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Colin Davis, Hanna Meretoja

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Colin Davis
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TRAUMA,
POSTSTRUCTURALISM
AND ETHICS

Colin Davis

This chapter examines a significant strand in the development of modern trauma studies as practised in the humanities, that is, its emergence out of what is sometimes characterized as an “ethical turn” in poststructuralism in the latter part of the twentieth century. Trauma studies brings with it an ethical summons; but I also want to ask to what extent it is equal to the task it sets itself. Does adopting the vocabulary of ethics equate to being ethical?

An ethical turn?

In 1993 the French philosopher Alain Badiou wrote, with some exasperation, that ethics had become “the principal philosophical ‘tendency’ of the moment” (Badiou 1993: 5; translations from French are my own throughout this chapter). He was drawing attention to a renewed readiness, amongst Continental philosophers and those influenced by them in anglophone humanities departments such as those associated with deconstruction, to talk explicitly about ethics and about the ethical significance of their work. Actually, it can be demonstrated that the ethical interests of the disparate thinkers loosely grouped together as “poststructuralists” pre-date by far Badiou’s complaint. Jacques Lacan had dedicated his 1959–60 seminar to the ethics of psychoanalysis (Lacan 1986); and in 1964 a relatively unknown Jacques Derrida had published what is arguably still the single most important study of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who would become the most prestigious reference point in ethical thinking informed by poststructuralism (reprinted in Derrida 1967: 117–228). Others associated with poststructuralism were politically militant through the 1950s and 1960s even if they were not explicit about the ethical underpinnings of their political commitments.

And yet, poststructuralism was dogged by the charge that it was ethically irresponsible, maybe even nihilistic. Lacan and Derrida, as well as others such as Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari or Louis Althusser may have had little in common with one another (and in some cases may have been rivals or even openly hostile to one another), but common trends could be seen in their writing, trends which some critics found to be ethically disturbing. Their interest in flux, slippages, ambiguities, ambivalence and indeterminacy, and their repudiation of absolute truth claims or immutable values could be portrayed as undermining the very foundations of ethics. In particular, their assault
on the autonomy of the human subject – leading to the so-called “death of Man”, the destruction or decentring of the subject – seemed to some to reject the possibility of human agency on which ethical choice and action depend. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, for example, spelled out at length the dangers of the “anti-humanism” of thinkers they associated with the protest movement of May 1968; and they attempted to re-build ethical possibilities by a return to the subject, conceived as the cornerstone of human ethical achievement (Ferry and Renaut 1988). In their book Impostures Intellectuelles Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont went even further in their denunciation of thinkers such as Derrida and Deleuze, drawing attention to what they regarded as gross errors of fact and reasoning in their work and describing them as posing a pernicious threat to Enlightenment values of thought (Sokal and Bricmont 1997).

Those sympathetic to poststructuralism, who had engaged with it more closely and attentively than most of its detractors, rejected such rash allegations. Catherine Belsey, for example, dismisses as a “common misreading” the claim that poststructuralist theory deprives us of the power to choose or to take action as agents in our own lives (Belsey 2002: 89). But the allegations stuck and gained popular currency. One point at which this view of poststructuralist thinking acquired some public visibility was in 1992, when Derrida was proposed for an honorary degree in Cambridge in the UK. This provoked a fierce polemic about the value or valuelessness of his work. The following extract, from a letter published in The Times in May 1992, signed by an array of international philosophers, is quite restrained compared to some of what was promulgated at the time:

Many have been willing to give M Derrida the benefit of the doubt, insisting that language of such depth and difficulty of interpretation must hide deep and subtle thoughts indeed. When the effort is made to penetrate it, however, then it becomes clear, to us at least, that, where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial. Academic status based on what seem to us to be little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth and scholarship is not, we submit, sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university.

(Smith et al. 1992)

The claim here is clear: Derrida should not be taken seriously as a philosopher. Moreover, his work is dangerous because it undermines the values of reason, truth and scholarship, and by implication it is ethically noxious, nihilistic and corrupting. This has been echoed more recently by those who have seen a clear line leading from the academic querying of universalist truth claims to the flagrant propagation of falsehood, lies and unsubstantiated allegations in our modern post-truth political era. Some people seem to think that Trump is all Derrida’s fault.

