A misunderstanding: trauma and terrorism in the '9/11 fiction'

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After September 11, 2001, a colossal number of literary works have constituted a privileged corpus to be analyzed under the often cited concept of trauma. Increasingly displaced during the XX century from its original legal-medical context, trauma has definitely become a major cultural concern in the wake of the terrorist attacks, though at risk of not only being mistakenly applied to the diverse range of the so-called '9/11 fiction', but also of enforcing interpretations beforehand.

In this paper I suggest the employment of the term specifically by literary critics should be reviewed, for it incurs a double misunderstanding: firstly, it might make incorrect and indiscriminate use of the term in the historical context, secondly, it obliges literature to necessarily reflect the same quality (trauma), considered to be present in the historical event. A proper analysis of what I consider to be a misunderstanding also contradicts the necessary attribution of the aesthetics of trauma to the ‘9/11’ literary works, which is designated by the presence of, so to speak, ‘traumatic’ elements, such as repetition, flashbacks, prolepsis, images of disasters and so forth.

I shall focus on different ways of approaching the topic through a reading of Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* (2005) and Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). These works offer a critical view of the term and its employment.

**The trauma paradigm**

The predominance of trauma in cultural studies was mentioned by the scholar Roger Luckhurst, quoting Andreas Huyssen: “it seemed as if the entire twentieth century was marked under the sign of ‘historical trauma’”. Nevertheless, the prevalence of such a concept in literary studies related to the ‘9/11 fiction’ was early on criticized by Araújo, who calls attention to the problems which arise when one uncritically and straightforwardly applies to literature a term such as trauma, which was “too readily
available within media and cultural circles”. This attitude, she states, is likely to achieve “predictable results”.

I shall locate the main reasons for the overuse of the concept not only in a misapprehension of the very term detached from its legal-medical realm, but in the slippage between fiction and history. Both problems are distinct in nature. Even if trauma was a factor at play on September 11, 2001, which is, at least, to be carefully analysed, it does not necessarily follow that literature produced in its aftermath has trauma as an inner element. To regard literature as a necessary result of history or a mirror of reality is an attitude that takes both history and fiction for granted. Concerning these categories, in this paper I depart from Pierre Nora’s distinction:

Il n’empêche que, par principe, les deux genres sont irréductiblement séparés et s’opposent même radicalement. Il est entendu que le roman ne relève que de la pure imagination, qu’il est affranchi des contraintes de la réalité temporelle, à commencer par la chronologie, et qu’il n’obéit, dans sa construction, ses caractères, sa langue, qu’à l’invention personnelle de l’auteur et à son pouvoir de créer et d’animer un monde. L’histoire est habitée, au contraire, par une ambition de connaissance de plus en plus scientifique de tout le passé humain [...].

Fiction and history were at stake in the aftermath of September 11. Thinkers faced the dilemma of talking about such a recent, sorrowful and, for some, unprecedented occurrence. What followed was the paradoxical dualism summed up in ‘silence versus repetition’. The lack of concepts to apprehend the immaterial face of what had happened found its counterpart in the compulsion to constantly refer to the event. In addition to the loss of life and material destruction, the alleged impossibility to turn the dreadful occurrence into a sayable thing rapidly compelled cultural critics to approach the event through the lenses of trauma studies. Similarly, the Holocaust had been largely claimed to be unsayable, a problem of representation and cognition or, as Theodor Adorno said in 1949, a challenge for humans to continue to make poetry. And so it was in the case of September 11: “[It] is ultimately a semiotic event, involving the total breakdown of all meaning-making systems. [...] A trauma is deemed to be unsayable, any saying of it may be seen as a cheapening, a reduction [...]”, says Kristiaan Versluys. Richard Gray acknowledges: “Nothing to say became a refrain.”

