Introduction. Contemporary Literature in Times of Crisis and Vulnerability: Trauma, Demise of Sovereignty and Interconnectedness

S I L V I A P E L L I C E R - O R T Í N* & M E R V E S A R I K A Y A - Ş E N **

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The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been dominated by multifarious crises that have given way to individual and collective wounds resulting from environmental disasters, exile and migratory movements, war, terrorism, radicalism and other disturbing historical episodes. Our main contention is that trauma and/or excessive exposure to vulnerable situations can be relieved thanks to diverse narrative practices. Accordingly, we explore the field of Trauma Studies since its emergence to its current evolution towards the vulnerability paradigm, examining the different meanings of vulnerability not only from the perspective of the life sciences but also from the social sciences and its application to the humanities. Then, we move on to the notion of resilience and how it can help us articulate and/or move beyond trauma and vulnerability. In keeping with this, considering the ethical and political relationality between the self and other, we highlight one's tendency to be affected by the other's wounds and vulnerability as well as the inevitability of interdependency and interconnectedness between people and non-human entities. Thus, we explore the role of literature in giving voice to the voiceless and to unheard experiences of suffering as well as in representing the demise of the sovereign self and the rise of human and non-human interconnectedness after being exposed to traumatic or disastrous events, as represented in contemporary literatures in English.

Lauren Berlant argues that 'crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what is overwhelming' (Berlant 2011, 10). The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are no exception to Berlant's claim in that they have widely been dominated by various crises, which range from a current overexposure to disasters in our daily lives through the media and diverse cultural manifestations to the 'physical and psychical

violence exerted on children, women, the old, the poor, or the members of religious, racial and sexual minorities all over the world' (Onega 2014, 497). Along with this, individual and collective wounds resulting from environmental calamities, exile and migratory movements, war, terrorism, radicalism, along with many other disturbing historical episodes, have marked nearly the last 40 years. In keeping with this, Fran H. Norris argues that 'disasters generate an array of individually and collectively experienced stressors of varying degrees of intensity that interact with multiple characteristics of the person and environment to produce diverse outcomes that evolve over time' (Norris 2006, 173). However, this does not mean that disasters are new to humanity and that there are more wounded subjects than before. As Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega explain, the increased visibility of the wound, especially in the late twentieth and twenty-first century centuries, has mainly been caused by 'the evolution of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, media coverage, and a shifting system of empathy and sympathy for the pain of the other' (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 2).

This increasing focus on the multifarious dimensions of crisis and the visibility of the wound should be related to the resurgence of interest in trauma-related notions that has taken place in the field of the humanities since the 1980s, the moment when there was an 'ethical turn' acting as 'a reaction against the relativism propounded by postmodernist thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and his theory of simulation, and some extreme interpretations of deconstruction' (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 3). Derived from the Greek word 'wound', the term trauma was used in the eighteenth century to talk about 'a bodily injury caused by an external agent' while it was extended to the psychological domain in the late nineteenth century (Luckhurst 2008, 2). In this sense, the forerunners of Trauma Studies, Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, stated that psychical trauma had the potential to produce distressing affects (Freud and Breuer 1991, 58–62). With the passing of time, following the return of numerous US veterans from Vietnam suffering from serious psychological damage, the American Psychiatric Association officially acknowledged trauma as the reaction to an event which is 'outside the range of human experience' (American Psychiatric Association 1980, 236).

After the publication of such relevant works as those by the Yale School critics in the US – Soshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), and Geoffrey Hartman's *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1996) – who started to adapt medical ideas on psychic traumatic processes to the analysis of narrative texts, the concept of trauma was transferred to interdisciplinary areas, including the humanities, arts, social sciences, and film studies. These scholars' leading publications were followed by various others such as Kirby Farrel's *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (1998), analysing trauma in terms of anthropological and cultural studies; and Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* (2008), with a specific focus on trauma as a psychological concept and its application in the literary field.

