Introduction

Towards a Reconceptualization of Trauma

> "I had no one to love me; or to make me respected, to enable me to acquire respect. I was an egg dropped on the sand; a pauper by nature, hunted from family to family, who belonged to nobody – and nobody cared for me."
> (MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, *THE WRONGS OF WOMAN*)

> "Years pile up in front of me: the sign on the door saying KEEP OUT. THIS MEANS YOU!"
> (TREZZA AZZOPARDI, *THE HIDING PLACE*)

In Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Jemima – an unwanted, abandoned, and mistreated child – compares herself to an "egg dropped on the sand" (95) to express the experience of growing up motherless, without affection and care, in an environment that failed to provide even the most basic sense of security and familial or social acceptance and support. Like Jemima, Dolores, the protagonist-narrator of Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place* (2000), is a child victimized by multiple traumas and rejected by family and society. After she is injured in a fire as a baby, Dolores's childhood is dominated by physical and emotional violence and stigmatization: her father, a frantically superstitious man, interprets her disfigured hand as the devil's imprint, while her sisters regard her as a despicable "cripple." The novels by Wollstonecraft and Azzopardi both emphasize the powerful and persistent impact of childhood trauma and the pressing need of trauma victims to make sense of and come to terms with their harrowing past. Like a number of Romantic and postmodern novels, *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Hiding Place* focus on traumatic childhood experiences in the familial context and explore in detail the trauma victim's later quest for meaning and recovery. These texts are profoundly concerned with the complex psychology of their protagonists and the proc-

ess of narrating the traumatic past, investigating whether or not and to what extent it is possible to heal wounds by expressing them in words.

I use these glimpses into Wollstonecraft's and Azzopardi's novels as a point of departure to call attention to the discrepancies between two uses of the concept "trauma": one at play in "trauma fiction" (a term that Anne Whitehead investigates in *Trauma Fiction*), and the other operating in important paradigms of literary and cultural theory. The meaning of trauma in a text such as *The Hiding Place*, which emphasizes an individual's suffering and explores the nuances of traumatic and posttraumatic psychology, contrasts with the general, (often problematically) expansive meanings the term has acquired in leading currents of literary trauma studies.

One of the most influential theorizations of trauma in the humanities is that of Cathy Caruth.[1] Her *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) offers a number of crucial insights for literary trauma studies. For example, it explores how representations of trauma can facilitate understanding by enacting a collapse of meaning and how trauma, which challenges conventional forms of narrative, might, paradoxically, be expressed through the failure of words, through the breakdown of language. However, *Unclaimed Experience* also exemplifies the inflationary uses of the term trauma in literary studies. In Caruth's approach, the meaning of the term is broadened to such an extent that the distinction between traumatized and non-traumatized individuals and between victims and perpetrators seems to dissolve;[2] in the process, history becomes, essentially, a "history of trauma" (18). For Caruth, trauma figures as a metaphor for the general limitations of language and representation and for the notion of history as characterized by "indirect referentiality" (18).

Caruth's generalized approach contrasts sharply with the embodied approach of literary texts such as *The Wrongs of Woman* and *The Hiding Place.* Taken together,

1 The theorists who laid the groundwork for trauma studies in the humanities (especially Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra) still function as leading figures in the field in the sense that current trauma critics continue to anchor their work in the older work. Even though the study of trauma has flourished since the mid-1990s, it is difficult to identify recent studies that hold the status of key publications in the field. One exception is the work of Michael Rothberg, particularly *Traumatic Realism* (2000) and *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), although Rothberg plays a leading role more in the field of Holocaust and memory studies than in trauma studies.

2 For example, in the introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth reinterprets Freud's reading of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in such a way that the figure of Tancred (who wounds his beloved Clorinda twice, as if unknowingly) comes to represent the trauma victim *par excellence*, while Clorinda (the wounded) is marginalized (see *Unclaimed* 2-5). A detailed discussion of Caruth's trauma theory can be found in my first chapter.

these two approaches reveal tensions between the concrete and abstract dimensions of trauma, between the real and the metaphorical, the documentary and the tropological, as well as between the psychological and the cultural. While most literary trauma texts enact these tensions (although, in many ways, Wollstonecraft's and Azzopardi's novels gesture more towards the concrete), I contend that the theoretical trajectory that Caruth initiates overemphasizes the abstract aspects of trauma.[3] She pushes her attempt to reveal the fundamental significance and ubiquitous presence of trauma in the present age so far that the concept of trauma is "dilute[d] and generalize[d]" (Leys 305), hollowed out to such an extent that it loses its explanatory force and approaches cliché. In literary theory, the clinical concept of trauma has been reduced to a cultural trope for postmodern attitudes to language and history; as a result, it has increasingly faced the danger of becoming meaningless.

