

Hannes Fricke. *Das hört NICHT auf: Trauma, Literatur und Empathie*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2004. pp. 282. ["It Never Stops": Trauma, Literature, and Empathy]

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Taking these fates seriously

The concept of trauma has become a cultural issue of the first order. An experience is deemed traumatic if it is so intense that an individual's psychological resources for assimilating such an experience into preexisting coping strategies prove inadequate. Traumatic experience is reproduced compulsively in fragmented memories that resurface involuntarily and appear as dissociated from other sensory modes and, thus, from the original constellation of experience. A traumatic experience manifests itself in memory as an enduring alien element, as an "embodied" memory that resists coherent narratization. Rather than being remembered as something past, the traumatic experience appears as a perpetual present that is nonetheless always out of reach. Hannes Fricke's phrase—"it never stops"—is a succinct characterization of the nature of such an experience. Trauma was first perceived as a clinical, individual psychological phenomenon, but since the 1990s—at the latest—it has increasingly stimulated work in cultural studies.

Despite the current wave of interest in the trauma concept, scholarship on trauma that focuses on the forms as well as the cultural functions of aesthetic representations of trauma from the perspective of literary and cultural studies remains limited. Hannes Fricke's ambitious undertaking—to develop "a new set of tools for understanding texts" (9) on the basis of traumatology and to test the usefulness of these tools by examining selected literary works "from antiquity to the present"—is indeed an attempt to address a real desideratum, especially in view of the fact that the term trauma is often used purely in the sense of everyday speech. By aiming to link "these results to problems in applying (literary) theory in general and models of narrative theory, more specifically" (223), the author raises hopes of a contribution to research questions that, despite their significance, have been inadequately addressed to date.

Fricke's work is based on a concept of trauma grounded in empirical psychology and denotes, in the broadest sense, experience that cannot be integrated into coping schemes acquired by learning or by other means. Because of this lack of integration, trauma destabilizes the individual continuity of experience. Fricke's concept of trauma comprises a catalog of typical behavioral patterns that facilitate a differentiated description of the various forms and stages of experiencing trauma, such as anxiety states, paralysis, or feelings of powerlessness. In contrast to the usual understanding of literature as a historically and culturally variable field for experimentation or as a space in which possible worlds can be explored, this study assumes that literary works have a certain base in reality. Thus, the reference to psychological research aims to create an empirically sound foundation for analyzing a variety of texts, including literary ones. Fricke's innovative approach is based on the goal of "applying the results of recent trauma research to texts—with texts defined here in the broadest sense—from a variety of cultures and periods" (230). In particular, the author aims to employ the concept of trauma to examine the behavior of characters—an aspect often neglected in work from the field of literary studies—in order to elucidate individual reactions and to reveal that which is specific about universal responses. This focus on characters or constellations of characters in fictional texts derives from the recognition that they not only

have a special function in attracting readers but also have considerable potential for stimulating identification with literary characters. Thanks to their structural affinity to real individuals, fictional characters are especially suited to appealing to the emotions of readers and evoking empathy in this way. Based on this theoretical premise, Fricke describes his intention as “an attempt to understand, quite emphatically, the characters described in texts as individuals with their own fates, and to take these fates seriously—independent of the period, in which a text was created” (28).

Fricke’s study consists of two parts

Fricke’s study consists of two parts. The first, by far more comprehensive section (“Traumatized individuals and literature”) is devoted to an analysis of literary case studies. The disparity of the selected texts and the form in which they are presented is programmatic, in so far as they demonstrate that Fricke has chosen an approach that is neither oriented around literary history, nor focused on formal aesthetics and structuralist perspectives. Instead, his interest is defined primarily by the themes dealt with; at the center of attention are the psychological motives and reactions portrayed in a broad spectrum of historically and culturally heterogeneous works. Thus, the seven chapters that make up the first section are primarily defined by the kind of experience that typically leads to trauma, as demonstrated by their headings: “War”, “Torture and Organized Violence”, “Flight and Expulsion”, “Sexualized Violence”. In the final chapter of this section, the accent moves from the victims of trauma to the perpetrators of crimes that lead to it. This shift follows the assumption that the perpetrator, as well as the victim, experiences the crime “as a dilemma of decision-making and as a hopeless situation” (193).

