Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 3
Number 2 *Fall 2002*

Article 2

Fall 2012

Review of Trauma: A Genealogy

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Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
x + 326 pp. ISBN 0226477657.

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Ruth Leys's new book, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, by virtue of its title alone, situates itself in an academic situation complicated enough to merit a brief exegesis. At the end of a century characterized by its fixation on extreme phenomena, it should not be surprising that the concept of trauma has attained in the humanities a previously unknown prominence. There is much that is tedious about the sudden proliferation of trauma studies, but there is much that is engaging about it, too, especially since "the return to trauma" is motivated by a renewed interest in phenomena that contest the primacy of symbolic representation, that is, in affective states of all sorts. To think about trauma is thus to think about materiality, be it that of the body or of the body of the letter. As such, the preoccupation with trauma arises from within, and not necessarily against, the linguistic turn so dominant in philosophy and psychoanalysis these last forty years. Trauma, that is, foregrounds in an exemplary way the difficult relationship between representation and affect.

Trauma's theoretical ascendancy has been abetted by various historical phenomena. The most important is the recognition, first by the American Psychiatric Association but ultimately within North American culture at large, of a clinical entity called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in which the response, typically delayed, to an overwhelming and stressful scenario consists of flashbacks, hallucinations, and other invasive, irruptive symptoms. The designation of PTSD was itself the result of increased attention to the delayed and deleterious effects of overwhelming stress on a disparate group of sufferers, including Holocaust survivors, sexual abuse victims, and Vietnam War veterans. This intersection between psychiatric work and cultural theory culminated in the publication of two volumes by Cathy Caruth, professor of Comparative Literature and English at Emory, namely the anthology *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) and the monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).

In their way, these books were triumphs: they probed the limits of representation, and offered, especially to those whose enthusiasm about post-structuralism had always been tempered by concerns about its (putative) over-insistence on textuality, the benefit of an apparently unimpeachable ethical intent. Such, at least, is the narrative of Caruth's success, a narrative which, given the frequency with which her work is cited in current academic research in the humanities, is ascendant, even prevalent. It is not, however, a narrative to which Ruth Leys ascribes. Perhaps it is the presence of "history" in the subtitle to Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* that so incenses her. Leys, professor of Humanities at Johns Hopkins, sees herself as an historian or genealogist and her book as a work of intellectual history. In *Trauma: A Genealogy*Leys disdains the contemporary reduction of trauma to PTSD, a hypostatization that to her mind ignores the term's entire genealogy, from its first application to psychic wounding in the late nineteenth century to the codification of PTSD in the nineteen-seventies. The two culprits most guilty of the failure to historicize are, not surprisingly, Caruth and her ally, the clinician Bessel van der Kolk. Obviously, then, Leys's book is as much a polemic as it is a history, and its polemical subtext is the question of disciplinary difference, specifically between literature and history. While this difference is not without interest, it tends to seem petty in the face of the

ostensible object of both Leys and Caruth's researches, namely, the suffering of those faced with a devastating psychic blow. Moreover, the necessarily different rhetorical modes invoked by Leys in her dual role as historian and polemicist prove to be the undoing of her argument. Ultimately Leys finds herself caught in a contradiction between the way things are and the way things ought to be; she confuses the normal with the normative. Her scrupulously exacting historical examination rests upon ultimately untenable theoretical premises.

