THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO LITERATURE AND TRAUMA

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PHILOSOPHIES OF TRAUMA

Hanna Meretoja

"Philosophy of trauma" is not a widely used concept, and the topic is rarely discussed, despite the strong philosophical undercurrent of literary trauma theory and its genealogical link to poststructuralism. This is probably due to the fact that trauma is more commonly seen as a psychological or cultural rather than a philosophical concept. It could be argued, however, that precisely for this reason there is a need to explore the philosophical assumptions underlying trauma theory. These assumptions often remain unarticulated – they can be tacit and implicit – but they nevertheless structure different traditions of theorizing trauma. In this chapter, I approach philosophies of trauma precisely from the perspective of the philosophical assumptions undergirding different ways of engaging with trauma. These assumptions can take various forms depending, first, on how explicitly articulated they are and, second, on whether they emerge in the context of theoretical discourse or fiction. Drawing on these distinctions, I will sketch out four types of philosophies of trauma. In addition to this semantic categorization, I propose a substantial one, suggesting that the three main philosophical paradigms of trauma that underlie contemporary trauma theory can be called empiricism, poststructuralism and hermeneutics. I will then analyse in more detail the philosophical underpinnings of dominant literary trauma theory particularly concerning the concepts of experience and narrative understanding. The final part of the chapter elucidates these points through a discussion of Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* (2015).

Philosophies of trauma: four semantic types and three philosophical paradigms

The notion of a philosophy of trauma can be used with reference to, first, explicit philosophies on which trauma theories are based and, second, implicit philosophies underlying theoretical approaches to trauma. Third, a philosophy of trauma can refer to the ways in which writers or other artists explicitly philosophize about traumatic experience. Fourth, a philosophy of trauma may refer to implicit philosophies of trauma within works of art that deal with traumatic experience. These four types of philosophies of trauma, however, are not absolute, mutually exclusive or comprehensive. They overlap; not all cases fall neatly into any one of these categories; and some cases fall between them. The continuum from implicit to explicit is more of a spectrum than a dichotomy. This categorization is semantic

as it pertains to different meanings of the concept without differentiating between the philosophical content or orientation of various approaches.

Philosophies of trauma can also be grouped substantially, in terms of their underlying philosophical assumptions and commitments: I suggest that the main philosophical paradigms of trauma are empiricism, poststructuralism and hermeneutics. While poststructuralist philosophy is often explicitly embraced in literary trauma theory (although it can also remain implicit), empiricism and hermeneutics can mainly be seen in the tacit assumptions underlying various trauma theories. These three philosophical paradigms can also be used as analytical tools in the analysis of philosophies that emerge from fiction. In this section, I will give examples of the four types of philosophies of trauma and briefly indicate how the three paradigms can be used to analyse the philosophical assumptions involved in these examples.

First, when it comes to explicit philosophies in trauma theory, the strand of trauma theory that has been most influential in literary studies, the one developed by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, has made clear, from its inception, that it is strongly based on poststructuralist philosophy. Caruth and Felman were students of Paul de Man at Yale University, and not only their vocabulary and idiom manifest a clear affinity with deconstruction, but both Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and Felman's chapters in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Felman and Laub 1992) contain extensive discussion of de Man's poststructuralist philosophy of language. It is precisely in their conception of language and representation that poststructuralism is most explicit. Drawing on de Man, Caruth emphasizes the performative dimension of language, in how it "does more than it knows" and how a horrifying event can function as "a deathlike break" that disrupts the language of representation and cannot be known but only felt (Caruth 1996: 87, 90). Joining the Freudian idea of belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*) with poststructuralism, Caruth's and Felman's foundational work has made it a basic tenet of literary trauma theory that due to its structure of "inherent latency", "the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs" but returns to haunt the subject of experience through "repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (Caruth 1995: 4, 8). For poststructuralist philosophy of trauma, trauma is fundamentally unrepresentable, unsayable and unspeakable – it eludes language, knowledge and narrative as systems of representation – a position that is linked to particular philosophical assumptions concerning experience and narrative understanding, which I will analyse in the next sections of this chapter. Among the first type of philosophy of trauma we can also count numerous other explicit engagements with poststructuralism by philosophically minded trauma scholars, such as Dominick LaCapra (2004, 2018), as well as work that explicitly brings together poststructuralist and hermeneutic strands of thought, such as Colin Davis's "traumatic hermeneutics (2018: 29–45), or that draws on philosophical hermeneutics to develop a "hermeneutics of trauma" (Orange 2011) or a "hermeneutics of suffering" (Hovey and Amir 2013).

