Trauma and Post-9/11 novels: Foer, McEwan and McInerney

“This is the nature of these journeys – the steps, the sequences are not logical”

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1. Introduction

1.1. 9/11 as a traumatic event

At 8:46, the first plane crashed into the North tower of the World Trade Center building. Seventeen minutes later, at 9:03, the second plane penetrated the South tower. With this second crash, it became clear that the ‘accident’ was no accident at all and this changed the whole perception of the event. After the two towers collapsed, there were two more plane crashes in the Pentagon and in the Pennsylvanian woods. There were 2974 casualties that day, not counting the nineteen hijackers who were killed during the attacks as well. On the planes, 246 were killed, 2603 people from New York who were on the ground or in the towers did not survive, 125 lost their lives in the Pentagon and 24 people remain listed as missing until this day. People from more than ninety countries did not survive that Tuesday in 2001. Therefore, it affected people from all over the world. Husbands, wives, children, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, pets were lost during 9/11. Even after that horrific day people lost their lives due to suicides or diseases such as lung conditions caused by overexposure to the dust that the collapsing towers left behind. The event itself can easily be represented in numbers but the damage done and the feelings and experiences of the victims, the Americans and by extension viewers all over the world, cannot be represented that easily.

Art Spiegelman makes his alter ego in his graphic novel Maus (1991) question whether mankind needs a new Holocaust, in order not to forget the old one. Although 9/11 cannot be compared to an event as horrific and enormous as the Holocaust, it certainly remains the biggest trauma of the 21st century until now (Serraris 2007, 5). The big difference, however, is, that 9/11 was one of the most documented events in history while there is still much uncertainty about many things concerning the Holocaust, due to the destruction of substantial evidence and the Nazis’ secrecy about the true nature of the entire operation. On 9/11 however, seconds after the first plane hit the towers, it was already broadcast on the news all around the world, which was after all the
goal of the terrorists: to make it clear that they were attacking the US and all it stood for. In an age where camera’s and internet are readily available, no large events go by unnoticed. Still, there remains much uncertainty as well. It is this uncertainty that leads to the process of creation and imagination by the human mind in order to fill the blanks. How this happens, will be the main topic of my dissertation. Before going in to the nature of trauma in chapter two, I will explain my choice of the three post-9/11 novels I will discuss in chapter four.

1.2. Choosing Three Post-9/11 Novels

The power of the human imagination to create alternative worlds is one of the main reasons why many artistic depictions of 9/11 have followed in the wake of the atrocity, ranging from novels to poetry, from graphic novels to movies, from songs to paintings. I have chosen to discuss three famous novels by three very different authors, each with a different view on the events of that day.

According to Versluys, we can place the post-9/11 novels into four different categories: the novel of recuperation, the novel of first-hand witnessing, the great New York novel and the novel of the outsider (Versluys 2007, 68). Obviously, the last category is mostly written by non-American novelists, which demonstrates that 9/11 did not just influence the United States but other countries as well. The three novels I will be using in my thesis come from three of the four categories Versluys identified when discussing 9/11 as a European event. The novel of recuperation will not be a part of my discussion as “those are novels that can justifiably be called pulp fiction, in which the terrorist attacks are used shamelessly for ideological and propaganda purposes” (Versluys 2007, 68). Not surprisingly, these kind of novels have little literary merit but most of them do become best-sellers, as they attract a fairly large audience.

Although several authors and theorists uttered the impossibility to talk about 9/11, more than 1500 book-length items had already been written in 2007 (Versluys 2007, 66) and that number
has not ceased to grow after that. The reason for writing these kinds of novels and stories is explained in Versluys’ article and mostly has to do with the healing function of the narrative. What is important now, is how all these novels can be classified into different categories and what they contribute to the discussion revolving around 9/11.

The first category is that of the great New York novel. These “have the ambition to encompass the whole city” (Versluys 2007, 69), which is a perfect description of Jonathan Safran Foer’s second novel Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close (2005). This novel is set in New York City and the surrounding Burroughs and has little Oskar Schell as its protagonist. Oskar was seven years old when the Twin Towers came crashing down, taking his father with them. His story takes place two years later when he is still recuperating from the trauma and the black hole created by 9/11, which he now tries to fill by undertaking a quest through New York City, in search of a lock that will fit the key he found in his dad’s closet. Most of all, he is searching for answers and forgiveness for keeping a huge secret from his mother and grandmother. As his quest leads us through the five, and actually six, Burroughs of New York, this novel can rightly be called a great New York novel.

Ian McEwan’s Saturday (2005) belongs to the category of the novel of the outsider. It takes place in 2003 as well but the events of 9/11 are seen from a distance as the protagonist, Henry Perowne, lives in central London, as does McEwan. On that particular Saturday, 15 February, 2003, Perowne is a witness of the demonstration against the invasion of Iraq. He even gets caught up in a micro-terrorist attack himself, when a street criminal named Baxter invades Perowne’s home and tries to rape his daughter. The viewpoint of the extreme Other, the terrorist who causes the trauma, is pictured here but of course, without delivering a justification for the attacks of 9/11. The events in the novel can be read as a micro-9/11 and displays the general feeling of anxiety and fear that troubled the Western world after the attacks in New York. Because the novel deals with the shadow rather than with the event of 9/11 itself, Daniela Pitt considers the fact that Saturday is not a 9/11
novel at all (Pitt 2009, 45) but I tend to agree with professor Versluys and still consider McEwan’s book as a post-9/11, outsider novel, especially due to the many 9/11 references.

The third category, the novel of first-hand witnessing, is an interesting one because it gives the reader a sense of what happened that day in the epicenter of the event itself. Versluys uses Art Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers (2004) to illustrate this category because it is mostly biographical and it offers a view on 9/11 as a total event. I chose to discuss Jay McInerney’s The Good Life (2006) in this category because the plot of the story starts when the two main characters, Luke McGavok and Corrine Calloway, have an encounter during 9/11. This initiates a radical change for both of them when they fall in love and begin an adulterous relationship while still recovering from the shock of that dreadful day. As the novel takes place before, during and shortly after 9/11, I tend to think of it as a novel of first-hand witnessing, rather than a great New York novel. Although it is set in New York, it does not take the reader through the city as Foer’s novel does but instead, it focuses on the events taking place around Bowling Green and Ground Zero.

These novels show that the 9/11 trauma conjured up many different reactions ranging from attacking the behavior of the United States in its aftermath, to grieving for personal losses or turning one’s whole life around due to a sudden wake-up call. These are only a few reactions but they are worth exploring as they represent the ‘working-through’ of many people of the post-9/11 generation. It is also important to mention that these three works all appeared around the same time, four to five years after 9/11, which shows that it took some time before people tried to overcome their grief and were able to start talking about the trauma they underwent. These novels are often mentioned as some of the most famous and important post-9/11 novels, which makes them a perfect corpus to discuss the representation of the trauma of 9/11 in literary works.
2. **Theoretical framework**

In constructing the theoretical framework for this thesis, I make use of some groundbreaking works concerning trauma theory, which I will summarize before plunging into them. Most of these works have been written in the light of the Holocaust but they are, in most cases, applicable to other major collective, historical traumas as well.

One of the first theories comes from Cathy Caruth, a professor of Comparative Literature and English and Chair of Comparative Literature at Emory University. According to Robert Jay Lifton, an M.D. in Psychiatry, she is “one of the most innovative scholars on what we call trauma, and on our ways of perceiving and conceptualizing that still mysterious phenomenon.” She is the author of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). She is one of the figureheads of modern trauma studies and her work has served as a basis for other researchers in the same field. The two main themes in her work are the inherent latency that characterizes trauma and the strange paradox between the trauma of death and the trauma of survival, both of which already appeared in the works of Sigmund Freud.

The second academic, from whom I will borrow theories, is Dominick LaCapra, an American historian, a professor of Humanistic studies at Cornell University and, like Cathy Caruth, one of the groundbreaking theorists on trauma. I will concentrate on his theories as formulated in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001).

Finally, I will briefly discuss Kai Erikson’s studies on the influence of catastrophes, natural and technological, on the individual and the community in the last subchapter. The professor in Sociology and American Studies talks about how these catastrophes can affect groups of people who were not even present at the time of the catastrophe. His contribution will be smaller than those of Caruth and LaCapra. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to acknowledge the effects of disasters on collectivities, especially because “in a time of globalized witnessing and shared vicarious experience, an event like 9/11 is a rupture for everybody” (Versluys 2009, 4).
2.1. **The history of trauma theory**

In its most primary origin, the Greek word ‘trauma’ referred to an injury inflicted on the body rather than on the mind. In its later usage, it is used more and more to refer to conditions concerning the mind (Caruth 1996, 3). Unlike the wounding of the body, which is a simple and in most cases healable injury, the wounding of the mind is much more complex because it is not experienced in real time, which makes it harder to register for our consciousness.

When taking a look at the earliest appearances of trauma theory in history, I am inevitably traced back to the early theories of Sigmund Freud¹, who was one of the first to explore the realm of psychology and psychoanalysis. His research on trauma started at the end of the 19th century when he discovered that a psychological trauma was at the basis of women’s so-called hysteria. In his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), he explains the hysteria by suggesting that the women were sexually abused when they were young. According to Freud the actual trauma then “consists of two scenes - the earlier (in childhood) having sexual content but no meaning, the later (in puberty) having no sexual content but sexual meaning” (quoted in Caruth 1995, 9). Freud concludes that the actual trauma is caused by the dialectic relation between the two events and the moment of latency between the two moments, when you remain unaware of the trauma. Although this model is especially used to explain the trauma of child abuse, it does explain the importance of the temporal delay, which seems to be inherent to trauma and which Freud calls ‘belatedness’ (Codde 2009).

Freud needed to adjust his theories later on, especially because of the First World War and the soldiers who came back from the battlefield with signs of war neurosis, even though some of them never were on the actual battlefield. This condition reappeared during the Second World War but it was not until the war in Vietnam that the ‘disease’ got real recognition. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association defined “the long-recognized but frequently ignored phenomenon under the

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¹ He was the founder of the psychoanalytic school of psychology and writer of groundbreaking works such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).
title ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD), which included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell-shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses both human and natural catastrophes” (Caruth 1995, 3). Category A of this psychiatric condition is further defined as a response to an event “outside the range of usual human experience” (Caruth 1995, 3), which already hints at the subject of this thesis on 9/11.

2.2. The nature of trauma

There are many general definitions of trauma – and quite a few of them can be found in Cathy Caruth’s collections of essays named *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). This one, by Caruth herself, seems to sum up what they all have in common: “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11, my italics). The fact that the event was overwhelming for the victim means that the victim’s brain was not prepared for a shattering experience. The victim was not ready to feel pain and anxiety, in Freud’s term *Angstbereitschaft* (LaCapra 2001, 90). The delayed reaction is the condition I already mentioned in the first part of this chapter, namely PTSD. She gives her own definition of this phenomenon at the start of her introduction to *Trauma*:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (Caruth 1995, 4)

The principal feature of trauma is that the victim is not aware of the trauma at the time of the occurrence. Because of the unexpectedness of the event, the brain is not able to process the
shock immediately, thus creating a gap between the occurrence of the trauma and the return to full consciousness. Freud already defined this latency in his speculative study of Jewish history, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), where he came to the following conclusion:

> It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave physical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a 'traumatic neurosis'. This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the ‘incubation period’, a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease... It is the feature one might term latency. (Freud 1939, 84, original italics)

Whereas Freud described trauma as the succession of the occurrence of the event followed by its suppression and finally by its return, Caruth uses his insight to explain why some traumatic experiences do not seem to affect the victim upon occurrence. She says the victim of the train crash does not suppress or forget the trauma but he was never fully aware of the accident when it happened, so the accident did not leave a trace in the conscious of the individual. “The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (Caruth 1995, 7; Caruth 1996, 17). So whereas Freud says that the victim forgets the event after it occurred, referring to its return to consciousness with the term *nachträglichkeit* (belatedness), Caruth claims that the victim is not able to forget because he did not experience the event in the first place, due to ‘dissociation’.

This phenomenon is sometimes described as a very literal case of multiple personality disorder where the victim sees the whole accident happening from a distance or even hovering over the spectacle, as if the accident is really happening to someone else. It is only after a while, and in some cases through intense therapy, that the victim fully realizes he was not only involved in the accident but also traumatized by it. It is important to note here that it is, in most cases, not the event itself
that returns to haunt the patient but the fact that the event was shocking and unexpected and that it
c caught the victim completely by surprise.

A second characteristic of trauma is the fact that surviving the accident or catastrophe has a
double nature as well. One would think that after surviving a horrible accident, the victim, when
recuperated from all the bodily and psychological injuries, would be happy to still be alive but it is
not as simple as that. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the trauma does not register at the
moment of impact but rather, it hits with greater power later on. Secondly, Cathy Caruth mentions
that “what Freud encounters in the traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event but,
rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival” (Caruth 1996, 60). When Freud did
research to understand the war traumas some soldiers brought with them from the battlefields, he
discovered an enigmatic relationship between trauma and survival, which may explain why some
trauma patients are not content with their heroic title of ‘survivors’: “the fact that, for those who
undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but the passing out of it that is traumatic;
that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis” (Caruth 1996, 9, original italics). Indeed, surviving
your comrades in war, your family in an accident or even thousands of nameless people in a
catastrophe, may bring survivor guilt about your miraculous escape.

Moreover, this contradiction lies at the core of many narratives about trauma and survival, as
these pose the question: “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of
having survived it?” (Caruth 1996, 7) The survivor cannot deal with the death of so many people nor
face his or her own survival because of these deaths. Many of them feel that the only solution is to
commit suicide because they cannot find an answer to the question ‘why them and not me’? Some
studies even show that retraumatizing events can cause damage to the brain, affect the death drive
and therefore the suicide rate of the victims. The painful repetition in combination with the intrinsic
latency of the trauma, forces the survivor to keep on confronting the event that was not fully
grasped as it occurred. Caruth claims that “it is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of
its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony of the impossibility of living” (Caruth 1996, 62). What is terrifying for the patient is not so much the dream but the waking up, because it is exactly this boundary between the dreamlike state and the full consciousness that forms the essence of the trauma for the survivor. While during the phase of sleeping and dreaming, the unconsciousness is doing all the work, the consciousness takes over when the person wakes up and it is right then that the trauma hits in all its strength.

A large part of the trauma consists not only of having survived but having survived without really being aware of it, which is a logical consequence of the inherent latency. It is through the flashbacks that the victim is confronted for the first time with the mystery of his or her own survival, as opposed to the mystery of one’s near death experience. “Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one’s own survival” (Caruth 1996, 64, original italics), Caruth adds.

