

Trauma and Literary Studies: Some “Enabling Questions” by Elissa Marder

Rare is the phenomenon that legitimately is an object of study not only in the three traditional branches of the university (the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities) but in medicine and law as well. Trauma, it would seem, has something of a privileged and paradoxical relationship to interdisciplinary studies. Cutting-edge trauma research is currently being pursued in numerous fields across the university (including psychology, psychiatry, sociology, public health, history, and literature), yet none of these disciplines alone can explain or contain the phenomenon of trauma. The very notion of trauma defies simple definition and escapes the confines of known categories.

The word “trauma” comes from the ancient Greek meaning “wound.” Although the precise definition of the modern concept of trauma varies according to context and discipline, there is a general consensus that if trauma is a wound, it is a very peculiar kind of wound. There is no specific set of physical manifestations identifying trauma, and it almost invariably produces repeated, uncontrollable, and incalculable effects that endure long after its ostensible “precipitating cause.” Trauma, therefore, presents a unique set of challenges to understanding. Further, because traumatic events often happen *due to* social forces as well as *in* the social world, trauma has an inherently political, historical, and ethical dimension.

It might come as something of a surprise to learn that some of the most influential and far-reaching new insights about trauma have come from a field that might appear to be far removed from it: literature and literary theory. Over the last fifteen years or so, the emergence of groundbreaking new work on trauma in literature and critical theory has made a profound impact both within and beyond the field of lit-

erature. Scholars generally agree that the explosion of trauma work now being done in literary studies is largely due to the pathbreaking work by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, two prominent members of the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory. Since the early 1990s, both Cathy Caruth (Winship Distinguished Research Professor of Comparative Literature and English) and Shoshana Felman (appointed as Robert W. Woodruff Professor of Comparative Literature and French last year) have been working creatively on the borders of trauma, literature, and psychoanalysis.

In 1995, Cathy Caruth edited and wrote a critical introduction to an interdisciplinary collection of essays titled *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. In 1996, she went on to publish a full-length study of trauma, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Since the publication of these two works, Cathy Caruth has been recognized as a leading pioneer of trauma theory, and her work has become an indispensable and invaluable point of reference for much—if not all—of the work that has come after it. Shoshana Felman’s initial engagement with trauma began with her important 1992 book (written in collaboration with psychoanalyst Dori Laub) *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. More recently, in the 2002 book *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Felman joins her long-standing exploration of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis (she has written many previous books on the subject) to her more recent reflections on testimony and trauma and extends her brilliant insights to the field of critical legal studies. Although there are considerable differences between the work of Caruth and Felman, both

thinkers have radically altered the way we think about trauma. They have done so by insisting upon the importance of finding new ways to acknowledge the impact of events that can only be known belatedly and of listening to the power of experiences that can only be expressed indirectly.

In her introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth provides a clear and coherent description of trauma as well as a compelling explanation of why its impact presents specific conceptual challenges. By showing that the onset of traumatic pathology (post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD) cannot be fully determined by, or located in, a given traumatic event, Caruth proposes that trauma compels us to imagine that traumatic events do not simply occur in time. Rather, they fracture the very experience of time for the person to whom they “happen.”

The pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself—which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally—nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (4–5)

The true power of trauma, as Caruth herself powerfully explains here, is due to the fact that the person who falls victim to traumatic pathology does so precisely to the extent that he or she fails to be present to the event in the moment of its occurrence. Caruth points out that because the event was not assimilated as it occurred, it only comes into being “belatedly.” She writes: “[T]he impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9). A traumatic event is, therefore, a strange sort of an event because once it is understood as a belated consequence of a “missed encounter,” trauma itself must be understood in terms of “absence”—the absence of something that failed to become located in time or place—rather than as a “positive” presence. This absence at the heart of the traumatic event lends it its constitutive ghostly quality. And because of this absence, people who have suffered traumatic experiences can become so “possessed” by them that they frequently describe themselves as living “ghosts.”

But as paradoxical as it may appear, this “absence” does not necessarily produce purely negative consequences. Indeed, one of Caruth’s most brilliant (and occasionally misunderstood) insights about trauma is that to the extent that trauma opens

up a breach in experience and understanding, it also opens up new possibilities for experience and new modes of understanding. For Caruth, the very structure of repetition inherent to “traumatic belatedness” compels the traumatized person to survive the trauma by finding ways of bearing witness to it—both belatedly and in relation to others. Toward the end of her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, Caruth explains why and how trauma is not only a form of absence or “departure” but also a call to survival through new forms of contact with others:

The final import of the psychoanalytic and historical analysis of trauma is to suggest that the inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another. (10–11)

Although living through trauma thus exposes the traumatized person to a seemingly unbearable degree of isolation, the very act of surviving trauma entails discovering new ways of relating and being related to others. According to Caruth, this is why reflections on trauma can make an important contribution to ways of thinking about history, politics, and ethics:

The meaning of the trauma’s address beyond itself concerns, indeed, not only individual isolation but a wider historical isolation that, in our time, is communicated on the level of our cultures. . . . 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: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (11)

We might be tempted (and I don't think it would be inapt) to imagine that Caruth's invocation to "our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves" might well serve as a powerful description of the essential role that literature can play in human experience. Indeed, what is literature if not one of the most important ways available to us both to endure what Caruth calls "the departures we have all taken from ourselves" and to reach others by speaking through those very departures? Literature is one of the ways we tell one another about aspects of human experience that cannot be contained by ordinary modes of expression and that may even exceed human understanding.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth turns to literature—and literary forms of interpretation—to further her exploration into the structure of traumatic events and belated experience. Literature, she argues, enables us to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens our ears to experiences that might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard. Through a series of close textual readings of literary, psychoanalytic, philosophical, and film texts, Caruth powerfully and persuasively shows that despite the fact that certain kinds of events cannot be fully known or understood, these events become meaningful in different ways by being told to others and heard by them. In the opening chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*, "The Wound and the Voice," Caruth analyzes why and how Freud makes use of a literary text—a story from Tasso—in order to explain the concept of traumatic repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. She concludes her own interpretation of Tasso's story with the following haunting remarks about what this literary text reveals to Freud about the nature of trauma:

What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud's writings on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language. (4)

While the notion of "belatedness" constitutes the guiding thread of Cathy Caruth's work on trauma, the focus of Shoshana Felman's first invaluable contribution to trauma studies—her 1992 book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*—centers on what she calls "testimony." According to Felman (and her coauthor Dori Laub), testimony (here understood as the act of bearing witness to traumatic events) is a necessary and vital response to the ongoing consequences of traumatic history. The essays in *Testimony* all take up the daunting task of confronting the impact and aftermath of the historical traumas of the Second World War and the Holocaust by listening to how artists and ordinary people alike responded to those traumas *in language*—in poems, narratives, novels, and stories. In their introduction to *Testimony*, Felman and Laub give the following powerful description of their project that allows us to begin to appreciate the daring scope and path-breaking importance of their book:

The major texts, films and documents submitted to the scrutiny of this book . . . (Camus' novels, de Man's essays, the poetic project of Celan, videotaped Holocaust testimonies, and the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann) were all written and produced subsequent to the historic trauma of the Second World War, a trauma we consider as the watershed of our times and which the book will come to view not as an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially *not over*, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent (whether consciously or not) in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still *evolving* . . . in today's political, historical, cultural and artistic scene. (xiv)

As Felman and Laub point out here, although the traumatic past remains radically unfinished and unknown, it continues to act on, in, and through present events in ways that elude or surpass conscious understanding. But the most urgent and essential claim of *Testimony* is to show that even though we do not “recover” from our traumatic past, nor can we “cure” it, “overcome” it, or even fully understand it, we can and we must *listen* to it and *survive* it by listening to its effects as they are transmitted to us through the voices of its witnesses and survivors.

Above all, therefore, the aim of *Testimony* is to provide new ways of thinking about how trauma, language, and survival are bound together in the act of bearing witness through speech. Drawing upon insights reaped from years of writing about psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory and through rich textual analyses, Shoshana Felman asks why trauma calls out for testimony (or even demands it) and why testimony is one of the most viable and vital responses possible to trauma. More specifically, Felman draws our attention to the fact that testimonial speech differs from most—if not all—other uses of language and modes of speech, and she draws out the consequences of those differences. Because bearing witness entails speaking in the first person in order to attest to a truth that can only be validated through the very act of speaking itself, testimony places the speaker in a unique and difficult position. By responding to an ethical, political, moral, or even unconscious imperative that compels someone to take up the position of the witness (that is, to put oneself in the place of truth by “telling the truth”), the person who assumes the burden of that truth often does so at great personal risk. Felman gives the following moving description of the unique form of solitude to which the witness is destined:

Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated, or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden. “No one bears witness for the witness,” writes the poet Paul Celan. To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude. (3)

As Felman so powerfully points out here, the act of testimony condemns the witness to this radical solitude because although the witness is the only one who can speak the truth in question, the truth that is spoken does not belong to him or her alone. Testimony, as Felman explains, must go beyond the personal experience of the individual who bears witness because others must tell and hear the very truth that the witness is bound to tell: “By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the

witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is a vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*” (3). Felman’s radical and rigorous conception of testimony has profound implications for the way we think about the nature, impact, and transmission of historical truth. Truth does not belong to the speaker, the listener, or the empirical, material world. But by understanding testimony as a medium through which truth can be transmitted, Felman’s work enables us to be attuned to the truths transmitted by trauma even as those very truths may not be entirely “knowable” as objects of direct observation or historical documentation in the traditional sense. For these reasons, as she puts it, “testimony is, in other words, a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*” (5). As a discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory, Felman’s notion of testimony teaches us that we must open our ears, hearts, and minds to the voices of the dead as they continue to speak through the voices of the surviving witnesses. She also shows that in opening ourselves to these voices from the past that live in the present, we may also be able to open ourselves to the possibility of a future that might escape being overly determined by, or ensnared in, the (unwitting) traumatic repetitions of its (unknown) traumatic past.