In each chapter, such diverse works as Gryphius’ *Catharina von Georgien*, Grimmelhausen’s *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus*, or Orwell’s *1984* are examined; other parts deal with non-literary genres, including comics and even non-written media such as films. The interpretive focus is strictly limited to the concept of trauma, which is applied as a thematic and formal framework for understanding fictional texts. One intention is to recognize the specific behavioral patterns of traumatized characters and thus to reveal the possibilities and limits of working through trauma and, moreover, to analyze the various forms of suffering induced by trauma and the various ways in which trauma is expressed. Furthermore, Fricke elucidates the textual structures and formal-aesthetic elements utilized by writers in portraying trauma. In doing so, he aims to demonstrate how the concept of trauma, as an idea based in empirical observations, can describe aspects of the phenomenon that have been inadequately addressed by literary theory so far and thus make an innovative contribution to the practice of hermeneutics. Fricke’s study lives up to this high standard, in a manner that is both innovative and convincing. A short survey of the first chapter, “The Overpowering Moment”, will serve here as an exemplary illustration of the specific character—as well as the challenges—of Fricke’s approach.

The author’s starting point is an insight based in trauma theory, namely, that works of literature often portray exceptional situations, “in which the persons described are unable to cope with a situation, to the extent that they subsequently act as if they were suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder” (29). This insight raises the question of how such boundary experience is represented on a textual level; in other words, how can something that is ultimately unspeakable and beyond representation be portrayed in fiction? It would seem that the representation of traumatic experience—especially in literature, as the medium *par excellence* that relies on language—calls for specific textual forms. In order to elucidate the special structure of trauma, Fricke examines Batman comics; the resulting analysis serves as a

paradigm for literary works dealt with in later sections of his study. A close reading that probes the texts from a variety of perspectives, reveals how the specific composition of the comic's panels is designed to produce "a structure that is appropriate to the memory of trauma" (34). For example, individual motives from a preceding traumatic experience are juxtaposed with contemporary scenes in an "abrupt and seemingly paralogical, unrelated manner" (35); this literary device suggests the perpetual presence of a trauma that resists chronological structure and thus precludes a narrative that reduces contingency. Fricke's interpretation of the Batman comic is followed by an analysis of *The Yellow Bird*, a novel for young people authored by Myron Levoy. In the case of this text, which focuses on the experience of the young Alan Silverman and of a French girl who fled from the Nazis, Fricke is especially interested in revealing how certain formal and aesthetic characteristics of books for young people are employed to portray trauma. Fricke's reading emphasizes the use of fragmented and dissociated repetition and, above all, the role of Alan as a reflector character. It is not Naomi, the victim of trauma, but instead her friend Alan who is at the center of the story, as he attempts to comprehend Naomi's traumatic experience—both for himself and for the reader—from his "healthy" but nonetheless empathetic perspective. What results is a representation of trauma from Alan's perspective as a child, which effectively reveals the inherent limits to people's capacity to understand and to be empathetic: an effective strategy for illustrating what is special about the experience of trauma. This interpretation is followed by analyses of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*; again, these are works that could hardly differ more, in terms of their historical and cultural contextual and the degree to which they have become part of the literary canon. With these interpretations, the author again offers a masterful account of how traumatic structures influence not only constellations of characters but also the structure of language in a text. Fricke's selection of text interpretations provides an instructive survey of how various aesthetic forms portray traumatic experience.