In the face of this danger, then, should literary critics abandon the concept? Has this complex and contested concept become an empty signifier on its journey from medicine, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry to literary studies? Should critics attempt to coin new terms and concepts to replace "trauma"? I propose that it is far more fruitful to re-evaluate and reconceptualize the term rather than to abandon it altogether. Terms such as "crisis," "conflict," or "shock," for example, could serve as substitutes, but none is as rich and powerful as "trauma" – as long as we disentangle its strands of meaning rather than use it uncritically to characterize too many phenomena. Moreover, the continual flourishing of the field of trauma studies testifies to the ongoing importance of the concept and reinforces the idea that we should not proclaim the end of trauma studies but rather seek for continuities and new beginnings.[4] As Kate Douglas and William Whitlock wrote in 2009, it would be problematic to "characteris[e] trauma as a *fin de siècle* preoccupation that was, perhaps, on the edge of running its course and becoming '*fin*'"; indeed, many of the issues raised by trauma critics in the 1990s "remain sharp and relevant in discussions about life narrative and trauma now" (2).

The present study explores new as well as marginalized directions within literary trauma studies in three main ways. First, I extend the discussion of trauma back in time and bring into dialogue postmodern and Romantic trauma novels. Surpris-

3 For a similar criticism, see Ruth Leys' *Trauma* and Wulf Kansteiner's "Menschheitstrauma, Holocausttrauma, kulturelles Trauma."

4 Some recent examples include Jennifer Griffiths' *Traumatic Possessions* (2010), Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué's *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny* (2011), the recently launched *Journal of Literary and Trauma Studies*, the continuously active Centre for Literature and Trauma at Ghent University, and the considerable number of research clusters and centres related to trauma and memory (see Craps, *LITRA*). There is also a trend towards diversification within the field; more and more research is being done, for example, in the area of postcolonial trauma studies.

ingly little has been written on trauma in Romantic fiction in particular and in pre-twentieth-century literature in general.[5] The investigation of trauma in texts of the Romantic period (a period that is crucial in the history of psychiatry), in combination with postmodern trauma writing, is one important way in which I explore some largely uncharted territory. Second, I focus on literary approaches to childhood and family trauma, that is, on individual, personal traumas – an area that has received far less scholarly attention than historical and collective traumas. In a number of studies, the Holocaust, as Ruth Leys emphasizes, "in effect stands in for trauma generally" (16).[6] However, as Geoffrey Hartman wrote in 1995, "[t]rauma study's radical aspect comes to the fore less in its emphasis on acts of violence like war and genocide than when it draws attention to 'familiar' violence such as rape, and the abuse of women and children" ("Traumatic Knowledge" 546). Even though some recent publications in the field function as correctives to the one-sided focus on historical traumas,[7] I suggest that Hartman's assertion still holds true in a number of ways and that this "radical aspect" represented by literary approaches to individual domestic traumas still deserves more attention. In line with this view, I also place particular emphasis on trauma texts by women writers. Last, I pursue an interdisciplinary trajectory, combining literary and cultural trauma theory with psychological and psychiatric trauma discourses. While there seems to be a consensus that "[n]o disciplinary economy can exclusively account for the traumatic" (Herrero and Baelo-Allué 12), I believe that an interdisciplinary approach to trauma fiction can be pushed further than is usually done in the field. Pursuing a more radically interdisciplinary approach is a third important way in which this study seeks to fill a gap in literary trauma studies.

All three pillars of my framework lay the groundwork for a non-universalizing approach to trauma fiction. In particular, examining trauma fiction through the lens

5 Among the few existing investigations of trauma and Romanticism by Tilottama Rajan, Diane Long Hoeveler, and Mary Jacobus, all of which place considerable emphasis on biographical and psychoanalytical perspectives, the work of Rajan is particularly relevant to the present study (for example her 2010 study *Romantic Narrative*). A few titles to mention regarding trauma in pre-twentieth-century literature other than Romanticism are Jill Matus' *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* (2009) and Thomas Anderson's *Performing Early Modern Trauma* (2006).

6 The Holocaust indeed plays a pervasive role in the works of a considerable number of well-known studies on trauma in the humanities, including Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies* (1991), Saul Friedlander's *Probing the Limits of Representation* (1992), Felman and Laub's *Testimony* (1992), LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust* (1994), and Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* (2000).

7 See for example Deborah Horvitz's *Literary Trauma* (2000) and Griffiths' *Traumatic Possessions* (2010).

of both literary studies and psychology and psychiatry, which offer highly differentiated and continuously evolving analyses of trauma, reveals fresh perspectives on trauma writing. Similarly, the focus on childhood and family trauma facilitates a reorientation towards specific rather than overly tropological and abstract dimensions of trauma. This reorientation is important because emphasizing the collective and cultural dimensions of trauma has contributed to the flourishing of inflationary approaches in literary studies. Finally, by foregrounding historical perspectives – trauma in the Romantic period versus trauma in postmodernity – I want to challenge the view that the phenomenon of trauma emerged only in the twentieth century and counteract the problematic tendency to conflate the experience of trauma with the experience of postmodernity.