Stout defenders of Derrida and other poststructuralists insisted that this was a misreading and misunderstanding. But the attack on poststructuralism had been intensified by revelations which, a few years earlier, had provoked a crisis within circles which were intellectually favourable to it. The Yale professor Paul De Man was an influential critic and teacher, a key figure in the so-called Yale School, together with Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom. In his influential books Blindness and Insight (1971) and Allegories of Reading (1979) De Man had developed his own version of deconstruction through an intense, detailed intellectual engagement with the work of Derrida and other European thinkers. In 1988, five years after his death, it was revealed that as a young man in Nazi-occupied Belgium he had written numerous articles for a collaborationist newspaper, Le Soir, some of
which could be accused of anti-Semitism. He emigrated to the United States after the war and never publicly discussed his wartime journalism. Colleagues, students and friends were shocked to discover what he had written. Major figures, such as Shoshana Felman, Fredric Jameson, Barbara Johnson and Derrida himself struggled to come to terms with the revelations. In an interview Johnson said that “[she] really felt that the person [she] had admired and respected was a different person from the one he had to be now that his whole life became visible” (Johnson 1994: 88). If De Man’s admirers found it difficult to deal with what they now knew, his detractors had an altogether easier time of it: De Man’s work, and along with it deconstruction and poststructuralism more broadly, could now be dismissed wholesale. Jeffrey Mehlman summed up the situation in unforgiving terms, even if he later insisted that his comment had been misrepresented, when he suggested that there were “grounds for viewing the whole of deconstruction as a vast amnesty project for the politics of collaboration during World War II” (Mehlman 2010: 78).

The De Man affair provoked a trauma within poststructuralism (see LaCapra 1994: 113). It became a matter of intellectual and moral urgency to demonstrate that the charge of irresponsibility or moral nihilism was not justified. This urgency became one of the sources of trauma studies.

**Ethics and trauma studies**

In 1998 Dominick LaCapra wrote that “there [was] a need in critical theory for an explicitly ethical turn” (LaCapra 1998: 199). At that time, an ethical turn was already palpable in what would prove to be the canonical texts of trauma studies. Those founding works – Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1994), Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) – all contain chapters devoted largely or wholly to Paul De Man, making it clear that the De Man affair was a defining feature of their immediate intellectual context. As Tom Toremans puts it, “To an important degree, trauma theory can be considered a response to the challenge of reading ‘after’ De Man – both chronologically and following his example” (Toremans 2018: 52). There are other points of convergence between the founding works of trauma studies: they all have *history* in their subtitles, and all contain substantial discussion of Holocaust material. It would be wrong to conflate these very different works and the approaches of their authors, but their shared features are nevertheless striking. If poststructuralism had been accused of the irresponsible celebration of free play and semantic indeterminacy, trauma studies entailed the recovery of historical referentiality, however problematic it might be. The Holocaust provides a topic which should be undoubted in its historical reality even as it poses major challenges to representation, reception and interpretation. One might say that trauma studies in its modern form comes into being, at least in part, through the encounter between Holocaust studies and sophisticated practices of reading influenced by poststructuralism. And the underlying justification for this is ethical. Commenting on De Man’s silence about the war and the Holocaust, Felman warns against hasty, oversimplifying judgements, but insists that “the question of ethics is indeed a fundamental and an urgent one” (Felman, in Felman and Laub 1992: 121).

Trauma studies, then, is underpinned by an ethical claim. What is at stake is the possibility of an ethics of response, entailing an ability to listen to and be changed by traumatic narratives without appropriating them and claiming them as our own. Geoffrey Hartman calls for “a new awareness … which is ethical as well as clinical” (Hartman,
quoted in Toremans 2018: 52). Caruth describes her project as “a new mode of listening across disciplines” (Caruth 2014: ix); and to respond effectively to trauma entails “[creating] the conditions by which the very possibility of collective social witness and response may finally take place” (xvi). One might see a sense of exasperation or impatience with her use of finally: we have been waiting too long, and it is now high time that critics should assume their ethical and social responsibility as witnesses to the trauma of others. The ability to respond to literature, to read well and attentively, is also an ethical accomplishment.