As literary critics, Onega and Ganteau have also made invaluable contributions to Trauma Studies with their ongoing research line of publications (Onega 2014;

Ganteau and Onega 2013; Onega and Ganteau 2011) focusing on the ethical turn and the relationship between ethics and aesthetics as reflected in contemporary experimental trauma fiction. Their research has led them to assert that generic hybridisation and narrative experimentation are recurrent mechanisms that point at the difficult, but necessary, representation of trauma through literature. With their publication of *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* (Ganteau and Onega 2017), however, Ganteau and Onega have moved on to tackle the validity of the trauma paradigm in the contemporary world. In their excellent introduction to the book, they draw on Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman's (2009) emphasis on the necessity for a politics of sympathy and empathy towards the victims of trauma and thus underline the shift towards 'a politics of reparation' (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 2). The traditional Victorian approach associated trauma with 'mental weakness and/or moral degeneracy' which formed the basis of 'the general attitude of suspicion' (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 1–2). Instead of suspicion, Ganteau and Onega argue that 'susceptibility to the wound, exposure, and victimhood as potentialities or general characteristics' are the defining characteristics of a human being (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 7). This is mainly because there has been a need for 'radically new ways of viewing and interpreting forms of human suffering' with the recent ways of seeing trauma victims as 'culturally and politically respectable' (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 2). To put it differently, Ganteau and Onega insightfully underline the demand for accepting one's exposure and/or vulnerability to the wound as an essential element when constructing the self.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, being vulnerable means being open to both physical and/or psychological attacks; an individual 'may be wounded; susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury' and an individual may be 'open to attack or injury of a non-physical nature; esp., offering an opening to the attacks of raillery, criticism, calumny, etc.' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2015, n.p.). Therefore, the self is in a constant relationship with the other either physically or psychologically. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Silence* (2006), Judith Butler argues that the post-9/11 world is replete with 'heightened vulnerability' (Butler 2006, xi), which has triggered the inextricable relationship between the self and the other. As she claims: '[T]here are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know. This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away' (Butler 2006, xii).[1] Similarly, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou underline the relationality between the self and the other as follows:

> we do not simply move ourselves, but are ourselves moved by what is outside us, by others [. . .] we are moved by others in ways that disconcert, displace, and dispossess us; we sometimes no longer know precisely who we are, or by what we are driven, after contact with some other or some other group, or as a result of someone else's actions. One can be dispossessed in grief or in passion – unable to find oneself. (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 3)

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1. At the same time, however, Butler highly criticises and opposes the fact that some human lives are seen as 'more vulnerable' and 'more grievable' than others (Butler 2006, 29).

Accordingly, vulnerability and/or exposure to the wound brings in the idea of the demise of a sovereign self in that one is always in an interdependent and interconnected world of connections. In line with the Council for International Organisations of Medical Science (CIOMS), Christina Zarowsky, Slim Haddad and Vinh-Kim Nguyen consider that 'to be vulnerable means to face a significant probability of incurring an identifiable harm while substantially lacking ability and/or means to protect oneself' (Zarowsky *et al.* 2013, 7). And, in a similar vein, Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds argue that vulnerability denotes a 'contingent susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others' (Mackenzie *et al.* 2014, 6), implying that the harm that can lead an individual or group to be vulnerable may be originated in other people's actions or, on the contrary, the other's passivity. It could thus be agreed that vulnerability should be understood 'as simultaneously a condition and a process – a condition of heightened fragility of a population or specific group, and a process that is potentially reversible or avoidable through appropriate interventions' (Zarowsky *et al.* 2013, 5). Such conceptualisations can lead us to assert that vulnerability is in sync with alterity; the self is in a constant relationship with the other, no matter how destructive this relationship can be.

When referring to complex and disturbing relationships between the self and the other, the family background and the transgenerational connections deserve special attention, since 'individuals and groups already bearing the burden of previous generations' deprivation tend to be more exposed to risks, and also to have a more limited capacity to manage risk successfully' (Zarowsky *et al.* 2013, 6). The three dimensions of vulnerability fostered by Zarowsky *et al.* (2013, 6) – the initial level of wellbeing, the degree of exposure to risk, and the capacity to manage risk effectively– appear to increase when the subject inherits the vulnerable condition and/or the traumatic memories, or even traumas, which generated that vulnerable circumstance in the first place. Even though the transgenerational consequences of such traumatic events as the World Wars, the Holocaust and other genocides on the survivors' descendants are still a topic of significant controversy (Kellermann 2001, 207), a vast number of works published in the fields of Trauma and Memory Studies have analysed how the subsequent generations of traumatised survivors inherit their ancestors' traumas through a process of transgenerational transmission, which is inevitable unless the traumatised subject is able to identify his or her own state of acting out of trauma (Early 1993, 21). Kellermann explains this process in the following words:

> The mechanism of transmission of trauma [...] is assumed to be a more multifaceted process, involving various overt and covert kinds of parent–child learning experiences, including internalization, projective identification, modelling, socialization and vicarious learning. Apparently, it seemed to occur both indirectly through the implicit influences of early childhood and more directly through the communication styles, childrearing practices and family interactions of parents later in life. The transmission of trauma may thus be seen as a kind of subtle parental mediating process through which the psychological burdens of survivors are somehow transferred to their children

> from early infancy on, continuing to reverberate throughout childhood, adolescence, adulthood and beyond. (Kellermann 2001, 208)

His words point at the complex process that entails this transmission because, as Pellicer-Ortín has argued elsewhere,

> the children of survivors are the links that seem to provide some continuity to their families' memories. However, this continuity is never completely achieved since, although the children usually have a strong desire to establish a natural link with their parents, they fail to do so. (Pellicer-Ortín 2014, 196)

Yet, in spite of this difficulty, it cannot be denied that, as Efraim Sicher has studied, 'the intergenerational transmission of anxieties' is possible and, in fact, happens when it comes to 'food, fears of separation, expectancy of over-fulfilment, and constant reliving of traumatic experiences' (Sicher 2005, 133). The burden inherited by the survivors' kin can be the cause of their subsequent vulnerable situations as their families' traumas and vulnerable situations may develop into feelings of shame, guilt, and exclusion (Fine 1998, 195) – symptoms that are similar to those of traumatic processes.

Together with its transgenerational nature, vulnerability 'is often contextual, dependent on social and cultural systems and political and economic trends' (Zarowsky *et al.* 2013, 7), therefore affecting minority social groups that become extremely fragile due to exclusive migratory policies, alienation, foreignness and racist attitudes. Even though sociologists such as Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller have claimed that we are living in an age of migration, whose main features have to do with 'the growth of cross-border flows of various kinds, including investment, trade, cultural products, ideas and people; and the proliferation of transnational networks with nodes of control in multiple locations' (Castles and Miller 2003, 1), the complex relationship between the native and migrant populations still responds to binary mechanisms that rely on the negative construction of the other. In this sense, far from being an innovative concept, the term 'Other' was reconsidered by postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1994), Homi Bhabha (1994) and Stuart Hall (1997), who famously made reference to the process by which Western societies have traditionally vindicated the subordination practised upon those Others who defy their status quo. Hall thus offered a fruitful definition of the Other as the 'people who are in any way significantly different from the majority – them rather than us – [and they] are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation' (Hall 1997, 229). The uncertain figure of the Other forces those in a minority position to discard the dominant culture and establish a destructive relationship with the host country and its citizens, as the outsider is identified with all the negative aspects that appear as opposed to the positive values fostered by the predominant culture. However, at the same time, the Other also provokes a relation of attraction to and interest in the unknown.

Unfortunately, in the last few years this issue has become even more important in the case of those refugees and asylum seekers who, due to man-made or natural disasters, have been forced to leave their homes, turning into the vulnerable victims of criminal organisations, human trafficking, sexual and physical abuse, xenophobia and exclusion. Along with this, Serena Parekh (2016) has explained that the

expatriates become the victims of two kinds of abuse: the legal and the political, since these subjects lose their political community and citizenship while they are excluded in the host countries where they look for asylum. As critic and activist Jill Lewis (2018, xvii) has put it, 'despite the signed commitment to Human Rights of refugees in the signed UN charter, [. . . and], the political ear in country after country heeded groundswells of racialised resistance and antagonism to absorption of foreigners'. Consequently, as she claims:

> Many of those who managed to come into Western countries, dreaming of safety, well-being and opportunity, were to encounter the sparse possibilities on offer to 'the migrants', 'the refugees'. They found themselves in the uncharted landscapes of dislocation, ghosts of past trauma, the missing of families and friends, the absence of cultural dynamics of everyday lives they had known 'before' and segregation as outsiders on the margins of the more individualistic, materialistic, consumer cultures of Western societies. In Western press, the 'migrant' or 'refugee' issues now get sparser, momentary 'topic' coverage. (Lewis 2018, xviii)

As Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Tofantšuk have claimed, these recent migratory movements have brought about 'a new wave of building borders, such as the recent Brexit and the controversial 2016 presidential campaign in the US' which, together with 'the terrorist atrocities carried out in European cities in 2015–2017 have led to the demonisation of ethnic groups and Islamophobia used in populist campaigns' (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2018, 2–3).