Once the event was regarded as traumatic, literary critics were to study fiction and poetry departing from the same concept, which made them identify a (debatable) aesthetics of trauma. As Ann Keniston states: “Belatedness is often manifested for trauma victims in repetition, flashbacks, prolepsis, and other forms of temporal instability, and post-9/11 poems sometimes reveal these features [...]” Similarly, James Berger says: “[...] in literary studies, trauma theories [...] offer a poetics.”

The word trauma in fact traces back to Ancient Greece, referring to a physical wound. This very aspect of an external cause was to follow the development of the term from its outset. Interestingly, it was not until the late XIX century when the meaning of the word shifted and encompassed an internal condition as well. Roger Luckhurst gives a historical account of the reasons behind the emergence of the modern concept. Its development was centered in a medico-legal realm in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution where the frequent accidents on the railways were at the core of legal disputes between private companies and injured passengers who presented mental symptoms after casualties.
Later, Sigmund Freud's attempt to describe hysteria helped to cement the psychoanalytic concept of trauma. Although his ideas vary in later writings, the two main aspects remain the same: belated temporality and repetition. I do not want here to agree or disagree with Freud's contention regarding the sexual background of the trauma. Instead, my aim is to highlight how the problem can be described as a matter of time and reminiscences. This is better explained by Freud's two-stage theory: an original traumatic event only raises its symptoms afterwards. The first impact remains a forgotten wound that can solely emerge after a hiatus in which it plays a latent role in one's psyche. This is how early childhood traumas are brought into light in adulthood.

Traumatic past fails to become conscious at the time the violent event takes place due to the mechanism of repression, which constantly keeps unconsciousness from surfacing. Imagine there was an original traumatic event, what are the symptoms of it? Repetition, according to Freud. He says: “In essence, the psyche constantly returned to scenes of unpleasure because, by restaging the traumatic moment over and over again, it hoped belatedly to process the unassimilable material, to find ways of mastering the trauma retroactively.”

So if September 11 was a traumatic event, did we have enough time to witness its symptoms? Or was the collapse the World Trade Center and the attack in the Pentagon just a restaging of a previous violent and traumatic event?

Cunningham: displacing trauma

Michael Cunningham's Specimen Days displaces trauma from terrorism and from the 2001 events. The book presents three novellas from different genres in a chronological perspective. It begins with a ghost story during the Industrial Revolution, then moves to a thriller in the aftermath of September 11 through the eyes of a police agent, and ends with a science fiction narrative in which androids live together with human beings after a nuclear accident. New York is the main setting of all the narratives.

Since the structure of the book lies upon three different historical moments, clearly divided into past and future, I consider the diachrony a crucial key to interpret the narratives. Its aim is to reveal a genealogical and causal perspective of the notions of violence and terrorism discussed within the novel. The Chinese ball which appears in the three novellas stands like a curse passed down through generations and emphasizes the idea of a genealogical approach. This premise will be of the utmost importance if we are to read Specimen Days as a counter discourse which conveys a representation of terrorism as a symptom of a previous violent occurrence.

The stories have some other motifs in common: a triad of characters consisting of a disabled or ugly child, a woman and a man, who interchange roles of savior, guilty and victim from one novella to another. Moreover, the novellas make clear references to Walt Whitman's oeuvre, namely Leaves of Grass (first published in 1855).

I will focus my analysis mainly on the first story, “In the machine”, as it provides the basis of the novel. It presents the twelve year old Lucas, the youngest son of a poor Irish family who emigrated to the US. Having his brother recently died in a work accident, Lucas takes over his position in the factory and becomes responsible for supporting his parents.
His mother becomes increasingly crazy and depressed and claims to listen to her dead son's voice through a music box, whereas Lucas' father, who suffered from a work-related disease, stays at home apathetically dependent on a machine in order to breathe.