All of which makes Leys's book as maddening as it is magisterial. The magisterial part begins with her quite correct displeasure over the absence of historical rigor in post-structuralist work on trauma. It continues with her refusal to tell the story of trauma as one of historical development, in which a too-much maligned concept proceeds, despite the resistance of a hostile clinical community, toward an inevitable enlightenment that has culminated in the widespread diagnostic acceptance of PTSD. Instead, Leys proposes a genealogical excavation of the term, which, in the absence of an underlying telos, examines the meaning held by trauma at different times in its history. The great strength of the book lies in its selection of those historical moments. The first six chapters investigate pivotal figures in the history of trauma, and thus form the book's genealogical core. The first chapter offers an exacting reading of Freud; the second discusses the nineteenth-century American psychologist Morton Prince and the patient who made him famous for a time, Clara Norton Fowler, aka Sally Beauchamp; the third takes up the debate in post-World War I Britain over the phenomenon of shell shock, a debate engineered by the psychotherapist William Brown; the fourth and fifth investigate the charismatic but unconventional, and thus much maligned, psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi, and the American analyst who in the thirties and forties took up Ferenczi's work, Abram Kardiner; and the sixth focuses on the British psychiatrist who first experimented with drug-induced abreaction therapy during World War II, William Sargant. Leys's research is prodigious, almost overwhelming. She seems to have read everything about her subjects and their ideas, and the footnotes offer a treasury of sources for the reader who wishes to investigate further. It is only unfortunate that the publisher decided against including a full bibliography.

The book's final two chapters focus, respectively, on van der Kolk and Caruth. And it is here that the book becomes maddening, for the more polemical Leys's tone becomes, the more apparent it becomes that these two figures pose insuperable difficulties for her own conception of trauma. In particular in the discussion of Caruth, Leys's own assumptions are laid bare; they beg a question so fundamental it threatens to compromise the very validity of the book's titular concept. The question is this: How useful as a concept is trauma? To answer it such that the term's problematic nature becomes evident necessitates that we examine Leys's argument in some detail, emphasizing the relation of the first six chapters to the last two.

Contrary to her assertions of attunement to historical difference, the thesis that Leys argues in her book is decidedly monologic. For her interest lies in the structure of trauma, which she claims is the same in each of the historical moments under examination. That structure is composed of two opposed models that, according to Leys, cannot exist independently of one another. The models are based upon a set of oppositions: inside versus outside, subjectivity versus objectivity, experience versus event. Is trauma a phenomenon that besets an autonomous psyche from without, or is it a phenomenon that generates the psyche from within, through an identification with an event inseparable from that psyche and unrepresentable to it? More precisely, since Leys

is adamantly, perhaps rightly, and undoubtedly well-meaningly focussed on the possibility of healing, these oppositions pertain to the potential *overcoming* of trauma, which, in the (mostly therapeutic) genealogy that she details, has taken two forms: the mimetic and the anti-mimetic. She explains that "the guiding thread or central interpretive theme of this book is that from the moment of its invention in the late nineteenth century the concept of trauma has been fundamentally unstable, balancing uneasily—indeed veering uncontrollably—between two ideas, theories, or paradigms" (298).

Leys's definitions of those theories, the mimetic and the antimimetic, are rather idiosyncratic, especially to those used to thinking of mimesis as equivalent to representation. She explains that her definitions are taken from the work of three philosophers/theoreticians who were at one time based in Strasbourg, namely Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and, most importantly because most directly concerned with psychoanalysis, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen. That these three figures, all so deeply invested in the Derridean project, should so undergird the theoretical approach of this ostensibly Foucauldian argument is striking. The case of Borch-Jacobsen is especially intriguing because, as Leys admits, and thoughtfully considers, he has in recent years repudiated his early work on subjectivity as constituted in psychoanalytic terms, the best expression of which remains *The Freudian Subject* (Trans. Catherine Porter, Stanford UP, 1988). The importance of hypnotic identification as expounded by Borch-Jacobsen, both to psychoanalysis as a practice, and to the psyche or subject it seeks to establish, is the basis for Leys's mimetic model of trauma. In Chapter Five, entitled "The Hysterical Lie: Ferenczi and the Problem of Simulation," Leys examines the trajectory of Borch-Jacobsen's work. Ultimately, she takes its current state—in which Borch-Jacobsen repudiates the very notion of an unconscious, understanding hypnosis as a set of fictive games on the part of an autonomous subject who willingly colludes with his or her hypnotist—to be a swing toward a rigidly antimimetic understanding of the psyche. That stance, Leys adds, is nonetheless undermined by incoherence over the degree of control or authority that the hypnotist/analyst brings to the therapeutic scenario and, furthermore, besmirched by the anachronistic understanding of hypnosis it brings to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century descriptions of therapy. Leys thus concludes that Borch-Jacobsen's ostensibly antimimetic argument is at the same time irreducibly mimetic. If Caruth is the book's bogeyman, then Borch-Jacobsen is its hero. That he is a rather reluctant one, however, is suggested by the lengths Leys goes to in order to recuperate him for her thesis, by identifying the mimetic strain of his apparently antimimetic argument.