Nevertheless, these polarizing and binary attitudes – perhaps not in such a clear and destructive way – can also be distinguished towards other groups that have been conventionally relegated to the social margins by hetero-patriarchal discourses, as is the case of women, sexual minorities and different ethnic groups within a given society. These groups tend to be more exposed to risk and vulnerability on the grounds that, endorsing Hall's (2003) view, contemporary approaches to identity construction often operate across differences rather than identification with the other. In the case of women, Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk (2018) have explained that, whereas Hall proposes a broad political agenda in the construction of the other, contemporary feminists critics such as Val Plumwood (2002, 104–105) have emphasised the idea that

> it is women in particular who, [. . .], become underprivileged in a system of hegemonic centrisms that privileges reason and marks the Other as 'deviation from the centrality of the One, as colour is a deviation from the "normal" condition of whiteness'. (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2018, 11)

On the whole, despite the fact that nowadays we can generally acknowledge that the failing of

> the boundary of the centre and margin, hegemonic self and suppressed other, irrational nature/body and rational culture/mind has been largely facilitated by the changing dimension of present-day world, in which borders and distances have become more transparent because of travel and migration, and structures less fixed because of the onslaught of the digital age, (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 2018, 12)

the ideas just mentioned seem to point at a human tendency to exert power and unequal subordination upon those others who are more vulnerable because they represent the other and the unknown or because the care system has failed its mission to protect them, relegating them to the margins of society. In this light, Anton J.M. Dijker has defined a care system that shows a positive attitude towards the target individual or group, respects and values individual and cultural differences, and tries to protect the subjects that have more risks to become vulnerable (Dijker 2014, 178). Following this definition, it could not be denied that most of our state systems do not provide enough care to their vulnerable populations and thus do not foster the mechanisms of resilience needed to confront and adapt to vulnerable and risky situations. This would explain Dijker's contention that

> With respect to living things, vulnerability can be defined as the property or disposition of objects to change into a state of lowered fitness [. . .] when exposed to certain conditions. [. . .] vulnerability cannot be directly perceived [. . .] organisms do not always need to form experience-based internal representations of properties in order to respond adaptively to objects [. . .] the mechanism at stake here is *care mechanism*. (Dijker 2014, 177, emphasis in original)

Thus, when the vulnerable subjects perceive their lack of protection by the state and the other members of the society and internalise their victim and/or vulnerable status, they can contribute to the instauration of 'foundational traumas' (LaCapra 2001, 23) that become the basis for collective identity. As Dominick LaCapra explains, there has been a tendency in modern culture to:

> convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into the test of the self or the group and an entry into the extraordinary. [. . .] Even extremely destructive and disorienting events, such as the Holocaust or the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki may become occasions for negative sublimity or displaced sacralization. They may also give rise to what may be termed founding traumas —— traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity. (LaCapra 2001, 23)

Foundational traumas, therefore, may produce the myths of origins that outline the collective sense of identity of some communities which, after being victims of traumatic episodes throughout history, have reduced the traumatic events and their vulnerable status to a unique event and category that delineates and guides the community. Consequently, if the care mechanisms – for a variety of historical, political, cultural and sociological reasons – fail both in protecting its citizens and teaching them to be resilient when they are unable to respond to a threatening situation or a continuous painful episode, vulnerability can become endemic and these individuals and communities will be more prone to construct their identities on the basis of trauma, vulnerability and exclusion.

