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Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (eds), *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*

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REFERENCES

Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (eds), *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013), 267 p, ISBN 978-0415-66107-2

- 1 Trauma fiction has been the object of much critical inquiry in the last two or three decades, while, over the same period of time, trauma scholarship knew significant developments with the works of Dominick LaCapra, Michael Rothberg, Hal Foster, Anne Whitehead, Roger Luckhurst, etc. Following a previous collection of essays, also edited by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (*Trauma and Ethics in Contemporary British Literature*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), *Trauma and Romance* makes an original contribution to the field, knitting together two terms that may not quite sound incompatible but may at least appear as a problematic pairing. In fact, as the introduction convincingly argues, in contemporary trauma narratives, romance as a mode — as opposed to the less malleable category of genre — regularly comes to the rescue of realism in the representation of unheard-of traumatic situations, compensating for the inadequacies of the realist idiom in dealing with the paroxystic and the unspeakable. One of the most interesting points which the introduction makes is that trauma fiction problematizes realist conventions by moving in two opposite directions, at once borrowing from the strategies of non-fictional testimony and from the so-to-speak hyperfictionality of the realms of romance and fantasy. The thirteen essays that follow all examine the “zones of collaboration” between romance and trauma fiction.

- 2 The volume is divided into four parts. The first part focusses on the meeting points of (Gothic) romance, hauntedness and trauma. In his study of Pat Barker's *Another World* for example, Jean-Michel Ganteau shows how, through the motif of spectrality, romance paradoxically contributes to the construction of traumatic realism, representing the symptoms of trauma, its warped temporality, the uncanny resurfacing of a ciphered other within the familiar, the "half knowledge" that destabilizes the subject and challenges meaning-making. The ghost story is also the focus of the next essay in which George Letissier discusses Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger*. It is the relationship between romance and historiography that is more specifically examined here. The main contention is that Waters revisits the genre of the historical romance by exploring a traumatic recent past (World War II) and that, through the use of the ghost story, she "preclud[es] the possibility of a totalising vision" (35). Waters's hauntology exhibits the epistemological loopholes of historiography and presents itself as a kind of palliative capable of recapturing the event.
- 3 The second part of *Trauma and Romance* is organized around various forms of individual trauma. In the first essay of the section, Lynne Pearce sheds a very interesting light on the intersections of romantic love and trauma. Contrasting the psychoanalytic and the philosophical approaches to love, she establishes repetition as the driving force of romance understood as love interest. In psychoanalysis, there is no such thing as pure love; love, because of the unrealisable nature of desire, is only repeatable. Western philosophy, on the other hand, "still clings to the notion that 'true love' is both durable and non-repeatable" (76). Lynne's essay centers on the tension between this belief in an absolute, non-repeatable love and the desire to enter into new relationships as part of a quest for "the same again" (78), which can only undermine the alleged uniqueness of true love. The essay includes insightful analyses of Jackie Kay's *Wish I Was Here* and Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*, two examples of how contemporary British fiction represents the traumatic dimension of romantic love through repetition and repeatability. In the next essay, J. Hillis Miller offers a very original reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. In this postmodern romance, the characters suffer severe traumas. Yet, the author of the essay less expectedly chooses to concentrate on the trauma of the reader who, shaken by the narrative's final twist, experiences disillusionment and finds himself/herself forced into a second reading, which "may activate a latent trauma repressed in the first reading" (92). Hillis Miller brilliantly analyzes the combination of romance and realism that McEwan puts to traumatic use in *Atonement*, creating a "disquieting oscillation" that leads the reader to the ultimately traumatic realization that "you cannot atone in a work of fiction" (103). In the last essay of Part Two, the notion of testimony comes under scrutiny. In his study of Peter Roche's autobiographical memoir, *Unloved*, Frédéric Regard very inspiringly investigates the complex relations between romance and trauma, romance and testimony, testimony and fiction, photography and testimony, romance and photography, personal testimony and social commentary. Romance is here taken in the sense of a successful quest narrative (Frye), which, on the face of it, makes it incompatible with trauma, if only because trauma precludes any "linear, progressive re-emplotment of one's life" (107). Yet, as Regard demonstrates, Roche anchors his narrative in a romantic tradition and, in doing so, preserves the ethical possibility of disbelief in the inhumanity of his abusive parents. The essay also makes remarkable use of Derrida's work on testimony in a section entitled "Di(visibility)" which brings

together the testimonial power of photography (visibility) and truth, for which there is “no ‘divisibility’” (113).