The three elements that constitute the basis of my trajectory – the comparison of Romantic and postmodern texts, the focus on childhood and family trauma, and the interdisciplinary approach to trauma fiction – require further explanation. First of all, the aim of exploring trauma narratives from two historical periods is to bring into relief the specificities of each period's trauma writing as well as the contextual meanings and cultural significance of trauma more clearly than a focus on one period allows. Moreover, as my analyses attempt to show, many of the central issues in contemporary debates about trauma are relevant to both Romantic and postmodern texts, but comparing how these issues play out in texts of the two periods reveals intriguing parallels and thought-provoking differences. I want to let contemporary trauma discourses speak to Romantic trauma novels and, at the same time, explore what texts preceding the theorization and discursivisation of trauma can bring to current theoretical debates.

The significance of comparing Romantic and postmodern trauma fiction rests on two interrelated assumptions: that trauma is not just a phenomenon of the twentieth century and, more specifically, that using the notion of trauma in relation to the Romantic period is justified. Postmodernity has made notions such as "trauma culture" and "wound culture" prominent (see for example Kaplan's *Trauma Culture*), yet what is at stake here, as Wulf Kansteiner rightly points out, is less the historical question about the *occurrence* of traumatic events and more the different *awareness* of trauma that distinguishes the twentieth century from earlier centuries (109); twentieth-century mass media has played a vital role in generating and perpetuating this awareness.[8] The widespread notion of trauma as the hallmark of the postmodern age is no doubt crucial for understanding postmodern trauma writing

8 As Chris Brewin observes, the dramatic shift in attitudes toward trauma is contingent on "the sheer amount of exposure through the media to the realities of the war, the Holocaust, childhood abuse, and other telling examples of horror and cruelty." Acting as a platform for the public staging of personal suffering, the media has also vitally contributed to the emergence of a "victim culture" (*Posttraumatic* 221-22).

and its cultural meanings, but we need to remain alert to the dangers of pushing this notion too far. The idea that there is something inherently postmodern about trauma risks blurring the line between a general (post-structuralist) awareness of the limitations of language, representation, and memory and the experience of trauma in a more specific sense, which involves particularly severe and destabilizing crises of language, representation, and memory. Hence, if we broaden the critical perspective to trauma to include an earlier culture, the blind spots of current perspectives of trauma, immersed in an ongoing "trauma boom," become more distinctly visible.

The Romantic texts that I investigate in this study date from the late 1780s to the late 1830s; that is, they span the entire Romantic period, although the core texts were written between 1798 and 1819. The postmodern novels that I focus on were published between 1990 and 2010. Thus, given that the origin of postmodern fiction tends to be located roughly in the 1950s-60s (see McHale 12-25), these novels are examples of late postmodern fiction. I want to emphasize, however, that I employ the terms "Romantic" and "postmodern" not merely as period designations; rather, I use these terms more specifically, to convey particular thematic and formal features that are characteristic of the novels of each period in their approach to trauma. The concepts of Romantic trauma fiction and of postmodern trauma fiction hence require further explanation.

First of all, how can the notion of "Romantic trauma" be conceptualized? In the Romantic period, psychological trauma was not yet an official psychiatric concept; of course, Romanticism precedes any explicit discursive theorization of trauma. Nevertheless, the *idea* of trauma, I argue, is present in a considerable number of Romantic literary texts. In other words, a number of Romantic texts are profoundly concerned with psychological patterns of experience and response that later trauma theory responds to. The novels of Mary Wollstonecraft, her husband William Godwin, and their daughter Mary Shelley investigated in this study revolve around individual experiences that are severely distressing, painful, and/or shocking and explore in depth the complex and persistent effects of those experiences. Significantly, the novels repeatedly refer to the harmful impact of these experiences using the key term "wound." This image of mental or psychological injury connects, through the etymological roots of the term "trauma," to later notions of psychological trauma. Trauma is borrowed from ancient Greek and originally denotes "a violent injury from an external cause that breached the body's integrity" (Brette 1800), in other words, a "wound." By transferring the notion of wound from the physical to the psychological realm, from the body to the mind, these Romantic writers implicitly expressed an idea that has been elaborated only considerably later in theoretical frameworks. I use the term Romantic trauma fiction, then, to refer to a kind of Romantic fiction that reflects the period's profound interest in psychology and

growing fascination with the disrupted or "wounded mind" (*The Wrongs of Woman* 74).[9]

My notion of Romantic trauma fiction also hinges on the Romantic reconceptualization of identity as crucially shaped by the past and by one's memory of the past (see Ferguson's "Romantic Memory"). These novels feature narrators who strive to understand how their past and their memories affect their present sense of self. In their representations of the depths of the mind, Romantic trauma novels repeatedly include elements of the Gothic, often to express a fascination with the pathological as ultimately uncontrollable. These texts foreground the "themes of excess and transgression, margins and limits" that Gary Kelly identifies as characteristic of an important strand of Romantic fiction, represented mainly by Gothic novels and "novels of passion" (*English Fiction* 185). The "limits" that Romantic trauma novels – many of which indeed combine features of the Gothic with a psychology of the passions – are concerned with include limits of the self and subjectivity, but also, in the words of Kelly, "limits moral, ethical and existential" (184). Furthermore, these novels' explorations of trauma and pain, of suffering and existential crises, also involve political dimensions, especially in, for example, *The Wrongs of Woman,* which examines trauma in connection with gender and family politics. Finally, Romantic trauma fiction problematizes and investigates limits also in connection with language and narrative, with writing and literature, expressing a critical awareness of the potentials and the limitations of (self-)narration and communication at several levels of the text.