However, if traumatised and vulnerable subjects and/or communities receive proper attention and care from the diverse care mechanisms or manage to cope with adversities on their own, they gain the opportunity to build resilience and move beyond their traumas and/or vulnerabilities. As defined in the *Merriam-Webster*

Dictionary, the word resilience has different connotations: in physics resilience means 'the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused by compressive stress', and in social sciences it refers to 'an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change' (Merriam-Webster 2019 n.p.). Boris Cyrulnik is one of the most important contemporary critics analysing resilience in relation to Trauma and Vulnerability Studies. His parents' deportation to a concentration camp during the Holocaust has triggered Cyrulnik's later analyses of traumatised children, especially victims of institutional abuse and genocides. According to him, a traumatised subject is not necessarily haunted by a traumatic event but s/he can also rely on his/her coping mechanisms in order to move on. Cyrulnik names such coping mechanisms under the umbrella term 'resilience', which he describes as 'an internal mechanism that allows us to cope with life's adversities' (Cyrulnik 2009, 47). Besides, he believes that resilience naturally follows a traumatic event: 'what we are at any given moment obliges us to use our ecological, emotional and verbal environments to 'knit' ourselves. We might feel that, if a single stitch is dropped, everything will unravel, but in fact, if just one stitch holds, we can start all over again' (Cyrulnik 2009, 13). Therefore, it could be argued that a traumatised subject cannot be reduced to his/her traumatic past or vulnerable inherited position because s/he has the natural potential to face and get over his/her trauma by depending on his/her internal fighting mechanisms.

As can be inferred from Cyrulnik's arguments, the theory of resilience is germane to the potential of traumatised and vulnerable subjects to deal with their traumas and move towards healing themselves. The possibility of healing one's trauma (lived or inherited) was first conceptualised by Freud in his essay 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through' (Freud 2001 [1914]). There, he argued that, although the traumatised subject might resist healing his/her psychic wound, s/he can deal with it by remembering and then working through it:

> One must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to *work through* it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work according to the fundamental rule of analysis. (Freud 2001 [1914], 155, emphasis in original)

According to Freud, working through necessitates remembering previously repressed traumatic affects whereby the traumatised subject can achieve 'the greatest changes' (Freud 2001 [1914], 155). Taking Freud's theories of healing one step further, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane have argued that trauma needs to be integrated into one's life in a meaningful way by modifying and placing it in a proper context and thus the subject could engage in the present life rather than being haunted by the traumatic past:

> [T]he patients need to regain control over their emotional responses and place the trauma in the larger perspective of their lives – as a historical event (or series of events) that occurred at a particular time and in a particular place, and that can be expected not to recur if the individuals take charge of their lives. (van der Kolk and McFarlane 2007a, 419)

In order to achieve this, the traumatic past needs to be 'attached to other experiences such as feeling understood, being safe, feeling physically strong and capable, or being able to empathise with and help fellow sufferers' (van der Kolk and McFarlane 2007b, 19). From a related perspective, LaCapra approaches working through as an internal capacity that allows the self to cope with his/her trauma and build an empathic union with the people around him/her. This scholar notes that working through provides the possibility 'to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then, which is related to, but not identical with here and now' and to 'assist in restoring to victims the dignity denied them by their victimizers' (LaCapra 2001, 66). Accordingly, working through acts as a process which causes 'not simply alterity in the abstract but actual others – possibly empathic, trustworthy others' (LaCapra 2001, 76). In doing so, the traumatised subject 'acquires the possibility of being an ethical and political agent' (LaCapra 2001, 143–44). Thus, the concept of working through traumatic affects is carried from individual to societal and, not surprisingly, it has to do with ethical and political concerns.