Again, the link with 9/11 is apparent as this event was one of the most unexpected and most shocking of all traumatic events in the recent past, creating a wave of unbelief as it was broadcast all across the world. However, it was not until later that the seriousness and the extent of the event began to seep through in the consciousness of the people who were witnessing and watching the event as if it was a movie instead of reality. In that way, 9/11 resembled the story of Tancred, written down in a poem by the Italian artist Tasso, which Freud used to explain his view on the ‘latency’ in a traumatic experience. Tancred is a Christian knight who falls in love with a princess named Chlorinda. After mistakenly killing his loved one on the battlefield, Tancred goes into a forest and grief-stricken plants his sword into a tree. Immediately, the tree begins to bleed and he hears the voice of Clorinda calling out to him, crying over the fact her lover killed her again. It is only during this ‘second murder’ that Tancred fully realizes what he has done on the battlefield, just as the Americans only realized what was going on after the second plane planted itself into the South Tower of the World Trade Center, which made it clear that it was no accident but a terrorist attack.
Before concluding this subchapter on the nature of trauma, I want to make the remark that not all traumatized people can be seen as a victim (LaCapra 2004, 79). In some cases, the ones traumatized by a certain event are perpetrators but these cannot be treated in the same way as the actual victims. LaCapra gives a striking example when he says that “the fact that Himmler suffered from chronic stomach cramps or that his associate Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski experienced nocturnal fits if screaming does not make them victims of the Holocaust” (LaCapra 2004, 79). Especially when reading works of fiction that include stories of trauma, the reader has to be careful not to sympathize with the wrong persons. Although a perpetrator can be traumatized by what he or she has done as well, one cannot treat him or her in the same way as the actual victim of the event. One can best see a ‘victim’ as someone belonging to a social, political, and ethical category instead of just looking at the psychological state of the person because LaCapra think that “historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it” (LaCapra 2001, 78 – 79).

To wrap up Caruth’s thoughts on the nature of trauma, I would like to use the following quote from her introduction to Unclaimed Experience: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth 1996, 18). But since this would mean that nobody’s trauma is accessible for other people who were no part of the event in question, she adds to this, a few pages later, that “trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 1996, 24). This explains then why so many novels and movies have been made about devastating incidents, because people need to share their trauma, in order to overcome it. This notion will further be explored in my discussion on acting out and working through.
2.3. Overcoming Trauma

Overcoming trauma obviously is not something that happens in one day. Instead, the traumatized person has to go through different stages in order to ‘heal’. Whereas Freud used the terms mourning and melancholia to describe the different stages of a person’s traumatic aftereffects, LaCapra prefers the respective expressions ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ which were ‘invented’ by Freud as well. These terms are no synonyms but rather, mourning can be seen as a form of working through and melancholia can be seen as a form of acting out, according to LaCapra. Pierre Janet’s terms ‘narrative memory’ and ‘traumatic memory’ are related to both these oppositions as well.

Acting out, or melancholia, means that the traumatized person is still stuck in the past, as he or she keeps on repeating the painful events in the form of nightmares or compulsive behavior. Working through the trauma, on the other hand, means that the victim is overcoming the traumatic aftereffects of the accident. In this stage, the traumatized person is ready to accept his trauma as a part of his life and because he recognizes this trauma as his own, he can finally start to mourn and learn to live with it. Additionally, the victim “is also able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (LaCapra 2001, 22). I have to stress that acting out and working through cannot be seen as complete opposites but rather as a process one has to go through in order to ‘heal’ from the trauma.

Freud furthermore feels the need to make a vital distinction between melancholy and mourning. “While the latter represents an active working-through of a traumatic loss, the former is characterized by inertia and self-hatred. The melancholic is apathetic, [...] incapable of love and achievement” (quoted in Versluys 2009, 20). Again, both stages cannot be seen separately. One frequently has to go through the stage of acting out to get to the working through (Codde 2009). This is more difficult when we look at Pierre Janet’s terms of ‘narrative memories’, which are common,
everyday memories and ‘traumatic memories’ which are not easily translated into narratives as they mostly consist of flash-backs and a lack of coherency. These difficulties can be resolved, however, by the act of bearing witness, which I will discuss in the subchapter on working through.

2.3.1. Acting Out

There are many different ways in which a person can ‘act out’ his or her traumatic experiences. In most cases, nightmares often take the patient back to the trauma unconsciously but even when awake and fully conscious, the patient can experience flash-backs of the traumatic event. LaCapra defines ‘acting out’ as a state “in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes [...] In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene” (LaCapra 2001, 21). Thus, the patients have to deal with more than just a bad dream because the ‘traumatic nightmare’ keeps on haunting them, long after they have woke up. The fact that the past is “relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription” (LaCapra 2001, 70) can be an explanation for this constant haunting presence because the patient is not able to distinguish between dream and reality anymore.

Besides the nightmares, acting out can also show itself through compulsive behavior and amnesia, a lack of memory, or sometimes through hypermnesia, an excess of memory (Codde 2009). It is because of this lack of memory that the victim feels the need to remember through repetitive actions which Freud formulated as follows: “The patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud 1924, 150, original italics). Additionally, the obsessive behavior shows itself in the failure to make thought-connections or drawing the right conclusions and in isolating memories. This failure is initiated by the patient’s urge to repeat, which has replaced the impulse to remember. Especially in the case of major historical
traumas like the Holocaust and 9/11, words do not suffice to describe the whole experience. Versluys says that “[9/11] is ultimately a semiotic event, involving the total breakdown of all meaning-making systems” (Versluys 2009, 2). The unconscious remembering and especially the repeating are two of the actions that are crucial in defining ‘acting out’ and two of the major bridges to cross in getting to the ‘working through’ part of the traumatic experience, where the patient is aware of his or her problems.

Unfortunately, when memories are hostile and hurtful, the tendency to resist remembering obviously grows. Freud therefore does not underestimate the importance of resistance. “The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering” (Freud 1924, 151). When patients resist to talk about their feelings or resist to acknowledge their issues, the task of the therapist becomes more difficult but it also provides him with information about the client. This can help to break the cycle of resistance. What the therapist has to do, is help the patients to dig into their own mind and confront them with their buried memories of calamities or natural disasters because the missing pieces of information need to be included in existing mental schemes in order for them to mean something. This is mentioned by Van der Kolk and Van der Hart in an essay in Caruth’s edited volume on trauma (Caruth 1996, 176). Caruth, however, discusses another striking feature of trauma, that unfortunately seems to defy this simple solution, namely that “traumatic recollection […] is not a simple memory” (Caruth 1995, 151). Pierre Janet already mentioned this when he talked about the difference between narrative memories en traumatic memories. Again, a paradox informs this claim because although the images of the traumatic event remain as lifelike and precise as a photograph, “they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control” (Caruth 1995, 151). This means that the victim is not able to conjure up these disturbing images at will because they pop up at the most inconvenient times. This can happen during the night when the victim tries to sleep and fight off the nightmares or even when the victim is fully conscious, these images can disturb his or her daily routine. Therefore, these distressing experiences are not easy to handle.
without the help of other people, insiders of outsiders to the event, which will be discussed in the subchapter on ‘working through’.

One more dichotomy characterizes the process of acting out, namely the distinction between absence and loss. Although both terms imply that something is missing, absence does not imply that there was something to begin with, whereas loss does imply an original possession of something. LaCapra says that “in converting absence into loss, one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made ‘us’ lose” (LaCapra 2001, 58). The reference to 9/11 is quite obvious here as thousands of people lost someone or something as a consequence of the attacks. On the other hand, nobody ‘lost’ the Twin Towers although the lack of seeing them when looking at New York’s skyline can easily be defined as an absence. LaCapra further mentions that “when absence, approximated to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the mourning may (perhaps must) become impossible and turn continually back into endless melancholy” (LaCapra 2001, 68). This is because one cannot really mourn the loss of a person or an object that was not really there in the first place. Therefore, it is important to make clear to the patients that they have to create a proper distinction between the two forms of voids. The problem of creating a distinction between absence and loss will return when I discuss ‘empathic unsettlement’ in the following chapter.

2.3.2. Working through

What is essential in the progress from acting out to working through, is that the victim is able to talk to someone about his or her feelings concerning the trauma, in order to break the temporal confusion and the cycle of repetition. According to Pierre Janet, one can give trauma a place in one’s recollection by turning traumatic memory into narrative memory (Versluys 2009, 3). The easiest way

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\footnote{This distinction cannot be seen as a complete binary because such complex, problematic opposites should be understood as having varying degrees of strength or weakness. (LaCapra 2001, 47, footnote 5)}
to do this is by creating a (chrono)logical narrative. Because of this, a vital role is played by the listener or in some cases, by the therapist, who acts as “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (Laub 1992, 57). It is the task of the therapist to make the unknown, repetitive behavior known to the victim and turn the trauma into an integrated part of who he or she is. “Descriptively speaking, it is to fill in gaps in memory; dynamically speaking, it is to overcome resistances due to repression” to quote Freud again (Freud 1924, 148).

It is important to keep in mind that it is only by testifying that the victim becomes a witness and the listener becomes a secondary witness. This testimony is not without risk for the listener because it is possible that some of the trauma will be incorporated in him or her. Both Dominick LaCapra and Dori Laub have formulated their findings on these matters and both agree that there are two ways to listen to the survivor’s stories. When the interviewer listens to the testimony, he shows that he understands the trauma and problems of the survivor. This reaction, which is called ‘empathic unsettlement’, is a healthy and, most of all, human response which does not involve full identification with the victim. It becomes dangerous, however, when the listener takes this association too far and the trauma really becomes one’s own, which LaCapra has termed ‘vicarious experience’, as opposed to the healthy response, which is called ‘a virtual experience’ (LaCapra 2001, 47; Lacapra 2004, 125). When the experience of listening to a first-hand witness becomes vicarious, the interviewer has to make sure that he or she can still make the distinction between absence and loss because this difference is often already forgotten by the original witness. When the person testifying has lost a loved one and one oversympathizes with him, it is possible one experiences this as a loss as well, although there was no loved one to begin with. Therefore, it is crucial to remain partly objective while acting as a secondary witness. If the interviewer conflates between absence and loss, there is no way the initial witness will see it in the future. It is then that melancholic paralysis or manic agitation may develop within the survivor and this may lead to the generalization of huge historical trauma’s, in which everyone can function as a possible victim (LaCapra 2001, 64).
Still, “empathy is an affective component of understanding” (LaCapra 2001, 102) which makes it
difficult to control.

In his research on the Holocaust, Dori Laub came to the conclusion that “the survivors did not
only need to survive so that they could tell their stories, they also needed to tell their stories in order
to survive” (Laub 1992, 78). Consequently, another weight presses on the shoulders of the survivor.
The fact that, as a survivor, he or she has the task and most of all the responsibility of being a witness
to the event, since witnessing the death of people is basically the definition of being a survivor.

Caruth says that “trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of
survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between
destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart
of catastrophic experience” (Caruth 1996, 58). Of course, the victim cannot create a testimony on his
own and that is why the role of the listener is of great importance as he in turn becomes a witness to
the story of the witness. The listener also tries to make sense of this inherent incomprehensibility by
letting the victim talk about his experiences and only interrupting or motivating the victim to talk
when necessary. LaCapra mentions that “in testimonies the survivor as witness often relives
traumatic events and is possessed by the past. These are the most difficult parts of testimony for the
survivor, the interviewer and the viewer of testimonies” (LaCapra 2001, 97). During these difficult
parts, the response of the interviewer is of great importance to the victim, though it is often very
hard for the interviewer to create an appropriate response to such traumatic testimonies when they
have not experienced it for themselves.

Nonetheless, sometimes the stage of working through the trauma is not so easily reached
because “those traumatized by extreme events, as well as those empathizing with them, may resist
working through because of what might almost be termed a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one
must somehow keep faith with it” (LaCapra 2001, 22). Because of the extremeness of the events, as
is for instance the case with the Holocaust and 9/11, the trauma regularly becomes a part of the
victim’s identity and as such, the victim may have trouble parting with it. This is also the case when during the experience, the victim has lost relatives or loved ones. Then the event itself serves as a kind of memorial or commemoration for these dead intimates, which makes it harder for the patient to relegate the trauma to the past as he would then put the dead in the past as well. It is remarkable that a horrible event like 9/11 can form, in some cases, a large part of someone’s identity. LaCapra says that “all myths of origin include something like a founding trauma, through which the people pass and emerge strengthened” (LaCapra 2001, 161). This situation is sometimes prompted by the community, which often keeps commemorating the painful events on a yearly basis and by the media, who keep on displaying the whole spectacle on television and in print, as they did with 9/11. Here, the working through is especially prohibited by a need to have a dedication or fidelity to the dead instead of being based on suppression or a lack of remembrance (LaCapra 2001, 144).

To conclude, when one has effectively worked through a traumatic experience, “one is both back there and here at the same time, and one is able to distinguish between (not dichotomize) the two” (LaCapra 2001, 90) In short, the victim remembers the past and the trauma and can sometimes be obsessed by it to some extent, but he or she has not lost touch with the present. The victim knows that it is the present that is important and the past differs from the present in that it is just a healthy part of his or her memory.

2.4. **Private and public trauma**

The aforementioned Kai Erikson researches the effects of sociological disasters like the oil spill of the Exxon Valdez or the genocide in Yugoslavia. His theories concern the fact that trauma can be a collective phenomenon too, but both forms of trauma can obviously be present at the same

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3 One of these founding traumas has been described by Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), where he explains how the Jews only practice religion to make them feel better about the guilt they feel for the murdering of their leader, Moses. However, most historians rejected Freud’s theories on this subjects from the 1960’s onwards.
time. He tries to define ‘trauma’ in general and in doing so, he makes use not only of Caruth’s theories, but also of a quote by Paul Valéry, which says that “our memory repeats to us what we haven’t yet come to terms with, what still haunts us” (Valéry quoted in Caruth 1995, 184). Erikson’s definition of trauma does not differ from the definitions Caruth and LaCapra offer us. Erikson also mentions “a blow to the tissue of the mind,” – the invasion of the trauma into your mind in so far that it ‘possesses’ you – and some classic symptoms as “restlessness and agitation at one end of the emotional scale to feelings of numbness and bleakness at the other” (Caruth 1995, 183). He adds to this that people who have been traumatized often distrust the world and the people in it and are constantly aware of the impending doom the world can bring (Caruth 1995, 184).

The difference between Erikson’s definition and those of other commentators is that Erikson applies most of his explanation to the tissues of the community’s mind. “But even when that does not happen, traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a groups culture, almost – that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension” (Caruth 1995, 185). He even goes so far as to say that community trauma can function in the same way as a common language or a common background, to create bonds and feelings of unity. The big difference between individual trauma and collective trauma, according to Erikson, is that individual trauma involves a blow to the individual’s psyche, which happens all of a sudden so that the individual cannot come up with an appropriate reaction or defense in time, while the collective trauma consists of a blow as well, but “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bond attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Caruth 1995, 187). This sense of communality will play a significant role in *The Good Life* and *Saturday* as the characters try to form a countermovement to the terrorists.

This certainly makes sense when looking at 9/11 because according to Luc Lang, the French author who wrote ‘11 Septembre mon amour’ (2003), “for the first time perhaps in the history of
humanity, we were all contemporaries” (quoted in Versluys 2009, 7). Add the expansion of the media and one can understand that by broadcasting all these disasters so quickly and widely, they become “a moment in everyone’s history, a date in everyone’s store of knowledge” (Caruth 1995, 191) Of course, a big difference remains between the natural disasters Erikson describes and the technological ones, as it is easier to point out the person guilty of the disaster in the second type of tragedy. In the case of 9/11, it is not hard to see that the terrorists are indeed the ones responsible for the trauma but when we consider Saturday by Ian McEwan, it will become clear that this is not quite as simple as it seems.