Postmodern trauma fiction, as Whitehead maintains, "emerges out of postmodernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit" (*Trauma Fiction* 82). This urge to test the boundaries and limitations of narrative is one important point where postmodern fiction intersects with trauma fiction. Hence, the kind of postmodernism under investigation here is a postmodern writing that is heavily self-reflexive and that persistently challenges and problematizes processes of narration and representation. Another crucial intersection between postmodern fiction and trauma fiction is the emphasis on a particularly complex and conflicted relationship with the past, including the sense that any access to the past is exceedingly difficult and that processes of remembering are fraught with instabilities and tensions. This crisis of memory has led to an obsession with memory; "[i]n the face of mounting amnesia, there is an urgent need to consciously establish meaningful connections with the past" (*Trauma Fiction* 82). As a result, postmodern fiction is, according to Whitehead, part of a larger "memory project" – and so is

9 One of the few literary critics who also explicitly calls attention to the proximity between "trauma" and "wound" is Hartman (see "Trauma").

trauma fiction (82).[10] Postmodern trauma novels, moreover, represent a strand of postmodernism that is less playful and more critical and political or, in Edward Larrissy's terms, less "ludic" and more "sceptical" (8). My reading of postmodern trauma fiction is in line with Linda Hutcheon's view of the postmodern as fundamentally political, as challenging grand narratives and cultural assumptions (see *The Politics of Postmodernism*). It is especially through its concern with the marginal and the repressed, with silenced or forgotten histories, that trauma writing tends to be profoundly political, often giving a voice to the oppressed and calling attention to wounds that have been hidden under the grand narratives of history and to pain and suffering that has been ignored.[11] It is partly due to this political and ethical commitment that postmodern trauma fiction does not push narrative experimentations as far as the seminal works of postmodern fiction, such as texts by Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut. Trauma fiction, as Michael Rothberg argues, tends to retain a certain commitment to the real and, ultimately, "cannot free itself from the claims of mimesis," that is, from concerns with referentiality and the demands of documentation and testimony (*Traumatic Realism* 140).[12] As Rothberg further asserts, "[t]he abyss at the heart of trauma entails not only the exile of the real but also its existence" (140). Hence, trauma fiction, as Jean-Michel Ganteau puts it, tends to trouble and challenge realism, but realism "remains vestigial even while it is being subverted" (34). Discussions of the negotiation of postmodernist and (new kinds of) realist strategies of narration and representation in the face of trauma are relevant to, for example, Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place*, which is profoundly self-reflexive and challenges processes of remembering, narration, and representation, while still expressing a strong concern

10 Similarly, Susannah Radstone argues that the obsession with memory in the context of both trauma and postmodernism should be seen as interrelated: "Trauma theory is associated with the 'turn to memory' in history as well as in the humanities more generally. Postmodernism's problematizations of grand narratives, objectivity, universality and totality prompted a turn to memory's partial, local and subjective narratives" (81).

11 As Whitehead emphasizes, this "acknowledgment of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten" also reveals that trauma fiction tends to share important concerns with postcolonialism (*Trauma Fiction* 82).

12 Rothberg sums up this idea as follows: "Traumatic realist texts, however, search for a form of documentation beyond direct reference and coherent narrative but do not fully abandon the possibility for some kind of reference and some kind of narrative" (*Traumatic Realism* 101). It needs to be emphasized that Rothberg's notion of "traumatic realism" refers primarily to representations of the Holocaust. Yet some of his discussions regarding trauma and realism also have a more general relevance, reaching beyond the context of the Holocaust.

with the real in the way the text records and documents the bleak realities of family trauma.

The narrative strategies and experimentations of postmodern trauma fiction provide an interesting counterpoint to Romantic literary techniques used to represent trauma, pushing further, for example, the conscious attention to language, narrative, and narration that characterizes Romantic trauma fiction. The dialogue between Romantic and postmodern trauma writing becomes even more meaningful in connection with the second pillar of my framework, the thematic focus on childhood and family trauma. Childhood and the family were crucial topoi in the sociocultural fabric at the turn of both the nineteenth- and twenty-first centuries. As is often noted, the Romantic age is characterized by an increasingly strong interest in childhood. In fact, this interest precipitated the "birth of the child" in the sense that, as Jeroen Jansz and Peter van Drunen point out, children were no longer regarded as small adults; instead, they acquired a "social identity" and a "social status of their own" (*Child-Rearing* 46-49). The specificities of the child's psyche, its mental and cognitive topology and developmental processes, became the subject of much investigation. This fascination with childhood is reflected in many texts of the time – including those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Wordsworth, and William Blake as prominent examples – testifying to the "rise of a child-centered British culture" (Richardson, *Literature* 24-25). The novels of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Shelley are firmly embedded in this "child-centered culture," expressing a deep interest in childhood and in the complex relations between child self and adult self. It is in the works of this family of writers that the Romantic concerns with the family, family politics, and education manifests themselves with particular consistency and intensity.[13] As Julie Carlson writes in *England's First Family of Writers*, it is "striking the degree to which this family's writings address the topic of family" (4).

