Conclusion

> "Since then, at an uncertain hour, / That agony returns; / And till my ghastly tale is told, / This heart within me burns."
> (SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER*)
>
> "This is not a story to pass on."
> (TONI MORRISON, *BELOVED*)

The Romantic trauma novels by Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Shelley, and their postmodern counterparts by Smiley, Michaels, and Azzopardi all highlight the formative impact of childhood and the familial home. Even if the family figures as the locus of pain and suffering, of violence and loss, the subject continues to define his or her identity and life-story through the family. The family, in these texts, functions simultaneously as the site of trauma and as the site of essential and persistent needs and desires. For instance, Dolores in *The Hiding Place,* who experiences multiple traumas in her childhood, keeps striving for a sense of understanding and familial community decades later. Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* embarks on a life-long quest to find ways of restoring the familial bonds that were broken by scenes of historical violence, while Wollstonecraft's Jemima yearns for human connections and relationships that might compensate for the home and family she never had.

Exploring how families are disrupted through internal or external destructive forces, these novels share a political commitment to children, often (especially in Wollstonecraft, Smiley, and Azzopardi) in conjunction with a feminist commitment. In addition, the dialogue between novels of the two periods has revealed significant differences between Romantic and postmodern approaches to trauma. Romantic trauma fiction displays a conscious attention to language, narrative, and the functions of self-narration, but this critical awareness takes on a far more radical shape in postmodern forms of self-reflexivity. Romantic trauma novels are profoundly concerned with issues of voice and audience, listening and reading; the autodiegetic narratives of Maria, Mandeville, and Mathilda contain gaps and rup-

tures; and Godwin's and Shelley's texts implicitly problematize the narrators' reliability. However, postmodern trauma novels – perhaps not too surprisingly – push such narrative techniques further. Textual fragmentation and narrative disruptions are key features permeating *The Hiding Place*, and the novel not only foregrounds the unreliability of memory, like *A Thousand Acres*, but also fundamentally challenges the position of the narrator and the status of the text. In fact, the novels by Smiley, Michaels, and Azzopardi all consciously explore what demands trauma imposes on narration and representation. They play with notions of temporality, linearity, and causality, and, even more importantly, they undermine narrative conventions and subvert expectations – Smiley destabilizes traditional realism; Michaels transcends conventions of representing the Holocaust; and Azzopardi challenges the boundaries of autodiegetic narration – thereby pushing their readers to reflect critically on their relationship to the narrative and to the trauma depicted therein.

Moreover, the texts also reveal significant differences between Romantic and postmodern negotiations of memory, recovery, and the body. While Romantic trauma novels seem to hinge on the idea that a consistent identity crucially depends on memory, postmodern trauma fiction tends to express an obsession with memory that is deeply rooted in an intense crisis of memory. The narration of the past is an integral part of Maria's, Mandeville's, and Mathilda's narratives, which is one important way in which Wollstonecraft's, Godwin's, and Shelley's shared belief in the powerful, formative impact of experience and education manifests itself. The past as a crucial influence on the present and the individual's confrontation of that past – especially its particularly painful and traumatic moments – run as central common themes through the trauma texts of this family of writers. Yet the protagonists' engagement with the past often seems motivated by drives beyond their control: Maria suffers from the power of "the events of her past life pressing on her" (75); Mathilda refers to a "feeling that [she] cannot define" (5); and Mandeville seems compelled to anatomize his mind. The postmodern protagonist-narrators Ginny, Jakob, and Dolores, in contrast, engage in more conscious, intentional, and extensive memory work and in active quests for the recovery of memories. In fact, they explicitly identify the reconstruction of the past as an attempt at working through and overcoming their pervasive crisis of memory.

In addition, postmodern trauma novels display more optimism about the possibility of recovery and healing than Romantic trauma texts. Even though *Mandeville*, *Mathilda*, and *The Wrongs of Woman* explore means of therapy and self-therapy, their endings resist consolation, integration, and cure. Drawing on elements of the Gothic, they express a profound fascination with the abysses of the "wounded mind" (Wollstonecraft 74) as persistently uncontrollable and uncontainable. Postmodern trauma fiction also emphasizes the complexity of recovery processes, but it refrains from depicting trauma and the pathologies of the mind as radically uncontained in the way that Godwin, for example, does in *Mandeville*. The novels by

Smiley, Michaels, and Azzopardi enact a shift from a fascination with the pathological to a profound interest in the figure of the survivor. All three texts explore the posttraumatic not only in relation to the crises caused by the past but also in relation to the psychology and the meanings of survival, survivorhood, and recovery.