Another point about collective trauma I would like to stress, is the fact that sometimes it is the community itself that creates, in its hour of need, this collective identity associated with the trauma. In the case of New York, this identity was foremost created by the hundreds of missing-person signs which were hung up all over town. The New York Times used these posters to create 1,910 short biographies of the victims under the title ‘Portraits of Grief’, which were later published as a book called ‘Portraits’ (Miller 2003, 19). This is not so different from the many memorials that are often erected after massive collective traumas, but in the case of the portraits, the focus mainly lies on the individuals and not on the collective trauma, although one could argue that the 1,910 deceased together form a collective as well. Miller adds that “the loss is so great that the only way to bring it to language is to think small, cutting it down to size” (Miller 2003, 28). In my opinion, this stress on the individuals might as well be a typical American things because through the portraits, they want to stress that they consider everyone to be equal, whether they are poor, rich, colored or white. That is why the New York Times stressed the good deeds and positive qualities of everyone they portrayed. Obviously, one does not speak ill of the dead. The short biographies consisted of a photograph and an anecdote from the victim’s life, which was randomly chosen by the ones who left behind. Nancy Miller says that “the anecdote might […] serve as a telling detail in a life’s interrupted story” (Miller 2003, 21) which again stresses the impact of the whole event and the abruptness with
which hundreds of lives ended. Furthermore, these kinds of texts “take the private person into the public arena” (Miller 2003, 23).

LaCapra notes that the way in which historical traumas penetrate the public’s memory is of the utmost importance. When historical research is out in the open, it is available “for both uses and abuses” (LaCapra 2001, 95) and the way in which one remembers for example the Shoah is very important to come to terms with the disaster. LaCapra also mentions that there might be a difference in perception because obviously, an event like the Holocaust is remembered differently in Germany, Israel or in the United States. This is another reason for novelists to be careful when dealing with a mixture of fact and fiction, a problem that will be the subject of discussion in the next chapter on trauma and literature.
3. Trauma in Literature

3.1. Fact and Fiction

When Dominick LaCapra discusses the Holocaust Testimonies in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, he explicitly mentions the testimonial art called traumatized or post-traumatic writing as an art that has been prevalent since the end of the nineteenth century (LaCapra 2001, 105). He also mentions the risks that are involved in writing such narratives when one begins to transgress limits that should not be transgressed or when one makes associations that are not accounted for. Still, “it is a relatively safe haven compared with actual traumatization. It may even be a means of bearing witness to, enacting, and, to some extent, working over and through trauma whether personally experiences, transmitted from intimates, or sensed in one’s larger social and cultural setting” (LaCapra 2001, 105, original italics).

However, I mentioned in my introduction that great, traumatic events, such as the Holocaust or 9/11, often defy representation. Still, the number of works that have been written on these events are endless. Once more, the fact that trauma contains several paradoxes becomes clear, and this also means that there are no simple solutions. This is why Caruth claims that “the phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive” (Caruth 1995, 4). It is a phenomenon that the human mind cannot grasp easily, and therefore different disciplines are used and combined to form an adequate explanation and foremost, a solution for overcoming trauma. Caruth sums up different disciplines like psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and the one that is important in the next chapters, literature. Together, these disciplines try to bridge the gap between the knowing and not knowing of traumatic experience. Another important work on this subject is *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), where Dominick LaCapra proposes two ways of historiography, the study that examines the way in which history is written, namely radical constructivism and a documentary or self-sufficient research model (LaCapra 2001, 196). The most extreme form of the latter model is positivism.
LaCapra positions himself between these two extreme forms of history writing when dealing with traumatic accounts.

The latter model of writing, namely the documentary form, uses primary documents that allow the writer to put down the facts of history and recount these in a narrative which allows the reader to check if the facts are really facts and not fictional creations. These kinds of text just reproduce the results of the research in question and do not focus on the form of the narrative, as this is less important than the content and the reader has to know right away what the text is about. Nothing can be lost in metaphorical language or literary wordings, so a clear-structured and well-crafted piece of prose is preferred. In LaCapra’s opinion however, fiction can also express truth because it gives the readers an insight “into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which might be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods.’ (LaCapra 2001, 13) Fiction frequently adapts non-fiction stories to remain truthful, but then adds stylistic and fictional and often emotional elements to give the story a timeless character. LaCapra adds that “truth claims are neither the only nor always the most important consideration in art and its analysis. Of obvious importance are poetic, rhetorical, and performative dimensions of art which not only mark but also make differences historically.” (LaCapra 2001, 15) It is obvious that art and historiography should not be seen as complete opposites because they can easily work together and in that way make history come alive. Nevertheless, writers need to be careful when adapting the facts of history to create a narrative because there are extremely traumatic events that are still very value-laden and painful for the people who had to deal with them. Naturally, the Holocaust is a very good example but it works for 9/11 as well, because it took place in a more recent past than the Holocaust.

Radical constructivism on the other hand, focuses primarily on the aesthetic function of a text but these texts include the political and the ideological side of things as well. When truth claims are involved, they tend to revolve around the events only and even then they do not have that much significance. Constructivists see a big difference on the level of the event itself whether it is a
description in history or in literature, yet, surprisingly, they do see “an identity or essential similarity” (LaCapra 2001, 8) on the structural level. Again, this relativistic position can have dire consequences when representing large traumatic events like the Holocaust, because they might open the doors to the denial of the Holocaust and the minimization of other shattering historical events. This historiographic point of view falsely implies that the political and ideological opinion of the writer is the one that holds the real truth.

Fortunately, LaCapra himself does not support either one of these extreme positions as he defends “the position [that] puts forth a conception of history as tensely involving both an objective (not objectivist) reconstruction of the past and a dialogic exchange with it and other inquirers into it wherein knowledge involved not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value.” (LaCapra 2001, 35) In short, LaCapra does not condemn a romanticized approach of trauma in literature but he does plea for a clear-cut distinction between the facts and the fictionalized.

Another vital remark that has to be made here, is the fact that trauma and literature not always go together that well. Right after a traumatic event, it is very difficult for writers to put their feelings on paper, yet, they often try because they want to come to terms with the experience. Thane Rosenbaum, a Jewish American author, wonders if we “can make art in a time of atrocity” (quoted in Versluys 2009, 11). Personally, he did not want to touch the story of 9/11 because he uttered that “silence might be the loudest sound of all” (quoted in Versluys 2009, 11), an opinion some of the theorists, who did research on the Holocaust, shared with Rosenbaum. Still, after a certain period, many stories are written about traumatic events. Especially because people still attach a lot of importance to the opinions of writers, whom they expect to have oracular insights. How much time has to elapse before one can write about a certain event is not really defined but it appears that many people want to understand what happened to them by using “the healing potential of language” (Versluys 2009, 14). How trauma is actually represented in works of fiction will be discussed in the last subchapter of this theoretical framework.
3.2. Characteristics of Traumatic Narratives

In my discussion of the three novels, I will apply this theoretical framework mostly to the analysis of the characters and their respective traumas. But for an analysis of literature or movies on the basis of trauma theory, it is important to go beyond this psychological analysis and consider the structural and formal components of the work of art. One of the features of traumatic events is their difficult representation because how does one even begin to describe an event as horrible as a genocide or as overwhelming as 9/11? When the character Art Spiegelman, in the novel Maus visits his therapist, they talk about the need to witness traumatizing events in stories. Art then comments on this that Samuel Beckett once said: “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness” (Spiegelman 1991, 205). After he quotes the playwright, he comes up with a smart remark: “On the other hand, he SAID it” (205). Nonetheless, language remains one of the most important devices in coming to terms with traumatic.

Anne Whitehead sums up some of the main characteristics of trauma fiction in her eponymous novel ‘Trauma Fiction’ (2004). She starts by explaining the influence of postmodernism, postcolonialism and the postwar legacy on traumatic narratives. Trauma fiction, according to her, overlaps especially with postcolonial fiction “in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” (Whitehead 2004, 82). But in recent years, trauma fiction has been concerned with much more than just creating a narrative out of trauma and conjuring up painful memories. It is no longer ‘what’ is remembered, that forms the central point in these narratives, but rather ‘how’ and ‘why’ something is remembered. This can explain another shift in the field of trauma studies from the medical and scientific discourse to literary studies, where the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of traumatic memories can be represented better. However, in trauma fiction conventional narrative techniques do not suffice to represent the traumatic event. Trauma fiction instead pushes these conventional techniques to the limit and

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4 I also consulted Laura Beadling’s article on Whitehead’s Trauma Fiction.
foregrounds the nature and limitations of literature. This way, narratives can try to convey the damaging and distorting impact of traumatic experiences (Whitehead 2004, 82).

One of the first characteristics of traumatic narratives, is the non-linearity or the nonconventional beginning-middle-end plot as Dominick LaCapra calls it. This kind of structure is frequently applied because the more traditional plot serves to seek closure and this is what ultimately lacks in traumatic narratives. Other forms of narration are used in these cases because they “raise in probing and problematic ways the question of nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence.” (LaCapra 2001, 54) It is important to know that most of the novels in modern literature apply this nonconventional form so it is not something that is exclusively used in trauma literature but it can nevertheless be seen as one of its characteristics. One way of defying the linear structure can be found in the use of flash-backs and flash-forwards, which causes a disrupted chronology. Another form of non-linear writing can be found in the novels by Foer and McInerney, where there are multiple focalizers and the chapters switch between the views of these different focalizers. In some cases, there are huge temporal and spatial gaps between the multiple point of focalization, as is especially the case in Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close. These gaps and fragmented story lines represent the inherent latency of the trauma.

These gaps are often called lacunae and together with the open ending of the story, they serve to defy closure. As remembering and forgetting are two important characteristics of trauma, uncertainty about some memories is also essential in the traumatic narrative. Characters forget to mention things, make something up or tell untruths, although they are unaware of their lies. This unconscious lying even is a problem in non-fictional works because it makes historians doubt about the reliability of the witnesses. One has to take into account that these witnesses often were so traumatized that they do not recall everything as it really happened and therefore tell ‘lies’, because their brains were not able to process everything that happened on the moment of the trauma. Repetition therefore is one of the main stylistic features of trauma fiction on the level of language,
imagery and even plot. Anne Whitehead mentions that repetition is not only inherently ambivalent but it also mimics the process a traumatized person goes through. Besides these fragmented storylines and lacunae, intertextuality forms an important mode of representation in traumatic narratives.

LaCapra also mentions the middle voice, a voice hovering between active and passive modes, when he discusses the free indirect style, or Erlebte Rede (LaCapra 2001, 196) as one of the most appropriate ways of representing trauma in literature and especially literature concerning the Holocaust. This type of voice is “most suitable” according to LaCapra, “for representing or writing trauma, especially in cases in which the narrator is empathically unsettled and able to judge or even predicate only in a hesitant, tentative fashion” (LaCapra 2010, 197). This mode of telling is mostly not applied in narratives where ethical or political matters are discussed and it does not claim to tell the absolute truth. On the contrary, the middle voice is often related to uncertainty, risk and an openness to the story of the radical other (LaCapra 2010, 197). When we look at this middle voice in grammatical terms, the dictionary tells us that this type of voice is in between the passive and the active voice because the subject is not an agent, nor a patient. Whitehead adds to this that the present continuous tense is a means of representation that often helps to transmit this uncertainty and openness to the reader.

It is true that language fails in the view of trauma but not talking or writing about such gruesome events is no solution either. Pierre Nora says that “our current ‘Era of commemoration’ is characterized by forgetfulness: we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left” (quoted in Whitehead 2004, 82). This is one of the main reasons why we should not stop trying to express trauma, even when it is unrepresentable. However, one thing authors should be aware of is that they have to create a precise distinction between what is real and what is fiction. When a

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5 However, he does not support the use of this middle voice in representing historiography, as uncertainty is one of the traits most opposite to writing history.
novelist represents the traumatic event in a too romanticized way, with a happy ending, it may have a bad influence on the victims and witnesses.
4. Three Post-9/11 Novels

4.1. Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

Jonathan Safran Foer’s second novel was published in 2005, three years after he made his debut with the novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002)\(^7\). His novel was praised and criticized at the same time, because some critics thought Foer disregarded the graveness and importance of 9/11.

The story is written in different layers, as is typical in accounts of traumatic experiences. The most important storyline is the one I already summarized when defending my choice of the novels. Nine-year-old Oskar Schell lost his father during 9/11 and he now goes on a quest through the five Burroughs of New York, in search of answers and a way to process his loss. Besides the story of Oskar, there are a second and third storyline concerning his grandparents, both of which have witnessed another great historical trauma, namely the bombing of Dresden. Oskar does narrate the main story in the novel but the narrative is interspersed with letters from Oskar’s grandfather, Thomas Schell Senior, to his son, Thomas Junior, and letters from Oskar’s grandmother to Oskar. The story of Oskar will take up most of my analysis but I will not disregard the secondary plots.

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\(^6\) I based my analysis of this novel on my notes of professor Codde’s classes on ‘Third Generation Jewish American Trauma Narratives’ (Contemporary American Literature, Ghent University, 2009) as well as on his article ‘Philomela Revised’ (2007). Furthermore, I made use of Sien Uytterschout’s article on ‘Melancholy and mourning in Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close’ (2008).

\(^7\) Foer’s novel has been turned into a movie as well. It was released in the USA in 2005. Due to the adaptations the director, Liev Schreiber, made the book and the movie show some remarkable differences.
4.1.1. The Characters and Their Trauma

4.1.1.1. Oskar’s Trauma

Oskar Schell, the protagonist of the story, lives in New York with his mom, and across the street from his grandmother. Oskar is not your typical nine-year-old. Foer describes him as an inventor, a letter-writer and amateur detective. He has major psychological problems caused by the loss of his father. The action in the book begins when Oskar finds a vase in his father’s closet, where he often hides, and he notices that it contains an envelope with the word ‘Black’ written on it. Inside the envelope, there is a key for which Oskar cannot find the right lock. From that moment on, it is his goal to find the key’s lock and linked to that, his father’s secret. The main reason for Oskar to go on the quest for his father’s key is the fact that on the day of the attacks, Oskar was actually at home when his father called. Not knowing what to do, Oskar listens to the messages that are already on the machine when he gets home from school, but when his father calls for the last time, while Oskar is right beside the telephone, he is unable to pick it up (Codde 2007, 244). Oskar seems to be paralyzed, which shows that Foer takes into account the physical and especially mental paralysis that often comes with a traumatic experience. Besides the fact that Oskar seems to be paralyzed, Foer does not describe Oskar’s reactions to the event in great detail. Instead, he concentrates on the way Oskar deals with his traumatic recollections and he shows us the paradoxical process of attraction and repulsion that is so distinctive for post-traumatic memories. Sien Uytterschout already mentions this dichotomy when discussing melancholy and mourning in Foer’s novel: “Typical reactions to trauma comprise either a repression of all trauma-related memory or an endeavour to remember the event and fit it into a coherent whole” (Uytterschout 2008, 1).

Furthermore, Laura Frost stresses the importance of the messages on the answering machine (Keniston and Quinn 2008, 195-196). Oskar listened to the messages repeatedly and he timed the

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8 Parts of this subchapter were borrowed from my unpublished bachelor paper on ‘Photographic Representations of Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close’ (Verbestel 2009).
last message his father left on the answering machine: “it’s one minute and twenty-seven seconds. Which means it ended at 10:24. Which was when the building came down. So maybe that’s how he died” (Foer 2005, 302). This uncertainty adds to the original trauma and even enhances it because Oskar is not able to put the memories of his father to rest. Moreover, Oskar is bothered because his mother does not seem to be as troubled as he is, about the death of his father. Although making his mother happy is one of Oskar’s raisons d’être (Foer 2005, 7), he blames her for moving on so quickly, with her new friend Ron.