Likewise, in postmodern fiction, childhood and the family emerge as key issues, albeit with a somewhat different focus. As has often been noted, in the last decades of the twentieth century, personal traumas experienced in childhood and within the family, such as sexual abuse, incest, and domestic violence, have emerged as prominent themes in fiction.[14] This development can be seen in connection with the formulation of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a diagnostic category within the field of psychiatry; PTSD was incorporated into the *Diagnostic and Sta-*

13 According to Kelly, the "changing nature and role of the family and the 'domestic affections' (including childhood and the role of women)" are among the main issues explored in Romantic fiction (*English Fiction* 11).

14 See for example Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* and Gillian Harkins' *Everybody's Family Romance*.

tistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980.[15] The category is broad, subsuming different traumatic experiences under one general diagnosis, but its inclusion has resulted in increased attention to sexual and domestic traumas. The women's movement also significantly contributed to increasing public awareness of "the reality of violence against children and women" and of how widespread such violence is (Farrell, *Post-Traumatic* 15). It is within this cultural climate that a considerable number of novels dealing with child and gender-specific trauma have begun to appear. For example, *The Hiding Place* dramatizes how six sisters and their mother are victimized by a tyrannical and abusive father. Such a pessimistic view of childhood as a period of profound suffering rather than innocent happiness and the disillusioning vision of the family as a cradle of trauma rather than a safe haven of domestic peace dominate both Romantic and postmodern trauma fiction.

In trauma fiction, childhood trauma and family trauma are often closely interrelated. The latter term, however, requires more detailed definition: I use the term family trauma, first of all, to denote individual traumatic experiences that happen within the context of the family. At the same time, the term is also meant to express how the whole family may be affected by an individual's trauma and how, in particular, interpersonal trauma within a family tends to shatter the group's sense of safety and stability as well as damage the bonds of the familial community. The texts discussed in this study all suggest in different ways that child-parent as well as sibling relationships tend to be the source of particularly powerful and injurious traumas; the texts highlight the damage that results when these relationships are disrupted by violence, abuse, and incest or are terminated by separation, loss, and death, implying that an individual is crucially shaped by his or her familial environment.

In both Romanticism and postmodernism, the concern with childhood and the family can also be understood as part of a general cultural interest in subjectivity, self-narration, and life writing. The Romantic age witnessed a surge in different forms of life writing: Rousseau's *Confessions*, Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and Godwin's notorious biography *The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* are some prominent examples.[16]

15 The DSM is published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and revised and updated periodically. The inclusion of PTSD as a psychiatric disorder in the third version of the DSM (i.e., the DSM-III) marks a crucial moment in the history of trauma; it can be seen as the moment when the phenomenon of trauma was first widely and officially recognized by the medical and psychiatric professions.

16 As Eugene Stelzig asserts, autobiography, which began to emerge in the middle of the eighteenth century, "is indeed a distinctive romantic genre as well as a mode of self-knowledge" (224). According to Stelzig, the end of the eighteenth century witnessed an "explosion of the genre in Europe" (224).

Indeed, individual life-stories play a pivotal role in Romantic trauma fiction at both the thematic and structural levels: these texts revolve around processes of self-narration and often follow the structure of a fictional autobiography, memoir, or confession. The last decades of the twentieth century can similarly be seen as a period crucially concerned with life writing. As Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir observes, a major trend in postmodern writing has been to explore the intersections of autobiography and fiction, and theorists have produced a flood of investigations of life writing (1). The fascination with individual life-stories manifests itself in different genres of life writing. According to Roger Luckhurst, the late 1980s and early 1990s were characterized by a "memoir boom" (*Trauma Question* 88), while Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that the late twentieth century was an age of testimony (see *Testimony*). In the Romantic and postmodern periods, then, the individual with his or her personal story and individual background takes centre stage in a number of fictional and non-fictional writings. The texts discussed in this study all foreground processes of self-narration, some of them blurring the boundaries between fictional and autobiographical writing in complex ways. While I read these explorations of self-narration as part of a culture of life writing, my primary focus is to investigate how a given text explores processes of narrating the self and trauma rather than how it reflects the author's own life. In other words, the main focus of my readings is on the textual enactments of life writing about trauma – I read the biographical dimension of texts concerned with self-narration and trauma as merely an additional layer.

Autodiegetic narration, which is the prevalent narrative form in the present study's corpus of texts, puts special emphasis not only on the individual's life-story, but also on the individual's psychology. These types of narratives tend to render with particular immediacy the processes of experiencing, remembering, and narrating trauma. This inherently psychological narrative frame brings me to the third cornerstone of my framework: an interdisciplinary approach to trauma fiction. The idea that trauma is a subject that calls for interdisciplinarity is, of course, not new; it can be traced back to Caruth's seminal 1995 collection of essays *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, which represents the beginnings of literary trauma studies.[17] Yet while literary critics after Caruth (e.g., Whitehead, Laurie Vickroy, and Deborah

17 In the introduction to *Trauma*, Caruth writes that "psychoanalysis and medically oriented psychiatry, sociology, history and even literature all seem to be called upon" to explain the seemingly inexplicable phenomenon of trauma ("Trauma and Experience" 4). The framework of *Unclaimed Experience*, however, is far less interdisciplinary. While Caruth, in an endnote, postulates that "we should look at what [contemporary psychiatry and early psychoanalysis] can learn from each other" (131), her discussion of trauma throughout *Unclaimed Experience* relies heavily on Freudian psychoanalysis, while moving away from psychiatric approaches.