Second, there are implicit philosophical assumptions and commitments underlying trauma studies. Indeed, much of the poststructuralist influence in literary trauma theory remains implicit. For example, a crucial ethical imperative for Caruth and Felman is the recognition of the fundamental otherness of the Other, which is the basic starting-point of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy, highly influential among the poststructuralists, but Caruth and Felman refer to him only sporadically (see Davis, Chapter 3, this volume). I will here, however, focus on the empiricist and hermeneutic assumptions underlying trauma theory as they remain less acknowledged.

Empiricism is a philosophical tradition according to which knowledge comes primarily from sensory experience, commonly understood in terms of what is directly given to the senses without mediation. Empiricism is rarely embraced explicitly in trauma theories, but it can be seen to shape the tacit assumptions underlying many approaches to trauma. It is particularly dominant in psychological, psychiatric and neuroscientific approaches that commonly identify with "cognitivism". Bryan T. Reuther approaches philosophy of trauma in terms of philosophies of psychology – psychoanalysis, behaviourism, cognitivism and post-cognitivism – and asserts that "the cognitivistic paradigm dominates in psychological and psychiatric diagnostic conceptualization" (Reuther 2012: 439). Cognitivist approaches tend to assume that the experiencing subject has immediate, direct sense experience (or "sense data"), which is then processed according to cognitive schemas. In comparison to social and cultural approaches, a cognitivist approach has remained relatively marginal in literary trauma studies, but it has received some interest from cognitivist narratologists. Joshua Pederson, for example, drawing on the work of Richard McNally and other cognitive scientists, argues against poststructuralist, Caruthian trauma theory: "traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may choose not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they cannot" (Pederson 2014: 334). Poststructuralist and hermeneutic approaches to trauma, in turn, might ask whether there is a somewhat voluntarist conception of subjectivity and agency underlying the idea of choosing not to speak about traumatic experience.

Caruth's critics, however, have observed that empiricist assumptions also underlie her approach insofar as she takes for granted that traumatic experience has "imprinted itself literally (a key term) on or into the subject's mind and brain" in a form that is inaccessible to consciousness (Leys 2000: 304, see also 267) or what Susannah Radstone characterizes as a "reflectionist understanding of the mind's relation to external events" (2000: 88). Caruth stresses repeatedly the "directness" and "immediacy" of the mind's registration of the traumatic event: "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (1996: 91–2). She defines trauma in terms of a situation in which "the outside has gone inside without any mediation" (59). The empiricist dimension of Caruth's work is linked precisely to this emphasis on how the experience of trauma is a matter of unmediated registration of a horrifying event "that has not been given psychic meaning in any way" (59). But is it possible to avoid giving the traumatic experience any meaning?

Hermeneutic philosophy of trauma, in contrast, problematizes the empiricist-positivistic assumption of direct, unmediated experience and emphasizes the temporal, cultural and social mediatedness of all experience, including traumatic experience. It argues that experience is always socially embedded, shaped by earlier experiences and involves meaning-giving, as I will flesh out in the next two sections. Many cultural approaches to trauma (including psychoanalytic and other strands of cultural psychology) are implicitly aligned with the philosophical hermeneutic tradition particularly insofar as they acknowledge the role of the traumatized subject as a (dialogically/relationally constituted) subject of interpretation and sense-making. They see the subject as not transparent to him- or herself but shaped by cultural and social forces that affect the experience of trauma – starting from the way a particular experience is interpreted to be "traumatic" in the first place – and suggest that improved understanding of these shaping mechanisms can help the subject to find new perspectives on the traumatic experience. Hermeneutic assumptions also play an important role in phenomenological trauma theories, such as Matthew Ratcliffe's approach in which trauma is seen to involve a loss of trust in the world and other people and a diminished sense of agency, which implies "a perceived world that appears bereft of salient possibilities for meaningful action" (2017: 15). More broadly, I would count under the umbrella term

"hermeneutic philosophy of trauma" what Reuther calls the paradigm of "postcognitivism", which problematizes the "decontextualized schemas" of cognitivism and draws on Martin Heidegger and phenomenology in emphasizing our embodied experience of engaging with the world:

