory in the chapter titled "Science of the Literal: The Neurobiology of Trauma" (2000). She suggests that van der Kolk and Caruth's theories circularly support and confirm each other. She says "Caruth makes use of the work of van der Kolk and his colleagues to support her arguments, while van der Kolk and his associates return the compliment by appealing to one of Caruth's statements to defend their ideas" (Leys 2000, 229). The claim that trauma is a literal imprint on the brain is not a common thought agreed upon by everyone, as Gibbs also contends "[c]laims such as van der Kolk's, however, despite the lack of convincing scientific or clinical evidence, have proved highly influential amongst Caruth and her followers, to the extent that to suggest traumatic memory is not precisely literal is an unorthodox position in cultural trauma theory" (2014, 15). The claim that trauma is unavailable for conscious recall and only presents itself through nightmares and flashbacks makes it hard to reject in its own logic. The reason lies in the issue of the narrativization of

trauma which is claimed to “distort” the traumatic memory by integrating it into the mind as a normal memory. Thus all the verbal recollections of traumatic memories are seen as inaccurate and this makes it impossible to deny the accuracy of trauma in the mind before it was integrated into what is called the “narrative memory”.

Leys calls the scientific evidence presented by van der Kolk “flimsy”, she talks about a sleep study on post-traumatic nightmares which suggests the opposite of van der Kolk’s findings in his study. Van der Kolk’s study suggests that traumatic dreams have the same content and are exact replicas of real life events (van der Kolk et al. 1984, 187-190). However, Leys mentions a study by Milton Kramer that contradicts van der Kolk’s, in his study on two groups of combat veterans, of which one group experienced nightmares and the other group did not (Kramer et al. 1984, 90) Milton Kramer found out that the PTSD sufferers who had sleep disturbances and nightmares did not always see the exact replicas of events they experienced in the war and nor was the content of their nightmares always about combat (Leys 2000). Therefore, the literality of the traumatic nightmares was not a phenomenon everyone in the field agreed upon. Using van der Kolk’s studies and omitting other findings that contradict it was a deliberate choice on Caruth’s account. Another difference between the sleep studies of van der Kolk and Kramer, is that in van der Kolk’s study the content of the traumatic dreams were not asked to the patients, the questions only consisted of “yes” or “no” statements and eleven out of twenty five test subjects (out of which only fifteen had combat related PTSD and the rest were life-long nightmare sufferers) answered yes to the statement “Replicates an actual event,” but everyone answered yes to the statement “Repetitive, almost exactly same content” (Leys 2000, 237-238). This casts a shadow of doubt on van der Kolk’s findings because the evidence was not strong enough to constitute an absolute truth of traumatic nightmares being exact replications of the traumatic event. Therefore, there is no strong evidence that supports the idea of traumatic dreams as the

literal copies of events but somehow van der Kolk's study came to be accepted as the proof of this literality and was "cited regularly in support of a sweeping neurobiological theory and research program in which the exact, indeed literal, nature of the traumatic experience, as manifested in nightmares, so-called flashbacks, and other reenactments, is an absolutely crucial element" (Leys 2000, 238-239). If traumatic nightmares are not literal, then the idea that trauma is a literal imprint on the brain that cannot be assimilated into memory is not true.

One of the problems of trauma presents is the "crisis of truth" which "extends beyond the question of individual cure and asks how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access" (Caruth 1995, 6). This crisis is only solvable through deconstruction because it is the mode of access to previously unknowable truths according to the poststructuralist scholars. Traumatic memories cannot be understood because they defy conscious recall and only reveal themselves through flashbacks and repetitions of the original event, so trauma has no connection to or has no meaning in the real world and this absence of connection is similar to the absence of referentiality in deconstruction.

Trauma theory has also been found guilty of being unethical and depoliticised (Gibbs 2014, Rodi-Risberg, 2020). Not having access to another person or even one's own history is a parallel Caruth draws from trauma to deconstruction because deconstruction suggests that language cannot accurately represent the external world which is why the truth of the external world is inaccessible by language. This is one of the reasons Caruth keeps defending the idea that narrativizing trauma might cause it to lose its meaning (Caruth 1995, 154). The focus on poststructuralism rules out any chance that one can have an access to one's own history. In Caruth's words: "The phenomenon of trauma ... both urgently demands historical awareness and yet denies our usual modes of access to it" (1995, 151). The fact that de Man never talks about trauma but she insists on incorporating his work into trauma theory suggests that her

style of analysis shapes its sources to her needs. In Caruthian trauma theory, trauma is always unknowable and incomprehensible, hence the use of deconstructionist ideas, and yet her analysis of texts discovers new traumas and truths.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced trauma theory starting with its emergence in literary theory in which Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Geoffrey Hartman took part. These scholars are known for being close to the Yale school of deconstruction and they follow Paul de Man's ideas on language and referentiality. Then Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma and trauma theory have been explained with references to her works such as *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and *Unclaimed Experience* for a better understanding of her theory. Trauma is considered as a response to extraordinary or overwhelming events where the person who experiences the event fails to register the event as a regular memory and as a result the traumatic event stays in the traumatised person's mind as a literal imprint of the event which the person cannot consciously recall. The traumatic memory which stays unknown and inaccessible to the traumatised individual presents itself through flashbacks, nightmares and unconscious reenactments of the event.

The scientific and psychoanalytical roots of trauma which involves the ideas of Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart have been explained with their relative relation to Caruth's conceptualisation trauma theory. The problems related to these ideas are shared by trauma theory as well. Explaining the scientific roots was necessary because trauma theory turns to these sources for its definition of trauma and they give a scientific basis for the poststructuralist conceptualisation of trauma, which further necessitates introducing them since examining Caruth's trauma theory as a theory of textuality which takes its cue from de Man's theories on language and textuality is in the

scope of this thesis. Furthermore, as de Man's theoretical work is an important source for Caruth's trauma theory his ideas on deconstruction and language are briefly introduced in this chapter as well and it will be further explained in the next chapter. For de Man, language cannot establish a direct referential relationship with the material world because the materiality of the word and the thing it refers to are not the same (RT 11)⁴. Since language does not function the same way the external world functions reference is bound to fail. When language tries to refer to the external world it can only produce fiction which is not reality. Since the words in the text cannot refer to what they intend to refer to the text remains undecidable. According to de Man's understanding words cannot have absolute meanings and their meaning depends on the interpretation of the reader which makes it impossible convey a fixed meaning through the text.

Deconstruction has been criticised for being unethical and depoliticised (Gibbs 2014, Rodi-Risberg 2020) because it is primarily concerned with textuality because de Man claims that the language of literature can only reach truth by referring to itself. For the critics, deconstruction "reject the possibility of human agency on which ethical choice and action depend" through the refusal of the possibility of conveying meaning through language and therefore it undermines "the foundations of ethics" (Davis 36). These criticisms combined with the revelation that de Man worked for a pro-Nazi journal and published antisemitic essays made both de Man and deconstruction unpopular. Trauma theory emerged as a response to the criticisms directed to deconstruction and de Man. It aimed to bring deconstruction into ethical grounds because trauma is related to everything deconstruction failed to engage, such as politics, history and ethics. Aporia, which means puzzlement or paradox, has been explained with its relation to deconstruction because deconstruction

⁴ RT: Abbreviation of De Man, Paul. *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

favours paradoxes of meaning that arise in the text as a source of knowledge that is not bound to referentiality. Trauma as well is like a knowledge that not bound to referentiality because it cannot be represented by language and the truth of trauma can be learned either through nightmares and flashbacks or aporias and referential failures in a text. Trauma can indeed be narrativized by integrating the traumatic event into regular memory but Caruth, van der Kolk and van der Hart is against this because integrating trauma into regular memory means that it will lose its truth and precision.

Explaining the concepts that are related to trauma is necessary because they point out and at times clarify the problems of the conceptualisation of trauma. Perpetrator trauma emerged from the necessity of separating the victim and the perpetrator which is something Caruth's trauma theory failed to make. Caruth's conception of traumatised individuals as victims carries the risk of considering perpetrators as victims and giving them a moral superiority because society considers the victim as morally superior. Thus, even though trauma itself is not related to moral arguments as a part of a psychological disorder trauma theory nevertheless needs this clarification. Laura Brown's concept of insidious trauma as well as LaCapra's distinction between structural and historical trauma point out to the problem of the event-based definition of trauma because the definition of trauma disregards traumas that occur from non-event based acts such as ongoing acts of violence or racism. The concepts related to trauma will also come in handy in the following chapters in which Caruth's close readings will be examined.

Caruth's trauma theory has been criticised by scholars such as Ruth Leys, Dominick LaCapra, Stef Craps, Lucy Bond, Roger Luckhurst and others. The criticism towards trauma theory has been explained because they challenge Caruth's understanding of trauma while pointing out to problems such as its limits, its evident focus on deconstruction and its failure to deliver on the promise of being ethical.

To sum up, this chapter introduced trauma theory as well as its flaws and the following will examine the close readings of Caruth for further analysing the problems of this theory and providing proof to the criticism direct towards trauma theory. The ultimate goal of this chapter and the thesis in general is to show that Caruth's trauma theory is a theory of language and textuality influenced by de Manian deconstruction. After accomplishing this task, this thesis aims to provide a brief introduction of new theories of trauma as well as discussing how a new understanding of trauma can be conceptualised.

CHAPTER 2

Deconstruction Meets Trauma: “The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference”

This chapter aims to analyse “The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference” (1996) by Cathy Caruth to point out the similarities between Caruth’s concept of trauma and de Man’s ideas on language. This essay seems the best access Caruth’s understanding of de Man-inspired deconstruction that she employs in trauma theory. I would argue that the word ‘influence’ is not enough to describe de Man’s unintentional (on his part) contribution to trauma theory because Caruth’s understanding of de Man’s ideas forms the framework of this theory. Thus, trauma theory is a continuation of de Man’s thoughts. This chapter will show that de Manian deconstruction is intricately bound up with trauma theory to the extent that the theoretical framework of trauma can be described without using the word ‘trauma’, because the word ‘trauma’ has not been used in Caruth’s essay.

Cathy Caruth was a student of both Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, and the fact that these scholars shaped her understanding of literary theory has always been explicit.

Unclaimed Experience starts with a reference to the criticisms of deconstruction:

Recent literary criticism has shown an increasing concern that the epistemological problems raised by poststructuralist criticism necessarily lead to political and ethical paralysis. The possibility that reference is indirect, and that consequently we may not have direct access to others’, or even our own, histories, seems to imply the impossibility of access to other cultures and hence of any means of making political or ethical judgments. (1996, 10)

As already mentioned, Caruth’s answer to these claims is “the peculiar and paradoxical experience of trauma” (1996, 11). Therefore trauma is not only the answer to the criticisms against deconstruction, but somehow it also continues and updates deconstruction. Even

though trauma is never mentioned in Caruth's chapter, it explains the connection between trauma and deconstruction; as Caruth writes, de Man's text "does more than it knows" (1996, 90). The chapter is titled "The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference" and it is devoted to the analysis of the works of de Man through his readings of Kant and Kleist. This chapter in *Unclaimed Experience* serves as a theoretical framework of de Man's ideas on language which informed Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma. Caruth makes a connection between de Man's works and trauma when she writes that "de Man's critical theory of reference ultimately becomes a narrative, and a narrative inextricably bound up with the problem of what it means to fall (which is, perhaps, de Man's own translation of the concept—of the experience— of trauma)" (1996, 7). Even though de Man never wrote about trauma, Caruth wants to incorporate him into her nascent theory because his works and ideas are what constitutes its natural theoretical framework. This chapter will analyse Caruth's analysis of de Man's essay to examine to what extent de Man influenced trauma theory and how Caruth incorporated him. By the end of the analysis it will be revealed that trauma theory examines texts of literary theory in the same way it examines literary works on trauma, an inherently poststructuralist idea because trauma theory privileges literature as well as literary theory to be the only way to reach the *truth* of trauma.