An ambitious and innovative synthesis

At first, the highly heterogeneous body of texts examined and the seemingly eclectic collection of disparate texts may seem odd and Fricke's approach certainly makes considerably demands on readers. Nonetheless, I must emphasize that a careful reading is worth the effort. In the second section of his book ("Trauma and coping with trauma in and through literature"), the author succeeds in bringing together the broad spectrum of themes opened up in the first part, in an ambitious and innovative synthesis that is grounded in literary theory. Here, the structural parallels between the texts analyzed are demonstrated and correlated with theories (literary and otherwise) as well as with narrative models. Among the recurring characteristics discussed are the temporal structure already mentioned above, paratactical sentence constructions, and the structural fragmentation of the literary narrative; the potential contribution of each of these elements to representations of trauma is examined. Numerous texts utilize these modes of literary expression to convey a sense of the overpowering nature of traumatic experience and of the non-representability of such experience. These specific formal-aesthetic features also evoke an impression of dissociation and lack of orientation in readers. In many texts, the intratextual repetition of a recurrent motif intensifies this memory-like effect. This strategy is designed to simulate a key characteristic of trauma—the fact that it cannot be assimilated into existing (narrative) modes. As Fricke notes, quite fittingly: "This return to older structures—which portray the world of experience of one or more of the protagonists as a quasi-mechanical reflex, a closed horizon with no way out—can be interpreted as a re-experienced trauma scheme" (225). His analysis reveals that literary representations of traumatic experience—linked as they are to the breakdown of

narrative structures that serve to create order—depend on elaborated and clearly structured forms of expression to secure the communicability of traumatic experience.

From this analysis of textual structure and formal specificities, Fricke proceeds to reflect fundamentally on the “problems of approaches based on literary theory” and, in particular, on narratological approaches. Since his text analyses are based, methodologically speaking, on close readings and on the examination of literary structures, it is at first sight surprising that Fricke subsequently adheres to the assumption that “many of the explanatory models proposed in modern narrative theory slip away from texts ... about trauma... or [make] only limited [contributions] to a more precise understanding” (237). According to Fricke, it is difficult to focus more sharply on the ‘how’ of representing trauma “within a closed, acausal and atemporal horizon” (237). Moreover, he argues, the categories of narrative text analysis are an inadequate instrument for understanding the specific temporal structure of trauma. Equally inappropriate is the category of unreliable narration, since it is based on a premise that is ultimately positivistic, namely, the assumption that a stable, authentic world exists behind the words of the narrator and that the narrative about this world can be transparent, reliable or objective. This premise can hardly be upheld with respect to the representation of trauma and of memories that are, per se, ephemeral.

Drawing our attention to the limits of narrative text analysis is no doubt justified. But I would hold that Fricke’s fundamental skepticism on this issue is rooted in an understanding of narratology as a merely formal, ahistorical set of tools. Be that as it may: reconsidering and defining the categories currently employed in narrative analysis from a perspective that focuses more sharply on the nexus between form and content is, no doubt, a significant challenge in the field of literary studies. A narratology grounded in trauma theory would have to assess the potential of various formal-aesthetic categories in representing trauma and in evoking reader responses. Such an approach would also imply that literary representations of trauma should not be conceptualized merely as evidence of an “anthropological constant (i.e. one based in brain physiology)” (230), but should also focus on their cultural and historical variability, on both the level of representation and reader response. Given the constructed and reliable nature of memory—and especially of traumatic memory—the concept of unreliable narration may appear to be of limited use when applied to narratives of memory. Nevertheless, differentiating between unreliable narration and the unreliability of memory may yield significant and to date unappreciated insights into the distinctive characteristics of portrayals of trauma.

