The Trauma Novel
Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster

Ronald Granofsky
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To my parents
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Acknowledgments

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I wish to acknowledge permission to quote from the following:

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Insane thoughts race through my brain. I want to catch hold of something, something that will explain this mad fury, this maniacal congealed hatred that pours down on our heads. I can find nothing to console me, nothing to appease my terror. I know that hundreds of men are standing a mile or two from me pulling gun-lanyards, blowing us to smithereens. I know that and nothing else. (Harrison 26-27)

This description of the emotions of a young soldier under fire in World War One in Charles Yale Harrison’s remarkable but neglected Generals Die in Bed (1930) is a good example of a literary depiction of twentieth-century trauma. The rational mind is in abeyance; an existential horror fills the vacuum of reason since no reasonable explanation is even remotely possible for the reality experienced. The known world can provide no precedent for what is occurring.

In a more recent piece of fiction, Graham Swift’s Waterland (1983), in which the Second World War is a backdrop to the study of a family drama set in the mere of the Fenlands, the self-consciousness of trauma is muted but not entirely mute. In a chapter entitled “About Contemporary Nightmares,” one of the pupils of the history teacher-narrator describes a recurring dream in which the deepest anxieties of contemporary youth are imagined:

“... they announce it on the telly. You know: you’ve got four minutes ... But no one seems to notice. No one moves. My Dad’s snoring in his chair. I’m screaming. My mum just sits there wanting to know what’s happened to Crossroads ... all the buildings go red-hot and then they go white and all the people go red too and white ...” (256, ellipses in the original)

While descriptions of the horrors of trench warfare and the fears of nuclear war are marks of our own era, there have, of course, always been many ways of depicting trauma in fiction. It is difficult to conceive of a novel—as opposed, say, to a lyric poem—without a central conflict and only a little less difficult to imagine such a conflict not embodying
an experience that we might vaguely conceive of as “traumatic.” What I am going to be describing in the following pages is one specific kind of literary depiction of trauma, a kind found in some contemporary fiction—and by that I mean fiction written after World War Two—where the individual trauma at the centre of the fictional world is linked to a general angst related in turn to the horrors seen to reside at the heart of human nature.

Conrad’s Kurtz insisted that such horrors were there, but, despite Conrad’s early modernist project to make the reader see, it took two global conflicts to uncover them completely. The modernist retreat into art to purchase, in Terry Eagleton’s words, a “toehold of certainty in a particular world where certainty seemed hard to come by” (110) is overwhelmed by events at the end of the 1930s and beyond. After 1945 and the introduction of atomic weapons, the possibility for viewing the world as one of order and reason was seriously diminished as the character of the trauma facing humankind changed dramatically at the same time as advances in technology increased tremendously the dramatic effect of the transmission of news of disaster. 1945 is the year a certain innocence ended for the human race, a Second Fall, if you will. No wonder Golding’s work is saturated with the Fall motif. It is the year in which the idea of total destruction was revealed on two axes, an intensive one (one race) and an extensive one (the human species). Since then, the extinction or danger of extinction of such highly visible animals as the elephant and rhinoceros largely through depredation by human beings has added to the sense of total destruction in the second half of the twentieth century.

The advent of television and its relatively rapid spread in the industrialized world so soon after World War Two is a major factor in increasing the sense of a collective anxiety. The nightmare described in Swift’s Waterland is announced “on the telly.” In Tim O’Brien’s The Nuclear Age (1987), the narrator, in recalling “an encounter with napalm,” is remembering television images rather than first-hand experience: “In the hours before dawn I was awakened by Phantom jets. I saw burning villages. I saw the dead and maimed. I saw it. I was not out of my mind. I was in my mind; I was a mind’s eyewitness to atrocity.
Introduction

by airmail” (71). The air he refers to carries television signals from the battlefields of Vietnam to his home in the United States.