Deconstruction and the Critique of Reference

Paul de Man's critique of reference is an argument against the notion that words in a text directly refer to or represent particular objects or concepts in the real world. De Man argued that words do not have concrete, objective meanings and that language is inherently unstable. Bond and Craps define deconstruction as "an approach to the study of texts, both literary and philosophical, that is concerned with the ways in which texts resist being reduced

to a coherent and consistent meaning that is *the* meaning of the text” (51; emphasis in the original). This idea lies at the core of de Man’s practice of deconstruction.

For de Man, referential failure stems from the problematic relationship between the signifier and signified. He contends that “[t]he phenomenality of the signifier, as sound, is unquestionably involved in the correspondence between the name and the thing named, but the link, the relationship between word and thing, is not phenomenal but conventional” (RT 10). Therefore, the signifier’s materiality only consists of a sound which cannot be equated to the materiality of the signified because it “contains no responsible pronouncement on the nature of the world — despite its powerful potential to create the opposite illusion.” (RT 10). The connection between the word and the external reality it refers to is an abstract notion according to de Man. The connection between the word in the text and the world outside the text which involves the physical object or the concept that the word refers to is severed. This is called the absence of referentiality, since the meaning of a word in a text is influenced and shaped by the reader and the context provided by the text, there cannot be a fixed referent a word refers to. Thus there is no direct connection between words and the things they are supposed to refer to. What this inevitably suggests is the impossibility of coherent meaning in language. The conventional relationship between the *word and thing* gives the illusion of language’s ability to refer to the external world by considering words as a replacement of the material world it refers to, or in de Man’s words:

This [relationship] gives the language considerable freedom from referential restraint, but it makes it epistemologically highly suspect and volatile, since its use can no longer be said to be determined by considerations of truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, or pleasure and pain. Whenever this autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, we are dealing with literariness and, in fact,

with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available. (RT 10)

If the word conveys the illusion of replacing something from the material world, this suggests that language can no longer convey *truth or falsehood* because it cannot replace reality.

Therefore, the illusion of language produces fiction rather than something real. For de Man, *non-phenomenal linguistics* frees “the discourse on literature from naive oppositions between fiction and reality” (RT 11). He claims that the referential function of language is unable to refer to the phenomenal world of cognition and therefore the capacity of literary or theoretical language to engage the external world weakens:

Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge "reality," but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language. It would be unfortunate, for example, to confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies. (RT 11)

Thus literature can only provide reliable information by being self-referential. Since language does not function in the same way that the phenomenal world functions, it cannot refer to the phenomenal world. De Man’s solution to the problem of reference is separating the materiality of the world from the language of literature. It would appear that whenever language refers to the external world it automatically produces fiction, which is not what language ought to refer to, i.e.: reality.

The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference

In the chapter “The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference” Caruth aims to show “how de Man’s critical theory of reference ultimately becomes a narrative, and a narrative

inextricably bound up with the problem of what it means to fall” which she considers as de Man’s own version of *trauma* (1996, 7). She establishes a connection between the weakening of reference and trauma via the metaphor of falling. At the start of her essay, arguing for the usefulness of de Man in her own project of redeeming history from abstraction, she writes:

This emphasis is to be read not only in de Man’s statements about language, however, but most concretely in a story he repeatedly tells: the story, specifically, of a fall, not just of a figurative fall but also of a very literal falling. It is de Man’s unexpected association of theory with falling that, I will suggest, constitutes the original insight of his theory, a theory that does not eliminate reference but precisely registers, in language, the impact of an event. (1996, 74)

Caruth’s theory arises from the *encounter* between the *story of the falling body* and the *story of trauma*; she claims that “the story of trauma is inescapably bound to a referential return”(7). She concludes that the “understanding of trauma in terms of its indirect relation to reference, does not deny or eliminate the possibility of reference but insists, precisely, on the inescapability of its belated impact” (7). Even though, the word ‘trauma’ was not mentioned in the chapter itself Caruth establishes the connection in the introduction.

The chapter is a particularly strong response to the criticisms against deconstruction. In fact, the focus on deconstruction seems to be more central than the trauma theory itself. There are two layers in Caruth’s defence of deconstruction: the first one is the direct rejection of the validity of the criticisms against it; the second one is the attempt to employ deconstruction on the ethical ground of trauma theory which involves finding gaps, paradoxes and other features that can be considered as indirect telling or failures of language.

De Man’s theoretical work is marked by an inherent paradox, that is, the necessity and the impossibility of theory. For instance, his essay “Resistance to Theory” (1982) which was written in response to a call by the Committee on Research Activities of the Modern

Language Association “a contribution to a collective volume entitled *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*.” he was supposed to write about literary theory but instead he wrote about “why the main theoretical interest of literary theory consists in the impossibility of its definition” (RT 3). Since language cannot provide fixed meanings for the words, theory cannot be defined by language. He defines the resistance to theory as “a resistance to the use of language about language. It is therefore a resistance to language itself or to the possibility that language contains factors or functions that cannot be reduced to intuition”(RT 12-3). Paradoxically literary theory both engages with language and resists it at the same time. This resistance is related to the failure of reference in language which de Man explains throughout his essay.

The “World of Falling”

Caruth interprets de Man’s work in terms of trauma building on “a narrative that is not explicitly articulated” (Caruth, 1996, 75) in his essay “Resistance to Theory” (1982). In this essay de Man talks about the connection between the “sciences of language” such as logic, rhetoric and grammar and the “non-verbal sciences” such as geometry, astronomy, arithmetic and music (RT 13). What concerns his analysis is the difficulty of “the articulation of the field of language with the knowledge of the world in general” (RT 13). He exemplifies this difficulty with the seventeenth-century epistemology which aimed to define language with geometry:

at the moment when the relationship between philosophy and mathematics is particularly close, [seventeenth-century epistemology] holds up the language of what it calls geometry (*mos geometricus*), and which in fact includes the homogeneous concatenation between space, time and number, as the sole model of coherence and economy. (RT 13)

For seventeenth-century epistemology, irrefutable logic could only be achieved by combining geometry and language, or what can also be described as a connection between “a science of the phenomenal world and a science of language” (RT 13). De Man’s analysis aims to show the problem in the attempt to combine geometry and language which is related to the referential resistance.

According to Caruth “the phenomenal world that this geometry seemed to describe so successfully was a world thought to be governed entirely by motion” (Caruth, 75). Caruth explains that the idea of combining language with non-verbal sciences failed after Newton’s discovery of gravity, according to which the *objects fall toward each other* by the gravitational force. The discovery of gravity was the end of the idea that the world was governed by motion because it was revealed that the objects pulled each other, therefore it was not a world of motion but a *world of falling*. She suggests that after Newton’s discovery, the history of philosophy consisted of trying to find ways to talk about falling. Through de Man’s comparison of the problem of reference to philosophy she contends that the problem of reference is “*how to refer to falling*” (1996, 76; emphasis in the original). Thus, the act of falling is central to this analysis.

One of the examples of the recurring concept of *falling* in de Man’s texts is his discussion in “Resistance to Theory” on the meaning of Keats’s unfinished epic’s title *The Fall of Hyperion*. He suggests that one cannot decide whether the title refers to figural falling as in defeat, or to the literal act of falling (16). Then he explains that what *Hyperion* refers to is not clear as well, which adds further complexity:

it is told about a character who resembles Apollo rather than Hyperion, the same Apollo who, in the first version (called *Hyperion*), should definitely be triumphantly standing rather than falling if Keats had not been compelled to interrupt, for no apparent reason, the story of Apollo's triumph. Does the title tell us that Hyperion is fallen and that Apollo stands, or does it tell us that Hyperion and Apollo (and Keats,

whom it is hard to distinguish, at times, from Apollo) are interchangeable in that all of them are necessarily and constantly falling? Both readings are grammatically correct, but it is impossible to decide from the context (the ensuing narrative) which version is the right one. The narrative context suits neither and both at the same time (RT 16).

De Man conceptualises undecidability, which is central to his theory of meaning, through the image of *falling*. Reference fails when language meets falling. This example contains the general logic of de Man's theory and establishes a connection between referential failure and the failure of philosophy to refer to the world of falling. Gravitational force is applicable as a *mathematical formula* but it does not make sense in philosophy because as a word, gravity seems fictional when referred to by philosophy:

with the introduction of gravitation, the only thing that was adequate to the world was, paradoxically, that which didn't refer (mathematics); and what did refer, language, could no longer describe the world. In a world of falling, reference could not adequately describe the world. (Caruth 1996, 76)

Caruth's interpretation of de Man's argument implies that reference is bound to fail, just as philosophy fails to refer to the world of falling so does language. Philosophy tried to incorporate mathematics into the language of philosophy, however while gravity makes sense in mathematics, it does not in language. Ultimately, Caruth claims that de Man's choice of example is a "paradigm for a problem that is central to contemporary theory: the recognition that direct or phenomenal reference to the world means, paradoxically, the production of a fiction; or otherwise put, that reference is radically different from physical law"(76). Hence, the attempt to refer to the external world only produces *fiction*. As a result, a *disjunction* "occurs between language and physical law, the former no longer referring to or representing empirical reality" (Toremans 59). In Caruth's theory, trauma functions in the same way as well: it remains unassimilated in the mind and any attempt to refer to it inevitably fails. In its

unassimilated, true self, trauma becomes a truth that cannot meet linguistic mediation without turning into fiction. As a mental imprint of an event, it is untouched by the interpretative reference of language. Similar to the relationship between falling and language, when trauma meets language a referential failure occurs. In Caruth's understanding, trauma is the equivalent of the centrality of falling for de Man. Hungerford suggests that the concept of falling "for Caruth, epitomizes the trauma inherent in language itself, the trauma that is explored and indeed, concentrated, in the ambiguities and the indirectness of reference to be found in literary language" (2001, 88). Through the conceptualisation of this *pathos* in this certain way "Caruth simply replicates the pathos, and, more importantly, amplifies it, without making its object—the failure of reference—any more plausible as an instance of trauma" (Hungerford 88). Hungerford does not find the characterisation of falling as pathos convincing because "it is never clear how falling can ever be more than an analogy for the functioning of language"(88). In addition to that, contrary to what Caruth suggests, the similarities between trauma and de Man's works are not caused by de Man's text doing "more than it knows"(1996, 90); instead de Man's ideas are similar to the concept of trauma because trauma theory is an expansion of de Man's thoughts. Therefore, I would argue that de Man's work does not amount to a theory of trauma, but, instead, Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma is a version of de Man's theories on textuality.

The Figure of the Body

Caruth moves on to discuss the recurring figure of the body by introducing Kant's philosophy. Kant's transcendental philosophy "distinguishes itself from metaphysics in that the latter concerns empirical or phenomenal reality, while the former is about the conditions of possibility of experience and knowledge"(Toremans 59). Thus, there is a separation of empirical reality and philosophical discourse. For Caruth, Kant represents "the attempt to deal

rigorously with the referential problem” because his theory is aware of its separation from “empirical referents” (1996, 77). Through his readings of Kant and Kleist, de Man expounds on “the philosophical attempt to distinguish language from empirical law by making theory into a self-reflexive system” (77). For Caruth, de Man’s readings uncover “a resistance to this project arising within the language of philosophy that emerges in its use of examples, a referential resistance de Man will associate with a performative dimension of discourse” (77). Thus, the necessity and the resistance to theory occur in de Man’s analysis through the recurring concept of *falling* and the recurring image of a *body*. Furthermore, Caruth claims that de Man’s insistence “on the centrality of the body” is the best way to understand how de Man’s theory “both conceptualizes and enacts a mode of referential resistance” (77). Therefore Caruth’s analysis of de Man is focused on the way his readings uncover the resistance to theory.