Trauma studies is, I suggest, inseparable from a sense that literary and cultural criticism is worthwhile only if it can position itself as ethically responsible. Indeed, the language of ethics permeates the self-understanding of leading trauma theorists. A case in point is LaCapra’s notion of empathic unsettlement, which endeavours to describe how we can and should respond to narratives of trauma. It involves careful attention to traumatic experiences, a willingness and capacity to be unsettled by them, but without appropriation. The trauma of others is not my trauma. LaCapra refers to empathic unsettlement as “cognitively and ethically responsible” (LaCapra 2001: 42). Empathy, understood in this non-appropriative manner, is, he says, “important both in historical understanding and in the ethics of everyday life” (219). What I see here, as in other founding texts of trauma studies by Caruth and Felman, is an attempt to reclaim the ethical importance of work which might rapidly be described as poststructuralist. Thinking which might have been dismissed as arcane, obscure, irrelevant or even dangerous can now be re-framed as having important consequences on our values and identities as responsible citizens.

Trauma studies entails, then, a more explicit engagement with ethics than had sometimes been the case in critical theory; or, to be more precise, I suggest here that proponents of trauma studies tend to use the vocabulary of ethics, but sustained discussions of ethics are less common. One of the significant achievements of trauma studies has been to make it possible to talk once again about right and wrong, moral judgement, justice, decency and responsibility, after a period when – at least in some branches of literary studies – such terms seemed to be quaintly or disastrously humanist: outmoded, inappropriate, ineffective or simply meaningless. Fassin and Rechtman conclude The Empire of Trauma by claiming that, “Rather than a clinical reality, trauma today is a moral judgment” (Fassin and Fechtman 2009: 284). It becomes acceptable again to talk about ethics, values, rights, responsibilities and respect. What is not so clear, in this return to ethics, is the extent to which such terms are effectively substantiated or problematized.

The use of the word imperative in trauma studies can be used to illustrate the point. The final words of Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience refer to “the ethical imperative of an awakening that has yet to occur” (Caruth 1996: 112). The context is massively complex. Caruth has been discussing Freud’s account in The Interpretation of Dreams of the dream of a burning child. This also brings in Lacan’s response to Freud’s account, the trauma of the loss of a child, the problem of the transmission of trauma and the theory of trauma, and the difficulties involved in any attempt to pin down memory, repetition and representation. And all this culminates in this “ethical imperative of an awakening that has yet to occur”.

However, the status and meaning of this “awakening” remain unclear. Does the claim that it has “yet to occur” imply that it could in fact occur, or is it for ever deferred? Most of all, why is this awakening to be understood as an ethical imperative? The fact that, in her contribution to this volume, Caruth (Chapter 7) continues to reflect on this “awakening” indicates, I think, her own acute awareness that the full ethical significance of this passage has yet to be settled.
Amongst innumerable other instances of the word *imperative* in the founding texts of modern trauma studies, Shoshana Felman refers to “the new moral and political imperative” of the age of testimony (Felman, in Felman and Laub 1992: 114). Dori Laub also talks of the “imperative to tell” (Laub, in Felman and Laub 1992: 78–9), even if it is coupled with an impossibility of telling. What kind of imperative are we confronted with here, where does it come from, what is its authority or force? It does not appear to be a command of God, neither is it a command of reason like Kant’s categorical imperative. If anything, it appears to be a command emanating from the experience of trauma itself, and from the traumatized Other, when Other has distinct echoes of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. I will come back to this in a moment.

In a long endnote in *The Juridical Unconscious* Shoshana Felman gives a succinct and actually very powerful defence of Cathy Caruth’s work. Summarizing the third of her three main points about Caruth, Felman writes:

Because the experience of trauma addresses the Other and demands the listening of another, it implies a human and an ethical dimension in which the Other receives priority over the self. This ethical dimension is tightly related to the question of justice.

(*Felman 2002: 173–4*)

To unpack these two sentences would be a difficult undertaking. The language is assertive, yet every part of this raises major questions. Does the experience of trauma always address the Other, or only sometimes? Might not trauma sometimes entail precisely an unwillingness or refusal to address the Other? If trauma demands the listening of another, what kind of demand is this? Should I pay any attention to such a demand, and if so, why? Not every demand is a good one. When my daughter demands more chocolate, her mother tells me I should not give in. “Tightly related” (“This ethical dimension is tightly related to the question of justice”) needs further precision and explanation. And the progression from “the experience of trauma” to “the question of justice” is highly suggestive, but also calls for more detailed justification and analysis. The claim is presumably not that, because some people have experienced trauma, we are all more moral beings and justice prevails. So what is the claim? My point is that in their foundational work Caruth and Felman make a demand for ethical seriousness, but do not for a moment purport to resolve the urgent issues they have raised.