4.1.1.2. Oskar’s Acting-out

First of all, Oskar clearly shows some obsessive behavior related to the event of 9/11 itself, for obvious reasons. He hopes that he can find out more about his father’s death – another obsession of his – by gaining as much knowledge as he can about 9/11, although he never explicitly refers to the event by its name. Instead, he calls it “the worst day” (Foer 2005, 11) or “what happened” (14). The internet is one of his main sources for gathering information about September 11° (Keniston and Quinn 2008, 186-187). Oskar realizes that this will not bring his father back but he is desperate to do something, as he indicates himself: “I did a few other searches, even though I knew they would only hurt me, because I couldn’t help it” (Foer 2005, 42). The guilt Oskar feels for not answering the phone when his father called, forces him to do even more research and to go on the quest for the key, as Mitchum Huehls explains in his essay as well (Keniston 2008, 47). People who have been traumatized like this often feel the need to do something, anything, to take their minds off and to make them feel as if they are doing something useful.

On the other hand, Uytterschout stresses that Oskar also tries to avoid certain situations because there is “a lot of stuff that made [him] panicky” (Foer, 2005, 36; Uytterschout 2008, 8). He still feels this way after two years have passed which shows us the long-term effects of traumatic events. This

° He found the picture of ‘the falling man’ on the internet.
avoidance of stimuli concerning the trauma is what Cathy Caruth already mentioned when she discussed the paradoxical nature of trauma (Caruth 1995, 4). In these cases, people tend to avoid anything that makes them think of their traumatic experiences and that could ‘trigger’ their traumatic memories. Both the avoidance and attraction regarding these ‘triggers’, are parts of the melancholic process LaCapra described as ‘acting out’. What is essential for Oskar in order to arrive at the ‘working-through’ is that, rather than avoid the painful intrusions of these ‘triggers’, he should confront them head on and try to incorporate them into his daily life. By learning to understand and deal with these repetitive memories, he will eventually learn to grieve and mourn the death of his father. At certain points in the novel, Foer shows us that Oskar cannot get rid of his fears of planes and terrorists. Even when he visits the Empire State Building, Oskar cannot help but think about catastrophic scenes: “Even though I knew the view was incredibly beautiful, my brain started misbehaving, and the whole time I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us” (Foer 2005, 244). This shows us that trauma is something the brain cannot process in a simple and easy way. During his evolution from ‘acting out’ to ‘working-through’, Oskar also has a hard time with his emotions because the sorrow and the pain of the trauma are constantly bubbling under the surface.

In addition, Oskar also feels the urge to invent things. These inventions range from birdseed suits to singing teakettles and in one way or another, these are all linked to Oskar’s father. The birdseed suit for instance, is one of Oskar’s inventions that could have saved his father when the towers came down; the teakettle on the other hand has to serve as a replacement for his father’s voice. He even invents horrible ways of dying when he visits his grandmother and she is not home (Foer 2005, 235). By inventing alternative versions of reality, Oskar shows that he is not content with the way his life is now. He especially feels guilty about not telling his mother or grandmother about his dad’s telephone calls and the fact that he did not pick up the receiver, but he cannot find the proper way to tell them about it. This guilt also presents itself in the bruises Oskar gives himself. Basically, inventing things has become a substitute for the presence of his father. He especially misses him.
during the evening ritual of being put to bed. Oskar says that “being with him [his father] made my brain quiet. I didn’t have to invent a thing” (Foer 2005, 12). The importance of the evening ritual and the quality time spent with his father is emphasized again later on in the novel when Oskar mentions that the inventing is “worst at night” (36).

Additionally, Oskar is a boy who reads many books and knows many encyclopedic facts as well. This constant urge to possess knowledge about everything in the world pops up in the novel on frequent occasions. Oskar mostly mentions these amusing facts and figures when he talks about his feelings concerning the trauma, in an attempt to use his knowledge as a protective shield against the overwhelming nature of his own emotions. At some point in the novel, Oskar thinks about his father and the time he spent with him, and that is when he “decided that [he] would meet every person in New York with the last name Black. Even if it was relatively insignificant, it was something, and I needed to do something, like sharks, who die if they don’t swim, which I know about” (Foer 2005, 87). This last clause is added whenever Oskar gives proof of his seemingly unlimited knowledge (1, 36, 106). It seems as if Oskar tries to keep his mind busy with all kinds of random knowledge, in order to prevent the memories of 9/11 from haunting him.

Besides gaining encyclopedic knowledge, Oskar is an enthusiastic writer. He writes letters to famous people all the time to tell them about his inventions but especially to ask if they want to be his teachers. This way, Oskar searches for someone who can replace his father as a role model. In addition, these letters take his mind off of more horrible things: “A few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters. I don’t know why, but it was one of the only things that made my boots lighter” (Foer 2005, 11). This tendency to write letters will pop up again in the chapter on Oskar’s grandparents.

\[10\] Although I think that Oskar has always been interested in gaining knowledge, as he already played ‘the Renaissance game’ with his father when he was still alive.
Throughout the story, Oskar presents the reader with the photographs he makes with his grandfather’s old camera, a present from his grandmother. The photographs constitute some sort of pictorial diary for the young protagonist. One of the last images in this diary is seen as an ‘invention’ of Oskar as well. This slideshow Oskar creates at the end of his pictorial diary, and which provoked much criticism in the media, is also the most striking example of Oskar’s general unhappiness with life. It consists of a slideshow that shows the reader, when flipping rapidly through the pictures, a man floating upwards into the sky. The picture of this man, most commonly known on the internet as ‘The Falling Man’, appears for the first time as a single photograph (Foer 2005, 62) and it portrays one of the people who jumped from the WTC towers after the attacks. Oskar believes this man to be his father: “I printed out the frames from the Portuguese video and examined them extremely closely,” Oskar remarks. “There’s one body that could be him. It’s dressed like he was, and when I magnify it until the pixels are so big that it stops looking like a person, sometimes I can see glasses. Or I think I can. But I know I probably can’t. It’s just me wanting it to be him” (257). Although the diary contains some photographs that are related to Oskar’s life, they do not show actual scenes from his life. This would after all be the purpose of such a pictorial diary: to display important moments from one’s life. Instead, Oskar mainly chooses to put images from the internet in his diary. Again, Foer shows us that his protagonist rather avoids the confrontation with his own trauma instead of incorporating it into his diary, which I think would be more useful therapeutic work.

Of course, the quest for the mysterious key is one of the most apparent ways in which Oskar acts out his trauma. The metaphor Codde and Huehls use is clear: Oskar tries to unlock his trauma by going on this quest, which for him equals the cure for his trauma (Codde 2007, 244; Keniston 2008, 47)). He admits as much when he says: “finding the lock was my ultimate raison d’être – the raison that was the master over all other raisons” (Foer 2005, 69). I have found that Foer uses another

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11 More information about the photography in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is available in my unpublished bachelor paper (Verbestel 2009). I devote a separate chapter to the picture of ‘the falling man’ so I will only address it briefly here.

12 Codde mentions the reactions of Harry Siegel and Vivan Gornick in his article ‘Philomela Revised’ (p 250). John Updike, on the other hand, liked the flip-book at the end of the novel.
metaphor as well, although this one is more subtle and does not appear as often in the novel as the quest for the lock. When Oskar discovers the blue vase, which contains the envelope with the key, he has to stand on a stack of books in order to reach it. He gets *The Collected Shakespeare* set his grandmother gave him and says that he “brought those over, four tragedies at a time,” (Foer 2005, 37) to form a stack that is tall enough for him to get to the vase. Thus, Oskar has to pile up tragedies to get hold of the key, which I think can easily be seen as a metaphor for the piling up of his own traumas and the search for the right key to get rid of those traumatic experiences. Unfortunately, Oskar finds the key that unlocks someone else’s trauma instead of his own (Codde 2007, 252, footnote 10). By connecting both traumatized characters and having them help each other, Foer proves that Cathy Caruth was right when she said that “trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 1996, 24).

### 4.1.1.3. Oskar’s Working-through

As we saw in the theoretical framework, testimony is important for a trauma patient. By confiding in someone, one shares the burden of the traumatic memories. However, in many cases, there is a barrier that keeps the survivor from testifying. This is the case for Oskar as well. Right after the ‘worst day’, Oskar wants to protect his mother and grandmother from his father’s messages on the answering machine. I find it remarkable how much effort Oskar puts into hiding these messages from his family members because he even purchases a new, exact copy of the telephone at Radio Shack, hides away the old machine when he gets home and records the previous greeting onto the new phone so his mother would never notice. To me, this seems highly unlikely for a boy of Oskar’s age but Oskar has already proven to be a remarkable, not so average nine-year-old.

However, as the story progresses, we can see that Oskar feels the need to tell someone about his secret. He sometimes calls for his mother and when she says “yes?”, he mostly responds with “nothing” (Foer 2005, 36). This can be seen as an attempt to communicate what is on his mind,
but he changes his mind at the last second. He makes beaded jewelry for his mother, using Morse code to confess the secret of the telephone messages to her but of course, his mother only sees the jewelry and not the encrypted confession (Codde 2007, 245): “As for the bracelet Mom wore to the funeral, what I did was I converted Dad’s last voice message into Morse code, and I used sky-blue beads for silence, maroon beads for breaks between letters, violet beads for breaks between words, and long and short pieces of string between the beads for long and short beeps,...” (Foer 2005, 35). Oskar is convinced his dad would have understood.

At the end of the novel, we can see that Oskar is still working through his trauma and still ‘acts out’ by reversing the order of the pictures in his pictorial diary. This was to be expected, considering the nature and depth of the trauma. As I mentioned in the theoretical framework: acting-out and working-through are not completely different stages in the process of coming to terms with one’s trauma, it is a constant dialectic process. Initially, I would say that Oskar has made some improvements and is recovering steadily. When he is confessing everything that has happened to Mr. Black, Abby Black’s ex-husband and a man who lost his father as well, Oskar, for the first time, names the event correctly (Foer 2005, 299). Here we can see that both characters feel a strong connection between the both of them, as they both lost their father and are traumatized by this loss. Caruth already mentioned that “trauma may lead [...] to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (Caruth 1996, 8). Furthermore, by digging up his father’s coffin and witnessing the emptiness, Oskar learns to accept that his father is really gone. Although he knew there was not going to be a body inside, “[his] heart believed something else” (Foer, 2005, 321). On the other hand, Codde says that there is no real closure because Oskar still tries to bring his father back by letting him float upwards through the sky, back into the building and back home. In this way, he tries to deny the death of his father. I agree with Codde when he says that Oskar does not find closure but at the same time I believe Oskar’s wish to bring his father back is also a small acknowledgement of the fact that he really did disappear from his life. If he learns to fully accept this, it could be a first step towards real closure. Huehls expresses a
similar opinion when he says that “while this reversal is clearly just so much wishful thinking, its temporal form [...] proves crucial to Oskar’s healing process” (Keniston 2008, 43)

Oskar still has a long way to go and will have to mourn the death of his father even more but confessing everything to his mother is already one step in the right direction. She may even be the empathic listener he has been looking for throughout the book, given that she knew all along what Oskar was doing, traveling through New York City (Foer 2005, 291-292). Moreover, he now knows that she cares for him and understands his trauma. She even gave him the freedom to let him handle it in his own way. Oskar could have found this out a long time ago but because of his telephone phobia, he got Abby Black’s message only months after she called him. This experience will teach Oskar that he cannot be afraid of things all his life and it will help him to overcome his fears.

4.1.1.4. Oskar’s Grandparents’ Trauma

Oskar’s paternal grandparents offer the reader another story line in Foer’s novel. They were both victims of the bombings of Dresden in the Second World War and the sole survivors of their respective families, which makes them suffer from survivor guilt. Moreover, they get retraumatized when their son dies during the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Both characters have suffered during these experiences but they cope with their losses in very different ways. Oskar’s grandparents narrate their stories mostly through letters. Thomas Schell writes letters to the son he never knew while his wife writes letters to her grandson, Oskar.

Oskar’s grandmother, after she lost her relatives during the Dresden bombings, fled to America. She tried to start her life anew, with Thomas Schell as her husband – although their marriage will prove to be just another way of acting out their trauma. Uytterschout explains that they both try to find a substitute for their losses in each other (Uytterschout 2008, 4-5). However, when Oskar’s grandmother gets pregnant, Thomas Schell abandons his wife and child. The possibility of losing
another wife and child is too much for Oskar’s grandfather. In my opinion, he tries to act like “the better man” and walks away from them because he is not able to live as they do: “I tried and can’t” (Foer 2005, 135). Uytterschout used a quote by LaCapra, who describes such an abandonment as part of the melancholic process. Some trauma victims “may be profoundly unable to act responsibly and/or ethically, for example by giving consideration to other people” (LaCapra 2001, 28; Uytterschout 2008, 10). At the end of the novel, grandfather confesses to Oskar why he really left his wife and son: “He wrote, ‘I lost a son.’ ‘You did?’ […] ‘How did he die?’ ‘I lost him before he died.’ ‘How?’ ‘I went away.’ ‘Why?’ He wrote, ‘I was afraid.’ ‘Afraid of what?’ ‘Afraid of losing him.’ ‘Were you afraid of him dying?’ ‘I was afraid of him living. […] Life is scarier than death.”’ (Foer 2005, 322).

The idea that life is sometimes worse than death is expressed by Oskar’s grandmother as well (215).

During their time together, grandfather and grandmother made some agreements in order to be able to live together. Thomas Schell and his wife “started marking off areas in the apartment as ‘Nothing Places,’ in which one would be assured of complete privacy, […] in which one could temporarily cease to exist” (Foer 2005, 110). As a consequence, their apartment consists of more Nothing than Something (211) and at a certain point, the same seems to apply to their marriage because Thomas Schell only wants to make love to his wife in a Nothing Place. It is clear that he cannot live in the present and is equally unable to let go of the past (Uytterschout 2008, 4).

In many ways, grandmother acts like her grandson. Just as Oskar hides in “the sleeping bag of myself” (Foer 2005, 37), she hides away in the Nothing Places, and just as Oskar wants to reverse time to get his father back, she wants to reverse time to get her old life in Dresden back (Codde 2009, personal notes): “in my dream, all of the collapsed ceiling re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up and into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backwards, like the second hands of clocks around Dresden, only faster” (Foer 2005, 306-307).

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13 Codde explains this abandonment through the mythe of Philomela (Codde 2009, 248). He adds to this that Thomas’s decision to leave his pregnant wife had puzzled many critics. They “deem it one of the weaker and more implausible elements of Foer’s novel”.
Furthermore, it is grandmother who makes Oskar think about the fragility of time and the non-
absolute power it contains. In one of her many letters, she writes to her grandson that “anyone who
believes that a second is faster than a decade did not live my life” (Foer 2005, 181). Grandmother
feels haunted by time because it seems to catch up with her, faster than she can live. She is haunted
in her dreams as well which the reader finds out through Oskar: “She hollered, which woke me up,
obviously, so my sleep depended on her sleep, and when I told her, ‘No bad dreams,’ I was talking
about her” (Foer 2005, 104). If grandmother wants to get rid of her traumatic memory, she will have
to testify and create a narrative. Grandmother chooses to do this by writing down her life story, due
to the encouragement of her husband, Thomas Senior. I find this to be a little ironic because Thomas
Schell clearly does not follow his own advice (cf. infra). She spends hours and even days in the guest
room, which is located in a Nothing Place, typing away on the old type-writer. At the end of the story,
however, the reader finds out that grandmother kept on hitting the space bar, filling the pages with
blanks: “I went into the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and again.
My life story was spaces” (Foer 2005, 176). This is not surprising: just as persons and feelings cease to
exist in the Nothing Place, written words dissolve when written in such a location. Oskar’s
grandfather’s testimony on the other hand, becomes completely black – the complete opposite of his
wife’s – as he tries to cram as many words as possible into one page (Foer 2005, 282-283). Foer
shows his readers that trauma victims often do want to talk about their problems but find
themselves completely unable to find a suitable way of testifying.