Childhood is taken as a metaphor and put centre stage in the narratives. Its duel presentation includes aspects of origin and future. Each one, though, is replete of controversial meanings. Sometimes childhood is deemed as the place and time of discoveries and promises, whose optimistic and prospective aspect gets closer to the idea of progress and future. Nevertheless, it also gives the readers the perspective of what is rotting, decaying, and ruining, thus, revealing notions tied to the past and its remains. Because the novel departs from an ill origin, it leads to the projection of a future fated to be terrifying, though at the same time with a paradoxical ray of hope. In any case, the future appears in each novella as a latent presence of something bad, but we do not know what it is or when it will be brought to light. The insistence on something on the verge of happening leaves us with the feeling that, whatever is to happen, it is likely to be catastrophic and dreadful.

The decaying side of children as an allegory for an ill origin is reinforced by the physical description of such characters in *Specimen Days*, normally associated with disability. The ambiguous treatment of childhood tends to desacralize the idealized imagery of children as the last remaining bastions of goodness. Not being able to carry out such ideals, they turned out to be vehicles for presenting horror and terror.

In the first story, Lucas becomes increasingly obsessed with the thought that his dead brother is speaking through the machines in order to take human lives (especially Catherine's, his brother's girlfriend). Lucas gets worried about Catherine's job in the sewing factory and tries desperately to save her life. In the final scene, the latent event finally emerges. Lucas and Catherine are looking, from the street, at the Mannahatta Company, where she works, now in flames. The seamstresses were locked in, not allowed to leave during their break, and so cannot escape the accident. A crowd gathers around the building, screaming and weeping, while women in uniform jump out the windows. For a contemporary reader, the scene clearly evokes – while reformulates – the collapse of the Twin Towers.

If *Specimen Days* is ever to mention trauma, it does so by displacing the concept from September 11 and putting it into a genealogical perspective which enables readers to trace the 'original accident'. From this point of view, thus, the traumatic event is located in the Industrial Revolution. In doing so, Cunningham places XXI century terrorism as a restaging of the trauma. The violent act of confining the seamstress was a common thing in the XIX century, like many others taken in the name of progress and explored in the narrative.

Moreover, the burning of the building was witnessed by a crowd who was, at the same time, shocked and excited, which suggests a social endorsement of the violence. In this sense, the author ends up questioning a crucial aspect of the psychoanalyst definition of trauma, that is, the external agent. The novella in fact reveals a history of violence perpetrated from within the American society and not from outside. Consequently, other discourses, like the one spread by the media in general and the American government after September 11, cannot take place here (although it does in many other novels), for they contend that America was a victim of an external threat – Islamism. How is it possible for America, regarded as the land of democracy and justice for the official
discourse, to be attacked by a foreign enemy who launched an era of terrorism, if terror was something already undertaken within and encouraged by the same society?  

Such interpretation of Specimen Days places the novel in an outstanding position in relation to the majority of literary works produced in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2001. In general, they tend to incorporate predominant motifs of insecurity and establishing characters – and American society at large – as victims. What is striking is that Cunningham goes further and not only displaces trauma from September 11, but also presents an ambiguous view of the 'original accident'. At once, sorrow and fascination are set in motion in what can be considered the beginning of the modern trauma. Therefore, the idea of an experience with an unpleasant and negative impact on psyche, as supposed by Freud, is replaced by controversial meanings. In Cunningham's account, pleasure also comes into trauma. After all, if trauma was as bad as it seems to be, how would it be possible for humans to keep reinforcing it? In the extract below, Lucas regards the catastrophe beside Catherine:

He saw the woman cross the sky. He saw above her, above the smoke and the sky, a glittering horse made of stars. He saw Catherine's face, pained and inspired. She spoke his name. He knew that his heart had stopped. He wanted to say, I am large, I contain multitudes. I am in the grass under your feet. He made as if to speak but did not speak. In the sky, the great celestial horse turned his enormous head. An unspeakable beauty announced itself.  

When the catastrophe occurs, readers can rapidly identify the beauty and celebration of life – attached to death – about which Lucas read in Whitman’s oeuvre. The emotional reaction of the crowd, absorbed by the tragic event, is also shared by the reader, making both evoke the figure of possible voyeurs. In a famous essay Susan Sontag wrote about one's attitude toward the pain of others:

Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it [...] or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.  