The words which describe “an ethical dimension in which the Other receives priority over the self” unmistakeably refer to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’s ethics are focussed on the non-reciprocal relation of self and Other, in which the Other makes an unconditional demand on me. It would take a very long time to discuss what this demand is, why I do or should pay any attention to it, and why I might sometimes disregard it. In the current context, it is important to recognize that Levinas has been a key reference point – perhaps the key reference point – in the so-called ethical turn of poststructuralism. He provides an ethical vocabulary and decades of established philosophical prestige dating back to his studies with Husserl and Heidegger in the 1920s. But references or allusions to Levinas often do not go together with a deep immersion in his work, its complexities and its many problematic aspects. Levinas has been simplified and sanitized, but real engagements with his thinking are to say the least sparse. Levinas appears once in Felman and Laub’s *Testimony* (Felman and Laub 1992: 3), and also once – in an endnote – in Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* (Caruth 1996: 143–4); and yet both books, and the subsequent works they have inspired, subscribe to a vocabulary of the Other, otherness, alterity, responsibility and the
demand of the Other upon the self. Levinas is an unnamed, largely uninterrogated presence. There are some notable exceptions, such as Robert Eaglestone’s *The Holocaust and the Post-modern* (2004) and Thomas Trezise’s *Witnessing Witnessing: On the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony* (2013), both of which include informed and profound discussions of Levinas. More commonly, however, Levinas serves as an authority underpinning the ethical claims of traumas studies without a significant degree of careful engagement with what he actually wrote.

Despite the prestige of his thought in trauma studies and ethical criticism more generally, Levinas is, I suggest, to some extent a surprisingly untapped source. There are at least two areas from which trauma studies might be enriched though closer attention to his work. The first is his conception of the relation between self and other. This is at a far remove from a cozy relation of care and respect for the Other, as it is sometimes caricatured. It is, on the contrary, violent and disturbing. The self may find itself dispossessed, torn apart, obliged to accept responsibility for others without choice or reciprocity. My debt to the other is a limitless burden, but I can expect no such indebtedness in return. From this troubled relation emerges the second aspect of Levinas’s thought which I believe has been underappreciated in trauma studies, namely his conception of trauma itself, especially in his later writing. Levinas’s use of the term owes little or nothing to the psychoanalytic framework which proponents of trauma studies have used extensively. Rather, it returns to the older medical sense of *wound*. Levinas’s language draws upon the visceral, violent power of this meaning of trauma. The Levinasian subject, confronted with the unfathomable Other, finds itself *traumatized*, psychically and physically pained through its discovery of otherness. The encounter hurts; we can never be the same again as we were before. Trauma is associated with other key terms in Levinas’s later thinking, which convey the difficulty and distress of the subject exposed to otherness: obsession, accusation, persecution, vulnerability, expiation, exile, wounding (Levinas 1974: 31). Moreover, the trauma at the core of subjectivity is the painful foundation of my ethical responsibility to the Other. As Simon Critchley puts it, “Without trauma, there would be no ethics in Levinas’s particular sense of the word” (Critchley 1999: 240).

So far, I have been talking about trauma studies rather than trauma literature, though the two are linked: the ethical claim of trauma studies rests on the ethical force of trauma narratives, which trauma studies analyses, theorises, mediates and transmits. The critical act is part of the ethical process. This is particularly evident in the study of testimony. There is a circuit of testimonial storytelling: the witness has a story to tell and requires a listener to receive it; by receiving it, the listener becomes witness to the witness, and thereby a bearer of testimony in his or her right. Witnesses follow an imperative to tell their stories, and witnesses to the witnesses are also subject to an imperative to re-tell the story. Describing the essential role of the listener in trauma testimony, Dori Laub says that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event” (Laub, in Felman and Laub 1992: 57). I find this to be a problematic formulation. It may be psychologically accurate, but hermeneutically and ethically it raises huge questions: what does it mean for me to participate in and co-own a trauma which is not mine, what right do I have to claim a share of the pain of others? This is precisely where trauma meets ethics and leads to an unresolved dilemma. However, I would suggest that an uninterrogated commitment to the ethical value of secondary witnessing is the founding blind spot of trauma studies. To put it in other words, we like – perhaps we need – to believe that we are doing something ethically valuable when we immerse ourselves within, listen to, talk and write about, stories of unspeakable trauma.
New versions of this position have subsequently emerged, for example in Aleida Assmann’s notion of the “empathetic listener” or Michael Rothberg’s “implicated subject”. Both of these notions draw upon important work on postmemory and secondary witnessing. For Assmann, a response founded in empathy involves “intellectual interest, active imagina-
tion, emotional investment” and – crucially – “ethical engagement” (Assmann 2018: 216). She goes on to argue that “Participation in such a memory creates an affective community that is independent of the filiations created by blood or nation or religion” (216). This suggests that there is a clear link between trauma, empathy and moral improvement, which has potentially universal relevance because it is not limited by any national, ethnic or religious boundaries. Rothberg’s “implicated subject” also makes significant claims about the signi-
ficance of our direct or indirect involvement with trauma and injustice. The implicated sub-
ject is the cornerstone of a new theory of historical responsibility: through our opinions, lifestyles and cultural embeddedness, we are all implicated in violence even if we have no direct part in it, either as victims or perpetrators. Rothberg insists that recognizing this “will not automatically make us better people” (Rothberg 2019: 19). There is nevertheless the suggestion that understanding and embracing our implication will have beneficial social, political and ethical effects: “Recognizing collective responsibility, in other words, can lead to new versions of collective politics that build on alliances and assemblages of differently situ-
ated subjects” (21).