The “collective” disasters of the contemporary world—Nazi death camps, nuclear weapons, the dehumanizing Soviet Gulag, catastrophic environmental pollution, and others—have inspired a variety of novelistic responses. Paul Brians, for example, lists hundreds of titles in his study of atomic war in fiction from 1895 to 1984, almost a century of jeremiads of imminent apocalypse. These are for the most part “artists’ conceptions” of what the result of such a war could be, based on certain technological and geopolitical possibilities which, of course, became frighteningly conceivable for everyone at the end of the American war with Japan. One response to contemporary trauma, then, has been that of science fiction, where, as in the distinguished novel by Walter M. Miller Jr. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1955–57), perceived tendencies in the writer’s culture are extrapolated to form a cautionary if sometimes wryly humorous work in an otherworldly setting.

The rigorous realism of a Solzhenitsyn, a Koestler, a Wiesel or a Primo Levi—writers who experienced trauma first-hand whether in the form of the Soviet Gulag or the Nazi death camps—has become another, much different, means of dealing with trauma in contemporary fiction. Here the near-documentary style serves as a cathartic exhausting of a waking nightmare, a compulsive rhyme in which the reader plays the Wedding Guest and the narrator the Ancient Mariner. Less documentary in style but still in the realistic tradition broadly speaking are works such as the stories collected in Mavis Gallant’s *The Pagnitz Junction* (1973). Here the author obliquely and in fragments renders the efforts of Germans in the immediate post-war period to come to terms with or, more accurately, to repress the implications of “opening the dossier” on “the Adolf-time” (49, 70).

Magic realism may be viewed as a response to the horrors of the political situation in much of Latin America. The warping of the phenomenal world in such fiction serves generally, like much satire historically viewed, as an allegory in the service of censorship-evasion. The long years of suffering of the people of Latin America under a succession of military tyrants is transformed into the concept of undying
tyranny itself, which in turn is personified, for example, in the General of García Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), whom it is impossible to identify with any specific leader. Generation after generation, the General hauls his herniated testicle after him in his dogged clinging to a power that he maintains for so long that he begins to doubt his own existence. Although magic realism has been transplanted to North America in recent years, it would seem to remain a product of centuries of oppression elsewhere, to be rooted in the world of García Márquez and Isabel, not to say Salvador, Allende.

Black humour as practised by Beckett or Vonnegut constitutes yet another well-defined and generally recognized mode of fictional response to trauma. So does the humour of a slightly paler shade in works such as Mordecai Richler’s *St. Urbain’s Horseman* (1971), in which the narrator indulges in fantasies of revenge against Nazi figures, or O’Brien’s *The Nuclear Age*, in which William Cowling, by his own reckoning “a normal guy in an abnormal world” (56), adopts a “holistic” attitude to combat holocaust. He engages in a life-long battle to awaken others to the real possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, a prospect which has disturbed him since his childhood in the 1950s. In 1995, the novel’s present, he imprisons his family in order to save them from the nuclear war he is convinced is coming and, on another level, to prevent his wife from leaving him. The “hole” he one day finds in the medicine cabinet where her diaphragm ought to have been (287) becomes the trigger impelling him to attempt to ward off the menace of time through the creation of space. His only means of reacquiring a shattered wholeness of self, family, and universe, apparently, is through holeness. He digs a deep pit as a refuge against nuclear attack.

The dystopian novel—Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), for example—is an important influence on the trauma novel in its concern for a collective sense of trauma. A utopian or dystopian setting, in fact, is often used as a starting point or, less often, a terminus in the trauma novel, whose protagonist may find himself or herself in a waking nightmare, or propelled suddenly into paradise, or simply acting a part in an alternate world. However, where the dystopian writer tends toward
realism or allegory or satire in terms of fictional mode, the trauma novelist uses symbolism as the primary technique.