> In this perspective, contextualized practical engagements are the primary mode by which we come to understand ourselves, others, societal norms, and the like. Confrontation with a traumatic event shatters how individuals engage with the world and ruins their orientation to it.
>
> *(Reuther 2012: 439)*

Third, when it comes to trauma fiction, at the explicit end of the spectrum are texts that present overt reflections on trauma. Such reflections are obviously central, for example, to Patrick McGrath's novel *Trauma* (2008), which popularizes PTSD theory and thematizes the peculiar temporality of trauma: "It was the familiar horror, seeing the body as though for the first time. This is what trauma is. The event is always happening *now*, in the *present*, for the *first time*." (McGrath 2008: 131) Such reflection features also in life-writing that can be called "trauma-writing". For example, Christine E. Hallett looks at the trauma-writing of First World War nurses and writes about their "philosophy of trauma" by which she means their ways of attaching meaning or meaninglessness to suffering, for example "by describing suffering as an inescapable element of being human" (Hallett 2010: 76–7). Their philosophizing has links to theoretical work on trauma but is not properly theoretical – rather, it can be characterized as (self-)reflection on the nature of trauma and suffering. Like life-writing, trauma-writing encompasses a wide spectrum of different modes of engaging with traumatic experiences, ranging from fictional to non-fictional writing that can nevertheless draw on literary devices and narrative strategies.

The fourth type of philosophy of trauma is present in trauma fiction that conveys an implicit philosophy of trauma while dealing with traumatic experiences. For example, modernist and postmodernist trauma fiction have developed certain textual strategies to performatively give expression to trauma through fragmentary, non-linear style, by foregrounding repetition, disrupted temporalities, absences, gaps and silences that indirectly point towards the unsayable (see e.g. Whitehead 2004; Pederson 2018; Eaglestone, Chapter 26, this volume). This kind of aesthetics of trauma is often linked to the poststructuralist philosophy of trauma that presents traumatic experience as beyond representation, fundamentally unknowable and incomprehensible. Other literary trauma narratives, however, challenge the aesthetics of the unknowable and show an affinity with hermeneutic philosophy of trauma, which emphasizes the mediatedness of traumatic experience. A recent example is Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, to be analysed at the end of this chapter.

The conception of experience in philosophies of trauma

There is little sustained comparative research on the basic philosophical assumptions underlying different trauma theories, in particular those concerning experience and narrative, despite the centrality of these concepts to trauma theory. While the next section explores narrative, in this section I will discuss two interlaced grounds for problematizing the Caruthian tenet that "the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs" (Caruth 1995: 8): it is

based, first, on a privileging of exceptional events and, second, on an empiricist-positivistic assumption of direct, unmediated experience.

First, due to structural violence – linked, for example, to social, racial and gender inequality – and long-term conditions such as living in the age of climate change and threat of nuclear extinction or with chronic illness, traumatizing experience can be a substantial part of one's everyday life. For this reason, several trauma theorists question the dominant event-centred approach to trauma and emphasize everyday processes of violence and distress that do not involve a single spectacular event. Judith Herman (1992) and Laura Brown (1995) were among the first to stress that the diagnostic model of trauma (in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM-III, 1980), which defined post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in terms of exposure to "a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience", privileges the male experience of exceptional, violent events, thereby assuming that violence, oppression and harassment are not part of one's everyday experience. As a result, girls' and women's "everyday assaults on integrity and personal safety", their "secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain", tend to be left outside the male-oriented "official lexicon" of "agreed-upon traumas" (Brown 1995: 101–2, 105). Since then, many scholars have drawn attention to the importance of structural violence for trauma studies, particularly in connection to racial violence (see e.g. Craps 2013; Rothberg 2009) and "slow violence", especially linked to climate change (see Nixon 2011). It is equally important to acknowledge the effects of class and social inequality. The everyday experiences of millions of people in adverse conditions involve a traumatizing dimension that not only keeps them from flourishing but positively damages them. Living in poverty can cause deep-seated shame with profound effects on self-esteem. Intersectional approaches are attentive to the multiple mechanisms of (racial, class-related, gendered etc.) traumatizing violence that intersect in lived, embodied, individual experience (see Ilmonen, Chapter 16, this volume).