It becomes apparent that mimesis, on the model offered by Leys, is the very opposite of representation. Instead, mimesis designates an identification with the trauma so complete that there is no longer any distance between subject and event. Identification, or acting-out, describes the inability on the part of the victim to distance himself from his trauma, but only to suffer from it, through repeated re-enactments (flashbacks, nightmares, etc.) so literal they cannot be described as a recollection of the event in question. The patient on this mimetic model is stuck between forgetting and remembering, in a state irreducible to consciousness; he is plagued by symptoms that can neither be assimilated nor narrated. The unassimilable nature of every mimetic theory of trauma, says Leys, renders it insufficient for therapy. Thus every model of trauma counterbalances the mimetic theory with an opposing antimimetic one, but it remains unclear how the two are linked. For Leys, there is no continuity between her two theories, merely a willed alternation or oscillation between them. To recapitulate: it is impossible to confirm the

reality of the trauma by recourse to cathartic methods that are immersive, because the veridical status of that trauma is thwarted by the suggestibility of the very processes designed to unearth it. Historically, the most representative form of immersive treatment has been hypnosis, but Leys explains that the transferential model of psychoanalysis and the abreactive drug therapies used in World War II and the Vietnam War are merely different versions of this same treatment.

It should be apparent from what I have just said that Leys is most exercised by the possibility—and she describes a long history of suspicion, in both military and civilian settings—that the victim is simulating or malingering. At bottom, claims Leys, anyone who treats victims desires empirical confirmation of the trauma. Mere cathartic abreaction is therefore not enough, because it is fatally contaminated with the notion of a suggestibility that does not outlast the immersive state and therefore cannot be narrated or otherwise adapted to by the patient. The result, says Leys, is that all the historical investigations into the mimetic nature of trauma simultaneously contain an antimimetic element, in which the subject is by contrast conceived as an aloof, independent spectator to his or her trauma, and who is thereby capable of representing it to him or herself. Thus Freud, for example, put at the center of his theory of trauma "a mimetic theory that defines trauma as a situation of unconscious imitation or identification with the traumatic scene" but immediately sought to repudiate the loss of identity implicit in that conception with an antimimetic theory based on the notion of the libidinal unconscious, "which posits a subject capable of seeing and hence depicting to itself and others the objects of its fantasies and wishes . . . the unconscious is understood as a stage on which the subject in its traumatic dreams or fantasies observes himself or herself performing the scene" (300). The point is not, for Leys, to choose between one or the other of these models, but rather to recognize that in every historical conception of trauma the desired resolution between them has proven structurally, necessarily impossible.

These thoughts return us, however circuitously, to Leys's polemic against Caruth, that is, to chapters seven and eight of the book. Caruth stands as an insoluble challenge to Leys's thesis, in that her theory of trauma is entirely mimetic; in it, trauma is forever inimical to its narration. In *Unclaimed Experience* Caruth argues that traumatized people perform rather than represent their trauma. That performance ensures direct, affect-laden communication, however inimical to symbolization, between those who are traumatized and those who are not, to the point where this distinction collapses. For Caruth, through her attention to the trope of latency or belatedness, it is the constitutive gap in experience provided by trauma that ensures its proliferation, in a chain of witnesses that, to be sure, is forever aporetic. This eventuality is unacceptable to Leys because, by collapsing history into memory, it complicates, she would say distorts, the very meaning of the term "event." The result, at least in the version of Caruth offered by Leys, is that there is no difference between the traumatized person and the witness, which raises the undesirable possibility of an entirely traumatized society.