Caruth connects the figure of the body to De Man’s reading of Kleist’s “On the Marionette Theater” (1810), in which “the acclaimed principal dancer of a local opera company admires the gracefulness of marionettes, which he claims to be superior to that of human dancers”(Caruth, 80). The marionette dancers are puppets (*Gliedermann*) and “this paradoxical figure of the puppet substantially disrupts the figuration of philosophy as organic body” (Toremans, 60). Even though these puppets consist of *dead* and *mechanical* limbs they perform their dance better than the human dancers; they are seen as aesthetically superior even though they are not capable of moving by their will. The superiority comes from the ability perform the movements perfectly in a mathematical way. The mechanical limbs connected to a thread creates movements that can be explained by geometrical terms, their moves are like “ellipses, parabola, and hyperbole.” (AFK 285)⁵. The puppets not only do this

⁵ AFK: Abbreviation of De Man, Paul. “Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist’s Über Das Marionettentheater.” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Columbia UP, 1986, pp. 263–90.

but also exist in a constant flux of motion during the performance unlike human dancers who has to stop in between moves. For Caruth what de Man means by this example is the following:

behind philosophy's own figure of its conceptual project, which would incorporate force, as an unknowable event, into the articulated body of philosophical thought, lies the ideal of a mechanism that lifelessly transforms the laws of force and motion into superhuman grace.

The philosophical body, in other words, should not simply move upright, but dance: and dancing, its movements are no longer strictly human, but are rather the movements of lifeless, mechanical limbs. To understand Kant, de Man implies, is to grasp how the body of the system is both a human body and is at the same time the gracefully inhuman body of a marionette. (Caruth, 1996, 80)

Thus, in philosophy, the body can only be referred to as a collection of mechanical limbs through which philosophy itself becomes the figure of the mechanical body. The puppets enact gracefulness through "the union between the mechanical puppet and the particular agency who directs" and the "transformations" that occur from this union (Caruth, 80). The aesthetic power of this dance is neither in the puppets nor the puppeteer but rather "in the text that spins itself between them" (AFK 285) because the puppets cannot move without the puppeteer who gives them the motion that turns into a dance. Similarly Caruth's reading of de Man suggests that, in Kant, the body of the system merges human body with the mechanical body and achieves aesthetical superiority. Therefore, in philosophy the aesthetic function of language can only produce a lifeless replica of the material world but surpasses the aesthetic of the thing it replicates because it is not bound by the same rules. This claim is similar to de Man's idea that language can only produce fiction when it refers to the external world.

According to de Man the text mentioned here “is the transformational system, the anamorphosis of the line as it twists and turns into the tropes of ellipses, parabola, and hyperbole”(AFK, 285). This also shows how these moves can be explained with geometrical terms. At the same time, the reference to text enacts the connection between the writer and the text, or philosophy and the empirical world. Caruth, contends that, for de Man, the puppeteer’s transformative act of turning his motions, through the strings, into the puppet’s dance moves represents “the relation between the author and his writing” (81). As Toremans points out “this juxtaposition between the organic and the mechanical translates into a problem of reference”(60). This is where the argument is connected to textuality. In Caruth’s interpretation, the connection that de Man makes between the puppeteer and the puppets and the author and his writing implies “a primary referential relation behind the text” because the marionette dance “permits the difficulties of such *referentiality* to be lost, entirely, in a formal, quantified system that is as predictable, and ultimately nonspecific-or *nonreferential*-as a mathematics”(Caruth 81; emphasis added). This system consists of the *tropes* of “quantified motion” which connected the *text* to geometrical terms and as a result, “[t]he indeterminations of imitation and of hermeneutics have at last been formalized into a mathematics that no longer depends on role models or on semantic intentions” (de Man, page). Therefore, the text can only aesthetically represent the external world through mathematical tropes that causes referentiality to be lost and when its lost, the writer or the puppeteer “is lost entirely in the movements of the puppets” (Caruth 82). These mathematical tropes are a grammar in language which is conceived as a coded set of differences not based on any extralinguistic reality:

what is at work here is the power of a grammar that incorporates referential differences into nonreferential, intralinguistic ones. Yet at the same time this loss of referential particularity appears, surprisingly, in the very figure of a human being. The

paradox of this writing system is that it produces the human figure of the author in the very elimination of authorial referentiality. Precisely when the text appears most human, it is most mechanical. (Caruth 82)

The puppets both play with the existence of gravity and defy its pull at the same time because they are suspended mid-air by the strings. The ability to defy gravity provides superiority to the puppets over human dancers because “[a] nonformalized, still self-reflexive consciousness--a human dancer as opposed to a puppet--constantly has to interrupt its motions by brief periods of repose that are not part of the dance itself” (AFK 287). The text helps the puppets retain “*continuous motion*” and since they are not self-conscious they can easily perform the *formalized* movements which are mathematical. Consequently the act of explaining the external world through mathematical language which seventeenth-century epistemology aimed to accomplish can happen here, according to the de Manian understanding of this situation. At the same time, the puppets’ movements depend on the rise and *fall* of their mechanical limbs. This graceful rise and fall is like “the turn from parabola to hyperbole” (AFK 285) or death and rebirth. This mechanical body that rises and falls is the “falling body” which through Caruth’s reading of de Man also refers to referential loss. To sum up, the figure of the human body, represented in the examples by the puppets, can only appear in language as a mechanical being. Therefore in aesthetic representation the figure of the body-which is mechanical- can only refer to the reality of the human body-which is organic- by not being what it represents -organic- because that is the only way it can be integrated into mathematical tropes. When this example is transposed to language to represent referential loss, what it suggests is that “although a purely formal, nonreferential grammar might allow reference to be eliminated and inscribed into a system of intralinguistic differences, it nevertheless ends up figuring an organic, phenomenal link to empirical reality”(Toremans, 60).

The Impact of Reference

The second part of the title is concerned with the “Impact of Reference.” De Man finds a “a deep, perhaps fatal, break” (de Man 1996, 79) in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*. This break happens when Kant’s philosophy wants to “integrate force into its formal motions and integrate language with phenomenal reality” (Toremans, 60) because it calls for the performative dimension of language and this in turn disrupts the separation of phenomenal reality and metaphysics -something that is central to Kant’s philosophy. Through this break the *resistance of reference* occurs (Caruth, 87). This is also when we encounter the figure of the body once again. Kant considers the body not as a whole but as a combination of different limbs without attaching any importance to what these parts serve, therefore “we no longer perceive a unity, but read a kind of disarticulation” (Caruth, 88). A disarticulated body without unity and purpose of its limbs is essentially dead or mechanical, like Kleist’s puppets. Then, a resistance to referentiality similar to the previous example occurs in Kant’s conception of the body because it fails in its attempt to refer to the organic body by aiming to separate its philosophical language from empirical referents, however at the same time, paradoxically, it fails this aim in its attempt to refer to the phenomenal reality. When the falling body meets reference the impact breaks it, or in Caruth’s words in the texts of de Man and Kant “the impact of reference is felt in falling: in the resistance of the *example of falling* to a phenomenal or perceptual analogy that would turn it into the mere figure of an abstract principle” and it is felt “not in the search for an external referent, but in the necessity, and failure, of theory” (89-90)(original emphasis). Hence, Caruth’s reading of de Man introduces and supports his theoretical legacy.

Caruth claims that de Man’s text “does more than it knows” which suggests that de Man unknowingly talked about trauma (90). Ultimately de Man’s text discovers “the

resistance of theory in the story it tells of its own falling”, as a result theory *falls* and *refers* while it falls (Caruth, 90). Then “the task that falls upon us” when we read this text is to “capture the reality of this falling” which is what de Man’s theory tries to do (Caruth, 90). Accomplishing this *task* is presented like a moral obligation through the word ‘fall’, similar to how being a witness to someone’s trauma is presented as a moral obligation: “[listening] may no longer be simply a choice: to be able to listen to the impossible, that is, is also to have been *chosen* by it” (Caruth 1995, 10). It is noteworthy to mention once again that the word trauma is absent in the chapter but this very absence or refraining from referring to trauma is what enables this chapter to be the textual explanation or the theoretical basis of trauma. As Toremans as well points out, de Man’s theory “provides a theoretical basis for the inscription of trauma in language,” which allows “for the perpetual troping of trauma” by the narratives used, as well as confirming the “traumatic narratives” of the exemplary texts used by Caruth (61). In addition to that, the resistance to theory causes a problem of *knowledge* and a problem of *reference* both of which are “intimately connected to the epistemological crisis effected by trauma” (Toremans, 61). The problem of reference is ultimately a problem of knowledge which presents itself in trauma theory as unknowability. Trauma is *unknowable* and the victim of trauma reenacts the event *unknowingly* both of which point to the impossibility of knowledge-and inevitably, reference.

What trauma theory does is essentially separating the empirical referents from discourse to enact a Caruthian version of Kant’s philosophical discourse in which she trauma discusses trauma conceptually without the details that belong to the world outside of the experience of trauma but are nevertheless related to it -such as who caused the traumatic event. Therefore trauma becomes much like the mutilated body or a puppet which cannot refer to the empirical reality but replaces it in aesthetic representation and philosophical language. This approach creates its own resistances and referential paradoxes which Caruth

uses to interpret as the reflection of trauma. The question of whether trauma resembles the linguistic problems of de Man's theory or conceptualising trauma as a linguistic problem of reference makes it fit into this certain framework will always be answered with the latter being true. Trauma in Caruth's theory is a problem of language, the same textual problem poststructuralists focus on. To use Caruth's example, the transformation from an organic body into the mechanical puppet happens when trauma is integrated as a normal memory which suggests that the main problem is memory itself as a text that fails. Trauma has to stay in theoretical language without referring to the empirical or external reality and it has to be separated from the person who experienced it hence the title of her book-*Unclaimed Experience*. On the subject of the title, Hungerford makes a similar point:

Once what a subject does is detached from the subject—in these cases, detached from a person—the act of experiencing can become a thing in the world, like an object (and here we can begin to understand the book's title). Experience, like a lost glove, can be “claimed” or left “unclaimed.” In other words, once “she forgets” becomes “a forgetting,” the forgetting can belong to anyone, and indeed, can begin to have actions predicated upon it. By cutting experience free from the subject of experience, Caruth allows trauma not only to be abstract in the extreme but also, by virtue of that abstraction, to be transmissible. (2001, 83)

According to Toremans, Caruth's trauma theory preserved its importance through inscribing trauma in language, thus firmly positing a linguistic condition [...] which will still demand to be addressed and imagined by trauma studies to come” (65). Trauma is in language but not in consciousness -as well as the subconscious or unconscious for that matter- thus, trauma is more related to language than the person who experiences it. The excessive focus on language as well as considering trauma as *unclaimed* lets trauma theory separate trauma from the subject. If trauma is separated from the subject, it loses subjectivity or the potential

to be subjective through integration as a regular memory. And if you remove subjectivity out of the picture then you also remove interpretation and context which are the things that cause reference to collapse. Thus trauma becomes a replica of the event that everyone who comes into contact with it owns because the truth of trauma can only be preserved if it stays unclaimed by the person who experienced the traumatic event. Therefore the integration of trauma into memory becomes the problem of integrating the world of falling to the language: integration -language, meaning making processes of the mind- creates fiction and cannot refer to trauma in its reality.

The transformation of memory into narrativized verbal or textual discourse enacts a problem similar to the figure of the body in de Man's readings. However it is not limited to that, even as a regular experience is being recorded as a memory it becomes a mediated, thus inaccurate, version of the experience. What trauma theory does is interpreting gaps and aporias in texts as a reflection of trauma, similar to resistance to theory, trauma is resistant to representation and this resistance creates paradoxes. Deconstruction itself is the only key to understanding trauma which gives unnecessary power to it. The theorist holds the power of interpretation and as it can be seen in the example of Caruth, who can interpret these gaps and aporias as a sign of trauma -such as *Moses and Monotheism* which will be discussed in the next chapter.