In addition to societal structural violence, long-term adverse conditions linked to interpersonal relationships can make everyday life traumatizing. For example, long-term emotional abuse in childhood can damage one's ability to see oneself as a person worth being treated with kindness and respect. A traumatizing childhood can be the sole reality for a child, forming the only world he or she knows. In such cases, traumatic experiences are not singular exceptional experiences that resist integration into one's self-narrative. Instead, they are recurring, formative experiences that fundamentally shape one's self-narrative and sense of self – to the extent that it may be difficult for such traumatized persons to imagine other kinds of self-narratives or forms of agency that would allow them to better fulfil their potential.

Another example of a traumatizing everyday experience that challenges the event-centred model is long-term illness. I was diagnosed with breast cancer at the final stage of editing this volume, and after going through the shock phase and internalizing that this is really happening to me, I have struggled with the difficulty to locate the trauma in time and space. The traumatic experience I am going through has no clear temporal boundaries. Getting the diagnosis, out of the blue, was a shocking, traumatizing event, but overall my cancer trauma is more about the future: despite a good prognosis, it is an experience coloured by intense anxiety about the possibility of recurrence, of a lost future, of not having a chance to see my children grow up. A similar anxiety about the possibility of having no future, but on a more collective level, pertaining to the possibility of our planet becoming uninhabitable, is integral to the phenomena that are discussed in this volume in connection to "climate trauma" (by Craps, Chapter 25; Durrant and Topper, Chapter 17; Teittinen, Chapter 32) and "nuclear trauma" as a form of "haunting from the future" (by Schwab, Chapter 40).

Dealing with any kind of personal or collective trauma is always culturally mediated, and the cultural dimension of narrating and giving meaning also affects how the traumatizing event or process is experienced in the first place. For example, my traumatic experience of illness is embedded in a cultural context in which the dominant cultural narrative about cancer is that of battle or war (see Hansen 2018; Sontag 1978). An important aspect of my struggle has been the need to engage with this deeply problematic narrative that positions cancer patients as winners and losers, as if those who die did not fight hard enough, and with its underlying ideology of "normative optimism", the pressure to be positive in the face of hardship, as if the "right attitude" could lead to healing. Similar problems pertain to the current cultural discourse that narrates the coronavirus pandemic as a war against an invisible enemy.

Second, it can be argued more generally, against the claim that "the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs" (Caruth 1995: 8), that traumatic experience – whether exceptional or pervading the everyday – is experienced (and often intensely experienced) as it occurs. In the case of everyday experiences, trauma can colour one's entire being in the world. Even when traumatic experience is exceptional and so terribly painful that it resists assimilation and integration into one's narrative self-understanding, one can legitimately ask: is it not an experience all the same? In poststructuralist approaches, a traumatic experience is seen as a rupture that challenges one's previous beliefs, that is, as a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth 1996: 4). However, the suggestion that "the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs" seems to rest on the assumption that experience is a point-like event that happens here and now to a fully conscious subject of experience. If we understand experience as something that is without clear temporal boundaries, as pervaded by both the past and the future, as something that we go through as embodied beings, as only partly accessible to consciousness and as something that is constantly reinterpreted as it becomes part of new constellations of experience, it makes less sense to say that trauma is not experienced or that it is unambiguously separate from "normal" experience (Meretoja 2018: 114). What we face is more of a continuum than a dichotomy.

From a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, all experience extends in time: the present experience takes place from a horizon formed by our earlier experiences, and it is oriented towards a projected future (Heidegger 1927). Edmund Husserl (1991 [1893–1917]: 49) called *retention* the "just-passed" that is part of the present experience and *protention* the "not-yet" of the near future anticipated in the present. Rather than a dichotomy between fully integrated non-traumatic experience and not-at-all integrated traumatic experience, there is a continuum from integration to lack of integration. New experiences are integrated into old experiences to different degrees, and not only traumatic experience but also other types of experience can resist integration: for example, we use defence mechanisms to explain away phenomena that do not fit with our preconceptions and self-image. When one lives in traumatizing social conditions, everyday traumatic experiences can be well-integrated as they can be the sole reality for a person, but this does not mean that they would not cause hurt and damage. Thus, there are limits to the model of rupture in theorizing traumatic experience.

Narrative understanding in philosophies of trauma

Philosophies of trauma lead to wildly divergent implications on the significance and potential of narrative in understanding and working through trauma. As Roger Luckhurst notes, there is a "flat contradiction between cultural theory that regards narrative as betraying traumatic singularity and various therapeutic discourses that see narrative as a means of

productive transformation or even final resolution of trauma" (2008: 82). I propose that this contradiction becomes intelligible by looking at their different philosophical premises. In this section (drawing on Meretoja 2018: 107–16), I will particularly flesh out the main difference between the dominant poststructuralist trauma theory and a hermeneutic approach on the issue of narrative understanding.