After Thomas Schell loses his girlfriend and child, he loses his ability to speak as well. It is not
clear if his aphasia is caused by a physical inability or by a blunt refusal to speak (Uytterschout 2008,
5). I tend to believe that Thomas just refuses to speak, in the same way he refuses to deal with his
trauma. Nevertheless, in cases of severe trauma, the body of the victim can sometimes mimic the
wounding of the mind and soul. This ‘traumatic neurosis’ can present itself in other forms than
aphasia as well but in this case, the loss of speech is clearly an echo of Thomas’s deceased loved
ones. Either way, his aphasia prevents him from sharing his trauma with other people. Besides
notebooks, the words “yes” and “no” and a few other gestures, grandfather also expresses his thoughts and feelings through other means of communication and through other code systems. He pushes the keys on the telephone to convey his message (Foer 2005, 272), although grandmother does not understand what he means. Codde tried to decipher the consecutive number and although the first numbers form actual words and sentences, after a while, it only amounts to gibberish.\(^{14}\)

In all, it is unlikely to say that Oskar’s grandparents are working through their traumatic experiences because they are both still dealing with survivor guilt. Cathy Caruth explained this thin line between the crisis of living and the crisis of death (Caruth 1996, 7) and Oskar’s grandparents clearly confirm this idea. Their survival leads to feelings of guilt and unworthiness, which are direct results of PTSD (Uytterschout 2008, 4). Grandmother even tried to commit suicide after surviving Dresden. When her son dies during 9/11, she plans to commit suicide again because Oskar sees her carrying a huge boulder across Broadway. She normally picks up tiny rocks to help Oskar with his collection but Oskar senses that there is something weird about the large rock when he says that “she never gave one to me and she never mentioned it” (Foer 2005, 104). Furthermore, she is very insecure and does not have a high opinion of herself: “I wanted to lie down in my own waste, which was what I deserved” (Foer, 231). Both grandparents try to make up for their past by spending time with their grandson and helping him through his trauma. Nevertheless, the surname of the characters is an appropriate description of their conditions: they are but the ‘shell’ of their former selves and their survival is merely a bodily one.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) For a full explanation, consult Codde’s ‘Philomela revised’ (2007, p 253, footnote 14).

\(^{15}\) Codde explains that Oskar’s grandfather may have had a different name in the past (Codde 2007, p253, footnote 14). I do find his “Elie Blum” explanation plausible but on the other hand, Codde is right when he says that maybe “the name simply is supposed to make no sense at all”.
4.1.2. Trauma and Literature

In his second novel, Foer “tackles some of the remaining historical traumas of the twentieth century that were left untouched in *Everything Is Illuminated*” (Codde 2007, 241). Thematically, the novel is not the most innovative; other novels have been written about 9/11 as well, although Foer handles the painful subject in a unique way. Formally, on the other hand, Salman Rushdie was right to dub it “pyrotechnic” (Codde 2007, 241). Foer does not only play with the typography but he mixes it with another medium as well: photography. Codde mentions that many critics have questioned the form of the novel but I agree with him when he says that “many of these responses seem prompted [...] by emotions about [...] the incredible closeness of the historical crisis of 9/11” (241). I discussing the formal elements, I will focus on just one photograph, namely that of the ‘jumper’.

The picture of the ‘falling man’ or ‘jumper’ and the fact that it closes the novel, had been very controversial. By reversing the order of the photographs, many critics accused Foer of wanting to reach easy closure (Codde 2007, 250). They said he pretended to undo history, which would then be as offensive as denying the Holocaust. What these critics fail to see, according to me, is that Foer did not want to undo history but that his protagonist is a little boy who really is in need of closure. Oskar thinks he can reach this by inventing an alternative ending but Susan Sontag already said that although photographs are powerful, “they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs [...] haunt us” (Sontag 2003, 89). Megan O’Rourke thinks the final photographs are justifiable, especially because “images were a crucial part of 9/11” (Keniston 2008, 194). Furthermore, the last photographs seem to be excluded from the story because the pages are not numbered anymore. This would then again suggest that Oskar’s attempt to undo history has failed, because his flip-book is not comprised in the entire history. By doing this, Foer stresses the distinction between what is fact and what is fiction in his novel. By choosing a protagonist of nine years old, I think he stresses this even more. I think that if the critics would

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16 For a discussion of the other photographs, consult Verbestel 2009.
discuss the novel in a more objective way, they would realize that in the mind of a young boy almost anything can happen, including reversing time. Codde also mentions this when he says that “the form of the novel, far from being playful, is actually an accurate representation of a young boy’s traumatized mind, and it does not trivialize or seek premature closure for 9/11” (Codde 2007, 251). The fact that Foer realizes there is no such thing as ‘undoing time’ is highlighted by the use of the past conditional tense in the closing section of the novel (251).

Foer does not neglect to pay attention to the structural elements as well. The non-linearity of the story is prominent from the beginning. The reader is drawn into the story immediately, in medias res, as Oskar starts to sum up his inventions and daily adventures. It is only on the fourth page that the reader gets a notion of the subject of the novel, when Oskar mentions the first time he was in a limousine. Still, he does not stick to that one subject and when he comes too close to the actual subject, the funeral of his father, he starts a new story. The non-linearity is also apparent in the sequence of the chapters as well. Oskar’s version of the story is constantly alternated with his grandmother’s and grandfather’s point of view. Because their stories have some key moments in common, the reader is sometimes offered a slightly different version of the same event. This becomes clear when Oskar and grandmother tell their version of their experiences in the limousine, while driving to Thomas Junior’s funeral. Through these different interpretations, the reader sees Oskar’s trauma and acting-out more clearly (Foer 232) Furthermore, she does tell the reader what happened at the funeral, although Oskar does not mention this at all: “When we got to the grave and they lowered the empty coffin, you (Oskar) let out a noise like an animal” (232). By creating different versions of the same reality, Foer lets the reader know that those who are traumatized sometimes forget or deliberately change the details of their experiences, which is inherent to trauma. Moreover, by letting the characters repeat what has happened, but in a slightly altered way, Foer symbolizes the shift from traumatic to narrative memory.
The symbolic nature of the novel becomes clear when one sees the intertextuality in the novel. By including other traumatic narratives into the story, Foer creates another layer in his own traumatic narrative. Codde already discussed the link between the novel and the myth of Philomela (Codde 2007). By letting Oskar play the role of Yorick in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*, Foer creates more depth in his story. Shakespeare’s famous play *Hamlet* acts as a metaphor for Oskar’s relationship with his deceased father. Oskar could be compared to Hamlet, looking for answers about the mysterious death of his father. Thomas Schell’s presence in the novel is haunting Oskar, just as the Ghost of Hamlet’s father is haunting Hamlet throughout the play. Both ‘ghosts’ encourage the protagonists to go looking for answers. The fact that Oskar is playing the part of Yorick, the court’s jester and a friend in need for Hamlet, could mean that Oskar has to be his own savior. He has to figure out the solution to his problems on his own. Although he is not alone in the beginning and receives help from Mr. Black, his upstairs neighbor, and Abby Black, Oskar has to face the final part of his quest alone, just like Dante in *The Divine Comedy*.

The failure of language is another important characteristic of traumatic narratives. I already addressed some of the other media, like the photography, Grandfather’s notebooks and coded messages, Morse code and so on. The main idea behind the failure of conventional language is that the characters have to learn to make their language work, in order to testify. Without a real testimony, one cannot experience the healing effect of the traumatic narrative. Foer emphasizes this by letting his characters act out until the end of the story, underlining that they have not worked through their traumas yet. He also symbolizes the failure of language in the only letter Thomas Senior actually sent to his son. Thomas Junior corrected the letter, by marking all the historical and grammatical errors with a red pen. He marks the word “you” in the following sentence: “In the days and weeks after my release, I looked for my parents and for Anna and for you” (Foer 2005, 214).

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17 I have found no evidence of this reference to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* but I think it is possible that Foer tried to mimic some elements of this poetic work.

18 The other letters were written to his son but never sent. Thomas Senior puts them in his son’s coffin when he digs it up, together with his grandson.
Here, Thomas Senior confuses the unborn child he had with Anna with his other child. He mixes up time, places and identities and this presents itself in his language use. The confusion is enhanced by the linking of the generations by giving them the same surname, a technique Foer already used in his first novel (Codde 2009).

Besides the failure of language, Foer shows us the creativity involved with language when he uses the expression “wearing heavy boots”. This expression appears several times throughout the story and is contrasted with “feeling like a hundred dollars”. Oskar uses these rather childlike expressions when he is feeling respectively down or reasonably well. Most of the time, his boots are heavy and there are few things that can make them lighter, although playing the tambourine can help most of the time (Foer 2005, 2). This expression is not a common idiom in English, Foer invented it when writing the novel and when he was asked – on the radio – about the meaning of the phrase, he said: “The best answer I could come up with is: It just means ‘heavy boots’. If I could have thought of another way of saying it, I would have. There are things that it’s like. It is kind of like being sad, it’s kind of like being gloomy, it’s kind of like feeling stuck or trapped or immobile. But what it is, is ‘heavy boots’. My goal as a writer is not to find synonyms for the world, but to find the proper words” (van der Lingen 2006, 37). It seems that although Foer is creative with language, he fails to explain his expressions as well.
4.2. Saturday

Ian McEwan’s tenth novel, Saturday, was published in 2005, like Foer’s second novel\(^{19}\). Nevertheless, both novels use a completely different point of view when discussing 9/11. Few critics had negative remarks about the book, which explains why the novel won the James Tait Black Prize for fiction in 2005. Although this novel discusses the events of 9/11 less directly, it deals with the trauma and its consequences on an international scale. By some critics, Saturday is considered to be McEwan’s best work.

Saturday tells us the story of the successful neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, and what he experiences on Saturday, 15 February 2003, in London. The story is set against a more political background, since on 15 February 2003, London was caught up in the largest demonstration in British history: the demonstration against the war in Iraq. Perowne is not really concerned with the protest but due to the demonstration, his day is influenced in a way he could not have predicted. He has an unpleasant encounter with a street thug named Baxter and is forced to meet this opponent again later on, when Baxter and a companion enter Perowne’s house with force and threaten the surgeon’s family. According to Kristiaan Versluys, “the questions the novel poses are what, in the aftermath of September 11, one owns, how tight one’s grip on life is, and how quickly one can lose it” (Versluys 2009, 188).

4.2.1. The Characters and Their Trauma

McEwan’s novel “begins and ends in the edgy border zones between sleeping and waking, the public and the private, night and day” (Brown 2008, 80). It actually starts on a regular Saturday morning, a few hours before dawn, as Henry wakes up and finds himself drawn to his bedroom window. After reflecting on his previous working day and his life in general, his attention is drawn to

\(^{19}\) [http://www.ianmcewan.com](http://www.ianmcewan.com) (consulted on 10 July 2010)
an unrecognizable appearance in the sky. He first mistakes it for a meteor but as it comes closer, Perowne clearly sees that it is a burning plane. After the first shock wears off, Perowne thinks about that other catastrophe, eighteen months ago, which still occupies his mind. Since 9/11 “everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed” (McEwan 2005, 16). Even “towers in and of themselves carry ominous overtones,” as Versluys stresses (2009, 188). The plane crash and the link with 9/11 will form an important element in the novel. In general, it is not like Perowne to act panicky when unexpected events occur. He is a neurosurgeon, a man of science who does not believe in dreams and has to keep his cool at all times, because according to Perowne “it’s not possible to be an unassertive brain surgeon” (McEwan 2005, 21). Versluys adds to this that “medical healers provide ready-made examples of the faculty of agency in times of distress” (Versluys 2009, 188), which explains Henry’s urge to call the emergency services. As opposed to his scientific nature and the need to find an explanation for everything, Perowne also feels a general unease in his day to day life. The plane crash is only one of the 9/11-like accidents that appear throughout the novel.

The second time Henry’s perfect Saturday is interrupted, he is on his way to his weekly squash game with his anesthesiologist, Jay Strauss, when he gets involved in a car accident with Baxter, an intimidating young man who tries to force Henry to pay for the damage on his car. But Perowne is not intimidated that quickly and tries to find a way out of the “urban drama” (86) as he calls it himself. He notices that Baxter has some symptoms that can be connected to a neurological disorder called Huntington’s disease and decides to tell him about his condition. Partly because he wants to agonize him and he wants to take revenge for ganging up on him, but on the other hand, Henry feels he should help the poor man, as will become clear later on. The accident made a real impression on Perowne and he is still bothered by the encounter during his squash game. By uttering the small word “crash”, Henry is taken back into his own memories:
[...] his own word ‘crash’, trailing memories of the night as well as the morning, fragments into a dozen associations. Everything that’s happened to him recently occurs to him at once. He’s no longer in the present. The deserted icy square, the plane and its pinprick of fire, his son in the kitchen, his wife in bed, his daughter on her way from Paris, the three men in the street – he occupies the wrong time coordinates, or he’s in them all at once. (McEwan 2005, 105)

This quote clearly shows the deeper impact of the accident on Henry. He is not able to express his true feelings about the encounter to Jay Strauss and his mind still lingers on events that already belong to the past.

Rosalind, Henry’s wife, is a lawyer. Henry fell in love with her when she was admitted to the hospital because of a brain tumor. Nonetheless, it took them several months to get their relationship off the ground. She appears to be damaged by the death of her mother and the absence of her father, the famous poet John Grammaticus. Especially the loss of her mother, Marianne, and the fact that her presence is haunting Rosalind is a barrier Henry has to break in order to really be with his wife. “Marianna Grammaticus,” according to Perowne, “was not so much grieved for as continually addressed. She was a constant restraining presence, watching over her daughter, and watching with her. This was the secret of Rosalind’s inwardness and caution” (McEwan 2005, 46). Rosalind has trouble accepting the way her mother died and has trouble parting with the memory of her mother. In the present, she has seemed to let her ghosts go and concentrates on her work as a lawyer.

Perowne’s son and daughter can be seen as the complete opposites of their parents because their interests and lifestyles are on the far other end of the scale. Theo, Perowne’s 18-year-old son, is a musician while his daughter Daisy, is an established poetry writer who currently lives in Paris. Theo is only just outgrowing his teen years but comes across as a very grown-up young man who is aware of the political climate of the day. He is interested in politics and lived through 9/11 very consciously. This unexpected event gave him a wake-up call and Henry finds it remarkable that Theo apparently skipped through his rite of passage from teenager to adult: “The September attacks were Theo’s
induction into international affairs, the moment he accepted that events beyond friends, home and the music scene had bearing on his existence” (McEwan 2005, 31). Still, he learned to accept the present state of the world rather quickly, although witnessing “the dissolving towers, was intense” (32). Because he is more relaxed in his way of living – a talent Henry is jealous of – the attacks do not seem to occupy his mind in the way they do occupy the mind of his father. He reacts very clear-headed when his father tells him about the plane crash and he immediately asks if terrorists were involved. He expects the possibility of threat but does not accept it. Like her brother, Daisy has a clear opinion about the war on Iraq as well. She has a heated discussion with her father about the upcoming war and cannot believe that an intellectual man like her father would support the war on terror. Here, McEwan wants to stress the fact that terrorism has almost become a daily intrusion into our 21st century lives.