This contrast between Romantic and postmodern negotiations of recovery is, perhaps, surprising, given the therapeutic optimism that drove the young discipline of psychiatry in the Romantic period and given that trauma is often described as a defining feature of the post-Holocaust era and the late-twentieth-century "post-traumatic" culture (Farrell, *Post-Traumatic*). In this light, the critical approach to recovery expressed in texts such as *Mandeville* and *Mathilda* can be read as an example of how literary discourses have the potential to challenge and question the assumptions, premises, and findings of scientific discourses: Romantic trauma fiction consciously and critically examines the paradigmatic changes taking place in the mental sciences of the time. By contrast, the more optimistic approach to recovery in the postmodern texts discussed indicates how the "wound culture" of late postmodernism has generated a need for gestures of hope amidst the sense of trauma's pervasive presence and impact. In fact, this need may be driving postmodern writers to explore and (to a varying extent) endorse the claims of contemporary traumatic stress studies concerning the healing functions of (self-)narration. It seems, then, that the continuous confrontation with trauma produces a desire for narratives that embed their depictions of vulnerability and victimhood into a reassuring frame of self-mastery and survivorhood. This cultural shift from victim to survivor figures may also be seen in connection with the increasing commodification and consumption of trauma stories. For example, the strikingly popular genre of "misery memoirs" or "misery lit," which began to emerge in the mid-1990s, capitalizes on the idea of depicting the individual's way from suffering to recovery, his or her triumph over trauma, which is meant to inspire other trauma victims with courage and hope. Even though the novels by Michaels, Azzopardi, and Smiley complicate such straightforward patterns of overcoming trauma, they can still be seen as symptomatic of a postmodern need to engage with trauma through the lens of survival and with an emphasis on recovery. While a number of Romantic trauma stories end in death – Shelley's trauma figures Mathilda, Frankenstein, and Beatrice in *Valperga* all die – postmodern trauma texts of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century tend to gesture towards new, albeit complex, beginnings and to signal to their readers that there is, indeed, a future after or beyond trauma.

Besides this strong contrast between Romantic and postmodern approaches to recovery, a further significant difference between the novels of the two periods concerns the role of the body. Romantic trauma fiction displays a twofold conceptualization of the way a mental wound affects the body. First, the texts depict fever as an immediate response to a traumatic experience. While this physical illness is usually not elaborated much further, the texts signal that it is a severe condition,

thereby highlighting the violent impact of the mental or emotional wounding. Second, some of the novels emphasize the intensity of an individual's posttraumatic suffering and/or madness through the depiction of a general physical decline that seems to resist explanation. Hence, they express a view of the body that emphasizes incurability. Moreover, both Romantic and postmodern trauma fiction highlight the close interrelations or even merging of physical and mental suffering. Yet postmodern fiction shifts the emphasis: the body takes on a crucial role in connection with memory. Smiley's novel, for example, suggests that the body not only retains the traumatic past but also carries memories that the mind has repressed. Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* pushes the notion of body memory even further by exploring whether trauma may be passed on from parents to children through their bodies, that is, through a physical transmission of memories.

As these examples from Smiley and Michaels indicate, "trauma" has come to signify a phenomenon that often seems too complex to be captured by the term or the notion of a "wound," even if the idea of trauma as an injury remains implicit in many literary representations. In *Fugitive Pieces*, for example, Jakob's witnessing of his parents' murder is depicted as the one moment that disrupts his life and leaves him emotionally scarred. In contrast, *The Hiding Place*, which associates emotional wounding with physical injury, represents the narrator's experience of trauma as extending over her entire childhood. Hence, the novel resonates with contemporary psychiatric discourses, which conceptualize posttraumatic disorders as a response to "stress" rather than shock (i.e., as "stress-related disorders"). In other words, if trauma is a "wound" here, it is not a sudden one; rather, it emerged and deepened gradually through an accumulation of distress and suffering. It is also significant that while the Romantic trauma novels, which were written before the explicit theorization of psychological trauma, all refer specifically to the protagonists' "wounds" of the mind or heart, the postmodern novels discussed here participate in trauma discourses without using the terms "wound" or "trauma." This refusal to name trauma can be read in different ways. It might, in part, result from a sense that, in an age where trauma discourses are so prominent, labelling the phenomenon would appear redundant and might even reduce it to banality or cliché. Or it could be read as an indication that trauma has come to be regarded as an experience with such complex psychological, physical, social, and cultural implications that one single word – be it "wound" or the more multi-layered, albeit more slippery term "trauma" – might fail to encompass it. This reading could also be supported by the fact that trauma novels depict a range of posttraumatic reactions, including crises of identity and memory, guilt and shame, fear and anger, depression, a sense of haunting, and a general loss of orientation.