In the final and most intriguing section of his study, Hannes Fricke moves beyond literary analysis and examines the cultural functions fictional representations may fulfill. Attention is drawn to the empathy-inducing functions of literature. This exceedingly productive addition to his study is based on the question “*why* such structures can often be found at all and why they are often found—with few exceptions—in more recent texts” (249). The author’s focus here is on the function of literature as a medium for communicating ethical issues and on its potential for offering identification by portraying experience that is specific, subjective, and perceptible with one’s senses. This section of the book demonstrates that the category of empathy is the key to appreciating Fricke’s unconventional selection of literary case studies and the transdisciplinary alliance of literary aesthetics and empirical psychology presented in the volume. The concept of empathy is the essential prerequisite to understanding the manifold interactions between literature and trauma. Literature, as the medium of empathy *par excellence*, creates opportunities for the intersubjective communication of traumatic experience. In a realm that has been marked as fictional, literature can present the unspeakable; it can create connections between kinds of experience that are sanctioned by

society and those that are not; and, last but not least, it can facilitate the process of working through and overcoming trauma in a larger societal context.

Empathy denotes human beings' capacity to relate to and share the suffering of others. Because it can represent the structure of trauma by portraying individual fates, literature has an enormous potential for evoking empathy. This insight is, of course, not new. Its historical antecedents are rooted in Aristotle's concept of catharsis, as the author points out. The category of empathy, however, is broader than that of catharsis. Moreover, while both concepts are based on the experience of failure, in the case of trauma failure is something that can be perceived both in terms of content as well as on a formal or structural level. The individual fails with respect to her or his attempt to integrate personal experience into an ordered narrative. Conventional narrative patterns are useless, for trauma constitutes the impossibility of narration. Remarkably, this "brokenness and inconsistency" (224) in narrative structures is characterized by a high degree of inherent potential for empathy. For these special formal characteristics are the vehicle that transmits "the greatest of all narratable stories" (248): "Precisely the failed attempt to order one's own story might, indeed, be interesting for reading audiences, for this failure makes the urgency of the task that each person faces especially clear [...]. The ruptured, unordered story [...] can thus induce an empathetic engagement with the individual fate of a stranger" (247). Fricke argues that the special urgency associated with contemporary literary representations of traumatic structures results from societal constellations that are related to Andreas Gruschka's notion of "bourgeois cold-heartedness" [*bürgerliche Kälte*]. In this perspective, empathy is seen as a counter-concept to cold-hearted, bourgeois moral principles, which aim primarily to functionalize social relationships for one's personal goals. What follows from this argument is the expectation that literary representations of trauma and the empathy they evoke might function as important correctives in society and aid in initiating a reintegration of phenomena that formerly were marginalized or excluded.

A theoretical foundation for the complex interaction between trauma and literature

Since it is impossible to do justice to the complexity of this extensive (nearly 260 pages) study in the space available here, this review will end with a brief summary of the theoretical perspectives and the periods in literary history dealt with in the volume. Fricke examines literary texts from the eighteenth to twentieth century; besides works from high culture, films are considered in some detail as a case study of the role of popular culture; forms of presentation that are unique to specific media are examined, offering a basis for transmedial perspectives in research on the representation of trauma. By drawing on psychotraumatology, Fricke outlines a theoretical foundation for the complex interaction between trauma and literature and thus opens the way for differentiated descriptions of literary portrayals of trauma. By referring to empirical psychology, the author lays the foundations for relating his study to interdisciplinary research on trauma and memory. Finally, the concept of empathy links formal and aesthetic aspects of literature to phenomena from the realm of reader-response or reception studies and the cultural function of literature. Literature is discussed here as more than a mere representation of traumatic structures. By creating the possibility of speaking about traumatic experience, literature can actively contribute to producing meaning in society and to working through traumatic experiences that are part of cultural history. The scope of Hannes Fricke's study at times makes it difficult for readers to keep track of all the strands taken up by the author; due to the wide spectrum of issues and works considered, some theoretical premises are explicated in very cursory terms. Those who make the effort of a careful reading will be rewarded, for this book is much more than a study of how trauma is portrayed. Fricke's study is a sophisticated and subtle

examination of the many ways in which trauma and coping with trauma can be represented empathetically in literature. As such, it is recommended reading not only for those interested in trauma but also for all those interested in genuinely fictional forms of representation and in the special potential of literature as a medium for creating meaning.

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Short biographical note

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