Poststructuralistically oriented trauma theorists tend to suggest not only that trauma is de facto inassimilable to narrative understanding but also that narrative form in itself is ethically problematic in its attempt to make sense of traumatic experience. This is because the act of storytelling is taken to force an irrevocably singular event into an account that appropriates it by subsuming it under a general meaning or explanation. Caruth, for example, suggests that narrating implies "forgetting of the singularity" (1996: 32) of the narrated event, such as the singularity of the death of the French woman's lover in Caruth's analysis of Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*. Caruth locates the narrative's ethical potential in the "movement of her not knowing within the very language of her telling" (37) and in "the interruption of understanding" (42). Underlying Caruth's argumentation, like that of many other poststructuralist thinkers, is the idea that narrative is ethically problematic precisely insofar as it is a form of understanding and that it has ethical potential insofar as it disrupts understanding.

Scholars generally agree that narrative is a form of understanding, but those who see it as ethically problematic tend to subscribe to the poststructuralist criticism of understanding as inherently violent. This criticism is directed at what can be called a subsumption model, which has dominated the Western history of philosophy and which envisages knowledge and understanding in terms of conceptual appropriation, as an event in which something singular is subsumed under a general concept, law or model. Friedrich Nietzsche argued that concepts are violent because they mask the differences between singular things: "Every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent" (2001: 145). He uses as an example the leaves of a tree, all of which are different, but the concept of a leaf obscures those differences. Similarly, when we categorize people as "women" or "Asian", we risk forgetting the singularity of each individual and crucial differences within each group.

This Nietzschean tradition fuels twentieth-century poststructuralist suspicion towards narrative and understanding, such as Claude Lanzmann's statements about the "obscenity of understanding" (1995: 200) in relation to narrative attempts to comprehend the Holocaust. The most influential figure in making the violence of understanding the central starting-point for a new ethical sensibility was Levinas who rejected narrative and understanding as ethically questionable modes of appropriation: "In the word 'comprehension' we understand the fact of taking [*prendre*] and of comprehending [*comprendre*], that is, the fact of englobing, of appropriating" (1988: 170). On similar grounds, Jacques Derrida suggests that language as such, due to its universality, is inherently violent: what he calls "the originary violence of language" (or "arche-violence") is the act of classifying and naming, of inscribing "the unique *within* the system" (1997: 112). Against the violence of language and knowledge, many poststructuralist thinkers endeavour to develop a mode of thinking in which the experience of the unintelligible is valorized as an ethical experience that entails openness to the unknown (see Lyotard 1991 [1988]: 74; Meretoja 2014: 86–91).

The problem inherent in the poststructuralist criticism of narrative as a form of understanding is that dismissing the possibility of ethically sustainable narrative understanding can itself be violent in ruling out or foreclosing the possibility of genuine dialogue. The phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition provides a valuable alternative to the dismissal of

narrative understanding tout court by allowing us to differentiate between violent, appropriative narrative understanding, on the one hand, and non-violent, dialogic narrative understanding, on the other. It argues that the structure of a hermeneutic circle characterizes understanding as we always understand something new in relation to our earlier conceptions, and the new, in turn, can challenge our pre-conceptions. The new experience is structured according to certain concepts, but at the same time the event of understanding leaves a mark on these concepts and can reshape them. Understanding is successful only when the concepts are transformed so that they do justice to whatever is being understood. Such events of understanding are possible because concepts are not fixed but only exist in the temporal process of being used. The Gadamerian *negativity of understanding* means that we properly understand only when we realize that things are *not* what we thought they were (Gadamer 1997: 353–61). Hence, instead of subsuming the singular under general concepts, in genuine understanding *the singular shapes the general.*

This has important implications for narrative as a form of understanding. It allows us to acknowledge that not all narratives produce totalizing explanations or end up reinforcing violent practices of appropriation. Storytelling is a temporal process that has the potential to transform our conceptual frameworks, even if this potential often remains unrealized. Such an implicit philosophy can be seen to underlie, for example, Hannah Arendt's view that "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (1968: 105).