Considering the ethical and political relationality between the self and the other, critics such as Judith Butler (2006), Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013), Erinn C. Gilson (2014) and Martha Nussbaum (2001 [1986]) highlight one's tendency to be affected by the other's wounds and vulnerability. Butler and Athanasiou argue that being open to physical and/or psychological wounds prepares the grounds for reflecting on the other's wound: '[W]e do not simply move ourselves, but are ourselves moved by what is outside us, by others', a situation which 'establishes us as relational and interdependent beings' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 3). They conclude that we are 'dispossessed by the other's presence' which reminds us of the 'limits of our self-sufficiency' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 17). Similarly, Erinn C. Gilson states that 'if we are not vulnerable, we have no need for ethics, and it is precisely because we are vulnerable—can be affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, or empathy—that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically' (Gilson 2014, 11). Therefore, our vulnerability triggers our need to establish a relation to the other's suffering and respond ethically by building an empathic union. In line with this, Butler and Athanasiou underline the fact that we are 'dependent on those powers that alternately sustain or deprive us, and that hold a certain power over our very survival' and, thus, 'we are interdependent beings whose pleasure and suffering depend from the start on a sustained social world, a sustaining environment' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 4). Nussbaum follows a similar line when she draws a parallel between a good person and a young plant. In her words, both of them are 'something growing in the world, fragile, in constant need of food from without' (Nussbaum 2001 [1986], 1). Just as a plant needs weather and good care, so a person needs 'to live in fostering natural and social circumstances, to stay clear of abrupt catastrophe, to develop confirming associations with other human beings' (Nussbaum 2001 [1986], 1). Thus, Nussbaum draws attention to the inevitability of living in a world of interconnectedness and interdependency. In an interview with Bill D.

Moyers, Nussbaum further underlines the positive effects of vulnerability in relation to being a good person:

> The condition of being good is that it should always be possible for you to be morally destroyed by something you couldn't prevent. To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the human condition of the ethical life: that it is based on a trust in the uncertain and on a willingness to be exposed; it's based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from its fragility. (Moyers 2014, n.p.)

Therefore, being vulnerable and exposed to traumatic affects does not necessarily leave negative effects on the self's psyche and one's social relations. Instead, vulnerability can bring along the demise of a sovereign self and the rise of interdependencies and interconnectedness, a situation which assists in restoring the dignity to the victims of traumatic events and crises on individual and collective levels as well as establishing empathic and trustworthy relationships in our global and interrelated societies.

As literary critics, we would like to contend that trauma and/or excessive exposure to vulnerable situations can be, when not healed, alleviated thanks to narrative, both from the perspective of writers and readers. Returning to the Freudian notions about the power of the talking cure in order to verbalise and integrate the traumatic experience into the psyche (Freud and Breuer 1991 [1893], 57–58), Geoffrey Hartman (2003, 259) establishes a parallelism between the function of literature to that of the talking therapy.[2] In fact, he points at the double function of Trauma Studies of pointing at the unrepresentability of trauma while acting as a healing mechanism, when he says that: 'As a specifically literary endeavour trauma study explores the relation of words and wounds. Its main focus is on words that wound, and presumably can be healed, if at all, by further words' (Hartman 2003, 259). In keeping with this, Suzette A. Henke has coined the term 'scriptotherapy' to refer to 'the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment' (Henke 1998, xii–xiii). This definition seems to indicate that literature can act as a curative strategy to reconstruct the self after a traumatic episode or after being exposed to a vulnerable situation. The objective of the process of scriptotherapy could be connected to that of such psychoanalytical practices as psychotherapy, counselling, group therapy, or the talking cure itself, because all these methods try to 'reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context' (Herman 2001 [1992], 177). Along with this, Dori Laub and Daniel Podell, in their ground-breaking article on 'Art and Trauma', argue that the so-called 'art of trauma' (Laub and Podell 1995, 998) should not only include autobiographical genres but also

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2. In addition, Pierre Janet's (1901, 278–365) distinction between traumatic memory and ordinary narrative memory, and Carl Jung's (1990 [1959]) certainty that the healing of trauma begins when the traumatised person is able to transform traumatic events into a coherent narrative, are examples of well-known theories supporting the benefits of the talking cure or similar practices.

'imaginative' acts that occur spontaneously within the process of survival itself. These imaginative acts arise in one's attempt to 'know' the traumatic events that confront him. [. . .] When a person is subjected to trauma, the only way he can maintain a connection between self and internal other is by exercising an inner capability to shape and order the coercive 'facts' that confront him. Art aids survival (as well as recovery) by widening one's vision and offering alternative perspectives and ways of seeing things. (Laub and Podell 1995, 998)

Therefore, these words seem to support Sandra L. Bloom's (2010) conviction that there is something inherent to humanity that makes us rely on art when we become vulnerable subjects and need to overcome a traumatic experience. This inherent trait corresponds to the need to reorganise and integrate the hurting experiences in a coherent way, a task that can be carried out in the artistic sphere.