Sontag analyzes the iconography of suffering in the Western World, considering that Christian images “surely intend to move and excite, and to instruct and exemplify”16, but they can also be used as a means of provocation: “There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching”17. In fact, the pleasure of regarding suffering images was first studied by Aristotle in his seminal Poetics:

[... no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies.  

The introduction of pleasure in the final scene of “In the machine” also evokes a public reaction in face of the widespread images that circulated in the media after 9/11, particularly the broadcast of people jumping through the windows of the World Trade Center. Cunningham does not copy history to literature. On the contrary, he proposes a literary rewriting of history and a very critical view of the limits between both practices and fields.  

The subsequent novellas work as further steps in this sort of genealogy of violence (terrorism included). They unfold the belated temporality of trauma, pointing out moments when the hidden reminiscences of the original accident emerge and are restaged. From this point of view, September 11 cannot be regarded either as a traumatic event or as an unprecedented case, contrary to the common belief among critics. Indeed,
the consequences of the terrorist attacks are much more devastating than the event itself. Terrorism remains the echo from the past and a transitional moment which lays the grounds for the future, becoming (again) the origin for another moment in the future and so on.

It is worth thinking about the kind of future suggested by Specimen Days both for society and literature at large. Following my exposition, it is reasonable to argue that the novel discloses the threat and fantasies of insecurity and affections such as anxiety brought about by the original traumatic experience. These feelings are defined by Freud: “Affective states have become incorporated in the mind as precipitates of primeval traumatic experiences”19; “Anxiety describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one”20. In Specimen Days, the unknown enemy and the atmosphere of paranoia are depicted in a community increasingly based on surveillance systems and overtaken by machines. In such a context, poetry is more and more disengaged with its literary purposes.

The more the stories evolve, the more language becomes ‘mechanical’. The final narrative, “Like beauty”, is set one hundred and fifty years from now, and presents androids and aliens as main characters. The android Simon works for Dangerous Encounters, an illegal company that offers services for those who want to have violent crimes committed against themselves, such as robberies. Clients wanted to experience “old-fashion” forms of violence ever since New York has been protected and secured by a high-tech normative system of security and surveillance to prevent urban crimes. Taken in a broad perspective, this is a clear effect of the Industrial Revolution explored in the first novella, whose symptoms were thereafter exacerbated and restaged.

Cunningham’s novel eventually suggests the increasing limits of poetry, confined in the remainders of humanity. Simon is the character who can speak Whitman's verses. Yet androids are neither robots nor humans. Because humanity has been violently affected by the industrial process of urban societies to the point of replacing humans’ duties with machines and creating android beings, poetry is at a crossroads: if not humans, who is to speak or listen to poetry? Is it ever to survive?

Ben Lerner: the absence of trauma

Leaving the Atocha Station is the debut novel of the American poet and critic Ben Lerner. While in Cunningham’s account trauma was displaced from September 11, the terrorist attack being just a symptom of the first experience, in Lerner’s book its very existence is questioned. The novel is a Künstlerroman about Adam, a young poet spending a year in Madrid as a fellow of a foundation in order to write a poetry book.

Departing from the novel’s title, we are informed that the story is set in the same period as when Al Qaeda sponsored a bombing attack on the Atocha station - although the author’s acknowledgment at the end of the book refers the citation to a John Ashbery poem, which was written in 1962, long before the attacks. As a result, we are pretty much expecting a novel about terrorism, and we tend to follow the acts of the protagonist regarding him as an American who had somehow ‘lived’ the 9/11 event. Nevertheless, terrorism turns out to be an opportunity to criticize the essence of literary debates raised after 2001 and the possibility of trauma is, at least, mocked, as I shall contend.
Lerner offers a transatlantic approach to the topic, which is something unusual in '9/11' American literature, mostly focused on New York settings. Although novels such as *The reluctant fundamentalist* (2007) by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid or *Saturday* (2005) by Englishman Ian McEwan give a transnational account, this seems to be the first time an American character is displaced in Europe.