Science fiction, realism, magic realism, black humour, and dystopian fiction are generally recognized generic or sub-generic categories for certain types of novels. They do not, however, encompass the contemporary novels—British, American, and Canadian—that I wish to describe and explore in this study and that I group under the heading "the trauma novel." Most of these novels are difficult and have been viewed as such because of their symbolic rendering of aspects of the phenomenal world. As Martin Amis has suggested through a wryly ironic metaphor with regard specifically to the topic of nuclear weapons, "the subject resists frontal assault" (Einstein's Monsters 19). Perhaps for that very reason, some of the works I wish to discuss have been critically neglected or have elicited a somewhat puzzled response. All of them, in my opinion, are powerful pieces of fiction which we better can understand given the concept of an emerging type of contemporary novel. My purposes here, then, are to set out the claim that it is useful to differentiate the trauma novel from other novels as a distinct sub-genre of contemporary fiction, to describe its form, to provide suggestions as to why it takes the form it does, and to attempt to place it within the terrain of contemporary fiction. In doing so, I will attempt to combine a formalist study of the individual texts with an overall generic consideration that has its basis in historical and psychological factors.

What distinguishes the trauma novel from other novels is the exploration through the agency of literary symbolism of the individual experience of collective trauma, either actual events of the past, alarming tendencies of the present, or imagined horrors of the future. As I have intimated, not all novels dealing with trauma are symbolic, nor do all symbolic novels deal centrally with collective trauma. I reserve the term "trauma novel" for those contemporary novels which deal symbolically with a collective disaster. (I use the more general term "literature of trauma" for works of any genre and any period which deal centrally with trauma.) The collective disaster will, of course, leave its traces on the individual, and the nature of fiction is such that the collective will be portrayed in individual terms. That is precisely why the symbolic tech-
nique is crucial. The linguistic symbol, in pointing beyond itself, is an ideal vehicle to link individual and communal experiences. Furthermore, while symbolism may lead away from specificity, the fact that the collective disaster in the trauma novel is often portrayed in amorphous terms since it cannot be understood by its victims makes such a generalizing effect appropriate. Even an author like Doris Lessing, whose earlier commitment to an ideological position is unquestioned, tends to evoke a general sense of dread and unease when she is writing in this mode, as I discuss in connection with her *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) in the next chapter.

In these introductory remarks, I would like to enlarge further upon three potentially vexing terms in the phrase “symbolic depiction of collective trauma,” beginning with “symbolic.” As French anthropologist Dan Sperber suggests, symbolic knowledge “is neither about words nor about things, but about the memory of words and things. It is a knowledge about knowledge, a meta-encyclopedia ...” (108). Since the historical memory of certain events is, so to speak, a collective memory in the sense that the recollection is independent of the individual once the experiencing generation has died off, the “meta-encyclopedia” of symbolism is an appropriate and effective literary mode to deal with collective trauma. This is so regarding even the trauma of anticipated events since, here too, the memory of images associated with, for example, a future nuclear war is a prime agency of trauma. One need not share Sperber’s view of symbolism as the mind’s waste disposal mechanism to see the connection between an emotional rather than rational response to experience and the utility of literary symbolism in dealing with that response. The symbolic mode comes into play when new information resists easy assimilation into memory.

The literary symbol in the trauma novel facilitates a removal from unpleasant actuality by use of distance and selection. While human memory achieves distance temporally, the symbol in fiction achieves it spatially by imposing itself between the reader and the thing symbolized. Selection is achieved in the mind by the very nature of the faculty of memory, which is capable of expunging painful experiences from consciousness. Similarly, the symbol’s analogical mechanism, by which
correspondent aspects of two or more otherwise distinct phenomena are linked, allows only certain selected aspects of the fictional experience to come to the foreground of the text. In this way, literary symbolism allows for a “safe” confrontation with a traumatic experience.

The second term, “collective,” also merits elucidation. Since the authors of trauma novels generally view society as the individual writ large, the sources of social movements or events may be traced back to the individual in their work, as what is potential in the individual comes to fruition in society. William Golding, for instance, once described his purpose in *Lord of the Flies* (1954) to be “an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of the individual” (Biles 41). Golding’s debut novel, we do well to recall, deals with a group of children, not shipwrecked as were the boys of R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858), but rocketed as far away as possible from the atomic conflict convulsing their world. Golding parodies Ballantyne’s novel because of what he considers to be its romantic view of the (white, male) individual and its chauvinistic portrayal of Christian society as a collective.