Traumatic experiences often resist assimilation due to the inadequacy of our earlier understanding in the face of an unbearably painful experience. While the subsumptive model of narrative presents storytelling as a way of assimilating new experiences into a pre-given mould, a traumatic experience can be so shocking that it cannot be appropriated into pre-given narrative scripts. From the perspective of narrative hermeneutics, however, narratives function as a vehicle of genuine (non-subsumptive) understanding precisely when, instead of a comfortable subsumption of new experiences into what we already know, they facilitate change (of pre-given categories, values, identities). Understanding is a temporal, two-way process that involves both interpretation of new experiences and reinterpretation and re-evaluation of one's narrative preunderstandings, which can thereby be profoundly transformed. Leigh Gilmore (2001: 6) defines trauma as a "self-altering" experience of violence, injury or harm. If we take seriously the negativity that lies at the heart of the hermeneutic conception of understanding, all genuine understanding is self-altering in some sense; experience of a traumatic event and the process of dealing with it, however, is often self-altering in a more radical sense because it can involve confronting a wounding or even paralyzing experience that fundamentally challenges one's previous understandings and orientation to the world.

Many therapeutic approaches start with the premise that making sense of a traumatic experience in narrative terms is a process of making a painful, distressing experience (partly) communicable and comprehensible by relating it to something. Such a process of relating can be necessary for survival as Dori Laub suggests: "The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive" (Laub 1995: 63). The hermeneutic conception of the temporal and interpretative nature of narrating one's experience implies that it is not just about applying pre-given narrative models to singular experience but a dynamic process of (re)interpretation that can involve learning something completely new that challenges one's previous narrative understandings (see Ricoeur 1985). Therefore such a process of narrative working through is not inevitably ethically questionable.

Recurring traumatic experiences can fundamentally shape one's narrative self-understanding, resulting for example in a self-diminishing narrative that impedes one from flourishing. In such cases, working through traumatic experience requires the difficult task of reinterpreting one's self-narrative and trying to renarrate it in less damaging ways that strengthen one's agency. Both the task of integrating traumatic experiences to other experiences and the task of renarrating one's (trauma-shaped) self-narrative require hermeneutic resources. According to Miranda Fricker, "hermeneutical injustice" is what occurs "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (2007: 1). Literature as well as other arts and social movements can fight hermeneutical injustice by providing new vocabularies for dealing with traumatizing processes. They can have empowering potential by helping us to understand and articulate experiences that we have not been able to narrate to ourselves or others. The #MeToo campaign, for example, demonstrates how sharing personal stories can change the shared intersubjective space – or the "narrative in-between" (Meretoja 2018: 117–25) – in ways that make it possible for individuals to be heard and seen and to understand aspects of their past experience anew. Similarly, literary narratives have potential to provide hermeneutic resources not only for self-understanding but also for social change, in the struggle against traumatizing structural violence.

Hermeneutics of trauma in *A Little Life*

Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* starts off as a novel about the friendship of four university students, Willem, Jude, Malcolm and Jean-Baptiste, focusing on their dreams, anxieties and existential search. As the novel progresses, however, Jude emerges as the central character: the narrative focuses on his struggle with his traumatic past, shaped by years of sexual abuse, the details of which gradually unravel as the narrative unfolds. The novel compellingly fleshes out the emotional, embodied and social effects of childhood trauma. The language of trauma is occasionally explicitly used by the characters, such as Jude's doctor or when Jude cries in shame after letting Willem see his scarred body naked for the first time and Willem responds: "I didn't know it was going to be so traumatic for you" (Yanagihara 2015: 456). But more important are the novel's implicit ways of dealing with – and verbalizing – the struggles of a traumatized individual.

The friendship of the four young men is marked by Jude's inability to share his past with the others: "they developed a friendship in which the first fifteen years of his life remained unsaid and unspoken, as if they had never happened at all" (Yanagihara 2015: 128). He becomes Jude "who never shared stories of his own" (279). He experiences this not-sharing as a failure to reciprocate what his loved ones give to him: "the things Harold gave him so easily – answers, affection – he couldn't reciprocate" (132). In relation to this inability, the narrative oscillates between the idea of the language of trauma as Jude's ownmost language and the idea of lacking an adequate language. At times, the narrative implies that Jude would be capable of speaking about his traumatic past but chooses not to: "Although if he were to tell anyone, he knew it would be Willem" (95). Other passages, however, suggest that "he literally doesn't have the language to do so" (299). But the novel also makes it clear that lack of language is not unique to traumatic experiences. Many kinds of bodily sensations (including positive ones) are difficult to bring to language: "the curious sensation he sometimes experienced – too indefinable and contradictory to even name it with language – that with every encounter they had, he was drawing closer to Jude, even as Jude pulled further from him" (519).