The protagonist Adam is an outsider in Madrid, highly concerned about what people think of him and constantly trying to get rid of the American stereotypes. As a way of being accepted, Adam pretends to appreciate Spain’s most famous poets, despite the little knowledge he has of them. In fact, he is tired of the frequently quoted poets like Lorca, cleverly used by Adam himself as a free pass to step into the circle of native intellectuals. Adam’s concern is down to the fact that Lorca’s work seems to be well considered by critics partly because of the poet's political engagement with the Republican groups during the Civil War. The idolatry of these leftist poets – as if there were no other good poets ever – reveals how the idolaters' judgment is to a large extent attached to something outside poetry. Therefore, a poet will be continually acclaimed as long as he is considered a spokesman of the reality.

Adam justifies the choice to move to Spain with his supposed interest in researching “the literary responses to the Spanish Civil War”. Even though such theme attracted many of his colleagues, he remains hugely ironic and critical about its premises. He does not believe in the widespread attitude of empowering poetry to affect History, as well as the other way around, that is, of empowering History to act directly upon literature. This is implied in the extract below, in which Adam ironically explains to a friend his 'literary' motivations:

“What makes the poem an effective form for a historical investigation?” I inferred from the words of hers I understood. I was surprised to find myself inclined to defend a project I’d never clearly delineated, let alone ever planned to complete, as opposed to conceding its total vacuity.

“The language of poetry is the exact opposite of the language of mass media”, I said, meaninglessly.

“But why are Americans studying Franco”, she asked (…), “instead of studying Bush?” […]

[...] “You can’t study a mode of production directly.”

Lerner’s work raises questions that are very opportune in the wake of September 11. Art as a consequence of something else is implied in the view according to which artists have to promptly react to their historical moment and is a common belief in critical works that relate literature and history. More recently, it has been the basis of a large amount of studies after XXI century terrorism. To regard a work of art as a ‘response’ to a historical event is, to some extent, the same as consider literature an effect of history, because ‘response’ is only possible when there is a question from which the former depends and derives. If there is to be a question, history is responsible for raising it, and literature for reacting to it, therefore, being determined by this very question.

Expressions such as 'affect', 'respond', 'be an effect of' or 'shape' are at risk of resulting in a determinist way of relating art to historical events, as can be read in the extract below:

(...) my contention is that political and public events beginning with the Al Qaeda–sponsored attacks of September 11, 2001, have profoundly affected the poetry of the last decade. These events have been so central to recent poetry partly because they coincide with a series of preexisting preoccupations and problems: writing “public” poems has allowed poets of the 2000s directly to consider larger questions about the cultural position and role of poetry.
I contend that the causes of the identification between history and literature when it comes to the so-called ‘9/11 fiction’ are twofold. Firstly, there is the feeling of emergence exalted by September 11. Large-scale disruptive events are historically felt as crises demanding prompt public answers from politicians, citizens and, not less importantly, artists and authors. It happened in the aftermath of the Holocaust or World War I, for instance. As Keniston pointed out, there was an urge to represent and respond to the 2001 crisis due to the scale of such an event, and it had to be done within the public sphere of which literature is part.

In this regard, Lerner’s novel has the benefit of hindsight. Published ten years after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C., *Leaving the Atocha Station* deals with many historical events (Spanish and American ones) with a certain distance that somehow allows the author to escape from that hurry of addressing answers (often revanchist) on the spur of the moment and to be caught by the trauma discourse that seems to have taken over writers and critics.

The second reason that might have contributed to the mixing of the historical and the literary is the unprecedented aspect of fictionality at work in September 11 or, in other words, the “slippage between fact and fantasy, history and (often nightmarish) dream”.