Caruth's model is one of a certain excess, but since Leys proposes to quell that excess by recourse to norms, which, insisted upon strenuously enough, can themselves seem excessive, her refutation is hardly incontrovertible. What kind of normativity would arise in the invocation of "a middle ground"? For it is clear that Leys must have recourse to norms of some sort, concerned as she is to establish the veridical nature of traumatic events. A normative reading, however, cannot help but be prescriptive. Accordingly, Leys is obliged to alter her hitherto genealogical

reading strategy. In the earlier chapters, Leys had diagnosed a mimetic and antimimetic element in each of the models under investigation, to the point where she concluded such simultaneity was constitutive of every theory of trauma. But in Caruth's self-proclaimed mimetic theory she can find no evidence for a countervailing antimimetic tendency. This fact leads Leys to contend that Caruth has simply misread her sources. Carefully reading Caruth's own reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, she demonstrates that Caruth has read Freud selectively. Specifically, she proves that Caruth has elided the fact that Freud, in that late work, did represent his own awareness of the trauma of Nazism, which uprooted him from Austria to England. Had Caruth presented Freud's work accurately, Leys claims, she would have been forced to include an antimimetic element in her own theory of trauma. Leys wants to suggest that Caruth is a partial and thus unreliable theoretician but all she proves is that there is a contradiction in her own argument between what is and what ought to be. Leys cannot read Caruth in the same way she does Prince or Ferenczi or any of the other figures in the texts, because, in having detailed a theory of trauma that is composed of only one of the two tendencies she says must coexist, Caruth shows the lie to Leys's hypothesis. Leys can thus only read Caruth prescriptively, as propagating a flawed theory that ought to be amended. It would seem, then, that Leys's argument is not so much historical (all theories of trauma *are* constructed as a tension between a mimetic and an antimimetic tendency) as normative (all theories of trauma *should* be constructed this way).

Why is the antimimetic element so important to Leys? Ultimately, her allegiance to trauma as theory is effaced, even shamelessly repudiated, in the face of a rather naive conception of cure as adaptation. But what is the value of a "cure" for trauma that, as the narration or representation of an immersive scenario, necessarily entails a recuperation and therefore falsification of the traumatic incident? By no means do I wish to suggest that the patient's undeniable suffering should not be acknowledged. I wish instead to suggest that trauma is something other than a neurosis, that it is an affect that cannot be thought in relation to representation. This line of thought is not the one followed by Leys. For her, it seems, theory must abase itself before practice. And practice must begin by delineating the real victims from the false. Although this is nowhere openly stated in the text, it is clear that what Leys desires, above all, is a mechanism for attributing truthfulness to different instances of trauma. In the opening pages, Leys compares two such instances: on the one hand, the plight of a group of girls, who, in the Ugandan civil war were captured by one of the factions and, before becoming sex slaves, were forced to beat a prisoner to death in a kind of horrible initiation process, and, on the other, the "plight" of Paula Jones, who, according to her lawyers at least, claimed to have suffered from PTSD as a result of alleged sexual harassment by then-president Bill Clinton. For Leys, Jones is, if not lying, then certainly less traumatized than the Ugandan girls. Maybe so, but who wants to make that sort of decision? The attempt to think trauma normatively is as futile as it is distasteful, because it necessitates the arbitration of different instances of suffering. Certainly, there are instances in which the veridical nature of a person's putative suffering matters, such as the possibility of false accusations against others. Nevertheless, it is my contention that the suffering engendered by a symptom, by the experience of trauma, cannot be denied; this is "real" irrespective of its historical status. So, of course no thoroughly mimetic theory of trauma will guarantee the empirical reality of an event. But the same is true of a thoroughly antimimetic one as well.