Further connections between the individual and society are inevitable if one believes that a culture may resort to some of the same defensive strategies as an individual in times of stress. Whether or not the links between individual and collective strategies of coping have any basis in fact, the salient point is that a number of contemporary novelists believe that they do. In presenting her overview of Canadian literature, for instance, Margaret Atwood describes four basic victim positions” on the understanding that “the positions are the same whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group or a victimized individual” (*Survival* 36). What a writer of fiction can do with more freedom than a social scientist is to speculate about how the collective trauma affects the individual. This is precisely what the group of novelists which, for convenience of reference, I label “trauma novelists” do and do in such a way that it is helpful to speak of the emergence of a distinct sub-genre of fiction.

We are dealing here, then, not with historical trauma (not with the works of Solzhenitsyn or Levi or Wiesel) but with the fictional depiction of imagined trauma. The fact that these novelists are concerned with
recent historical developments, are psychologically oriented in their observations and symbolically attuned in their technique makes the linkage of individual and collective experience in their fiction all the easier. One might say that the literary symbol in the trauma novel is generated by a conflation of the collective concerns embodied in a historical typology and the personal ones found in a psychoanalytic typology. The combination means that the quest on the part of the novel’s protagonist for psychic balance or integration will take place against a background of significant historical movement and that the individual search itself will represent a cultural effort at realignment.

We come, finally, to “trauma,” the most difficult term of the three. While a full description of what I mean by fictional “trauma” must emerge gradually in the course of my argument and its exemplification by readings of specific texts, I would like to stress here that, for the purposes of this study, I understand the experience of trauma to be one which defies reason and a sense of order, cripples our ability to maintain a stable sense of reality, challenges our categories of understanding and consequently the model of the world by which we unconsciously operate. The failure of normative categories of understanding to deal with a traumatic experience suggests that attempts at assimilation must give way to accommodation to borrow Jean Piaget’s distinction articulated in his *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (originally *La Formation du Symbole*). Assimilation allows for the mental incorporation of an alien experience within the existing categories of one’s operating model of the world, while accommodation requires a shift in the world view itself to take account of the new experience and is therefore much more painful and less frequently successful.

As an example of this distinction, one might imagine the unlikely situation of coming across a group of people floating in the air. Assimilation of such an experience would require an explanation that the spectacle was being enacted with the help of special effects. No Copernican jettisoning of our world view occurs. Accommodation of such an experience, though, would necessitate a rethinking of basic assumptions about the physical world as one in which all objects have a specific weight and are subject to the pull of gravity. Psychological
trauma in the trauma novel, understood in these terms, may be defined as a painful experience which defies assimilation and demands accommodation. There is no guarantee that the accommodation will be successful, of course. Madness is still another way in which the human mind may react to unassimilable experiences. In the example above, indeed, the most likely explanation might well be that the observer is hallucinating. The ever-present fear of nuclear war which plagues O'Brien's William Cowling may be summed up as a failure to assimilate what his society will not accommodate.

Alfred Schutz's formulation of a disorienting experience is relevant to this study of the fictional depiction of trauma:

The world of everyday life is taken for granted by our commonsense thinking and thus receives the accent of reality as long as our practical experiences prove the unity and congruity of this world as valid. Even more, this reality seems to us to be the natural one, and we are not ready to abandon our attitude toward it without having experienced a specific shock which compels us to break through the limits of these "finite" provinces of meaning and to shift the accent of reality to another one. (189)

It is just such a shock in the literature of trauma that shifts the accent of reality, sometimes the entire dialect, into the insanity of a Pip (Moby-Dick) or a Septimus Warren Smith (Mrs. Dalloway). But if, facilitated by the symbolic mode, the shift in the fiction is managed through the various "stages" of trauma response which I shall be outlining, the tribe's dialect may be purified, as it were, and an eventual return to the world of contingency and fact becomes possible. Symbolism in the trauma novel, just as it breaks down order only to create a new or greater order, deals with trauma not by negating it directly but by initially miming its effects in order eventually to take the individual and, by extension, his or her society, beyond them. Although the trauma novel may portray madness in a mad world to be ultimate sanity, the best outcome that can be envisioned is not individual madness but a saner world.