For Slavoj Žižek, the falling of the Twin Towers evokes the Hollywood cultural background, being “reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies.”

The premise according to which there is no such thing as a necessary response in literature lies in the basis of *Leaving the Atocha Station* and, by all means, radically distances Lerner’s novel from other literary and critical works of the so-called ‘9/11 fiction’. The disbelief in a literary response for a historical event is revealed through a number of events in the plot that attempt to be shocking or traumatic but failed to take place and so remain a mere virtuality. The fantasies of violence never become true, as if warning us to draw a line between art and life, as well as art and history. Adam believes an ‘authentic’ person/artist is formed by the spectacular, violent and shocking experience one undertakes. Because he fails to live such experiences, he turns to make them up as a way of compensation. This is why he lies about his mother, telling people she is dead or seriously ill. He also appropriates a friend’s experience of witnessing a woman dying of drowning.

The detachments both of Adam from an idealized aesthetic experience, and the reality from its artistic depiction, are important topics of the novel. They work as a call for readers to pay attention to simple events and to the simple experience of art, rather than looking for high idealizations. While waiting for the depiction of the terrorist attack, the reader ends up enjoying the mundane and daily events that happened during the character’s journey.

Here the trauma question becomes increasingly outlined. Given the fact that authenticity is regarded possible only by living violent and terrible experiences at first hand, the reader expects the so-called “March 11” to have the power to finally affect Adam. This is why we are all taken aback by the deflationary and anti-climactic depiction of Adam who, having passed by the Atocha station at the moment of the bombings, just passed by the scene and prefers to go back home to read about it on the internet. It shows a skeptical attitude, as well as the power of media in offering second-handed accounts:

There were police and medical workers and other people everywhere, many of them weeping and/or screaming, and, as I got closer to the station, more and more confusion. [...] As I got farther away from the station I saw crowds in the doorways.
of bars and restaurants watching televisions and I could hear people saying 'ETA'
[...] I opened a browser, called up the New York Times, and clicked on the giant
headline. The article described the helicopters I could hear above me.

Adam completely disregards not only the bombings – he is much more concerned with
the future of his love-affairs – but also the public demonstrations against the official
discourse which put the blame for the attack on the Basque terrorist group ETA. He
assumes later: “While Spain was voting I was checking e-mail.” When faced with the
question from a Spanish man about how an American is to react to such an event, Adam
says: “I looked off in the distance as though I was making an effort to formulate my
complex reaction so simply even an idiot like him would understand. Then, as if
concluding this was an impossible task, I said I didn’t know.”

The question implies there was a traumatic event – the September 11th lived by
Americans – which reemerged afterwards. Yet Adam is implying there was no such thing
as trauma – almost an obligation for an American in the XXI century, as well as for the
Spanish society that carries the burden of the dictatorship. In any case, literature is not a
response to it. This is why terrorist attacks and the question of trauma are displaced by
all sorts of adventures lived by the characters during the novel. If literature does not have
the responsibility of depicting traumatic events, nor is more special for doing so, what
follows is the importance given to simple fictional events and episodes. This position is
made clear in Adam’s critical attitude toward the debates aimed at gathering together
writers and other intellectuals to discuss and propose a role of poetry in an age of
terrorism.

Despite the critiques against the engagement of literature with the ‘real world’, history
plays an undoubtedly crucial role in the novel. Nevertheless, the author appropriates
historical events (including personal experiences) in order to convert them into literary
material. He focuses the interest of the novel not on depicting history, but on recreating
it and criticizing the ready subordination of literature to history. Its subservience is clear
in the following passage, in which Adam says, ironically, to his friend after the bombings :
“‘I’m not very interested in poetry at a time like this,’ I said, suggesting she was focused
on petty personal concerns at a moment of historical unrest.”