Even though it is difficult for Jude to find the language to talk about his past, it is evident that he does *remember* what happened to him, even if it is too painful "to relive those years" (Yanagihara 2015: 105) by talking about them. By narrating a variety of life-trajectories, the novel reminds us that we all have memories that sustain and empower us and ones that haunt, hurt and oppress us. For a traumatized person, the weight of damaging memories is overwhelming and paralyzing. Jude is able to "erase" parts of his past and "edit" it to more tolerable versions (503, 540), but many of his memories refuse to be tamed and keep circling him like hyenas (380).

The major problem is that what returns to him is not only a scene from a single traumatic event but "years and years and years of memories" (Yanagihara 2015: 389). The past haunts him but not in the form of an exceptional traumatic event that would stand out from the rest of his life; rather, it constitutes the first fifteen years of his life. What makes the traumatic past so overwhelming is the sheer scale of it – that it coloured his whole childhood, even his relationships with his most significant others, such as Brother Luke who gave him an education and never yelled at him but also organized the abuse that shaped his childhood and ultimately his narrative sense of self: "as much as he hated it, he also knew that they were right. He was born for this. He had been born, and left, and found, and used as he had been intended to be used" (401). This damaging self-narrative is so ingrained in him that he never really learns to shake it off. He is always haunted by the feeling that he is inherently evil and destined to be abused.

So, although the traumatic images sometimes attack Jude as if they had a life of their own, in flashbacks and nightmares, his past is also an integral part of him – it has shaped who he is. Jude keeps asking himself, "who would he be, without the scars, the cuts, the hurts" (Yanagihara 2015: 143). He recognizes that the past has created harmful habits in him, such as constant vigilance, but eventually accepts them as "simply a part of life, a habit like good posture" (107). The most damaging pattern he has developed since early childhood is the self-narrative of himself as worthless: "I'm disgusting" (193). Precisely this shame, so integral to his narrative sense of self (456), makes it difficult for Jude to talk about his past. The problem is not a lack of access to his traumatic past or an inability to integrate it into his self-narrative but rather that the trauma forms the basis of his self-narrative, diminishing his sense of agency and overwhelming him with shame. Thereby the novel challenges the poststructuralist trauma aesthetics of the unexperiencable, unsayable and unknowable, in a similar vein as hermeneutic philosophy of trauma.

An important aspect of narrative agency – our ability to navigate our narrative environments and find our own ways of narrating our experiences – is narrative imagination, the ability to imagine how things could be otherwise and different possible directions for one's life. It is shaped by what I have called our "sense of the possible – our capacity to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present" (Meretoja 2018: 20). The traumatic past has diminished Jude's narrative agency to the point that he is unable to imagine for himself a life involving happiness or love: "his imagination was limited" (Yanagihara 2015: 452). After the abusive childhood, "this idea that he could create at least some part of his own future" feels alien (545). His sense of agency is diminished to the point that, in his experience, "his life is something that has happened to him, rather than something he has had any role in creating. He has never been able to imagine what his life might be" (691–2). With his diminished narrative imagination, Jude is struck by how his friends are able to imagine a different life for him, full of possibilities (692), and it is life-changing for him that "someone had seen his as a meaningful life" (687). He and Willem cultivate a relationship that requires extensive narrative imagination, as it

does not conform to any pre-established relationship categories. They become acutely aware of the need to invent a new kind of relationship – and a vocabulary and narrative for it – because "friendship" is far too "vague, so undescriptive and unsatisfying" (569). What they have is romantic love but also an "extension of their friendship" (476): "I'm not in a relationship with a man, […] I'm in a relationship with Jude" (516). When Willem dies, for Jude the person he became with him dies as well (694), and he feels he does not "*know how to be alive without him*" (696): "Willem had so defined what his life was and could be" (641).