For Hungerford, Caruth's reading equates experience to language because the traumatic accidents-like the train accident which was used as the exemplary trauma from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*- she uses in her examples include accidents of language-like slippages- as well and reference becomes an accident whose impact results in "a moment of trauma that inheres in the very structure of language"(81), a language which "defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (Caruth, 1996, 5). Language embodies trauma and is itself traumatised-by reference- at the same time. Trauma is inextricably bound up with

theoretical terminology of deconstruction. The impact of reference is replicated every time she uses the word impact, such as the impact of trauma, accident, history, and trauma's incomprehensibility. Everything in trauma theory points to language and textuality, one way or another, and as a result it is a theory of textuality and an expansion of de Man's ideas "into the realm of psychoanalysis" (Hungerford, 91). Then, trauma theory can be considered "a departure from de Manian deconstruction [...] because it significantly extends the categories of object to which deconstruction applies" (Hungerford, 91). The expansion of de Man's ideas happened as a result of two things: Caruth had to establish a theory of trauma that is applicable to deconstructive reading by choosing sources that would allow her to conceptualise trauma as a problem of reference—such as Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* and his reading of *Gerusalemme Liberata*—and she reconceptualises de Man's texts to suggest that his critique of reference is related to trauma, which is easy because trauma theory is based on Caruth's understanding of de Man's ideas on language. Therefore, de Man's ideas and the concept of trauma are both shaped to fit in Caruth's theoretical framework.

Conclusion

This chapter involved the close reading of Carthy Caruth's "The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference" from her book *Unclaimed Experience* in regards to the connection between trauma and de Man's critique of reference. Caruth's chapter involved readings of de Man's "The Resistance to Theory" (1982), "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" (1984) and "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's Über das Marionettentheater" (1986), through which she aimed to build a framework of trauma as a problem of language by investigating the recurring concepts of "falling" and "body" as well as "the impact of reference". Combined together, these three concepts reveal how Caruth connects trauma to de Man's ideas. By adopting de Manian deconstruction not only as a way of accessing trauma but also as a way of

describing trauma (Caruth 1996, 7), Caruth incorporates de Man into trauma theory. In this aspect, it can be said that trauma theory is also a way to bring de Man on ethical grounds. What this close reading ultimately shows is that trauma theory is more interested in language than it is in trauma, therefore trauma serves as an ethical ground for Caruth and others to discuss poststructuralist ideas on language. One of the examples of this is the fact that the trauma is treated like the referential problem of language because when reference occurs it produces an inaccurate version of trauma.

Caruth's text takes its cue from de Man's ideas and his readings of Kant and Kleist. The concept of falling disrupts the language of seventeenth century epistemology which tried to integrate geometry into the language of philosophy to accurately refer to the material world because geometry refers to the world in numbers and mathematical formulas which make sense for the material world. The disruption in language happens because the concept of gravity transforms the understanding of the world as a world of motion into the world of falling. Philosophical language could not refer to the world of falling because even though gravity makes sense in mathematical formulas it does not make sense in language, for which the concept of falling seems like an invisible magical force when referred to. Therefore gravity is not a physical object of the material world but language still cannot refer to it because it is a force that belongs to the material world.

The concept of body is discussed in "Aesthetic Formalization" by de Man, in which de Man claims that language can only produce fiction in its attempt to refer to the external world. The production of fiction is exemplified through the marionette puppets in Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre", these puppet dancers are aesthetically superior than the human dancers but they are composed of mechanical limbs. This example likens the mechanical body of the puppets to the textual representation, or language, and the organic body of the human dancers are likened to the material world which language tries to refer to. This attempt

to refer to the material world only produces a lifeless replica -fiction- of the thing it refers to. Caruth's discussion then moves on to the analysis of de Man's reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, in which de Man finds a break within Kant's system of transcendental philosophy which aims to separate its philosophical discourse from the phenomenal world. In this break "or resistance to phenomenal knowledge, that the system will encounter the resistance, de Man suggests, of reference" (Caruth 1996, 87). Kant refers to the body as a combination of limbs and the function of these limbs do not matter, as a result "we no longer perceive a unity, but read a kind of disarticulation" (Caruth 1996, 88). The disarticulation of the body as different limbs that came together without any importance to what these limbs serve disrupts the unity of the body and creates a dead or mechanical body, like the body of a puppet which is a combination of dead and mechanical limbs. Therefore the concept of body resists Kant's attempt to refer to it. Even though through the disarticulation of body Kant aimed to separate his philosophy from empirical referents, the referential resistance of the organic body results in the production of the mechanical body in philosophical language of Kant. Similar to de Man's claim that language produces fiction in its attempt to refer to the external world. The impact of reference is what breaks the language and the figure of the body. Caruth claims that the impact of reference is felt "not in the search for an external referent, but in the necessity, and failure, of theory" (1996, 90). Caruth concludes that de Man's text "does more than it knows" (90) because de Man unknowingly creates his own understanding of trauma. De Man's text, according to Caruth, discovers "the resistance of theory in the story it tells of its own falling", as a result theory *falls* and *refers* to its story while it falls (Caruth, 90). What falls upon us when we read this text is to "capture the reality of this falling" which is what de Man's theory tries to do (Caruth, 90). The obligation to *capture the reality of this falling* is similar to the moral obligation of witnessing to trauma. In short, *the falling body* breaks with

the impact of reference. Trauma also resists reference and cannot be integrated into language which is the link between Caruth's understanding of de Man and trauma theory.

In his works, de Man explored the idea of the impossibility of reference and meaning. Language cannot be understood because it cannot refer to the phenomenal world because that considering the word as the same thing as the thing it refers would be to confuse "the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies" (RT 11). His theories of textuality claimed that there cannot be a fixed referent a word can refer to, as a result the text remains undecidable. What made trauma suitable deconstruction is that it is seen as a failure of representation and it questions "simple models of referentiality that hold that the signifier is a transparent vehicle for the signified" which is in line with deconstructionist view of literature which claims that "literary language is free of the fallacy of unmediated expression. It acknowledges and exploits the divergence between signifier and signified by flaunting its rhetoricity, its use of figurative language, its linguistic particularities." (Bond and Craps, 59). Therefore the problem of the irrepresentability of trauma replaces problem of reference through establishing a referential relationship between trauma and language. The dissociated traumatic memory replaces the external world because it does not belong to the world of language, it is the unmediated and uninterpreted version of reality. Furthermore narrativization is equated to the linguistic process of referentiality and it also functions as the *text* because after all, it is a narrative. One cannot refer to one's own memory of trauma or represent it which is like the referential collapse. Therefore any attempt to narrativize trauma is considered inaccurate because trauma is like the external world which language fails to refer to. Just like the text in deconstruction, linguistic narration of trauma is essentially an interpretation made by the person and thus trauma becomes something else. As a result the direct form of telling fails to represent the *truth* of trauma. Just like the idea that everyone interprets the text differently based on the context and their experiences which inevitably

makes truth inaccessible, the truth of trauma remains inaccessible precisely because adapting it into a language that directly tells it will inevitably produce an inaccurate meaning.

Therefore instead of adapting it to language(or verbalize it), deconstruction treats trauma as if it is the external world which language fails to refer to. Language cannot produce meaning for the traumatic experience and the meaning always remains inaccessible. Instead of narrativizing what trauma theory proposes is finding the paradoxes language inevitably presents and access the inaccessible meaning of trauma through deconstructive reading.

Chapter 3

Trauma Theory Through Close Readings of Caruth: Freud, Tasso, Resnais

Cathy Caruth's works on trauma can be seen as the beginning of trauma theory, namely, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) are the landmark works in the field. In these works Caruth has not only constructed a framework of trauma theory but also analysed literary works and movies like *Gerusalemme Liberata* by Torquato Tasso, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) by Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais as well as Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) by using this framework. The analysis and close reading of *Gerusalemme Liberata* is incorporated in her analysis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by Freud because this poem was also used by Freud as an example in his aforementioned book. The previous chapters of this thesis involved the outline and the problems with Caruth's understanding of trauma and in this chapter, these problems will be exemplified and further analysed through the analysis of Caruth's close readings. In this chapter I will argue that Caruth's close readings are problematic because the aim of the analysis is making use of deconstruction instead of examining "the impact of the experience, and the notion, of trauma on psychoanalytic practice and theory, as well as on other aspects of culture such as literature" (Caruth 1995, 4) or trying to, as Hartman says, "read the wound" (1995, 537). Thus, the predisposition for poststructuralism in trauma theory made Caruth disregard or miss the problems in her close readings.

Unclaimed Experience starts with a reference to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* by Freud. Caruth talks about the repetition of painful events in the lives of people who suffered from them, and builds on Freud. She says: "Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have

passed through them” (1). The repetition of catastrophic events is a central idea of trauma theory because of the flashbacks, nightmares and reenactment of the traumatic events which results from trauma. Freud has a central role in the development of trauma theory because of his ideas on ‘traumatic neurosis’ as well as the examples which he gives which are in turn analysed by Caruth. However his ideas are not the only reason of his importance. Caruth’s analysis comes to the conclusion that his writings are an example of the way that Freud himself has been traumatised. She comes to this conclusion through her reading of *Moses and Monotheism* which will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Gerusalemme Liberata

Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* a romantic epic which tells the tragic story of two lovers, Tancred and Clorinda. Tancred unknowingly kills Clorinda who was dressed as an enemy knight and becomes devastated when he learns that he killed his lover. Caruth first quotes the story in Freud’s words (which are important for the context):

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders’ army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (Freud 1961, 16)

For Caruth, Tancred unknowingly “wounding his beloved” twice symbolizes the repetition of trauma “through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (2). This reenactment of a traumatic event without knowing how and why comes to represent a symptom of trauma in Freud’s text, which Freud names as “repetition compulsion”.

Caruth’s close reading of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* is discussed as an example of Freud’s concept of trauma. However, Freud’s example was not really about trauma but

about “the general tendency in even normal people to repeat unpleasurable experiences, and hence as an example of the repetition compulsion, or death drive”(Leys 293). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, before moving on to his analysis on *Gerusalemme Liberata* Freud talks about traumatic neurosis, dreams about traumatic events and how they repeat themselves. However as Leys also points out, he proposes “to leave the dark and dismal subject of the traumatic neurosis” (Freud 1961, 8) and moves on to the way that people repeat unpleasant experiences in their lives, not particularly referring to traumatised people. Freud’s focus moves from the repetitions of traumatic dreams to other examples of repetition compulsion. The way Caruth introduces the subject can make the reader think that Freud’s entire discussion was about trauma, but in her defence she suggest that “the poetic story can be read” as a *parable* of the “unarticulated implications of the theory of trauma in Freud’s writings” (3). Leys claims that it takes some effort to turn this analysis into a trauma parable since it does not specifically refer to trauma:

It is only by begging numerous questions about the nature of the death drive that Caruth can incorporate Tancred's experience of being “pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some ‘daemonic power’” (SE, 18: 21) into the diagnosis of traumatic neurosis-bearing in mind that for Caruth traumatic neurosis involves the imposition of an unpleasurable “event” or “outside” that has “gone inside without any mediation” (UE, 59).⁶ (Leys 293)

In fact, the role of the characters need to be redefined in Caruth’s lens to be able to consider this epic as the parable of trauma. Tancred’s reactions or feelings are also unexplored, what we learn about his *trauma* only consists of what we learn from external sources, like Clorinda’s voice. The traumatised subject is mute, hence cannot tell or know his own history.

⁶ SE: Standard Edition of Freud’s Complete works used both by Caruth and Leys. UE: *Unclaimed Experience (1996)* by Cathy Caruth.