Versluys points out some novels engaged with the disaster of September 11 in an indirect
way: “as a tragic that punctuates other, more mainstream (mostly love) interests.” Yet,
the novelty and originality of Lerner’s was to consciously criticize the body of literary
and theoretical works that followed the 2001 and 2004 attacks by a) refusing to depict the
terrorist attack itself and, instead, by b) calling attention to the very mundane elements
of the plot. The strategy enables the author to develop a counter-discourse that raises
questions about the role of literature at large: Leaving the Atocha Station suggests the
failure of novels to mirror historical events and catastrophes and stresses the mundane
concerns of literature. Moreover, it also points out the inadequacy of literature to respond to traumatic moments, since trauma tends to be used as false evidence for certain political causes rather than for literary purposes.

Conclusion

Cunningham’s and Berner’s novels stand out in the recent post 9/11 American literary
boom. They both offer critical views of the literary. In the former, trauma is given a
genealogy whose representation is, at once, a fascinating and devastating event,
eventually restaged in terrorism. In the latter case, trauma cannot just be represented because it did not take place.

To stress that cultural scholars have detached the original meaning of trauma does not imply, necessarily, it is a wrong turn. Obviously, humanists can foster new concepts as long as they have a critical position regarding previous ways of thinking. Nevertheless, it may be also stressed that the inaccuracy concerning aspects of Freud’s two-stage theory of trauma allowed scholars to indiscriminately apply the term to the whole body of ‘9/11 fiction’. What is even more arguable is the fact that this attitude is a consequence of having applied the very concept firstly to the 9/11 event itself.

The predominance of the concept is better understood through the reasoning ‘if a= b, then c= b’. In other words, if September 11 was a traumatic event, then the literary narratives later produced are analyzed under the concept of trauma. The phenomenon of ‘merging’ different fields has to be seriously taken into consideration by scholars if we are to draw diverse interpretative approaches to cultural practices – and not to trap ourselves in cycles of repetition of a sole paradigm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The book has not yet been translated into Spanish. Its title can possibly been translated as Saliendo de la estación Atocha.
2. By ‘9/11 fiction’ I mean all novels in which the plot is informed by the 2001 attacks in New York and Washington D.C., as well as the subsequent related events (the ‘war on terror’, the bombings in European cities etc). Because this label reveals and encourages an unconscious mixing of history and literature, it is always used in quotes.
7. Among the recent thinkers who have sustained such viewpoints are Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth.
13. This sort of ‘inner’ violence is referred to by Susana Araújo, as stated in the following quote : “Cunningham uses the history of New York as mirror where the U.S. is forced to recognize itself […]”. See : Susana Araújo, “Whitman and Cunningham : Specimen Days and the ‘War on Terror’”. In : Ricardo Soeiro, Daniela Di Pasquale, Sofia Tavares (eds), Filologia, Memória e Esquecimento, Húmus, Ribeirão, 2010, p. 131-132.
The terrorist attacks in September 2001 were largely deemed by the media and cultural circles to be traumatic events. Since then, literary criticism has indiscriminately employed the concept of trauma in the so-called '9/11 fiction'. I shall offer a reading of Michael Cunningham’s Specimen Days (2005) and Ben Lerner’s Leaving the Atocha Station (2011) regarding their critical view of the term. My contention is that the predominance of trauma as a theoretical apparatus in literary works is due to a) a misreading of the very term, detached from its original legal-medical context, and b) a slippage between the categories of fiction and history.

Los ataques terroristas de septiembre del 2001 fueron considerados traumáticos tanto por los medios de comunicación como por los culturales. Desde entonces, la crítica literaria emplea indiscriminadamente el concepto de trauma en las novelas que se etiquetan con el nombre del '11S'. A partir de las novelas de Michael Cunningham, Días Cruciales (2005), y de Ben Lerner, Leaving the Atocha Station (2011), se defiende que el predominio del trauma como paradigma teórico en la literatura se debe a: a) una errónea interpretación del término, extraída de su contexto médico-jurídico, b) una fusión de las categorías historia y ficción.

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