From its early stages to its recent developments, literary trauma studies is, I suggest, driven by the urge to find in the difficulties and paradoxes of reading an ethical imperative which transcends narcissistic pleasure. If literature matters, then reading and interpreting litera-
ture matter as well. Our critical and readerly acts are justified, maybe even redeemed. To cite just one example, in her brilliant reading of Albert Camus’s novel The Fall (La Chute) Shoshana Felman builds paradox upon paradox: through the narrator’s tortuous, slippery, deceptive practice of witnessing and self-witnessing, we are called upon “to articulate the very inarticulateness of the narrative”, “to repeat its unrepeatability” (Felman, in Felman and Laub 1992: 202). By doing this, “Camus succeeds in giving to the very silence of a generation – to the very voicelessness of history – the power of a call: the possibility, the chance, of our response-ability” (Felman, in Felman and Laub 1992: 203). Felman here sets a model which raises the stakes of literary criticism. As critics, we become participants in a dialogue of the utmost importance. If we are response-able, we are responsible. We are actors in the urgent, vital project of giving voice to the voiceless.

**Conclusion**

The language of ethics is integral to trauma studies and related areas of research such as memory studies. Leading scholars in the humanities have understood that, in increasingly difficult times, we need more than ever to engage with and to explain why the literary works which matter to us also somehow improve us, however terrible their subject might be. But my suggestion here is that using the language of ethics is not the same as exposing oneself fearlessly to the multiple ambiguities of literature, and to its gains and losses, its bene-
fits and its risks. It is not self-evident that trauma studies and its related areas of study have escaped the “culture of consolation” diagnosed some time ago by Lawrence Langer (Langer 1995: 9, 11): we find value where there is none to find, perhaps because we cannot bear the implications of doing otherwise. As readers, critics and citizens desperate to secure our ethical groundedness, we may be driven to find something good even and especially when there is nothing good to find. However, Susannah Radstone has warned against the
Temptation of regarding trauma studies as more ethically secure than other approaches: “Trauma criticism has no greater claim to ethical purity than any other critical practice. Like any other intellectual endeavour, it is driven by a complex interweaving of scholarly, academic, political and psychical imperatives” (Radstone 2011: 87). Adopting an ethical vocabulary does not guarantee our moral superiority.

The insufficiently interrogated language of ethics which runs through trauma studies may be a sign that we have not yet given up on the hope that the works we care for will somehow redeem us. This is a failure of reading, and it may be a failure which we have no option but to perform and repeat. We may be no closer to giving up on or going beyond the culture of consolation than we were when Langer first described it. Moreover, with its invocation of elusive ethical imperatives, empathetic gains and generalized responsibility, trauma studies risks being a symptom of that culture rather than an antidote to it. However, I do not want to end this chapter on a negative note. The gains of trauma studies have been substantial. It has demonstrated, palpably and (to my mind) irrefutably that ethical concerns can be and should be central to work in the humanities. Difficult and demanding critical practices should not be dismissed as ethically trivial or even nihilistic just because their conclusions are not glibly optimistic. If so far we have not dared to embrace some of the implications of trauma, it may be because we still have a long way to go before we find more viable ways of inhabiting traumatized or post-traumatic worlds.

Bibliography


Colin Davis


Further reading