His trauma can only make its way into the world through another person, a witness. The conceptual reshaping of the characters makes Clorinda's voice as the witness but in trauma theory the traumatised individual who tells his own story to a witness is portrayed as the only way of accessing one's otherwise unknowable history. The actual wound Clorinda testifies is her own, but Caruth needs to transfer the wound for the logic of trauma theory to work: "It is possible, of course, to understand that other voice, the voice of Clorinda, within the parable of the example, to represent the other within the self that retains the memory of the "unwitting" traumatic events of one's past" (Caruth 1996, 8). Leys describes this situation as the reinstatement of Tancred as the victim: "Clorinda witnesses Tancred's trauma by virtue of the fact that she is Tancred's internal "alter" who retains the memory of the traumatic experience, a memory that Tancred himself lacks" (Leys 296). Leys claims that what Caruth does is merging the two characters by considering Clorinda as Tancred's "dissociated second self" (295) which essentially assimilates her identity into his. As if being subject to violence twice was not enough, Clorinda loses her identity as well which is a bigger punishment than being turned into a tree. For Leys, this also allows trauma theory to be transmissible: "Tancred-Clorinda as a dual personality expresses her primary commitment to making victimhood unlocatable in any particular person or place, thereby permitting it to migrate or spread contagiously to others" (296). Thus, mixing personalities and combining the victim and the perpetrator allows Caruth to generalize trauma and identify anyone as the victim of trauma.

Tancred's role in this story is subject to some controversy. While Caruth considers him the victim of a traumatic event, critics like Leys and Lacapra suggest otherwise. Tancred is the perpetrator of a murder he unknowingly committed, twice, while Clorinda is the victim of both events. In the words of Leys "Tancred is a murderer, albeit an involuntary one, and Clorinda is his victim twice over" (295). In viewing Tancred as a murderer, Leys points out a

moral dilemma that is also at the core of trauma theory in general, as LaCapra contends: “One might observe that her focus on the survivor-victim (indeed, the apparently ambiguous status of Tancred as perpetrator-victim who is termed in passing a survivor) does not explicitly open itself to the formulation of the specific problem of perpetrator trauma which her example seems to foreground” (LaCapra 2014, 182). LaCapra defines Tancred’s position in the story as “perpetrator-victim” but *Gerusalemme Liberata* which is “the parable of the wound” (Caruth 4) or the theoretical framework of trauma conceptualised through this parable gets in the way of making the conceptual distinction between the perpetrator and the victim through consideration of Tancred as the victim. “Caruth knows and admits” that Clorinda is the victim, “as when she concedes that “the wound that speaks is not precisely Tancred's own but the wound, the trauma, of another” (*UE*, 8) or refers to “the original wounding of Clorinda” (*UE*, 116, n. 8)”⁷ (Leys, 2000, 295). Interestingly Caruth considers Clorinda as the unknown wound that informs Tancred of his trauma rather than the victim. According to Leys this is because she is interested in considering Clorinda “as the witness of something that Clorinda knows but Tancred does not” (Leys 295). Regarding the voice that is heard when Tancred hits Clorinda who was turned into a tree Caruth says: “the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*” (2). The example of Clorinda as the voice of Tancred’s trauma fails on two levels: firstly, a woman who was subject to violence is dislodged from the victim status and only exists as a symbol of the suffering of the person who caused the violence, and secondly, Tancred is considered the victim of an event he caused and he is never mentioned by Caruth as the perpetrator, therefore Caruth fails to make the distinction between the perpetrator and the victim. A theory that aims to be *ethical* cannot turn a blind eye to the female victim of male

⁷ UE: Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. JHU Press, 2016.

violence. Furthermore, it cannot turn the victim into an allegory of male suffering caused by the man in question. As LaCapra and other scholars observe, trauma theory blurs the lines between the victim and the perpetrator⁸. atrocities. The reason why distinction is necessary “is not to blur vital distinctions such as those between victims and perpetrators and between innocence and guilt or to normalize and excuse extreme violence” (Bond and Craps 123). The lack of distinction poses the risk of framing perpetrators as victims which is morally problematic because “the concept of trauma continues to function as a moral judgement in Western society” (Bond and Craps 114). For example, as it was mentioned in the first chapter, American government claimed victimhood as a traumatic subject as a result of 9/11 attacks which provided them a justification for their attacks and invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore decontextualising the cause of trauma-such as Tancred’s murder of Clorinda as the cause of the event- as well as considering everyone a victim of trauma produce ethical problems such as the false claims of victimhood.

Tancred is said to be unaware of his traumatic experience until he hears Clorinda’s voice through the tree. However, in the original story Clorinda takes off her helmet before she dies and that is when Tancred learns that he killed his beloved. As a result of this, “he becomes delirious and appears to his companions almost dead himself, on coming to his senses he is overwhelmed with grief, self-reproach, and guilt at the knowledge of what he has done and arranges a burial for her” (Leys 294). Therefore Tancred is already aware of the murder of his lover, he did not need to hear a voice from the tree and inflict violence upon his lover a second time to know this. For the purpose of keeping up with the allegory Caruth does not provide this information and instead she implies that Tancred does not know that he killed

⁸ LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. 2001. JHU Press, 2014.
 Bond, Lucy, and Stef Craps. *Trauma*. Routledge, 2020.
 Gibbs, Alan. *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.

her through clever wording by saying that he does not hear Clorinda's voice until the second event as if the knowledge of killing his lover depended on hearing her voice: "Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance— returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). She claims that the knowledge of the event depends on Tancred hearing Clorinda in the second event but Tancred had the knowledge since the first instance. In addition to this Leys makes a point on the symbolic meaning of the second murder:

the repetition of the murderous act is not literal and exact, but symbolic, metaphoric: it takes the form of a slashing or wounding of a tree that bleeds, a figure that, as Margaret Ferguson has shown, has a long literary history and whose deployment by Tasso is, Ferguson suggests, charged with symbolic significance, including Oedipal symbolic meaning. Caruth must ignore these difficulties if she is to make the claim that Tancred is the unconscious victim of a traumatic neurosis the experience of which remains unavailable to his consciousness except in the form of an exact and unremitting repetition.⁹ (Leys, 294)

Hence, Caruth ignores many crucial points in order to transform this story into a *parable* of trauma but this transformation ends up being problematic. What Tancred goes through in the story does not fit the framework of trauma provided by Caruth. As Rothberg also contends, not all victims are traumatised, "either because the victimization did not produce the kind of disruption that trauma ought to signify in order to have conceptual purchase, or because the victim has been murdered, as in the case of Clorinda" and "being traumatized does not

⁹ Margaret W Ferguson, *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven, 1983), 126-36.

necessarily imply victim status.” (2009, 90). To claim that Tancred is traumatised would be dubious because the event does not become an unregistered memory that Tancred cannot recall, it is known that he knows so the memory and the experience cannot be unassimilated. Even if he was traumatised it would not mean that he is the victim because he is the one that caused the event, therefore he is the perpetrator. The lack of clarification between the concepts of perpetrator and victim creates a problem in this parable.

For Caruth, the example from Tasso bears the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (Caruth 1996, 3)

Tancred *unknowingly* kills his lover and is not able to fully *know* his own *truth* (the truth of his trauma). The language of literature is privileged over other uses of language in the analysis of trauma in Caruth’s trauma theory. The relation between *knowing and not knowing* and psychoanalysis and literature meeting at their intersection point is a reflection of poststructuralist ideas. This is *precisely* the kind of *unknowing* that intersects with *knowing* which holds this theory together. It is not the epic but Caruth’s reading of Freud’s reading of the epic that encompasses the narrow scope of trauma theory because Caruth shapes the argument by claiming that Tancred does not know that he killed Clorinda which she frames as the impossibility of knowing one’s traumatic history. The less one knows about the epic, the more Caruth’s trauma theory sounds viable.

Moses and Monotheism

Finding out the ‘unarticulated implications’, which are the gaps, repetitions or referential collapses in the text, is central to *Unclaimed Experience* and Caruth-inspired trauma theory more broadly, because without them it would not be possible to incorporate Freud into her understanding of trauma, both as a psychoanalyst and as an individual who suffers from trauma, which she suggests through her reading of *Moses and Monotheism*.

The second analysis is from the chapter titled “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma And The Possibility Of History” and it is about Freud’s “notoriously speculative” (Leys, 275) *Moses and Monotheism*. This highly controversial work is a retelling of the history of Jewish community and the origin of monotheistic religions. The original story is that “Moses was one of the captive Hebrews, who eventually arose as their leader and led them out of Egypt back to Canaan”(Caruth13). However Freud claims that “Moses, the liberator and law-giver of the Jewish people, was not a Jew, but an Egyptian” (1939, 29) deriving from the claims of a historian that his name comes from an Egyptian word. Moses, the Egyptian, who is “a fervent follower of an Egyptian pharaoh and his sun-centered monotheism” (Caruth, 13) becomes the leader of the Hebrews after the murder of the Pharaoh and helps the Hebrews escape because he wants “to preserve the waning monotheistic religion” (13). Later on the Hebrews rebelled to Moses for his strict laws, murdered him and abandoned his religion. The murder was repressed and as two generations or a century passed they “assimilated his god to a volcano god named Yahweh, and assimilated the liberating acts of Moses to the acts of another man, the priest of Yahweh (also named Moses), who was separated from the first in time and place.” (Caruth, 14). Then, instead of Egyptian Moses, the new god Yahweh was considered the liberator of the Hebrews. However, some of the believers of the original Moses remained and through their influence some traditions of his religion also remained

even though they were mixed with the new religion. Later on, the religion of the Egyptian Moses slowly took over that of Yahweh and reinstated the old monotheistic religion.

Caruth suggests that for Freud, the most important part of the Jewish history is “not the literal return to freedom, but the repression of a murder and its effects” (14). In trauma theory this story becomes an example of cultural/collective trauma. The repressed memory of the murder is the unassimilated memory of the traumatic experience which is unavailable to conscious recall and the Jewish community is the victim of this traumatic experience. The time that has passed until the Mosaic religion reemerged symbolizes the *belatedness* (Nachträglichkeit) of the traumatic symptoms such as nightmares and flashbacks. In Freud, Nachträglich describes “deferred action” (Caruth, 120). The belatedness of trauma is the passing of time between the traumatic event’s unassimilation and its resurfacing through symptoms such as nightmares or flashbacks. According to this idea trauma is not realised at the first instance but only presents itself later on.

Through these close readings Caruth comes to the conclusion that history is a “history of trauma”(18):

For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence. (1996, 18)

Caruth considers *Moses and Monotheism* to exemplify the impossibility of writing history or “the aporia of a history propelled by an inaccessible traumatic pre-history” (Craps 2013, 16). Aporia presents itself once again, this time through history. Caruth argues that poststructuralist criticism, which was criticised for being unethical, dehistoricised and depoliticised, provided a new mode of access to history. But the claim that history is inaccessible is debatable. In addition to that, trauma theory fails to deliver on the promise that it can provide access to *inaccessible* history. The close readings which were examined so

far revealed that the political, ethical and historical facts were omitted, disregarded or reshaped for the sake of universalising trauma. Thus, the identities of the characters in the close readings such as Clorinda disappear into the theoretical universalisation even though what triggered those chain of events is very much related to who these characters are. The causes of the traumatic events in the analysed texts are disregarded and the events are reduced to a summary in which only the action or the singular event such as Tancred wounding Clorinda is told. Therefore trauma theory does not engage with ethical concerns and historical or political dimensions of events which were supposed to be the focal points of this theory. In trauma theory aporia needs to be constructed, it is not already there. What constitutes aporia is trauma itself and trauma theory takes events out of context to match the aporetic understanding of itself with the example given. Hence, one could say that trauma theory aims to create aporia rather than analysis because only through paradoxes can deconstruction thrive. Historian LaCapra criticises Caruth on the basis that “she approaches history only through the medium of theory and literature, thus not including historiography itself and the contributions or the resistances it might pose to her analysis in both intellectual and institutional terms” (2014, 184). In fact, Caruth’s conception or use of history is only through theory and literature. The text she uses as an example is speculative history at best. Trauma theory redefines what history means through the conceptualisation of traumatic memory as history. Just as Freud claims that the individual and collective psyche work with the same dynamics, Caruth claims that the individual and collective memory of trauma are the same and they constitute a history of trauma. The word history in the title of the book does not refer to history itself but to the redefined version of the word constructed through Caruth’s understanding of the dynamics of traumatic memory. This is because traumatic memory is what historiography failed to consider according to Caruth, just as poststructuralism claims that structuralist understanding of language failed to consider the

absence of referentiality. Therefore Caruth conceptualises history as a textual version of memory. Since the meaning of the text is undecidable and the truth of trauma cannot be narrativized, history enters a crisis of knowledge in Caruth's theory. Hence, trauma does not engage with historiography because it wants to rewrite history through the new understanding of the term.