These arguments seem to be in line with the fact that, in the last few decades, writing has become a site to voice traumatic experiences and to provide a curing mechanism for the transformation of traumatic memories into narrative ones (Luckhurst 2008, 28–47), as the great number of today's literary works problematising the representation of trauma demonstrates. In addition to this, more recently, Ganteau has specified that 'numerous contemporary British novels concentrate on the representation of vulnerabilities of different types, whether individual or collective, physical or economic, and that to do so they are bound to evoke exposure. Exposure both precedes risk and is part of its potential' (Ganteau 2017, 444-5). Yet this healing and exposing power of literature should not only be considered from an individual perspective but the social sphere becomes extremely relevant, as this is the dimension where literature is produced. Literature thus becomes the 'place of resistance and struggle' where trauma survivors and their descendants as well as vulnerable subjects and groups can, and should, voice their experiences in order to prevent their erasure from socio-historical discourses (Forché 1993, 31–2).

In this context, those minority and vulnerable groups that had been excluded from dominant discourses on the grounds of class, gender, ethnicity, religion have especially tried to re-construct their fragmented identities and silenced (hi)stories through multifarious acts of writing. Their 'counterstories' (Nelson 2001) have challenged deep-rooted versions of history through diverse cultural practices targeted at voicing their experiences of trauma, vulnerability and displacement, demonstrating that art has a vital role in the representation of vulnerability and the abreaction of trauma. In this sense, Ganteau (2015, 26) has pointed out that current writers have gradually focused on creating fictional spaces where vulnerable voices render and problematise their marginal and vulnerable positions in society. Writing practices thus demonstrate that they may act as adequate sites to speak out formerly ignored individual and collective experiences of marginalisation, vulnerability and abuse, whereas the proliferation of these narratives appears to augment the society's interest in these marginal stories (Heilman and Llewellyn 2007, 3).

The kind of literature we are referring to is better known as 'committed', using Jean Paul Sartre's (1947) conceptualisation, or political literature (Onega and

Ganteau 2017, 10). By making use of specific literary devices, complex narrative forms and multifaceted themes that pay particular attention to 'figures of vulnerability and exposure' (Ganteau 2017, 452), these narratives are able to raise political awareness and ethical commitment in the communities that read them. British artist and writer John Berger famously argued that such committed works of art

> judge[d] the judges, plead[ed] revenge to the innocent and show[ed] to the future what the past has suffered, so that it has never been forgotten. I know too that the powerful fear art, whatever its form, when it does this, and that amongst the people such art sometimes runs like a rumour and a legend because it makes sense of what life's brutalities cannot, a sense that unites us, for it is inseparable from a justice at last. Art, when it functions like this, becomes a meeting-place of the invisible, the irreducible, the enduring, guts and honour. (Berger 1992 [1989], 9)

This 'meeting-place of the invisible' may also refer to the capacity of literature to make evident the interconnectedness bonding us humans through vulnerability and trauma but also through empathy and solidarity. The imaginative world can make explicit the fact that we are all bonded and inseparably connected (Butler and Athanasiou 2013) and can reunite characters, situations, times and places in multidirectional and intersectional ways that mobilise our political awareness and caring affects. Moreover, Bloom's (2010) study of the inherent human need to share painful and vulnerable situations with other members of the community could also be seen in parallel to the intrinsic human need to listen and react when confronted with those others' traumatic stories. Regarding these stories, Shoshana Felman contends that

> To testify [...] is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community. [...] To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others. (Felman and Dori Laub 1992, 204, emphasis in original)

Therefore, it cannot be denied that traumatic narrations and/or vulnerable stories tend to imply a testimonial dimension. They require the figure of a listener to whom the narration is addressed, and they are usually based on the contractual relationship established between speaker and listener as well as writer and reader in literature. Accordingly, LaCapra has contended that a work of art concerned with questions of trauma, vulnerability and exposure should provoke in readers empathic unsettlement defined as 'a form of virtual, not vicarious, experience [...] in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own' (LaCapra 2001, 40). In opposition to over-identification, the notion of empathic unsettlement has an overt ethical scope in that it requires readers to put themselves 'in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place' (LaCapra 2001, 41). Therefore, the notion of empathic unsettlement is clearly related to Levinas' ethics of alterity, which asks the subject to show an attitude of responsibility towards the

other, and emphasises the individual's capacity to feel with that other, particularly the other's suffering, while recognising his or her sheer otherness (Levinas 1998).