In this regard, the absence in Leys's book of another important clinical practitioner who incorporated trauma into the center of his theoretical work is instructive. I refer to Jacques Lacan, whose reinvigoration of psychoanalysis in a structuralist vein is accorded only three pages. Leys says that for Lacan "the failure of memory in traumatic experiences exemplifies the need for a structural or formal version of psychoanalysis, conceived (or reconceived) as a discipline that on the one hand invests patient narratives with decisive significance but on the other hand maintains that those narratives are characteristically, perhaps inherently, discrepant with the (themselves often unknowable) 'facts' of the case" (117). This makes Lacan rather more aporetic, in the sense of quiescent, than he really is, and also misrepresents his understanding of narrative. (Slavoj Zizek, for example, has shown in *The Plague of Fantasies* (Verso 1997) that Lacan is decidedly anti-narrativist, and that the goal of his psychoanalysis is not to put one's traumas together in a coherent story.) What Leys here calls narrative can only be understood in the loosest sense, as equivalent to signification itself. What comes through in her citation, however, is the reason why a purely antimimetic theory of trauma, however appealingly it might seek to legitimate the actuality of the traumatic event, is impossible. For Leys, the antimimetic theory operates on the basis of a specularity that is never false, a critical distance that is always unquestioned. By contrast, in his essay on the mirror stage, and indeed in his conception of the psychic register he calls the imaginary, Lacan described every specular recognition as a misrecognition, a wholly phantasmatic, though nonetheless effective, operation. Caruth, who concludes *Unclaimed Experience* with an essay on Lacan, is doubtless aware that the idea of an unproblematic critical distance, perceived on the model of sight, is itself a fantasy, and so, above and beyond a selective reading of Freud, has good intellectual grounds for her insistence upon a wholly mimetic understanding of trauma.

Again, this is not to argue that Caruth is correct where Leys is false. (Though it is distressing how vigorously Leys would have us see things in such an absolute manner.) It is to suggest, rather, that in her book Leys has missed a chance to speculate more interestingly on the very idea of trauma. The failed opportunity stems from a misconception of the term "simulation," which Leys equates with lying, calling it "the domain of acting defined as deliberate feigning" (161). What she in fact describes is *dissimulation*, a straightforward situation in which one knows that one is putting on a mask and acting. But "acting" too is ambivalent. It refers not only to what actors do on a stage, but also to what each of us does all the time, in simply doing anything. *Simulation*, then, is an ambiguous term, which describes a transformation that fails to take, a highly unstable situation somewhere between malingering and suffering. Ultimately, though, beholden to a notion of cure, Leys is not out to offer a description of anything so uncertain. In the short conclusion to her book she says: "to the extent that my account of the genealogy of trauma is found persuasive [that is, that all theories of trauma are necessarily riven between two countervailing exigencies], it would seem to follow that the soundest basis for a therapeutic practice would be an intelligent, humane, and resourceful pragmatism" (307). Presumably, that would first entail distinguishing between those who really suffer and those who really don't. Leys dreams of a theory of trauma that would evade the problematic states of memory and fantasy, that would distinguish event from experience, and that ultimately would collapse before the exigencies of a treatment still defined by adaptive measures. Leys pursues this mirage, even in the face of numerous theoretical reservations, in order to distinguish not only between victim and perpetrator, but also between good sufferers and bad.

Trauma: A Genealogy is an important book; it demands to be read by anyone interested in psychoanalysis in particular, and the problem of affect in general. It will not, however, settle the problem of trauma once and for all. Trauma, at least as it continues to be conceptualized by Ruth Leys, is a kind of "god term" that must be bowed to for fear of seeming heartless. But trauma as this sort of absolute master we do not need. Indeed, we may not need trauma of any sort; it may not be the best way to think about even overwhelming expressions of affect. Certainly, it is of no use to those whose particular concerns are, like those of Leys, to delineate the pathos of the normative.