What strikes Craps about of *Moses and Monotheism* is "the tendency to turn violence inflicted on a non-European other into a mere occasion for the exploration of the exemplary trauma suffered by the—in the terms of Freud's argument—European subjects responsible for that violence, which itself becomes obscured in the process" (2013, 17). This argument is also valid for Caruth's reading of *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Thus, once again the colonial aspect is disregarded and the 'exemplary trauma' is always that of the Euro-American subject. On the subject of history Caruth says "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (1996, 18). Here, Caruth underlies her poststructuralist understanding of trauma as aporia and transposes it to the definition of history. History is claimed to be inaccessible and incomprehensible, only then can history be referential.

According to Caruth what marks Freud's text is the departure which is connected to Freud's own traumatic history. She interprets trauma as departure and the literal return of the traumatic event which then expands into the claim that *Moses and Monotheism* symbolises Freud's trauma as his departure from Vienna to London because of the threat of Nazi persecution. For Caruth the book is a "site of trauma" (20). The first two parts of the book were published in Vienna and the third part was withheld from publication until he went to London which Caruth identifies as the traumatic departure of Freud. There are two prefaces at the beginning of the third part, one of which was written in Vienna and the other in London,

and a “Summary and Recapitulation” in the middle of the third part. The first preface explains why Freud could not publish the book, which was written at Vienna where he did not feel free, and the second one explains why he does publish it. Caruth uses these to build her argument. In the “Summary and Recapitulation” Freud talks about the reason why his work seems to repeat itself which he explains as having written the work twice, not considering that he would be able to publish his book the first time he left the first two parts. After he came to London he felt free to publish them but instead of editing these parts he added a third part that repeats some of what he already wrote. Caruth claims that the book is “marked by the events that, as Freud says, divided the book into two halves” (20): the first is Freud’s decision to not publish the book and the Nazi occupation and the second is Freud’s departure after which the third part emerged. She connects trauma to departure in her analysis of the second preface:

The “interval” between the prefaces, which Freud explicitly notes, and which is also the literal space between “Before March 1938” and “In June 1938,” also marks, implicitly, the space of a trauma, a trauma not simply *denoted* by the words “German invasion,” but rather *borne* by the words *verliess ich*, “I left.” Freud’s writing preserves history precisely within this gap in his text; and within the words of his leaving, words that do not simply refer, but, through their repetition in the later “Summary and Recapitulation,” convey the impact of a history precisely as what cannot be grasped about leaving. (21)

The gap or the “literal space” both signify the referential gap of not being able to grasp or communicate one’s trauma and the “interval” of time between the prefaces which can be considered the latency period in Caruth’s understanding of trauma. This gap is characteristic of Caruthian trauma theory which she describes as “a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory” (1995, 7).

Consequently, *Moses and Monotheism* becomes an example of trauma both through the story it tells and its structure as a repetitive text that is marked by a gap that conveys the trauma in itself. Failure of reference is central to the claim that Freud's trauma is represented through the gaps and repetitions in *Moses and Monotheism*. As Bond contends, "Caruth's work is essentially a discussion of historical experience as a form of referential collapse. The inability to 'know' the traumatic event manifests itself in the failure to bear witness to it" (Bond 2015, 20). Thus, the poststructuralist idea of referential collapse resurfaces in Caruth's argument to conclude that Freud's text preserves trauma in itself. Freud's trauma is marked by what he cannot refer to because he cannot grasp his own trauma, and, according to Caruth, it can only be known through these gaps and repetitions.

Leys criticises Caruth for omitting certain information from Freud's discussion in order to shape the argument in her favour (Leys, 278). At some point, Freud's analysis comes to the conclusion that the Jewish history is like the castration model. Then he turns to the example of train accident before saying "The next example we turn to seems to have still less in common with our problem (MM, 84; SE, 23: 67)" (Leys, 277). Caruth quotes the passage about the train accident which describes a person who survives a train accident visibly unharmed but later on experiences the symptoms of what Freud calls "traumatic neurosis" (Caruth, 1995, 7). She passingly remarks that "the analogy with the Oedipal individual constitutes much of his explanation" (1996, 16) before moving on to the next discussion. Leys claims that for Freud, the most suiting to the analogy for his version of Jewish history "is not the trauma of the railway accident but the etiology of the neuroses in the sexual-aggressive castrative "traumata" of early childhood, their defensive repression, and the delayed return of the repressed." (Leys, 278). Through these details of Freud's discussion of analogies it is clear that the focus of Freud is the castration model as an explanation of his version of Jewish history but Caruth's focus is explaining Jewish history as an example of trauma both for the

Hebrews and Freud himself. Caruth only chooses to engage with certain ideas of Freud while leaving some central ideas out of discussion. In the train accident analogy what attracts Caruth is the term *latency* which is the belatedness of trauma, a characteristic of Caruth's understanding of trauma. Leys criticises her reading of Freud and her subsequent remarks on latency as "tendentious":

they are typical of Caruth's interpretative practices, which involve not so much detailed readings of the texts under consideration as thematizations of them in terms of certain privileged figures or tropes. In this instance, by making the accident rather than the child's Oedipal story the model for the history of the Jews, Caruth decisively alters the terms of Freud's analysis[...] Caruth rejects Freud's castration model of the trauma in order to thematize the same story as the story of Jewish victimhood-as the history of a murder. (Leys 279)

This once again reveals that Caruth shapes her arguments by leaving out information from the texts she relies on to theorize trauma. This problem of building an argument is that it seems like the texts she quotes fully support her claims, or claim what she says it claims. In conclusion, trauma theory can only be constructed through these kinds of selective readings and excluded ideas which may shroud the claims

Another instance Leys criticises Caruth for omitting information is for omitting some sentences in the quotation from the second preface: "[...]Then, suddenly, the German invasion. . . . In the certainty of persecution . . . I left [verliess ich], with many friends, the city which from early childhood, through seventy-eight years, had been a home to me. (69–70; 57)" (Freud quoted in Caruth, 1996, 20). In one of the missing sentences, as Leys herself also brings to attention, Freud mentions that he escaped persecution not only based on his work but also based on his 'race'. Caruth claims that Freud refers to his departure rather than the invasion by saying, "in spite of the temptation to lend an immediate referential meaning

to Freud's trauma in the German invasion and Nazi persecution, it is not, in fact, precisely the direct reference to the German invasion that can be said to locate the actual trauma in Freud's passage" (20), but "Freud *does* yield to the temptation to lend a referential meaning to his flight from the Nazis by mentioning explicitly the racial persecutions and threats made against him." (Leys, 289). The only way for Caruth to build an argument around departure as the term where Freud's trauma can be located was to omit the part where Freud refers to the risk of persecution based on his race. This kind of omission is a common feature of Caruth's close reading which has been brought to attention in some other examples.

Another interesting point in Caruth's analysis of *Moses and Monotheism* is that she identifies the murderers as the victims, similar to her claim that Tancred is the victim. The distinction between the victim and the perpetrator is inexistent. As explained before, perpetrators can be traumatised but the distinction between victim and perpetrator bears moral implications that should not be overlooked. The main reason for pointing this out is to bring the ethical and moral problem in lack of conceptual clarity of trauma in terms of the distinction the perpetrator and the victim to attention because "the concept of trauma continues to function as a moral judgement in Western society" (Bond and Craps, 2020, 114). Consequently, this confusion may lead to a false claim for moral superiority by claiming victimhood.

In her essay "Who Speaks? Who Listens?: The Problem Of Address In Two Nigerian Trauma Novels" (2008) Amy Novak criticizes Caruth's analysis of Tasso's epic poem as well as Caruth's claim that traumatic history is inaccessible. The analysis of Tasso's epic is criticised because of Caruth's disregard for the colonial implications of the text. A detailed reading of the epic reveals that there is a postcolonial dimension that is overlooked in Caruth's analysis. The story is about the "the sixteenth-century rediscovery of Ethiopian Christianity, a rediscovery that brought into European consciousness a potential ally against

the Muslim infidel and an ultimately troubling emblem of heresy because of the Ethiopians' divergent practices regarding baptism that separated them from Roman orthodoxy."

(Rothberg 2009, 95). Clorinda's black Ethiopian and Christian mother who is also the queen gives birth to a white child, Clorinda. In fear of the King's reaction, Clorinda's mother gives her away to a Muslim eunuch who raises her. After Clorinda was mortally wounded by Tancred she asks to be baptised and she dies as a Christian. With this new information one needs to rethink the scene of the first murder which is revealed to be a white African Christian killed by a white European Christian crusader. Novak's criticism is based on the missing information in Caruth's analysis as well as Tancred being considered a victim by Caruth:

In Caruth's analysis, Tancred is both the traumatized subject and the witness to an enigmatic otherness. Although Caruth's formulation draws attention to and attempts to listen to the voice of the Other, it is Tancred who remains "psychoanalytic theory itself." But Tancred does not experience the trauma; Clorinda does. And the voice that cries out from the wound is not a universal voice, nor is it a generic female voice: it is the female voice of black Africa. (Novak, 32)

The white European Christian male character has the moral high ground even in the act of killing. The failure of the promise of "cross-cultural ethical engagement" (Craps 2) in trauma theory is once again revealed through this analysis. Clorinda only exists in Caruth's reading as the voice of trauma which is the witness of the unknowing of Tancred, she is only mentioned through her relation to Tancred's trauma. Novak criticizes the story itself as well by saying: "Clorinda has been whitened and Christianized to make her an acceptable lover for his hero. In this act, we witness an early European discursive encounter with a racial and religious Other, a representation that is repeated in Freud's and Caruth's readings of Tancred not as the perpetrator of trauma but as the victim of it" (32). Caruth's analysis is not only an

example of her focus on Western experiences but also one where in an intercultural encounter the Other's experience is not only disregarded but also made into a witness of her murderer's suffering. A similar example can be seen in her analysis of *Hiroshima mon Amour*, which will be examined later on in this chapter.

Caruth's universalization of trauma and victimhood results in many problems as it has been seen in previous examples. Rather than bringing deconstruction to an ethical ground I argue that Caruth's trauma theory is the example of the limits of deconstruction when it comes to the analysis of trauma in literature.

Novak criticises Caruth's claim that history is inaccessible. In her analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004) Novak considers "how trauma theory might move beyond this colonial binary" (Novak 2008, 33). She criticises Caruth's definition of history:

to whom is the trauma of colonialism inaccessible? Not to the people of Nigeria who live it. Within Nigeria, the violence of the past and present are not outside knowledge but woven into cultural practices and everyday routines. The history of colonialism as trauma perpetrated by the West remains unacknowledged in the official histories of the Anglo-European civilizing mission and narratives of charity and progress. (Novak 35-36).

Here, I would argue that history is not a "history of trauma" but of denial, omitting and reshaping especially in the postcolonial context. Furthermore, I argue that poststructuralist trauma theory strengthens the dynamics that tries to erase the effects of colonialism and neocolonialism. As mentioned before in this chapter, there is a poststructuralist tendency to universalise psychological responses to trauma. Trauma theory refrains from engaging political arguments by stripping characters and events of their significant details because, as Novak shows, when trauma theory and colonial trauma meet, considering trauma as

inaccessible becomes a problem. To sum up, trauma theory informed by poststructuralism is misconceptualised through a theoretical understanding of trauma that is reduced to the absence of referentiality, an inherently de Manian idea, which refuses direct telling of traumatic experiences through the refusal of narrativization as an accurate form of communicating trauma. Caruth's insistence on deconstruction as the privileged mode of accessing trauma to bring deconstruction on ethical grounds is the central problem of trauma theory.