- 4 The third part of the volume is more specifically devoted to collective trauma, with a strong ethical flavour. Martin Amis’s trauma fiction, the object of the first essay, affords a kind of transition from the more private forms of trauma examined in the previous part and collective trauma: Amis’s work, the author argues, suggests that “sexual violence and abuse are located at the core of social violence” (128). The ethical turn is definitely taken in Christian Gutleben’s essay which discusses Jeanette Winterson’s and Graham Swift’s ethics of alterity and of responsibility in their representation of unfulfilled love. The third essay is concerned with Adam Thorpe’s “historicizing method” (173). Maria Grazia Nicolosi examines the input of romance into Thorpe’s unsentimental representation of history. According to her, Thorpe does not champion a vision of history as endless repetition. His historical romances are “epitomized by the paradox of the trace: ‘visible here and now as a vestige’ of something passed/past which it does not cause to appear” (173). While borrowing from the anachronistic structure of romance (Elam) to evade the tyranny of the eternal return, he also dismisses sentimental or redemptive closure, making “of loss and finitude [...] the necessary price to be paid in order to live historically” (175). With the last essay which discusses *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, we move to a radically different genre, the graphic novel. Andr  s Romero-J  dar provides a definition of this sub-genre as a deviation from Bakhtin’s chronotope of the Greek romance which informs the comic books’ superhero narratives. Having done this, he goes on to demonstrate that *Watchmen* is an allegory of Thatcherism, comparing it to Orwell’s rewriting of Stalinism in 1984. The essay works towards a re-definition of political trauma as “a narrative dealing with the traumatic collapse of the socio-political structures in the psyche of the individual” (196), thus bridging the gap between collective and individual anxieties.
- 5 Logically enough in a book concerned with wish-fulfilling romance, the final part constitutes a happy ending of sorts. The fourth and last section of the volume is devoted to the therapeutic dimension of romance in trauma narratives. As is well established now, trauma defies narrative. However, if the traumatic experience can be processed into a coherent narrative, working through becomes possible. Anne-Laure Fortin-Tourn  s demonstrates that in *Shalimar the Clown*, his post-9/11 novel, Rushdie makes use of romance to articulate trauma realities, and that romance paradoxically tends to re-introduce rational motive into the irrational horror of terrorism: it is thwarted love, the staple of romance, that leads to violence. Violence wreaks inhuman havoc but is at least explicable. The conflict between trauma and narrative is also at the core of the next essay, a study of McEwan’s *A Child in Time*. Here, Brian Diemert argues, McEwan does not seek to articulate trauma; trauma remains unutterable and the loss of the child is irretrievable. Yet the temptation of romantic resolution may be felt at the end. The tension is released and the family is reunited, suggesting that working through is under way. In *The House of Dee* by Peter Ackroyd, discussed in the final essay, Gothic romance participates in the creation of traumatic realism and the novel gestures towards healing at the end. However, its “therapeutic realism” requires the story to “halt before the fulfillment of its basically infantile vision of plenitude” (239), suspended between melancholy and mourning.

- 6 In postmodern recyclings of romantic material, unmitigated happy endings are ruled out. Yet the appeal of romance clearly endures in contemporary British fiction, as *Trauma and Romance* successfully evidences. The thought-provoking coupling of trauma and romance, impeccably buttressed by the excellent introduction, is consistently and convincingly documented in all thirteen articles. The brief is fulfilled and the volume has none of the piecemeal nature that collections of essays may at times have. The quality of analysis is very high throughout. The dialogue of romance and trauma as it is attempted here is a new development in the field of trauma studies and the book is bound to be a very fruitful read for scholars working on contemporary British literature, trauma fiction and romance studies.
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