Horvitz) occasionally include references to trauma psychology, there seems to be a tendency to rely on a small selection of standard works and/or a few of Freud's ideas about trauma – with Caruth repeatedly functioning as the (unquestioned) mediator. However, studies that engage more fully in a dialogue between the disciplines and strive to take into account recent trends and findings in the field of traumatic stress studies are still a desideratum. In an effort to move in this direction, I want to show how psychology and psychiatry can significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of literary psychologies of trauma, especially regarding identity, memory, childhood, and the body, as well as trauma and narrative, notably, the interrelations between narrative, working through, and recovery. Psychoanalysis, which tends to be the main psychological framework in literary trauma studies, will be included as a point of reference where relevant; however, I draw on the insights of the wider and rich field of clinical-psychological and psychiatric traumatic stress studies, with the aim of broadening the perspective on trauma psychology.

In order to contextualize my interdisciplinary approach, a short overview of the range of current notions of trauma is apposite. Within the current proliferation of trauma concepts, one could sketch a continuum spanning the two poles of trauma mentioned earlier: the concrete and individual on one end and the abstract and general on the other. The psychiatric notion of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), with its rigid categorization of traumatic events and its clearly defined symptomatology, can be situated at the individual end of this continuum, followed by other, more open-ended clinical-psychological, psychiatric, and psychoanalytical conceptualizations of trauma. Further along the virtual continuum of trauma, socio-cultural perspectives shift the emphasis of trauma from individuals to collectives. These theories argue that trauma damages the social fabric in similar ways to how it harms individual psyches.[18] Moving further towards the pole of the abstract and metaphorical, the concept of trauma crosses the line from being the diagnosis of a collective in a state of profound crisis to being a symptom of a general cultural condition, characterized by an increasing awareness of the limitations of language, representation, and history. At this end of the trans-disciplinary continuum, which is exemplified in Caruth's work, trauma becomes a cultural trope representing postmodernity.

In this study, I explore the interrelations and tensions between different points on this schematic trauma continuum, positioning myself on a via media between the extremes of the rigid frame of the DSM on the one hand and the looseness of some cultural approaches on the other, while keeping in sight the whole spectrum. The definition that I use as a starting point is that of trauma as a profoundly distressing, painful, or shocking experience that affects the individual so deeply as to cause a

18 A seminal article in this context is for example Kai Erikson's "Notes on Trauma and Community."

disruption in, injury to, or breach within the structures of the mind and the psyche and that, as a result, may have a persistent impact on an individual, especially regarding his or her relation to identity, memory, and the social environment.[19] Even though the psychology of trauma is a key focal point, my interdisciplinary methodology does not follow a case-study approach, nor does it pursue an approach that focuses exclusively on the psychological and concrete dimensions of trauma to the exclusion of abstract, metaphorical, and cultural dimensions. Rather, my aim is to rebalance the emphasis between these two poles by paying particular attention to the pole that tends to be underemphasized and undervalued in literary studies. This revaluation of the often-marginalized pole of trauma will generate new insights into the relationship between the psychological and the literary, between the individual and the cultural. While the gulf between the two poles can (probably) never be fully bridged, the continuum of trauma concepts never reduced to a common denominator, it is precisely the complex dynamics produced at the intersections that are particularly intriguing objects of investigation.

At this point, I want to emphasize that interdisciplinarity is crucial not only in the analysis of postmodern texts but also when reading Romantic trauma fiction. The Romantic-period scientific culture was shaped by vivid exchanges across disciplinary boundaries, and Romantic trauma fiction can be seen as symptomatic of a more general "age of introspection" (Faas 57), a time that was characterized by a flourishing of psychological discourses and the emergence of psychiatry as a discipline. The mental sciences of the time began to devote attention to the pathologies of the mind, and this fascination with the unconscious, irrational, and pathological sides of the psyche, as well as the urge to explore these in depth, is also strongly reflected in the literature of the time. Authors like Godwin and Shelley saw themselves as "mental anatomists," recording in their novels, with much detail and psychological interest, the fictitious life-stories of human beings suffering from mental disorders (see Brewer's *The Mental Anatomies*). The recurring theme of experiences and emotions that "wound" the mind and psyche can, as I will discuss in detail in Chapter One, be read in relation to the psychological and psychiatric discourses of the time. In other words, Romantic-period mental sciences are crucial for understanding the general framework within which the idea of trauma emerged in literary texts of the time. Even so, the psychiatry, psychology, and philosophy of the time lacked plausible concepts and theories to explain many issues regarding mental disorders. As Robert Brown observes, while the Romantic period was marked by a profound interest in the pathological aspects of the mind and the "non-