Comparing Romantic and postmodern literary discourses on trauma, as I have attempted to signal with the preceding observations, leads to new insights about both periods and also raises new questions. Moreover, as I have sought to demon-

strate throughout this study, literary trauma texts intersect in complex and revealing ways with psychological and psychiatric discourses. An interdisciplinary approach to trauma fiction is crucial not only for deepening critical responses to texts but also for rethinking theoretical assumptions and providing a corrective to universalizing and aestheticizing tendencies within contemporary trauma theory. A salient example involves the proposed changes to the definition of PTSD in the DSM-5 (to appear in 2013). As mentioned in Chapter One, Ann Kaplan exemplifies the universalizing tendencies of literary trauma studies by discussing responses to literary, cinematic, and media representations of traumatic events as a form of secondary trauma (21, 39). In contrast, the proposed definition of trauma in the DSM-5 specifies explicitly that "exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures" does *not* constitute a traumatic experience (APA, "G 03 Posttraumatic Stress Disorder"). Alerting us to the importance of distinguishing between experiences of media consumption and experiences of vicarious trauma based on direct exposure, the DSM-5 points to the problematic nature of Kaplan's approach. One further crucial change between the DSM-IV and the proposed DSM-5 definitions concerns the conceptualization of trauma. The DSM-5 defines the distinction between a traumatic and non-traumatic event based exclusively on the type of stressor experienced (A1 criterion), and it considers the individual's subjective response to the event (A2 criterion) as having no clinical utility; as a result, the A2 criterion has been omitted. In this respect, literary texts – which reveal how deeply the individual's specific response to a traumatic experience affects the meaning the trauma takes on – constitute an important corrective to the trend towards a more narrow and prescriptive definition in this leading psychiatric manual. Hence, engaging with literary and literary critical as well as psychiatric approaches to trauma helps to bring into focus the disciplinary blind spots of each. Finally, the changes to the DSM definition also reveal once again that the meaning of trauma is contested and historically variable – which reinforces the importance of comparing approaches to trauma from different historical periods.

These changing and conflicting notions of trauma lead me to a set of issues that I have repeatedly emphasized in this study: the complex relationships between trauma and ethics. According to Colin Davis, "[t]alking of the other's trauma is an ethical minefield" (19), and this assertion holds true even if the traumatized "other" is a character in a literary text. How one defines and analyses trauma as a literary scholar has important political and ethical implications. And trauma, as the above example illustrates, is notoriously difficult to define, requiring a careful balancing act between inclusion and exclusion, between expansive and restrictive definitions, between a register of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the normal and the pathological. Too much emphasis on trauma as part of the everyday risks downplaying its impact, while too much emphasis on singularity risks reducing it to extreme events such as the Holocaust, while glossing over experiences of, for example, domestic

trauma. A further ethical challenge is how to acknowledge adequately the intensity of posttraumatic suffering without unnecessarily pathologizing trauma survivors or reducing them to a position of helplessness. Important ethical concerns also arise from the contradictory needs that trauma tends to evoke. The title of Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué's recent essay collection, *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny*, calls attention to a tension that trauma typically produces. Similarly, trauma causes a pressing desire for verbalization and narration (as expressed in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), while often seeming unspeakable and unnaratable (as the ending of Morrison's *Beloved* signals powerfully). Trauma also tends to lead to ambivalent feelings of too much and too little memory, represented by flashbacks and amnesia, and to produce contrary responses of numbing versus aggression, withdrawal versus protest.

In the light of these complexities and paradoxes of trauma, a number of questions arise, some of general relevance and some more specific to literary trauma studies. What kinds of responses are psychologically and politically empowering for trauma survivors? When is it an ethical duty to pass on stories of trauma and engage in memorial practices, and when – if at all – should one allow for silence to bury these stories and for forgetting to take place? How can trauma narratives be transmitted in ways that convey their impact but refrain from internalizing, appropriating, or instrumentalizing the other's trauma, pain, and suffering? What perspective should an ethically conscious reading and literary criticism of trauma assume? To what extent should we strive for knowledge of trauma? To what extent should we insist on aspects of incomprehensibility and attend "to the traces of that which remains foreign to us" (Davis 40)?