The real trauma in the novel involves all members of the family, including grandfather John Grammaticus, and takes place during the family dinner that evening. Baxter, who acts as “the substitute terrorist” (Versluys 2009, 191), and a companion violently enter the family’s house and threaten them with a knife. Rosalind plays an important role in this scene, as she is taken hostage by Baxter and constantly faces the threat of being murdered by him. Henry’s daughter, Daisy, faces what M.L. Ross calls the threat of “a violent sexual penetration” (Ross 2008, 78) when Baxter makes her take her clothes off and intends to rape her. This would then be an echo of the “deadly serious penetration of Perowne’s private space by a home-grown hostile” which in turn echoes the “initial penetration of English airspace by putative hostiles” (Ross 2008, 78). Ross is right to call the third penetration only a threat because Baxter changes his mind about the rape when Daisy recites Matthew Arnold’s Dover Beach for him. The young man mistakenly thinks that Daisy herself wrote the poem and is so moved by her talent and virtuosity that he loses his focus. At that point, Henry and Theo are able to overpower Baxter by throwing him off the stairs.
This scene also forms a symbolic reference to 9/11. As with the attacks on the Twin Towers, Henry has to face danger, in the form of Baxter, twice in one day. The fact that this happens on the day of the mass demonstration can only enhance this symbolism. While Perowne is “the representation of civilization, rationality, and paternal authority”, Carpenter believes Baxter to be the personalization of terrorism (Keniston 2008, 150). In short, the peril Perowne faces on 15 February mirrors “what the United States experienced on September 11, 2001, on a microcosmic level” (Keniston 2008, 150). Furthermore, I think one can also recognize the story of Tasso in this novel. Although Theo already saw the danger of what his father had done to Baxter, namely humiliating him, Henry only realizes what he has done when Baxter comes to take revenge at Perowne’s home. Of course, Henry is not the offender in this story, as Tancred was, but it is possible that McEwan took the story into account when writing his novel. After all, he shows a great knowledge of trauma theory in describing the acting-out of his characters. I will come back to this in the next chapter.

4.2.2. Acting Out

Because of the temporal and especially the spatial distance from 9/11, the characters in McEwan’s novel do not act out in the same way Foer’s characters do. Perowne and his family live in London and have no direct link with the terroristic attacks in New York. Furthermore, the initial shock of 9/11 has worn off for them because they are not confronted with immediate deaths in their family or the presence of Ground Zero, as New Yorkers are. Of course, they did face danger in the form of Baxter but that traumatic experience is significantly smaller, in comparison to 9/11. Still, the effects of the whole experience cannot be underestimated and McEwan certainly does not. He gives a detailed and satisfactory description (in complete accordance with works on trauma theory) of how trauma patients react right after a trauma. His focus on familiar, daily routine also allows McEwan to counter it with the uncanny scene in chapter four, when all familiarity goes out the window (Brown 2008, 84).
A first possibility is the physical paralysis that occurs when confronted with a traumatic situation. A first instance of this reaction is described when Henry cannot bring himself to get out of his car immediately after Baxter and him hit each other’s car. “He’s not in shock, he’s not weirdly calm or elated or numbed, his vision isn’t unusually sharp, he isn’t trembling,” (McEwan 2005, 82) but still, Henry is not coming out of his car. The fact that he says he is not numbed only seems to be a mere medical diagnosis. He can still make use of his arms and legs but on the other hand, he cannot bare himself to leave the car before he has settled the whole thing in his mind: “the half-minute’s pause has given the situation a game-like quality in which calculations have already been made” (McEwan 2005, 83). The scene following the accident, where Henry is threatened and beaten up by Baxter and his companions, made a greater impression on Henry. Even when he picks up his familiar routine and start his squash game, he feels as if he is still not the same person because “his limbs appear to him as neglected old friends, absurdly long and breakable. Is he in mild shock?” (McEwan 2005, 102). He feels he should forfeit the game and ponder what happened with Baxter, “how he should have handled it, and what it was he got wrong” (102) but he plays anyway. Nonetheless, he cannot get “the pathetic figure of Baxter” (104) out of his mind and stumbles when he uses the word ‘crash’ (cf. supra). Henry’s body freezes again, “mid-step, in an unstable position” (McEwan 2005, 207), when Baxter enters his house during the family dinner, while Rosalind warns him of the knife Baxter is holding.

Instead of experiencing paralysis, Daisy starts to tremble and cannot steady her nerves enough to take her phone out of her pocket (208). Daisy’s mother has the same reaction, when she talks to her husband, later that night. Henry feels she is in shock because “the shivering appears to emanate from her knees in tight, dry spasms, as though her bones were grating in their joints” (265). During the fits of uncontrollable shaking, Rosalind can only utter the words “Oh God” (265), a sign that her mind seems to be numbed more than her body.
Rosalind is also the character that presents us with another reaction to the trauma. During the post-trauma conversation with the entire family, she describes how she experienced the whole event: “I felt myself floating away, [...] It was as if I was watching all of us, myself included, from a corner of the room right up by the ceiling. And I thought, it’s going to happen, I won’t feel a thing, I won’t care” (McEwan 2005, 229). This phenomenon, which goes by the name of ‘dissociation’, is described by Freud and Caruth as well, when they discuss what some train crash survivors experienced. They too felt as if they were watching the whole scene from a distance, as if it happened to someone else (cf. chapter 2.2.). Rosalind is also dissociated from time, just like Henry was during his squash game. She expresses to Henry that she is not able to say how long Baxter held the knife to her throat: “In my memory, it’s no time at all – and I don’t mean that it seems brief. It’s no time, not in time, not a minute or an hour. Just a fact...” (McEwan 2005, 268). After that, Rosalind’s tremor returns for a moment but ebbs away as she proceeds to talk about her feelings to Henry. This of course will be the proper way to process the trauma (cf. infra).

Besides dissociation during the traumatic experience, a trauma patient can feel dissociated from his or her normal life for a long time after the event as well. Henry for instance, already acts as a traumatized person before the incident with Baxter occurs. Even four years after the 9/11 attacks, Henry is still fascinated by them. This condition presents itself in a constant search for novel facts or developments in the investigation concerning 9/11 and its consequences, like the war on terror. Henry “reads the papers with morbid fixation” (McEwan 2005, 32) and does not miss a single television coverage. This is not just typical of Henry, because McEwan writes that this is “a condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety” (176). Pitt says “the underlying trauma [of 9/11] is not in this instance caused by personal loss but by a global threat viewed from the comfort of a television lounge” (Pitt 2009, 46). She adds to this that Henry is probably influenced by the media splurge on 9/11, as many other people are: “the television networks stand ready to deliver, and their audiences wait. [...] Please don’t let it happen. But let me see it all the same, as it’s happening and from every angle, and
let me be among the first to know” (176). Still I feel Pitt cannot disregard the fact that Henry is a traumatized person. He certainly acts as if he is traumatised on that particular Saturday by referring to the plane crash as “his own story” or “Henry’s airplane” (69,70,126). This is a typical reaction for trauma victims: they tend to experience a certain attraction to the trauma, although there is a tendency to avoid it as well. The dissociation thus presents itself here in a remarkable paradox. Henry is estranged from his own life by being attracted to a trauma that he only lived through as a spectator. Furthermore, he feels guilty for not calling the emergency services. He knows the pilot has probably already warned the airport but he regrets not having phoned anyone “if only to talk, to measure his voice and feelings against a stranger’s” (McEwan 2005, 23). Henry gets the chance to talk about what he witnessed when he goes to the kitchen and finds his son Theo there.

Later on in the novel, when it is made clear that the cargo plane was not controlled by terrorists and it was all just an accident, Henry wonders if he should have acted so anxiously: “he sees now the details he half-ignored to nourish his fears: that the plane was no being driven into a public building, that it was making a regular, controlled descent, that it was on a well-used flight path – none of this fitted the general unease. [...] Not an attack on our whole way of life then” (McEwan 2005, 39). The fact that Henry already anticipated a worst case scenario, illustrates the pervasive intrusion of 9/11 into our daily lives, according to Carpenter (Keniston 2008, 151). Besides the march against the war in Iraq and the plane crash, the novel is full of references to the war on terrorism in general. During his squash game Henry is confronted with footage of the cargo plane and the arrested pilots (107), during the visit to his demented mother he sees the march on television (166), during an argument with his daughter he has to defend his position on the war (185-193) and during many other instances, he ponders about the state of the world and how everything changed after 9/11. It is only after the media informs him of the innocence of the pilots, that Henry questions his anxieties (McEwan 2005, 180):
It’s an illusion, to believe himself active in the story. Does he think he’s contributing something, watching news programmes, or lying on his back on the sofa on Sunday afternoons, reading more opinion columns of ungrounded certainties, more long articles about what really lies behind this or that development, [...] He’s deeper in than most. His nerves [...] vibrate obediently with each news ‘release’. He’s lost the habits of skepticism, he’s becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn’t thinking clearly, and just as bad, he senses he isn’t thinking independently. (McEwan 2005, 180-181)

At this point, the reader can already observe a shift in Perowne’s behavior, even before the scene with Baxter’s hostile take-over begins. Henry realizes that he has been acting-out and that he was influenced by the media, as Pitt already remarked. I agree with Pitt though I have to add here that Henry’s profession may have influenced his assessment of the burning plane, that morning. After all, he still thinks as a doctor and may be worried about the casualties. Even so, by working through what already happened and by what is right in front of him (Baxter’s breaking and entering), Henry will try to get his independent mind back. According to me, Henry’s mother’s “mental death” (165) as he calls it may even be foreboding Henry’s future condition if he does not straighten his judgment out right away. If he lets other people make up his mind for him, he may as well be mentally dead.

4.2.3. Working Through

The process of working-through in this novel will be quite different from the process I described in Foer’s novel. In Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close the main traumatic event was 9/11 itself. The reader is then presented with little Oskar’s story two years afterwards, after an amount of time and acting-out has already passed. In Saturday on the other hand, the main traumatic experience takes place in the penultimate chapter so that the reader only gets to see the initial reactions of the victims to the trauma and less of the working through. Nonetheless, I will try to describe the steps the characters have to take in order to get to the cure of their trauma.
Rosalind is the first one to undertake action. After the police has left and the ambulance has taken Baxter away to the hospital, “she suggest that it might do everybody good to come and eat” (McEwan 2005, 231). Henry finds pleasure in their working together to secure a decent meal and he even finds it “reassuring that Grammaticus is on his way to getting drunk,” (231) like he always is. The evening seems to proceed as if the scene with Baxter never happened at all. Nevertheless, there are little and significant differences noticeable. Grammaticus does not get as drunk as he normally does, Henry has lost his taste for alcohol and the whole dinner has a forced feel to it, as if the family has to keep up appearances. Henry remarks that “Rosalind appears to make an impressive recovery” (231), the key word being ‘appears’, as Serraris notices as well (2007, 51). When Henry leaves the dinner table to go into surgery, he hears “unnatural laughter, exaggerated like before, almost harsh; they’re not really pretending to have forgotten their fear – they’re simply wanting to survive it” (232-233). I agree with Serraris when he says that the characters try to deny what has happened, rather than forget them. Denying that they looked death in the eye avoids the confrontation with the trauma later on, while temporarily forgetting the whole evening implies that they will have to deal with what has happened in the future.

It is only later that night, when Henry and Rosalind are in bed together, that Rosalind confesses her real feelings to her husband. She is still scared, although the immediate threat already disappeared, and she feels as though “they’re still in the room. They’re still here” (McEwan 2005, 265), even though Henry assures her she is safe. The presence of Baxter, the person that tried to hurt her entire family, still lingers, as trauma tends to do. Besides being scared, Rosalind first and foremost is angry with Baxter: “I can’t help it, but I want him punished. I mean, I hate him, I want him to die” (265). Because of her own revengeful feelings towards Baxter, Rosalind is scared Henry might feel the same way and he will make mistakes during Baxter’s surgery on purpose. But contrary to what Rosalind feels, Henry has no strong feelings of hatred towards Baxter anymore. What is more, Henry feels responsible for Baxter’s violent behavior. These feelings of “accountability and moral obligation,” as Versluys calls them, are engraved in Perowne, whose life is “marked by decency and a
concern for the Other” (Versluys 2009, 191). I believe Henry owes these characteristics to his job, where he has to care for other people as well. In her dissertation, Pitt gives the impression that Perowne treats Baxter in a condescending way (Pitt 2009, 52) but I disagree. I feel that while Perowne uses his medical knowledge to avoid a fight, he truly feels sorry for Baxter afterwards. Versluys already notices that “Henry […] is susceptible to the interpellation of the Other” (191) when the latter meets a street sweeper, looks him straight in the eye and feels a connection with this stranger (McEwan 2005, 74), who is placed lower on the social ladder. Although this meeting seems more symbolical to me, I agree with Versluys when he says that “Henry is bothered by feelings of guilt and a sense of unfairness” (192) when he overpowers Baxter. As Baxter falls down the stairs, Henry already starts to regret his actions: He, Henry Perowne, possesses so much – the work, money, status, the home, above all, the family – the handsome healthy son […], the beautiful poet for a daughter […], the famous father-in-law, the gifted, loving wife; and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less. (McEwan 2005, 227-228) Even after the operation, Perowne cannot resist checking on Baxter (McEwan 2005, 262-263). He wants to establish “contact” with Baxter by (unnecessarily) checking his pulse but first and foremost, he wants to break down his thoughts “into their components” like he usually does. “Only then will he know what to do, what’s right” (262). In the final chapter of the novel, the reader learns that Henry will try to persuade his family not to press charges against Baxter. A fairly odd reaction, given the fact that Baxter did intend to rape Henry’s daughter. I think McEwan may have overdone it a bit here and I doubt that Henry’s family will see it the same way he does. Whereas Rosalind is perfectly able to choose sides, Perowne is still not sure if he is ‘with’ The Other or against him. In the end though, he realizes that he will have to choose sides when he says “what weakness, what delusional folly, to permit yourself sympathy towards a man, sick or not, who invades your house like this” (McEwan 2005, 230). The fact that he does not wish bad things to Baxter is not that uncommon. Dori Laub interviewed trauma victims who were confused about who was the perpetrator and who was the victim as well (Laub 1992, 80). Henry
struggles with the same question. LaCapra would probably stress that Henry is confusing the roles of victim and perpetrator (cf. supra).