Another problem Caruth's approach implies could be summed up with the question 'Who is qualified to write this traumatic history?'. If the very people that have gone through the event have no memory of it and when they do they can only give an inaccurate account of events, what does this impossibility imply for the existence of history? What does this entail for the factuality, representation and the remembrance of the past?

Hiroshima mon amour (1959)

In the second chapter of *Unclaimed Experience* titled "Literature and the Enactment of Memory" Caruth examines *Hiroshima mon Amour*, a movie directed by Alain Resnais with a script by Marguerite Duras. The movie tells the story of the relationship between a Japanese man and a French actress who came to Japan to work in a movie about peace after the bombing of Hiroshima. The love affair is marked by the traumatic pasts of both. The woman fell in love with a German soldier in France during World War II. Her lover died on the last day of the war before they could escape together. After the war, she was condemned for this and she was humiliated and shamed. As a punishment, her head was shaved and she was locked in her parents' cellar. The Japanese man, who is an architect, lost his family in the war and feels survivor's guilt. "It is her presence in Hiroshima, another site of wartime trauma, and the facilitating role of the Japanese man, who lost his family in the bombing, that enables the woman to recount her story for the first time" (Craps, 2013, 18).

Caruth is interested in the historical and ethical implications of the Resnais-Duras collaboration. She writes: “*Hiroshima mon amour* opens up the question of history, I would propose, as an exploration of the relation between history and the body.” and the subject of history in the movie “is a matter not only of what we see and know but also of what it is ethical to tell” (26).

Alain Resnais was supposed to make a documentary about Hiroshima in the aftermath of the atomic bomb but he refused to do it after several months collecting footage from the archives and instead makes the movie in question. Caruth’s interprets of this as the refusal of direct telling:

Resnais paradoxically implies that it is direct archival footage that cannot maintain the very specificity of the event. And it would appear, equally paradoxically, that it is through the fictional story, not *about* Hiroshima but taking place at its site, that Resnais and Duras believe such historical specificity is conveyed. (27)

The refusal of direct telling is in line with the poststructuralist understanding of language and trauma. This refusal is the refusal of directly referring to the event which is why Caruth conceptualises trauma as an aporia of telling. Caruth’s theory locates and explains trauma where referential relationship fails or is established indirectly. In addition to that, the movie is fictional and in deconstruction language produces fiction in its attempt to refer to the world. Therefore fiction is privileged over direct forms of conveying trauma such as documentaries. The privilege of fiction also resembles the aesthetic superiority of the puppets of marionette theatre over human dancers, which de Man eventually connects to language producing fiction whenever it refers to the material world, in “Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist’s *Über das Marionettentheater*” (1986). Thus, trauma cannot be directly referred to by forms of art-verbal or visual- because art becomes a form of mediation-like language- when it directly refers to trauma and Caruth’s trauma theory claims that trauma should not be mediated

because mediation—such as meaning making processes of the brain, narrativization and language—provides an inaccurate version of the truth of trauma.

In relation to the praise on fiction, it is worth noting that Resnais made a documentary about concentration camps called *Nuit et brouillard* (1956) and refused to make a documentary about Hiroshima because they would be similar to each other. Caruth claims that Resnais made a fictional movie rather than a documentary because archival footage cannot convey historical specificity and right after that, she says that Resnais already made a documentary using archival footage which is contradictory to her claim. Furthermore the movie opens with the presentation of archival footage and as Pederson notes “Resnais embeds them in his fiction not because they fail as historical markers but because they succeed overwhelmingly in placing the story that follows in geographic and historical context” (2014, 347). The historical specificity Caruth refers to is actually the specificity of trauma because direct telling cannot convey the truth of trauma. Therefore, the refusal of direct reference preserves the incomprehensibility of trauma.

Caruth’s analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour* ends with the suggestion that trauma is transmitted through the film, which makes the audience the witnesses or *co-owners* of trauma. Instead of empathy which involves having a certain understanding of the situation, Caruth praises the impossibility of knowledge and understanding. Similar to the rejection of narrativization for the sake of preserving the truth of trauma, witnessing someone else’s trauma involves taking trauma as incomprehensible. Hence, Caruth’s tendency to preserve the truth of trauma through refraining from mediating trauma through language is evident in transmissibility. At the end of her analysis Caruth concludes that:

“In a similar way, a new mode of seeing and of listening—a seeing and a listening *from the site of trauma*—is opened up to us as spectators of the film, and offered as the very possibility, in a catastrophic era, of a link between cultures. What we see and

hear, in *Hiroshima mon amour*, resonates beyond what we can know and understand; but it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place.” (1996, 56)

The idea that trauma is passed around is in line with what Caruth’s theory is interested in: the incomprehensibility of trauma, which is why new modes of accessing trauma never involve understanding but involve increasing the number of traumatised people. Trauma theory emphasises its relevancy to the world by claiming that trauma spreads to everyone. Empathy involves a certain sense of understanding and direct forms of telling-e.g. making the movie about Hiroshima instead of *at* Hiroshima- involve mediation because direct telling is directly referring to trauma but indirect telling, fiction is what language can accomplish in its attempt to refer to the material world. The problem is that the transmission of trauma risks appropriation of someone else’s trauma and consequently “confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions” (LaCapra, 2014, 21) through overidentification, something trauma theory seems to promote. Luckhurst observes that Caruth’s concept of trauma “leaks between mental and physical symptoms, between patients [...] between patients and doctors [...] and between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy” (2008, 3). The idea of transmissibility is also supported by Laub and Felman(1992). In *Testimony* (1992), which was written together with Felman, Laub claims that the witness is “a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*” and “a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event” (57). Through learning about and bearing witness to someone’s trauma the witnesses becomes a part of it. This controversial idea is a characteristic of trauma theory. As LaCapra contends, “empathy should not be conflated with unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage.” (40). By replacing empathy with transmissibility, I would argue that Caruth preserves the incomprehensibility of

trauma because her deconstruction-inspired theory of trauma can only be employed when trauma is incomprehensible.

At some point, Caruth moves on to the discussion about the act of seeing. In the movie, the Japanese man claims that the French woman saw nothing in Hiroshima, presumably because she was not there when the bomb fell, to which she replies that she has seen everything because she visited the hospital and the museum. On the matter of what he had seen, the mutilated and dead bodies, when compared to seeing the pictures of the event and his denial of the woman having seen Hiroshima, Caruth argues that “the man’s denial suggests that the act of seeing, in the very establishing of a bodily referent, erases, like an empty grammar, the reality of an event. Within the insistent grammar of sight, the man suggests, the body erases the event of its own death. This effacement of the event of Hiroshima” (29). What is more striking here is the reference to language; the act of seeing suddenly becomes a component of language and *erases the event* through its *insistent grammar*. The language of deconstruction becomes the defining feature of the act of seeing. This section of her analysis is titled “The Betrayal of Sight” which resembles de Man’s influential work on deconstruction and language *Blindness and Insight* (1971). In this work de Man describes *blindness* as the impossibility of understanding or conferring a certain meaning to a text and *insight* denotes the moments where a certain understanding arises through the impossibility of understanding which deconstruction accomplishes. The resemblance is uncanny. Therefore, her discussion on sight is informed by de Man’s idea of blindness against the text and she establishes a structure of trauma by underlining the impossibility of understanding it. The argument on the failure of sight helps her shape the argument in poststructuralist terms. The failure of sight and what it refers to is a problem of meaning, which is the core interest of poststructuralism. Then she brings the difference between the Japanese and the French in terms of perception to attention, while the nuclear

bombing signifies a catastrophe for the Japanese it signifies the end of the war for the French. She comes to the conclusion that “this inscription of the Japanese event into the history of the French—the inevitable self-referential reversal of the act of understanding, founded in the erasure of death—is also associated, in the dialogue, with a kind of moral betrayal within the act of sight, with, indeed, the filming of Hiroshima” (29). Once again poststructuralist language shapes the argument, this time through the *self-referential reversal of the act of understanding*. The meaning of the same event for two nations differing from each other is similar to the poststructuralist claim that language have one fixed meaning and that meaning is constructed through the interpretation of the reader. Seeing the traumatic experience of Hiroshima through pictures and footages and claiming that one has seen it is considered a *moral betrayal within the act of sight* because trauma theory believes that the trauma is imprinted to the brain at the moment of the traumatic event and claims that one can only grasp it through indirect telling.

For Craps, what Caruth’s interpretation does is to “gloss over the lop-sided quality of the cross-cultural dialogue” in the movie because the Japanese man’s story or Hiroshima’s history are never explored in detail (2013, 18). The main focus is on the French woman’s story. He contends that “Hiroshima is reduced to a stage on which the drama of a European woman’s struggle to come to terms with her personal trauma can be played out; the Japanese man is of interest primarily as a catalyst and facilitator of this process” (18). This is similar to other texts Caruth analysed where the non-Western characters are treated as the *catalysts* or witnesses to the trauma of the Western subject, for example Tancred and Clorinda. After all, Clorinda’s voice as the witness *facilitates* the knowledge of Tancred’s trauma. Despite “the asymmetry of the exchange and the appropriation and instrumentalization of Japanese suffering in the service of articulating a European trauma”, Caruth considers this movie as an “exemplary model of cross-cultural witnessing” (Craps 18). Furthermore, the French

woman's suffering is personal even though it is related to the war but the Japanese man's suffering represents "the collective memory of atomic destruction," but the former is explored in great detail while the latter is not (Craps 18). In conclusion, Caruth's examples of intercultural witnessing are problematic because "rather than being evidence of a postcolonial sensibility, Caruth's descriptions of cross-cultural encounters actually reinforce Eurocentrism" (Craps in Buelens et al. 48).

The movie is against Caruth's concept of trauma in certain ways even though she extensively talks about the ungrasped trauma in the movie. As Pederson notes "Caruth's reading of the film is too narrow, and her choice of scenes too conveniently selected to fit her characterization of trauma." and the traumatic memories of the French woman are not unknown to her and instead she recounts her traumatic memories with lots of details (2014, 345). Her claim on this relies on French woman missing the exact time of her lover's passing while waiting by his wounded body (Caruth 1996, 38). However as the woman herself says, she could only think about the similarities of their bodies at the time of his death and missed the exact moment while she was preoccupied with this idea. Therefore, it is not a matter of forgetting or not being able to consciously recall the moment because she can already tell the story in detail, both the verbal and visual accounts of her story confirm this.

In conclusion, these three close readings, which make up the base of trauma theory and Caruth's interpretation of trauma, consists of narrow arguments that sometimes only work through omitting certain information and sometimes even contradict the information given. The examples have shown that Caruth's arguments are, as Leys calls it, *tendentious* (2000, 279). They rely heavily on de Man's understanding of poststructuralism to the extent that trauma in these texts are only explained in poststructural terms such as referential failure and aporia. I argue that trauma theory had to formulate a poststructuralist definition to be able to use deconstruction in the analysis of texts on trauma. Trauma theory

works through assumptions of trauma being incomprehensible and unassimilated, both of which are arguable.

Trauma theory does not create an understanding of trauma but rather promotes the impossibility of understanding and on top of that it fails to deliver on the promises of ethical, political and historical engagement, as the examples in this chapter have shown. Trauma theory promotes intercultural engagement but only to the extent that it witnesses Western trauma, ultimately failing to consider the Other's identity. The close readings have also shown that trauma theory universalizes by considering trauma to have same effects in everyone even though only the Western definition and examples of trauma are used in Caruth's examples, even to the extent that the trauma of non-Western characters are disregarded or assimilated into someone else's trauma, as in the case of Tancred and Clorinda. Thus, I argue that the main issue that connects these problems is deconstruction. These mistakes were made for the sake of bringing deconstruction to an ethical ground however trauma theory unwittingly proves that this certain literary approach is not suitable for this task on the basis of all the examples given in this chapter. Trauma theory is not concerned with understanding because of building a theoretical framework on the impossibility of understanding and the impossibility of conveying exact meaning through language. Therefore, trauma theory only engages with other disciplines to prove its deconstructionist conceptualisation of trauma.