In the trauma novel, the very humanness of humanity is questioned in a genre which is broadly humanistic. Inevitably, it closely examines
certain aspects of human nature in order to suggest the causes of mass trauma in our century and the consequences of the phenomenon for the human race as a whole. The experience of trauma itself in this sub-genre is closely linked to the reluctance to admit human depravity. As Doris Lessing writes, "... whenever people are actually forced to recognize, from real experience, what we are capable of, it is so shocking that we can't take it in easily. Or take it in at all; we want to forget it" (Prisons 17).

The subject of ecological disaster is a good example of this concern with human nature itself. It is clear that what ecological trauma means to many people whether or not they are (or are aware that they are) directly affected by a specific environmental problem is that there is a suicidal bent to humanity which does not bode well for its future. There is the feeling which Northrop Frye has described in a different context as "the sense that 'civilized' man, with his economy of waste, his relentless plundering of a nature which he thinks is there only to be exploited by him, his infinite capacity to litter his surroundings with every conceivable variety of excrement is the essential principle of pollution in nature, a monstrous deformation or cancer that nature itself has produced by mistake" ("Haunted," 29). Such pessimism is mitigated only by the observation that the very same "principle of pollution" that is humankind may be self-critical enough to possess such a sense of foreboding in the first place and from time to time produces Northrop Fryes to articulate it.

The depiction of trauma in the trauma novel has some resemblance to what psychiatrists call "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD). In the standard handbook of the American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Third Edition—Revised), PTSD is defined as a problem that results from "a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience" and that is usually accompanied by "intense fear, terror, and helplessness." One of the symptoms of PTSD, "re-experiencing the traumatic event ..." (248), corresponds roughly to the initial miming of trauma characteristic of the trauma novel. Although the manual includes traumas that are individual as well as those that are collective in nature, it
mentions among the latter "deliberately caused disasters (e.g. bombing, torture, death camps)" and also comments that "[t]he disorder is apparently more severe and longer lasting when the stressor is of human design" (248).

Indeed, the shock at the destructive potential in human depravity given free rein by modern technology is the basic cultural origin of the trauma novel. It is my contention that the type of writing found in the trauma novel is inconceivable before 1945. The concept of the trauma novel, then, is not a purely generic one but a genre-period notion and one, moreover, that suggests a bifurcation of post-war English fiction into two distinct sub-genres that emerge out of literary modernism: the modernist trauma novel and the postmodern novel. Insofar as it is a period construct, the beginnings of the trauma novel can be seen to lie between those of literary modernism and postmodernism purely in terms of chronology. It would not be surprising, then, if the sub-genre were to suggest some of the elements of the transition from the one to the other if that is, in fact, what fiction in English has been going through in the last few decades. One might argue that modern works of fiction prefigure the trauma novel, while postmodern fiction, no longer able to sanction a symbolic explanation or depiction, takes the horror at the heart of trauma fiction for granted. In terms of genre, however, and the ideology that underpins any recognizable genre, the trauma novel and the postmodern novel must be seen in certain fundamental ways as antithetical.

The modernist novel, very broadly, embodied the belief in the self-sufficiency of the artistic imagination to comprehend and give expression to reality, while the contemporary novelist (whether postmodern or not) is generally skeptical of such aestheticism and seeks a self-conscious continuum with the social and political worlds. The trauma novel mediates between the modernist retreat into art on the one hand and, on the other hand, both the postmodern realization that all observation is subjective and the perceived need to engage fiction with the events of life in the face of a dramatically new sense of collective trauma.

That a number of commentators on postmodernism argue for a certain similarity between postmodern fiction and (without calling it that) trauma fiction is not surprising if we consider that postmodern fiction