Both Rosalind and Henry try to figure out the proper response to their traumatic experience. They stay together with their family – in need of a familiar touch – and are sometimes overwhelmed by their emotions, hours after the police and the paramedics have left (McEwan 2005, 228). They talk about how they experienced the whole tragedy, which is precisely what they need to do. Acceptance is the first step to overcoming trauma and talking can work therapeutic:

They want to have it all again, from another’s point of view, and know that it’s all true what they’ve been through, and feel in these precise comparisons of feeling and observation that they’re being delivered from private nightmare, and returned to the web of kindly social and familial relations, without which they’re nothing. They were overrun and dominated by intruders because they weren’t able to communicate and act together; now at last they can. (McEwan 2005, 229)

The fact that the entire family immediately sits together and testifies about their horrific evening may bring the impression that they are already in the stage of working-through and that they are coping. In fact, the family seems to be able to communicate with each other about almost anything. Although Daisy is pregnant for a number of weeks now, she tells her mother as soon as the crisis is over, and Perowne confides in his son when he is shocked by the plane crash and his first encounter with Baxter. On the other hand, Henry is not inclined to share his feelings with other persons right away. This already becomes clear when McEwan mentions that Jay Strauss often encourages Perowne to talk after an operation did not go as well as planned (McEwan 2005, 101). Pitt also mentions that he “tries to create order out of chaos caused by fear and insecurity by relying on scientific explanations. He views the world in scientific terms” (Pitt 2009, 55). She predicts, and I agree, that Perowne will face disappointment when he holds on to this view because “science cannot transform in its entirety and cannot hold all the answers” (Pitt 2009, 56). At a certain point in the novel, Henry expresses his wish to be more laidback, like Theo (McEwan 2005, 57) but his daughter
tries to educate him as well. She regularly sends him copies of works he should definitely read and to me, it is no coincidence she first sends him Darwin’s scientific work, followed by a novel from Conrad about seafaring (6). Furthermore, Henry will discover the importance of the non-scientific mind when poetry saves his family from Baxter’s bad intentions.

“The action of the novel’s single day is framed by Perowne’s ‘night-thoughts’ which open and close it,” according to Brown (83) but I, like Serraris, disagree. The repetition in the form of Henry’s ponderings and in the love making with his wife stresses circular structure of the novel. In my opinion, this implies that Henry will go through the same day over and over again, defying closure. In addition, the inspectors still have to question the family the next day (270). This implies that the Perownes will have to go through the whole experience of the evening again. Moreover, because of Henry’s decision that the matter should be dropped, he is certain to have a discussion with his family, which will evoke many different reactions. They will have to break the wound open again and it might even hurt more on Sunday than it did on Saturday. The fact that Henry thinks “this day’s over” (279) may imply that the trauma is over as well, but I would rather put the emphasis on the word ‘this’. ‘This’ day may be over, but there is always the next one. The novel definitely does not end with perfect closure but on the other hand, if the family keeps talking about their experiences, they might turn out alright.

4.2.4. Trauma and Literature

McEwan’s novel is more traditional, compared to the pyrotechnical novel by Foer. Still, he uses a lot of techniques Anne Whitehead describes in her novel Trauma Fiction. The intertextuality together with the healing powers of language come together in the poem Dover Beach by the British

20 Darwin’s ‘On The Origin of Species’ (1859) and Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’ (1902) can be linked through their believe (or non-believe) in the superiority of the white race. For more information on this subject, consult Redmond O’Hanlon’s ‘Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin: The Influence of Scientific Thought on Conrad’s Fiction’ (1984).
poet Matthew Arnold. Versluys says that “poetry is interruption. In the novel, it interrupts the scene of horror literally. But its typical discourse is also an interruption of the everyday” (Versluys 2009, 193). McEwan encloses the poem in its entirety in the novel but only at the end, so it falls outside of the story, like the flip-book does in Foer’s novel.

During Baxter’s intrusion in the house, he commands Daisy to read one of her poems. Under the encouragement of her grandfather, Daisy then recites Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*, which she learned by heart long ago. The poem *Dover Beach* was written by Matthew Arnold in the middle of the 19th century. Carpenter comments on the last verses of the poem in relation to McEwan’s novel: “‘Dover Beach’, of course, suggests the futility of violent confrontation between ‘ignorant armies’ and within this context functions as another reference to the impending Iraq war” (Keniston 2008, 155). In the last stanza of his Poem, Arnold expresses a bleak world view that can serve as a description for the world after 9/11 as well. Besides referring to the war on Terror, I think it also echoes the futile use of violence by Baxter against Perowne. Baxter thinks Daisy has written the poem and is moved by the images the poem conjures up. It seems highly implausible that a poem could stir the emotions of someone as cold blooded as Baxter but because of the detailed description of brain surgeries and the high level of realism in the rest of the novel, McEwan gets away with it. Henry’s character uses scientific language in a non-professional context as well, which creates an even larger contrast with the languages of his daughter and son, poetry and music. It also enhances the contrast with the traumatic experience. Here, poetic language prevails. Although Henry does talk about a clinical trial, Baxter initially is more interested in the poetry Daisy writes. “British tradition saves the day,” according to Carpenter (Keniston 2008, 154). It also shows the healing potential of language again. It is by listening to the poem that Baxter gets new hope about life. He even believes Henry when he says there might be a clinical trial that can help him. Although it is a lie, Baxter is

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21 The epigraph of Saul Bellow’s *Hertzog* is also worth mentioning in this discussion. Daniela Pitt treats this subject in her dissertation on McEwan’s *Atonement* and *Saturday* (Pitt 2009, 50).
temporarily cured of aggressive behavior against the Perowines. In addition, the last stanza of Arnold’s poem is an adequate description of the mental state of trauma victims\(^{22}\) (Serraris 2007, 59).

Language in general plays an important role in this novel, just like with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. I already mentioned the opposition between Henry’s professional language use and his daughter’s poetic language (chapter 4.2.2.). This opposition presents itself in Henry’s dislike of the magic realists as well. He prefers the works of William James, whereas Daisy prefers the works of his brother, Henry James. Henry lacks imagination. His job requires him to work by the book and does not allow for a personal take on things. At one point in the novel, Henry says his job does not allow him to feel pity (McEwan 2005, 98), although we can see that he is able to feel sorry for Baxter later on in the novel. His job does enable him to diagnose Baxter’s and other people’s symptoms and give a suitable explanation for it, but he is not able to apply the same critical diagnostics to himself. If he would, he would realize he suffers from “anosognosia, a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one’s own condition” (McEwan 2005, 74). This lack of awareness can explain why Henry cannot really put his feelings into words. He tries but his conversations with Theo, Daisy or Rosalind do not centre around his real feelings about the plane, the war or Baxter. He is stuck in “the pre-verbal language that linguists call mentalese” (81). The failure of language to create awareness or even to express thoughts is handled well by McEwan, presumably through his knowledge of trauma theory.

The traumatic nature of the narrative is symbolized in the repetitive structure of the novel. Some examples were already given in the parts on acting out and working through. Henry has two encounters with Baxter, there are two crashes in the novel – which already echoed the crash into the Twin Towers on 9/11. The fact that the story begins and ends in the same way is another manner to express the repetition. It also symbolizes the cyclical structure of the healing process. In the

\(^{22}\) I agree with Serraris when he says it is an adequate description but I have to note that Matthew Arnold probably did not intend this to happen. It is just something we notice because of our focus on trauma theory.
theoretical framework, it was already mentioned that trauma victims often have to go through different cycles of acting out and working through before they can achieve real closure. McEwan perfectly illustrates this process by pointing out that Henry and his family may have reached closure on that day but certainly not on the entire traumatic event. Because of the open ending of the novel, the reader can only guess at what will happen the next day but in my opinion, the trauma may hit even harder after a good night’s rest, when they can think about everything more clearly. After all, the response to a traumatic event may often occur delayed (Caruth 1996, 11). The repetition is apparent in the family’s conversations on the traumatic experience as well. They keep going over and over the same story again, in order to fully understand what they have been through. The most important difference with Foer’s novel is that Saturday has a more linear structure and a more reliable narrator23. Regarding this aspect, McEwan stays more traditional.

In all, Saturday is an exceptional post-9/11 novel because none of the characters has an explicit link with the event itself. McEwan rather wanted to creature an image of the world after the terrorist attacks. He does mimic 9/11 in the encounter of Perowne, the innocent victim, with Baxter, the revengeful intruder. His novel is a more realistic one, because of the highly detailed recount of Henry’s activities throughout the day, whereas Foer’s novel does require more suspension of disbelief by the reader.

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23 Although the story is rather chronological, it is still interspersed with many flash-backs. These flash-backs then symbolize the fact that the past is not that easily forgotten.
4.3. **The Good Life**

*The Good Life* (2006) is Jay McInerney’s seventh fiction novel. It is the sequel to McInerney’s fourth novel *Brightness Falls* (1992). Both novels tell of the couple Russell and Corinne Calloway. Whereas “it was the virtual collapse of Wall Street in 1987 that gave dramatic shape to McInerney’s study of money and ambition in *Brightness Falls*, it is the literal, dramatic destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 that shapes his narrative of *The Good Life,*” according to Sylvia Brownrigg (Brownrigg 2006). Critics like Dylan de Thomas uttered that 9/11 only served as a background for an adulterous love affair. Although McInerney’s novel has not been discussed in the light of trauma theory – like Foer’s and McEwan’s novels – I think there are plenty of reasons to do so. William Skidelsky seems to agree when he says that making the usual criticisms would be unfair in relation to this seventh novel. “*The Good Life,*” according to Skidelsky, “is not a great novel. It is not even McInerney’s best. But it is a genuine and intelligent attempt to write about how life changed for New Yorkers after 11 September 2001” (Skidelsky 2006, 52).

At the beginning of the novel, we find ourselves among a group of privileged New Yorkers, the world McInerney is most familiar with. Russell Calloway is still a well-known publisher and his unemployed wife, Corrine, is currently working on a screenplay for Graham Green’s *The Heart of the Matter.* While they are entertaining their guests in their TriBeCa loft, Luke McGavock and his wife, Sasha, are on the Upper East Side of New York, getting ready for a charity gala. Luke is an ex-banker who is currently working on a novel – a euphemistic expression for being unemployed – while Sasha is described as “a professional beauty” (McInerney 2006, 21). Both couples seem to have it all but in reality are just good in keeping up appearances. Then unexpectedly, together with the towers, the daily routines of their lives come crashing down. Corrine and Luke get to know each other while working as volunteers in a soup kitchen at Bowling Green. There, “the disaster brings two troubled

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24 Because I found few sources on the traumatic nature of McInerney’s novel, my analysis will consist mainly of reviews and my own view on the matter, supported by my readings on trauma theory.

25 The usual criticisms are the ones McInerney often has to deal with. Some of them are summed up in Skidelsky’s review of *The Good Life* in the New Statesman (Skidelsky 2006, 52).
souls together for a passionate adulterous liaison in the shadow of the city’s great and fearsome loss” (Brownrigg 2006).

4.3.1. The Characters and Their Trauma

McInerney starts by describing Corrine as a woman who is not content with her life, and marriage, as it is. Her unhappiness with her marriage surfaced before, when she was having an affair with Russell’s best friend, Jeff Pierce. Moreover, she is having a hard time coping with the fact that her children are “the product of a donor-egg fertilization by her sister” (Brownrigg 2006). Russell, on the other hand, seems happier in his marriage, although adultery is no alien concept to him either. In the course of the novel, Corrine discovers that Russell had an affair with his former assistant. In the second chapter, McInerney introduces Luke McGavock, an ex-banker who, according to his daughter Ashley, “has got too much time on his hands” (McInerney 2006, 20). Luke has been trying to write a novel during his unemployment but feels that he is procrastinating. In addition, he too has to deal with rumors about his wife’s affair with one of their friends, Bernie Melman. Sasha is the flattest character of the novel. Luke describes her as “a professional beauty” (21). Brownrigg rightly comments that shallow Sasha is seen as an easy target when we compare her to Russell, who is described as a loving father, dedicated friend and first-hand witness of 9/11 (Brownrigg 2006).

These previous aggravations fade when something larger demands their attention. The promise of the city – “that anything can happen” (26) – is kept when two planes penetrate the towers of the World Trade Center. McInerney does not describe the catastrophe itself, thereby creating a gap between the first two parts of the novel. The day after the attacks, Corrine sees Luke “staggering up West Broadway, coated head to foot in dun ash” (McInerney 2006, 69). He looks like “a statue commemorating some ancient victory” (69), while she looks like “an angelic apparition” to him (85). McInerney describes their encounter as “a typical encounter on the day after, one of thousands between stunned and needy strangers, the kind of things she might have recalled months
or years later when something reminded her of that time or someone asked her where she’d been that day” (73).

Both characters lost a friend that day. Luke and his friend Guillermo were supposed to meet that morning in Windows on the World. Luke postponed the appointment, after having a fight with his daughter, completely unaware of the consequences of his decision. He arrives just as the first Tower collapses. After getting away from immediate threat, Luke helps people who are caught beneath the debris, hoping that one of them will be Guillermo. It is only when he meets Corrine that Luke fully realizes he was one of the lucky ones, while Guillermo was not. Corrine and her husband experience loss as well when they hear that Jim, one of Russell’s best friends, never returned from Ground Zero. Furthermore, Russell witnessed the collapsing of the Towers, “watching from their window the, as he put it, ‘not-quite-tiny-enough figures jumping out of the tower eight blocks away, close enough to distinguish between men and women’” (McInerney 2006, 99). Luke was confronted with the jumpers as well: “bodies raining down in the plaza. Falling slowly and then suddenly exploding like rotten fruit in the concrete” (McInerney 2006, 71). Both Luke and Russell suffer from survivor guilt afterwards.

4.3.2. Acting Out

I agree with Dylan de Thomas in his online review when he says “The Good Life is at its strongest in the few chapters describing the immediate aftermath of the towers falling”. These chapters contain some adequate description of trauma victims acting out. For instance, when Luke has “the first chance [...] to tell his story”, he creates an incoherent narrative in which he “accounts for his whereabouts” and explains that he called Guillermo to postpone their meeting. Corrine remarks that “for the past twenty-four hours, they’d all been telling their stories” (McInerney 2006, 76. Windows on the World was the restaurant on the 106th and 107th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

27 http://contemporarylit.about.com/od/fiction/fr/theGoodLife.htm (consulted on 28 April 2010)
Corrine just listens, without interrupting, which is exactly what Luke needs at that point. She also tries to make it clear to Luke that it is already Wednesday and that he has lost track of time – a symptom we already saw with Rosalind in Saturday. Even a few days after 9/11, Luke’s body clock feels “out of whack” (75). During his testimony, Luke keeps on repeating “Windows on the World at eight”, as if by repeating the time of their appointment, will somehow bring Guillermo back (71-72). Because of the overwhelming nature of the event, Luke and Corrine even seem to doubt for a moment that all of this is real. When Luke wonders “if I ever actually regained consciousness” (72), it shows that he went through the whole experience on an unconscious level.

After the original shock of the event has passed and both protagonists are back at home safely, they feel the urge to do something. In Foer’s novel, Oskar felt the same urge and went on a quest. In this novel, Corrine and Luke decide to volunteer at a soup kitchen. The soup kitchen is down at Bowling Green, “near the epicenter of the trauma” (Brownrigg 2006). At first, Corrine feels the urge to flee the city. After a while though, she begins to feel strangely at home at Bowling Green. Luke experiences the same paradoxical feelings: “He’d been scared shitless most of the hours he’d spent downtown and haunted by nightmares ever since, but he felt so utterly useless up here on Seventy-seventh Street that he now wished he’d stayed” (McInerney 2006, 75). Brownrigg is right to say that “ambivalence typically grips McInerney’s characters” (Brownrigg 2006). Especially after a severe trauma, patients can struggle with their paradoxical feelings. For Luke and Corrine, the attraction triumphs over the avoidance. The closer they are to the trauma, the less they have to think about the real world. Luke even starts “to panic whenever I think about going back uptown. I feel like as long as I stay here, nothing else will happen. To the city. To me” (McInerney 2006, 159).