In her most recent book, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Shoshana Felman pursues her work on testimony and trauma by showing that the historical traumas of the twentieth century have forced us, collectively, to reexamine our given conceptions of the relationship between justice and the law. By looking at the ways historical traumas have recently been taken up by the law and have become the occa-

sion for “historical trials” (from Nuremberg to the trials of Adolf Eichmann and O. J. Simpson), she explores what happens to legal institutions—and to the very notion of the law itself—when the open wounds of trauma and traumatic testimony are brought into contact with the enclosed space of the courtroom. Throughout *The Juridical Unconscious*, Felman suggests that in the aftermath of the catastrophic injustices of the twentieth century, certain trials have become truly “historical” events because of the way that they repeatedly attempt—and fail—to assume the burden of placing closure on historical traumas. One of the most important and brilliant insights of this book is the claim that trials become a privileged—albeit radically paradoxical—site for traumatic historical reenactment because the law is constitutively unable to account for trauma in legal terms. She argues that

the law is, so to speak, professionally blind to its constitutive and structural relation to (both private and collective, cultural) trauma, and that its “forms of juridical blindness” take shape wherever the structure of the trauma unwittingly takes over the structure of a trial and wherever the legal institution, unawares, triggers a legal repetition of the trauma that it puts on trial or attempts to cure. (146)

Felman proposes that certain historical trials inadvertently (one might even say unconsciously) put the very “blindness” of the law to its own limits on display in the trial so that the trial itself stages and enacts the effects of the very trauma that the law is unable to see. Moreover, because they are collective responses to historical trauma, historical trials often appeal, in powerful and surprising ways, to a form of collective discourse that is very different from the language of the law: literature and literary language. Throughout *The Juridical Unconscious*, Felman explores how literature—and literary modes of expression—differ from legal language because unlike legal discourse, literature can convey the truth of trauma even if it cannot put that truth into words. To the extent that the legal realm attempts to establish closure, it is condemned to repeat and act out the very trauma that it attempts to resolve. When the language of the law, however, breaks down in a historical trial and cannot sustain jurisdiction over the very terms of the trial because—as in the case of the Eichmann trial—the status of the crime is incommensurate with the law’s ability to pass judgment on it. Likewise, when the language of the law calls for legal testimony from witnesses who are unable to speak in legal terms, the literary dimension of language takes up the challenge of transmitting the truth within the trial that the trial cannot say. Literature (here understood broadly to include the literary use of language in whatever cultural context it might appear) assumes the task of bearing witness to the traumatic testimony of historical trials by lis-

tening attentively for, and hearing, the (unspeakable) truth of the trauma that it repeats but cannot say.

For Felman, therefore, literature (in this broader sense) has a critical and vital role to play in the age of historical traumas and trials because literature—like the law, but in its own terms—is committed to the notion of “justice.” In the introduction to *The Juridical Unconscious*, Felman suggests that her book aims to help us understand how “literary justice” may be especially called for in those special cases where legal justice is inadequate or insufficient to the task of “doing justice”:

What indeed is literary justice, as opposed to legal justice? How does literature do justice to the trauma in a way the law does not, or cannot? Literature is a dimension of concrete embodiment and language of infinitude that, in contrast to the language of the law, encapsulates not closure but precisely what in a given legal case refuses to be closed and cannot be closed. It is to this refusal of the trauma to be closed that literature does justice. (8)

Throughout *The Juridical Unconscious*, Felman engages her own theory of testimony and tunes her refined literary ear to produce stunningly innovative “literary” readings of the trials and texts in question. In this book, Felman suggests that even though the study of trauma requires the ability to be able to bear witness to wounds that cannot close, even those open wounds can sometimes become a powerful and vital source of truth by providing an opening onto new ways of looking at the world. Throughout this book, as in her many previous works, Shoshana Felman seeks, as she puts it, “not so much for answers as for new *enabling* questions, questions

that would open up new directions for research and new conceptual spaces for the yet unborn answers” (xvi).

Although Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman both approach the study of trauma from unique perspectives, they openly acknowledge that they have learned from each other’s work. Indeed, Shoshana Felman’s recent decision to leave Yale and join the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory was motivated, in part, by her desire to find and create a productive, enlivening, and empowering intellectual context for her ongoing work in psychoanalysis, literature, and testimony. She chose to come to Emory, she has said, because the comparative literature department’s proven commitment to scholarly work in critical theory makes it a place where enabling questions are indeed being asked and where the future remains open.



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