Others also need to engage in acts of imagination, to be able to respond to Jude's story. When he first tells Willem about his childhood, Willem finds the story unimaginable (Yanagihara 2015: 515) and needs to engage in "stretching his understanding past what is imaginable" (536). The key issue is that narrative imagination clearly has ethical potential in engaging with the trauma of another person – and it can lead to narrative understanding that is ethically productive. Those who love Jude engage in dialogical, non-subsumptive, non-appropriative narrative understanding based on listening and learning. It is crucial to Willem's love that he accepts the lack of narrative mastery – that "he would never fully possess Jude, that he would love someone who would remain unknowable and inaccessible to him in fundamental ways" (624). Silence is first protective for Jude but then oppressive, and the novel suggests that ultimately struggling to share one's experiences of pain with one's loved ones, no matter how difficult, may be the only way to bear a traumatic past (299). The novel shows that narrative does not need to be subsumptive or appropriative; it can be a vehicle of stretching one's imagination towards what feels incomprehensible. Ultimately, the whole novel attests to the power of narrative to function in an explorative mode, dialogically engaging with traumatic experience without pretending to master, explain, solve or redeem it.

In sum, the novel's implicit, hermeneutically oriented philosophy of trauma questions the aesthetics of the unsayable, emphasizing how trauma can profoundly shape one's self-narrative (and not merely disrupt it as poststructuralism suggests) – in a potentially damaging way. In exploring a spectrum from traumatic to non-traumatic experiences, the novel questions a clear-cut dichotomy between them. It shows how past experiences – both good and bad – mediate the experience of the present, giving it a complex multi-layered quality. In the novel, memory is not merely traumatic but also functions as a resource for agency. For example, Jude commits a special moment with Willem "to memory so he can think about it in moments when he needs it most" (Yanagihara 2015: 208). The novel also shows that although the past defines who they become – and their capacity for narrative agency – it does not determine their lives. Random chance affects the course of our lives as much as our own choices and inherited burdens. Love comes Jude's way unexpectedly and transforms him; when his loved one dies in a random accident, he is lost to himself. The novel underlines the importance of narrative imagination to narrative agency and to the struggle with a traumatized, damaging self-narrative. All four of the central characters repeat patterns of behavior and affect, rooted in their earlier lives, but they are also capable of inventing new modes of being in relationships of love and friendship. How they become who they are only in relation to one another testifies to an ontology of relationality and interdependency (cf. Butler 2004; Cavarero 2000 [1997]; Meretoja 2018): we are fundamentally dependent on one another in becoming who we are, in finding ways out of the paralyzing grip of the traumatic past through new modes of narrating our lives and in transforming the intersubjective narrative in-betweens in which we are entangled.

Towards hermeneutic trauma studies

The distinctions outlined in this chapter have sought to clarify some of the implications of different philosophical traditions for conceptualizing trauma and provide analytical tools for exploring trauma in fiction. The chapter has also drawn attention to some problematic philosophical assumptions underlying dominant forms of literary trauma theory, particularly concerning experience and narrative understanding. I will conclude by summarizing two key arguments of this chapter, the first relating to experience and the second to narrative understanding. They are insights drawn from a hermeneutic philosophy of trauma, which would merit more attention in literary trauma studies.

First, it is not necessarily true that trauma is not experienced when it occurs; it can be not only a complex, multilayered experience but an inextricable part of one's everyday life. As the discussion of *A Little Life* elucidated, trauma is not only a disruptive, exceptional event; for some, a traumatizing, damaging everyday life is all they know. This suggests that traumatic experience should not be defined primarily in terms of disruption but in terms of how damaging it is. Overall, traumatic experience is a spectrum, like most things in life. Whether an experience should be called traumatic or not depends less on its integration to one's self-narrative and more on the damage it causes to the subject of experience – whether it severely diminishes one's sense of agency, self-worth and possibilities to act in the world. Such damage can be considered a necessary condition of trauma.

Second, it is not necessarily true that attempts to narratively understand trauma are doomed to be ethically and epistemologically problematic. If we acknowledge that there are different modes of narrative understanding, on a spectrum from subsumptive (appropriative, totalizing) to non-subsumptive (animated by an ethos of learning, openness and dialogue), we can acknowledge that narrative understanding can sometimes be an ethically sustainable mode of working through traumatic experience or imagining the suffering of others. As the discussion of *A Little Life* showed, trauma can lead to a distorted narrative sense of self whereby what is required in attempts to amplify one's narrative agency is learning to renarrate one's past and imagine different futures. This is not always possible – sometimes the weight of the traumatic past is simply too debilitating – but when it does happen, it happens in a dialogic relation with others, and in this dialogue culturally available affective, imaginative, narrative and other hermeneutic resources play a crucial role.

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