19 This working definition is influenced by Brewin, who identifies the idea of trauma as a "very distressing incident" causing "some kind of internal breach or damage to existing mental structures" as a central consensual notion within traumatic stress studies (*Post-traumatic* 5).

rationality of the depths and privacy of the human self," these issues were "neither successfully examined nor plausibly explained by the mind-doctors" (362). Thus, as Brown continues, "[i]t was left to writers of fiction and poetry in the period to describe and exhibit these aspects, and to much later psychiatrists and psychologists to try to give plausible explanations" (362). Hence, a dialogue with contemporary trauma discourses, which introduces a terminology and conceptology that was not yet available to the Romantics, offers additional insights into Romantic literary psychologies of trauma, and it helps to reveal more distinctly the characteristics of Romantic trauma in contrast to postmodern trauma.

This general framework of a dialogue between Romantic and postmodern as well as literary and psychological discourses is also reflected in the structure of the present study. Bringing into dialogue late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century mental sciences and contemporary psychology and psychiatry, as well as literary trauma theory and psychological trauma discourses, Chapter One provides the theoretical framework for the subsequent discussion of trauma fiction. However, rather than sketching a comprehensive chronological history of trauma theory,[20] I focus on a number of key issues particularly relevant to my corpus of texts, which consists of a selection of Romantic and postmodern novels that deal with childhood and family trauma. The remaining six chapters, devoted to the analysis of these trauma texts, proceed chronologically, while also being structured dialogically around thematic connections: Chapters Two to Four each focus on one Romantic trauma novel, while Chapters Five to Seven are each centred on a postmodern one – and the three texts in each section are arranged in chronological order. At the same time, the study develops powerful thematic resonances between the three 'pairs' of Romantic and postmodern novels. The first of these six chapters investigates Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and the last one Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place* (2000), both of which explore the effects that severe disruptions in the family (such as physical violence and emotional abuse) can have on individuals. Gender perspectives on trauma are a crucial concern in my readings of these two novels, which emphasize the female trauma victims' experiences of being stigmatized, excluded from society, and cruelly separated from a child or a sibling by an abusive husband or father. Dealing with the earliest and most recent texts of my corpus, these two chapters, figuratively speaking, constitute the outer pillars of the arch spanning from late-eighteenth-century to early-twenty-first-century trauma fiction. The second Romantic chapter focuses on Godwin's *Mandeville* (1817) and the second postmodern chapter on Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). What links these texts is that, as children, the protagonists in each witnessed the murder of their par-

20 For an excellent discussion of important cornerstones in the history of trauma theory, including Freud, Pierre Janet, Sándor Ferenczi, Bessel van der Kolk, and Caruth, see Leys' *Trauma*.

ents. In both novels, the topoi of death and mourning, the protagonist's excessive fixation on his sister, and the interrelations between the individual and the collective as well as the private and the political are central concerns. Finally, the two middle chapters investigate Romantic and postmodern representations of incestuous father-daughter relationships in Shelley's *Mathilda* (1819) and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991). In both texts, the trauma of incest leads to a complex and seemingly irresolvable identity crisis. These two texts, which form the structural core of this study, are also the two that are the most performative and that express the bleakest and least reconciliatory views on trauma within the Romantic and postmodern section respectively.

While these thematic connections invite the comparison of Romantic and postmodern voices, the aim is also to explore in depth the particularities of each trauma novel. For example, the study looks at the detailed fictional self-analysis centred on the posttraumatic obsession with revenge in *Mandeville*, the investigation of trauma and identity through a complex poetics of intertextuality in *Mathilda*, and the interrogation of the ethics of witnessing in *Fugitive Pieces*. In each chapter, the discussion of the central novel will also be contextualized using a selection of other thematically relevant trauma novels by the same author or from the same period.

It may, perhaps, seem surprising that the three Romantic novels are from one family of English writers (Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Shelley), while the three postmodern ones are by three authors from different cultural backgrounds: Smiley is American, Michaels is Canadian, and Azzopardi is Welsh. However, the rationale behind this variety is that with Romantic fiction, which has so far hardly been explored in the light of trauma, it seems particularly fruitful to drive pegs into the ground in a clearly defined territory, while postmodern trauma fiction, as a far more established area of research, invites branching out. Moreover, the works by Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Shelley, which share central concerns and premises, provide a particularly fruitful area of investigation regarding trauma in general and childhood and family trauma in particular. Revolving around troubled childhoods and disruptive family environments, their writings are steeped in educational theory and philosophy that emphasizes the profoundly formative impact of experiences and environments. These writers not only have a shared personal background as a family but also a shared intellectual background regarding a number of the seminal thinkers they engage with in their texts, including John Locke, David Hartley, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Erasmus Darwin. The structural arrangement of putting the three chapters on Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Shelley next to each other is, then, one important way in which I aim at doing justice to the complex web of textual and biographical connections among these three writers. At the same time, the two-part structure linking Romantic and postmodern fiction in a dialogue will, furthermore, help illuminate the role trauma plays in each period and bring out the characteristics of Romantic versus postmodern trauma.