Beyond these persistent questions, the current study also opens up a number of possible directions for further research. For one, the exploration of trauma in a selection of novels by three Romantic writers of one family, whose writings are connected in manifold and complex ways, could serve as a starting point for a fuller investigation of trauma in Romantic fiction as well as trauma in Romanticism more generally. For example, the dynamics of trauma and self-representation at the intersections of autobiographical and fictional writing – issues that Leigh Gilmore explores in depth in relation to twentieth-century trauma writing – constitutes an area where this study leaves a number of questions open for further analysis. Secondly, the combination of postmodern texts from different cultural contexts could be a point of departure for exploring intercultural differences in the context of trauma – an area of research that postcolonial trauma critics such as Stef Craps have started to develop. In this context, a further investigation of interdisciplinary perspectives could yield particularly interesting insights. It might be fruitful, for example, to examine if and in what ways psychological and literary discourses about the therapeutic potential of self-narration play out in cultural contexts that place less emphasis

on the individual. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches could also provide input for further analysis of trauma and gender in these different areas of research.

Trauma studies, as the questions above signal, faces a number of intricate issues if it aims at the ideal described by Susannah Radstone as "an active, engaged and agentic practice that intervenes in and practices a politics and ethics open to critique, negotiation and transformation" (66). Openness to how disciplines other than one's own conceptualize trauma as well as openness to the perspectives of earlier historical periods, as I have sought to demonstrate, can be two ways of remaining alert to the continuing challenges of finding ethically and politically appropriate approaches to trauma. Another methodological aim that I have pursued was to remain critical about my own perspective, that is, to respond with a self-reflexive scholarly approach to the self-reflexive genre of trauma fiction. Trauma fiction explores the power of words to address wounds – a power that ranges from its function as an emotional outlet and space of escape (as in *Mathilda*) to its use as a means of bonding and as a political weapon (as in *The Wrongs of Woman*) and to its capacity as a tool of survival and healing, preservation and testimony (as in *Fugitive Pieces*) – and this self-reflexive awareness is also crucial regarding theoretical and literary critical languages of trauma.

Self-reflexivity is of vital importance in this context because trauma is a subject that forces us to confront the foundations of our selves. Trauma involves a complex conjunction of subjectivity and alterity, which not only confronts the trauma survivor with elusive aspects of the self but also exposes the reader of trauma writing to narratives that tend to be both fascinating and unsettling through their combination of disturbingly alien and uncannily familiar elements. In bringing together the "everyday and the extreme," in Michael Rothberg's terms (*Traumatic Realism* 4), trauma exposes a basic but troubling fact of the human condition – vulnerability. And this experience of vulnerability, alienation, and disruption is particularly powerful in relation to childhood trauma within the family, especially because the family plays a key role in determining an individual's sense of identity, belonging, and home. As Roberta Rubenstein asserts, as adults, we are all "exiles from childhood" (5) in the sense that "one cannot literally go home again (at least, not to the home of childhood that has been embellished over time by imagination)" (6). Yet childhood trauma significantly complicates an individual's relation to the past, resulting in pervasive feelings of displacement. What Romantic and postmodern trauma novels, with their scenarios of families falling apart and children suffering from emotional, mental, and physical wounds, are ultimately concerned with is the profoundly unsettling experience of feeling exiled not only from home in a literal sense but also from the sense of home in relation to identity and memory.

Through its disruption of these existential dimensions of home, trauma touches upon core issues of the human experience – issues encapsulated in Jakob's response to Bella's ghost in *Fugitive Pieces*. Hovering between the world of the dead and the

living, Bella's ghost captures the tensions that typically characterize the experience of the traumatic and the posttraumatic: tensions between a disturbing absence and an unsettling presence, between loss and the urge for recovery, between a ruptured sense of belonging and an intense longing for connection. As Jakob's imaginary companion in exile, Bella stands for both the home that he has irrevocably lost and the home that he desperately seeks. Her ghost signifies the quest of trauma survivors to find a sense of home in the "wounded landscape" (60) of their selves. As Jakob writes in retrospect, he tried to cope with his traumatic past by making his lost sister the core of his existence: "I saved myself without thinking. I grasped the two syllables closest to me, and replaced my heartbeat with your name" (195). Jakob's strategy for survival exemplifies the conscious and unconscious attempts of trauma survivors to create some sense of meaning and stability out of disruptive and destabilizing experiences. This quest for meaning in response to the inconceivable and incomprehensible appears, in many variations, in Romantic and postmodern representations of trauma, constituting a crucial aspect of the need for narrative in the face of trauma – the need, that is, for words to address even the deepest of wounds.