As a result trauma theory can be considered a multidisciplinary failure. Trauma theory can only be ethical in a universalised world where diversity does exist.

CONCLUSION:

WHERE DOES ONE GO FROM HERE?¹⁰

Trauma, “one of the signal concepts of our time” (Leys 10), which entered in *DSM-III* in 1980 as Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) transcended the boundaries of medical discipline and became a widely discussed phenomenon in other fields of study such as law and history. Trauma has made its place in literary theory through the work of Cathy Caruth and her associates Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Geoffrey Hartman. Caruth described trauma as

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (1995, 4)

This definition makes up the general understanding of trauma in literary theory. Trauma is characterised by the flashbacks, nightmares and unconscious reenactments of the traumatic event. Taking its cue from the ideas of Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud and Bessel van der Kolk trauma in trauma theory stays as a literal copy of the event in the brain because it fails to be assimilated into ‘narrative memory’; which is the process of the brain that records regular memories and enables them to be verbalised accounts ones experiences. For van der Kolk, and consequently Caruth, the process of integrating an event into narrative memory “ineluctably distorts the truth, since declarative memory is by definition a construction and

¹⁰ “How and where one goes on from there is far from clear” (de Man 1984, viii).

misrepresentation of the past” (Leys 251). Traumatic memory stays unassimilated and unable to be verbalised, thus traumatic memory is inaccessible to conscious recall.

For Caruth, trauma theory aims to create a new mode of access to the inaccessible phenomenon of trauma. The new mode of access is intricately bound up with deconstruction and textuality. Taking her cue from the ideas of Paul de Man on language and deconstruction, Caruth provides a theoretical framework that relies on the deconstructionist understanding of language. In his works, de Man emphasises the inherent instability of language. For de Man, the system of language which uses words to refer to the material world is faulty because it relies on the assumption that the word accurately represents or replaces the thing it refers to. De Man contradicts this by saying that this assumption confuses the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies.” (1982, 11), because the materiality of the signifier-the word- is a sound which is not the same with the materiality of the thing it refers to. The concept of aporia-paradox, unsettlement- which was frequently used by Jacques Derrida, who defines it as “a blocking of passage, a stalling or hesitation, a foot hovering on the threshold, caught between advancing and falling back, between the possible and the impossible” (Luckhurst 2008, 6), is a characteristic feature of trauma as well. Trauma is conceptualised as a paradox: it is inaccessible and yet it presents itself through flashback and nightmares, it is not a part of the conscious memory yet it is stored in the mind. Aporias, gaps repetitions and referential collapses are where Caruth’s trauma theory locates trauma in the texts. Instead of direct references to trauma, which would involve the integration of traumatic memory into narrative memory which can only produce an inaccurate version of traumatic memory, indirect references or features that imitate traumatic responses in the text like repetitions, aporias of representation and referential collapses are sought by trauma theory. Therefore, the text itself is treated like a traumatised individual and language bears symptoms and characteristics of trauma. Considering language as the bearer of trauma establishes the

link between trauma and deconstruction. Trauma theory and deconstruction both refuses the accuracy of linguistic representation through direct referential relationship between the signifier and signified.

The relation of trauma and history is also explored in trauma theory. For Caruth, “history is a history of trauma”:

For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence. (1996, 18)

History is linked to trauma because history is considered an objective account of memory-and connected to the personal history- which poses a problem for trauma because it is an inaccessible memory that cannot be directly referred to. Also, history refer to the past in a unity of time and place but for trauma theory the past haunts the present because trauma only presents itself *belatedly* and it cannot be witnessed or understood at the moment the traumatic event happens. On the other hand, since trauma is an unassimilated form of memory it is the most objective version of the event. History of trauma can only convey trauma by emphasising its *inaccessibility* because it is *not fully perceived as it occurs*.

One of the reasons of the interest of Caruth in trauma stems from the so called ‘ethical turn’ which aimed to bring literary theory on ethical ground. Poststructuralism was criticised for being excessively focused on the text and being unethical. The revelation of de Man’s antisemitic work published in Belgium during German occupation further fuelled these criticisms because de Man was the most prominent name in poststructuralism. This ethical turn can be the explanation of the ethical and political concerns of trauma theory which employs poststructuralist ideas to “‘read the wound’ with the aid of literature (Hartman 1995, 537)” (Toremans 52). For Toremans, Caruth’s trauma theory is “a response to the challenge of reading “after” de Man – both chronologically and following his example” and he links

this view with the challenge that “was formulated by de Man himself at the moment when his critique of linguistic referentiality had reached a point that appeared to signal the end of literary theory” (2018, 52). This thesis argues that trauma theory is Caruth’s solution to the problem of reading *after* de Man as well as de Man’s concept of the end of theory. Therefore Caruth’s theory brings deconstruction on an ethical ground and serves as a continuation of de Man’s understanding of deconstruction by employing deconstruction as a tool to access the truth of trauma through language.

Caruth explains her understanding of de Man’s works in the chapter titled “The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference” in *Unclaimed Experience*. This chapter uses de Man’s readings of Kant and Kleist to establish a narrative that is linked by the recurring concept of falling and the recurring figure of the body. According to de Man, seventeenth century epistemology aimed to combine language and geometry in order to create a philosophical language of irrefutable logic. For Caruth, “the phenomenal world that this geometry seemed to describe so successfully was a world thought to be governed entirely by motion” (Caruth 1996, 75). However, with Newton’s discovery of gravity it was revealed that *objects fall toward each other*, therefore the world becomes a world *falling* instead of motion. Philosophical world fails to refer to gravity because the concept of falling- or the force of gravity- makes sense in mathematical formulations but in language it seems like a magical invisible force. The referential failure to the concept of falling resembles de Man’s claims that language can only produce fiction in its attempt to refer to the world because language does not function “according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world” (de Man 1986, 11).

The figure of the body is connected to the referential failure of language. The claim that language cannot accurately refer to the external world is exemplified by de Man in Kleist’s “On the Marionette Theater” (1810). The marionette puppets are considered

aesthetically superior to the human dancers even though they are mechanical representations of the organic body of the human dancers. The puppets are suspended in the air and defy gravity while human dancers are bound by the gravity onto the ground. In addition to that, the puppets are not self-aware and they are controlled by strings which enables them to perfectly exercise the dance moves as opposed to the human dancers. This comparison between the organic and mechanical body symbolises the referential failure of language. In its attempt to refer to the organic body language produces a mechanical replica of the thing it refers to. Something similar happens in Kant's transcendental philosophy which aimed to separate philosophical language from empirical referents. For de Man, this causes a "deep, perhaps fatal, break" (de Man 1996, 79) in his system because Kant considers the body that is referred to in his philosophical language a combination of limbs without any importance to what these limbs serve. Therefore in Kant's understanding body is disarticulated. Through this break the *resistance of reference* occurs (Caruth 1996, 87). The disruption in the unity and the purpose of the limbs of the organic body rather resembles the mechanical body of the puppets which is a combination of limbs. Therefore Kant's philosophy which aims to separate its philosophical language from empirical referents, fails in its attempt to refer to the organic body because it tries to integrate something that belongs to the material world in to a philosophical system that refuses to refer to the material world. Therefore the phenomenal reality -the body- resists the reference of the language. When the falling body meets reference the impact breaks it, or in Caruth's words in the texts of de Man and Kant "the impact of reference is felt in falling: in the resistance of the *example of falling* to a phenomenal or perceptual analogy that would turn it into the mere figure of an abstract principle" and it is felt "not in the search for an external referent, but in the necessity, and failure, of theory." (89-90; emphasis in the original). Through these readings of de Man, Caruth introduces his theories and ideas which is necessary for the conceptualisation of trauma.

Trauma is connected to de Man's ideas in many ways. For Caruth, "de Man's critical theory of reference ultimately becomes a narrative, and a narrative inextricably bound up with the problem of what it means to fall (which is, perhaps, de Man's own translation of the concept—of the experience— of trauma)" (1996, 7). The link between trauma and de Man is established in the introduction of *Unclaimed Experience* and further explained through Caruth's explanation of de Man's ideas. I argue that Caruth's trauma theory is a theory of language and textuality which is highly influenced by Paul de Man's version of deconstruction because the conceptualisation of trauma depends on de Man's ideas on language. For example, the text and language become bearer of the trauma, Caruth locates trauma in gaps, aporias of representation and referential failures. Similar to the claim that language cannot accurately refer to the external world, trauma cannot be referred to as well because it is inaccessible and direct attempts to access it such as narrativization creates an inaccurate version of trauma's truth because the truth of trauma becomes distorted when it is assimilated into narrative memory. The disjunction in the link between language and the external world is replicated as a disjunction between language and trauma as well as the disjunction of the link between the traumatised individual and traumatic memory. The paradoxes of having a memory unknown to the person and the inaccessible phenomenon of trauma that both wants to be heard but cannot be told through language are the paradoxes that enables deconstruction to be employed as a way of accessing the truth behind these paradoxes. Therefore the concept of aporia which deconstruction is interested in is reenacted as the aporia of representation in trauma theory, or as Luckhurst contends, "De Man's errings and slippages between reference and representation clearly informed Caruth's formulation of the paradoxes of traumatic representation" (2008, 6).

To sum up, Caruth's theory of trauma is a theory of language and textuality. Caruth's concept of literary trauma theory which relies on Paul de Man's ideas on language and

deconstruction, serves as a mode of access to the truth of trauma through the text. Therefore trauma theory is a way to bring deconstruction on ethical grounds. The overt focus on textuality and language causes trauma theory to disregard other forms of trauma such as non-event-based traumas that are caused from ongoing processes. The lack of conceptual clarifications such as the distinction between the perpetrator and the victim pose a problem for the ethical claims of the trauma theory. As it has been pointed out throughout this thesis, trauma theory fails to include the traumas of minorities, non-western communities because it focuses on very specific definitions of trauma by the *DSM-III*, Freud's concept of traumatic neurosis and van der Kolk's ideas on traumatic memory as a literal imprint on the brain because these definitions and ideas of trauma connect to trauma to the poststructuralist understanding of language as a problem of reference. The claims of inaccessibility to the event rejects the trauma of people who remember the traumatic event they experienced which poses a problem for trauma theory. The field of trauma studies pointed out many flaws in Caruth's theory and many of them are connected to or stem from the focus on de Man's version of deconstruction as a theoretical framework for trauma theory as well as the selective readings Caruth uses to conceptualise trauma. Thus, Caruth's trauma theory fails to be an inclusive and ethical theory of trauma because of its focus on deconstruction.

After accepting that trauma theory has shortcomings, the question is 'where does one go from here?'. The direction of trauma studies is not very certain but many works on literary trauma theory aim to correct the shortcomings of Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma. There are many examples of creating a new understanding of trauma such as *The Future of Trauma Theory* (2014) by Gert Buelens et al., which contemplates on "the future of trauma studies and the changing nature of violence and power" and "inspires us to construct new parables beyond Tancred and Clorinda" (Rothberg, in Buelens et al., xvii); *Trauma* (2020) by Lucy Bond and Stef Craps which examines the shortcomings of trauma theory and *Postcolonial*

Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds by Stef Craps which aims to “decolonize” trauma theory as well as *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014) by Michelle Balaev which attempts to “demonstrate the broadening borders of this innovative field” (Balaev 11). These works are the proof that trauma theory needs to be rethought and adds to the existing literature of trauma studies. The ultimate aim of this thesis is to emphasise the need for a new understanding of trauma which overcomes the shortcomings of Caruth’s trauma theory. The multidisciplinary nature of trauma requires trauma theory to reconsider its sources because the concept of trauma in other fields of studies such as psychiatry have updated its knowledge on trauma, to which the change of the definition of PTSD in DSM-IV and DSM-V is the proof. As the recent interest on this field continues its attempts to correct the mistakes of trauma theory, the ultimate aim of trauma theory should be to create a reconceptualised trauma theory that does not depend on or aim to prove the usefulness of deconstruction.

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