In examining the psychologies and poetics as well as the politics and ethics of trauma fiction, a number of key questions arise and constitute central concerns throughout this study: How do literary works represent and enact trauma? How do they approach the unthinkable, express the unspeakable, and depict the unrepresentable? How do they conceptualize the impact of trauma and depict posttraumatic suffering? What shapes and functions does trauma take on in different literary texts? How does it figure as a semantic and as a structural category? In what ways do these texts self-reflexively thematize the meanings of writing (about) trauma? What historical constants and vicissitudes can we map out if we investigate the specificities of Romantic and of postmodern representations of trauma? What cultural and social concerns and anxieties are expressed in these texts? – Investigating these and related questions, I read Romantic and postmodern trauma novels as part of the cultural imaginary, with their negotiations of trauma and its multiple meanings reflecting back on the culture within which they were written. Trauma narratives constitute important points of intersection between several discourses, where issues such as subjectivity and identity, memory, life writing, the body, as well as mental health and mental illness are negotiated. They are also sites for working out gender and family politics as well as social issues. Moreover, images and semantic clusters that reappear time and again in both literary and theoretical languages of trauma – trauma as a gap, hole, or rupture; as a wound or injury; as a mark, brand, or inscription; as a *Fremdkörper* (foreign body) or contamination; as a ghost or sense of haunting – are heavy with psychological, social, and cultural implications, implications that will be explored further in individual chapters.[21]

Thematizing extremes of the human experience and exposing readers to existential crises, struggles for survival, and quests for reconstitution and recovery, trauma novels encourage us to reflect critically on the phenomenon of trauma, its reasons, effects, and contexts. They also invite us to identify emotionally with trauma victims (particularly in autodiegetic narratives like *The Hiding Place*), thereby confronting us anew with the foundations of our lives and selves.[22] Trauma texts "engage readers' empathy and critical faculties" (Vickroy 225) and raise crucial questions about processes of communication, transmission, and reception as well as about witnessing and testimony. They call for a critical reflection on how to respond to the wound of another, how to listen to another's pain, how to receive and

21 On recurrent tropes and images of trauma, see Bettina Rabelhofer's "Trauma, Erinnern, Erzählen."

22 For a discussion of this aspect of trauma fiction, see Vickroy: "Trauma also has meaning in that it is indicative of basic life issues such as the relation between life and death; the meaning and quality of existence; physical and psychological survival; how people understand and cope with loss and self-diminishment; and the nature of bonds and disconnections among people" (221).

react to stories of suffering – and these questions operate at the level of characters, at the level of the text as a whole, at the level of reader response, and finally, at the level of scholarly investigation by literary critics examining and writing about trauma texts and their reception.[23] Like Susannah Radstone, I think of trauma studies in the humanities as "practicing a kind of tertiary witnessing, setting itself the task of bearing witness to culture's extensions of witnessing through media indulging the visual arts, literature and film, as well as through the practices of historians" (64). Finding appropriate and ethically responsible ways of performing this mode of "tertiary witnessing" is a crucial goal for anyone, like me, working in the field of literary trauma studies. Caruth's appeal that we should remain alert to the "irreducible specificity of traumatic stories" and avoid turning them all into "versions of the same story" or "reduce them to clichés" ("Preface" vii) is an imperative that remains valid.

The three principal pillars of my framework represent my attempt to respond to this imperative, my attempt to pursue with renewed vigour the ethical commitment that was one of the foundational impulses of trauma studies but has, in the meantime, sometimes threatened to dissolve into the background.[24] The comparison of Romantic and postmodern trauma fiction, the focus on childhood and family trauma, and the interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and psychology and psychiatry all (in different ways) function as means of counteracting universalizing approaches to trauma. In other words, these three key aspects of this study's trajectory, which all enact a move away from Caruthian approaches and towards still-marginalized directions in the field, express my aim to return to one of Caruth's initial and still important demands: the demand of reading trauma stories in their individual and irreducible specificity and not as "clichés." At the interface of Romantic and postmodern and of literary, psychological, and theoretical "topologies of trauma" (Belau and Ramadanovic), I want to explore, from various

23 The ethics of reading trauma have been conceptualized in different ways, ranging from views of the reader as a surrogate victim suffering from "vicarious or secondary trauma" (see Kaplan 39-41; Caruth, *Unclaimed*) to notions of the reader as an "attentive secondary witness," who should be neither too close nor too distant from the experience of trauma (LaCapra, *Writing History* 78).

24 Luckhurst similarly points to the discrepancy between a turn to ethics as a driving force in the emergence of trauma studies and subsequent practices within literary trauma studies: "Trauma theory tries to turn criticism back towards being an ethical, responsible, purposive discourse, listening to the wounds of the other. But if it is truly to do this, this point of convergence also needs to be the start of a divergence, of an opening out of theory to wider contexts" ("Mixing Memory" 506). For a recent publication in the field that forcefully argues for the importance of ethics to trauma studies, see Herrero and Allué's *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny*.

angles and with repeated attention to ethical questions, the complex interrelations between trauma and narrative, between wounds and words.