These ideas can finally lead us to assert that literature creates a privileged space to expose, negotiate and even reconcile traumatic episodes and conflicting and vulnerable identities, including the individual writers, excluded collectives and minor groups represented in these narratives, and the readers entering an empathic relationship with the text by seeing and getting involved in the pain of others (Rothberg 2013, xv). Literary practices like those analysed in the following pages may force readers to look at the face of vulnerable or/and traumatised characters, and extract from them ethical lessons that can be extrapolated to the outside realities. Narrative succeeds, then, in offering the sites where contradictory, critical, painful and precarious events configuring the identity of the modern subject may be revealed and made visible in their sheer otherness, forcing the reader to see experiences of vulnerability and trauma through the other's eyes.

Accordingly, this special issue of *European Review* aims to explore the demise of a sovereign self and the rise of vulnerability and interconnectedness after an exposure to a traumatic or disastrous event as represented in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' literatures in English. Therefore, the articles in this issue can be grouped under two sections depending on the way they focus on vulnerability after traumatic and/or disastrous events and the following connections among humans and/or between humans and non-human entities. The first group of articles explores the demise of individual sovereignty when faced with traumatic episodes, such as the First World War in Silvia Pellicer-Ortín's and Juan Meneses's articles, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in Aliette Ventejoux's article. In her article, Pellicer-Ortín analyses how Zina Rohan's *The Small Book* (2010) represents a common lack of sovereignty during times of crisis, war in this case, which is followed by a state of vulnerability that is shared among coetaneous characters as well as their successive generations. This vulnerability is originated in a particular traumatic episode that happened during the First World War, as is disclosed as the novel advances. She argues that subsequent generations are temporally and spatially connected with each other, especially through their common traumatic memories of the war, a situation that verifies the distortion of the boundaries between victims and perpetrators of trauma as well as the interconnectedness among lineal descendants. Meneses similarly explores the effects of a lack of sovereignty during and after the First World War as represented in Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way* (2006). According to Meneses, the novel is mainly concerned with the disruption following the war, which destabilises hegemonic masculinity and the father–son relationship. From a different yet related perspective, Ventejoux focuses on how Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) narrativises the traumatic effects of 9/11, which made evident the unwilling submission of the self to the other through terrorism. Moreover, Ventejoux especially focuses on Alzheimer's disease as an instance of the loss of individual sovereignty exemplified in the novel.

The second group of articles addresses the question of individual sovereignty from the perspective of the interdependent relationship among humans as well as the

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inevitability of human and non-human coexistence. Accordingly, Henry Ivry looks into the way Jesymn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) represents the environmental destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, which posited a danger against individual and planetary sovereignty. Ivry concludes that the novel highlights the disastrous effects of Hurricane Katrina by focusing on the ecological interdependency and the racialized discourse of environmental destruction. Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim similarly addresses the representation of the loss of sovereignty by paying special attention to the relationship between human and non-human entities in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). Using the tools provided by post-humanist studies, Gündoğan İbrişim analyses the role of non-human entities in helping humans cope with traumatic episodes. She concludes that the natural environment can help the traumatized subjects to confer meaning onto their traumatic memories, which seems to confirm the interdependent and positive relationship between the human and non-human. Finally, Merve Sarıkaya-Şen analyses Aminatta Forna's *Happiness* (2018) as a representative of the possibility of resilience and interconnectedness that follows chaotic and/or traumatic events. By drawing on relevant theories about the mechanisms to heal one's wound and establish an interdependent world of connections, Sarıkaya-Şen argues that the novel provides us with the possibilities for a more hopeful and happier world in which the wounded characters could heal their psychological wounds by establishing a relationality both with humans and non-humans, mainly animals. All in all, the articles in this issue strongly demonstrate that contemporary literatures in English present powerful examples of the effects of traumatic and disastrous episodes on the vulnerable self, which might result in the self losing his/her sovereignty and/or establishing a world of interconnectedness that strengthens the internal mechanisms to fight against physical and psychological adversities.

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