Although they choose to stay close to the site of the trauma, being there conjures up many memories. Especially the comfort food served in the soup kitchen has a remarkable effect on the protagonists’ involuntary memory. While at one point, the smell of burgers on the grill makes Luke think about the first death he really remembers (150), at another time in the novel, “the mnemonic
power of a simple sandwich” takes him back thirty years. He mentions to Corrine that “weird memories seem to have been churned up lately” (151). Corrine feels the same way: “odd fragments of the past had been suddenly uncovered, jutting above the surface like fossils revealed by an earthquake” (151). This actually is a fitting metaphor. The trauma from 9/11 indeed uncovered earlier traumatic experiences. This shows that the earlier incidents have not been worked through properly. If Luke and Corrine handle their current trauma in the same way, it will surface again later on, like the other memories are doing now. The recollection of long-forgotten memories, due to a trigger as ordinary as a sandwich, may remind us of Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913-1927)\(^{28}\), where the main character remembers things from his childhood by eating a Madeleine, a traditional small cake.

From memories to commemoration is not a big step. In my opinion, McInerney is the only author discussed in this thesis who includes the trauma of the American community. This is most apparent in the scene where Luke and Corrine walk past “the makeshift gallery that has sprung up on the walls […] the faces of the missing glancing back hopefully and artlessly in photographs […] now hanging above impromptu shrines of flowers and candles” (McInerney 2006, 244). These missing-persons signs were the inspiration for a report in the New York Times called *Portraits of Grief*\(^{29}\). In these Portraits, “everyone memorialized was given equal space and equal treatment” (Keniston 2008, 19). Although McInerney’s novel for the greater part deals with the lives of New York’s aristocracy, he does not fail to include people from all races and all classes. Hispanics, blacks, business men, strippers, punks, firemen and even small time criminals are all given a place in his novel. Especially at Bowling Green, the volunteers have a diverse background. I agree that the attention is not equally divided but as Skidelsky already mentions: “if he does tend to bang on about

\(^{28}\) Translated in English as *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past*.

\(^{29}\) This report was originally named *Among The Missing* but due to “the implicit hope of recovery” it gave to the people, the title was changed on the second day of reporting (Keniston 2008, 19). The reports consisted of a photograph of the deceased and an anecdote about his or her life. They were based on the missing-person signs that were hung up all over the city. These reports were later published in the form of a book, also called *Portraits Of Grief*. 

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a certain kind of world, that is because it’s a world with which he is exceedingly familiar” (Skidelsky 2006, 52).

While they are volunteering at Bowling Green, Corrine and Luke also have contact with other eye-witnesses and survivors. Corrine describes her relation with the others as a “wartime intimacy, the camaraderie of strangers in a lifeboat” (148). She especially feels this way about Luke, with whom she will eventually begin an adulterous relationship. I would like to stress these feelings of unity as they arise after the traumatic experience. Luke, for instance, picks up the habit of smoking again, “on the breaks between digging” (74). Even Corrine is tempted when Luke offers her a smoke: “They’d both started smoking again, a response to stress, a harking back to the uncomplicated pleasures of youth […] It was also a shared habit, a kind of communion” (McInerney 2006, 110). Washington, Russell’s friend and a former alcoholic, also surprises Russell by ordering a Martini, due to “desperate times” (119). Luke’s daughter handles things even worse. She is taken to the hospital after an overdose of “a little of everything” (178). Although Sasha writes the whole thing off as a reaction to 9/11, I doubt this is the main reason for Ashley’s overdose. She did not have a ‘normal’ teenage life before and may have succumbed to the life of glitter and glamour, like her mother has. This overall search for numbness is a common reaction to trauma, although it only helps to delay the pain. It does not help to cure it.

The affair between Luke and Corrine has a similar, numbing effect. This may remind us of Thomas Schell’s marriage to Anna’s sister, which was a way of acting out as well. Luke and Corrine were already unhappy before 9/11 but were reluctant to undertake any actions to improve the quality of their lives and marriages. The terrorist attacks then served as a wake-up call, a reminder that life is fragile and it can be taken away from you at any given point. When they became more acquainted at the soup kitchen, they thought they found the person they were looking for all along. They even describe each other as each other’s lost twin, when they discuss Plato’s Symposium (McInerney 2006, 244). This reaction, to rush into a relationship – or rather sex – is not an unusual
one. Luke describes a similar reaction when he thinks about the first death that made an impression on him (151). He mentions he “did get lucky that night” and explains it by the fact that “the proximity of death seemed to [...] turbocharge the sex” (151). A case of “post-traumatic sex” (134), if you will. When death is near, I think it is logical that people want to feel that they are still alive, even if it is by “clutching one another, reaching out for a stranger” (151). Besides sex, we already witnessed a similar reaction when Oskar, in Foer’s novel, bruises himself. By making himself feel pain, he assures himself that he is alive. McInerney hints at these reactions by including a quote by Ana Menendez in his epigraph:

Cataclysmic events, whatever their outcome, are as rare and transporting as a great love. Bombings, revolutions, earthquakes, hurricanes, – anyone who has passed through and lived, if they are honest, will tell you that even in the depths of their fear there was an exhilaration such as has been missing from their lived until then. (Ana Menendez in McInerney 2006)

Still, this reaction is rather vicarious than virtual. By being too empathic with the dead, one ends up hurting oneself in unnecessary ways. While Oskar’s grandparents did not really hurt anyone but themselves by marrying, Luke and Corrine are already married and both have children. Corrine at one point realizes the foolishness of their relationship: “It was a ridiculous time to fall in love, inappropriate, somehow; certainly inconvenient, given the fact that they both were married” (McInerney 2006, 164). However, “the moral edge of the situation is blunted by the fact that both Sasha and Russell have confessed to previous sordid infidelities, thus liberating Corrine and Luke from much of their guilt” (Brownrigg 2006).

4.3.3. Working Through

Because the traumatic event is a great part of the novel, as it was in Saturday, the story will consist of more acting-out than working-through. Still, the obvious and most suitable way of working
through gets the most attention here: talking. The novel is full of conversations between the characters. They do not only talk about the attacks but about everything surrounding it and even about things that happened in their past but can be related to the attacks. The reader can find a striking example in the conversation between Russell and Washington. Russell has been feeling guilty for not helping out after the attacks, like his deceased friend Jim did. Moreover, he is bothered by the fact that he could have been there on the moment of the crash. He is able to echo some of his worries when he and Washington are evacuated from their building, after a bomb threat. As he thinks about the consequences of the attacks, – “wartime couplings, sudden intimacies, frenzied couplings” (119) – he and Washington discuss the loss of Jim, the situation at home and what they should be doing in the future. Though Russell is not really able to utter his deeper feelings in the rather shallow conversation, I think it helps to know that other people are struggling with the same questions. This is also what eventually helps Russell and Luke to cope with their survivor guilt. Knowing that other people went through the same thing and they could not have done anything to prevent their friends from dying, helps them to feel grateful for surviving.

Nonetheless, the opposition between Russell’s inwardness and Corrine’s open nature contributes to the fact that Corrine seeks comfort with Luke, who acts out in the same way as Corrine does. McInerney says that “she seemed to have been invigorated by the disaster, whereas he felt paralyzed” (122). Neither reaction seems to be the correct one but seeing that little time has passed since the attacks, there is nothing more to be expected. I already mentioned the relationship between Luke and Corrine as a way of acting out in the previous chapter. I also hinted at the fact that the same relationship may also serve as a way of working-through. Although it clearly helps to avoid the real trauma, they have both found an empathic listener in the other. They are able to talk about

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30 The importance of talking about traumatic experiences has been stressed on several occasions in this thesis. I would like to mention Ulrich Baer’s volume 110 Stories: New York writers after September 11 as a fitting example of this trend. Several stories from this volume contain testimonies about 9/11 or the events surrounding it. Some even tell about matters completely unrelated to the attacks. Other short story collections appeared in the wake of 9/11 (Versluys 2009, 12).
everything that happened as they should: open and honest, without any restraints. Because of the
tings they share, it is easier to confide in one another than to talk with someone who has not got a
cue of what happened. For the same reason, I think many patients opened up to Dori Laub, when he
nterviewed Holocaust survivors. They knew he was a survivor of the camps and therefore were able
to trust him. Still, Corrine and Luke at first considered the possibility that 9/11 would make their
ililies stronger (McInerney 2006, 148). Sadly, because their spouses cope with their troubles
differently, they are prevented from clinging together.

Another important element of working through a traumatic experience is establishing routine
in your life again. Both couples try to do this in the novel, especially for their kids’ sake. They start by
covering up the truth about 9/11, because they do not want to frighten their children (McInerney
2006, 100-101). In the end though, I feel Corrine and Luke are lying to themselves as well. Corrine
realizes this when she says “never had she felt quite as dishonest as a parent as in the last few days,
trying to comfort the children, when she felt absolutely no comfort or security herself” (101). Routine
returns in the lives of New York’s working people as well (McInerney 2006, 95). Still, McInerney adds
a rather strange element by including a man who is carrying an American flag on his way to work
(95). In my opinion, this symbolizes that routine cannot be established that quickly and that things
have changed. Although this element gives a very fictional feel to the entire scene, we have to keep
in mind that Americans are very patriotic and that actions like these appeared in real life too. The
establishing of routine may be a good way of working through, if it is done properly. One can only go
on with his life when he learns to accept that a traumatic experience changes your life. Acceptance is
a key word in working through.

Last but not least, volunteering can be seen as a way of working through as well. “Everyone
wanted to volunteer, to get close, to work off the shock, to feel useful, to observe the carnage, to
help” (McInerney 2006, 88). Although there are people who volunteer for the wrong reasons, I feel
Luke and Corrine just want to make themselves useful (147). I also suspect their motives for
volunteering change when they get to know each other better but at least, their original intentions were good. Luke describes how being at Bowling Green helps him to process his traumatic experiences:

The presence of the dead was most palpable in the hours after midnight, their spirits hovering in the canyons. It was better, feeling them around you, than seeing them in your sleep uptown. There was something demoralizing about the sunrise – the daylight inappropriately cheerful and mundane. Darkness, with its enfold ing intimacy and its mortal intimidations, was more suited to the time and place, more conducive to mourning, to rumors, to shared confidences and bravado. (McInerney 2006, 132)

Besides getting support from his fellow-volunteers, Luke finds comfort in the environment, which suits his mood. The contrast with the world he normally lives in, a kind of Hollywood scene, is more than he can take in these desperate times. Other characters volunteer because they desperately want to see Ground Zero, like Corrine’s sister, Hilary.

### 4.3.4. Trauma and Literature

*The Good Life* is, as McEwan’s novel, more traditional in its formal characteristics. The story is told by an extradiegetic narrator, which is different from the intradiegetic narrators in Foer’s and McEwan’s novel. Luke and Corrine serve as the main focalizers in the story. The first chapter is written in the point of view of Corrine, the second chapter tells Luke’s story. The point of focalization shifts in each chapter. By structuring the story in this way, the intertwining of the protagonists’ lives is made even more clear. Repetition is not a prominent formal feature, although I feel that some actions reappear throughout the novel. The conversations between Luke and Corrine are present at several times, as are the disputes between the couples (Mcinerney 2006, 87, 106 and 77, 174, 200). The presence, or rather the absence, of the Twin Towers is pointed out at more than one occasion as well (36, 83, 102). Although these repetitions may be less obvious, I feel they give the story a static
dimension. As if the weeks and months after 9/11 are lived through in stand-by, going through the same motions over and over again. On the other hand, the characters stress that they did not notice the Towers before they were gone. This would mean that they have woken up from their dreamlike state, through the shock of 9/11.

Before I go on with my analysis of this traumatic narrative, I have to go back to the *Portraits of Grief* again (cf. supra). In Miller’s article, the form of these Portraits is discussed in great detail. The editors of the New York Times chose to represent each person’s life in the form of an anecdote. Miller says that

> In the face of collective disaster, whose scale strained the imagination, the anecdote was seized upon as a mode suited to rendering the familiar acts of ordinary life. Like the snapshot, the anecdote, through the brevity of its narrative, catches life in its everyday dimensions. Like the snapshot, the anecdote’s appeal resides in its ability to carry both life and death, present and past: what once was but recalled to memory somehow still is. (Keniston 2008, 21).

Upon reading this quote, I wondered if the definition of the anecdote was to be applied to McInerney’s novel as well. The narrative comprises only a small part of the characters’ entire ordinary lives. The first part of the novel deals with life before 9/11 and the rest of novel deals with life after the attacks, thus carrying references to both life and death, present and past. Furthermore, because the characters do not work through their trauma, 9/11 is something that was but in their memories still is going on. I believe that the affair between Luke and Corrine is but a snapshot in the photo album of their lives. It may even be a snapshot in the history of New York, although I doubt if two rather wealthy families could ever represent the whole of New York. Nevertheless, the fact that McInerney chooses only to describe a small part of his characters’ lives is also explained in Miller’s article. She says that sometimes “the loss is so great that the only way to bring it to language is to think small, cutting it down to size” (Keniston 2008, 28). McInerney has done some cutting in his narrative. Especially by cutting away 9/11, he created a gap between how life was and how life will
be from 9/11 on. To me, he was right not to describe the attacks. This way, he stresses that language fails in times of trauma. He also cuts away the ending of the story, stressing that his story is one without closure, as are the other two traumatic narratives in this thesis.

Thirdly, intertextuality is present from the start of the story. During her unemployment, Corrine is working on a screenplay for Graham Greene’s *Heart of The Matter* 31. Her secret ambition for writing the script was “to try rekindle the romance and fan it back to life” (McInerney 2006, 4). It is no coincidence that Scobie, the protagonist in Greene’s story, starts an affair with Helen Rolt, a woman who just survived a shipwreck. The description of Scobie’s feeling for Helen is even described in the same way as Corrine’s feelings for Luke: “It seemed to him that he had not felt so much at ease with another human being for years [...] But this case was different, he told himself: they were safe with each other” (Greene 1948, 183 quoted in Malamet 1993, 294). Corrine has a whole discussion about Greene’s novel with Cody, at a script meeting. Although Corrine keeps on defending her hero, Scobie, I think Cody makes a clever remark when he says: “when you fuck a strange woman, you’re searching the void for meaning” (McInerney 2006, 63). Ridiculous as it may seem at that point in the novel, it is exactly what Corrine does when she starts an affair with Luke. By integrating Greene’s novel into his own story, McInerney predicts how Corrine will react to her own trauma.

There are other symbolic references present in the novel. One of the most important is the location around which the novel centers: Ground Zero. At the very least, Ground Zero serves as the obvious representation of 9/11. Although both 9/11 and Ground Zero are not really described in the novel, the gaps appear to speak for themselves. Many characters, like Corinne’s sister, want to ‘visit’ Ground Zero, the only ones who really get to see it are Luke and Corrine. Even then, the tears in Corrine’s eyes say more than the description of the “mass grave” does (McInerney 2006, 135). By letting the main characters return to Bowling Green almost every night, the author visibly shows that they cannot let go of their trauma. Moreover, this is the place where Luke and Corrine are drawn to

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31 Joyce Carol Oates discusses the link between Greene’s novel and Corrine’s relationship with her husband in the article *Dimming The Lights*. The article is available on The New York Review of Books.
each other as well. To me, this symbolizes the fact that they are only attracted to one another by their traumatic experiences. At the end of the novel, New York is still in ruins, like their lives are. I suspect that together with the rebuilding of New York, Corrine and Luke will try to rebuild their lives again as well. The closing scene of the novel lets the reader suspect as much. The quest they undertook throughout the novel, namely the search for ‘the good life’, is not quite fulfilled at the end of the narrative. Nevertheless, they know now that there is something better out there. McInerney even suggests that his characters may undertake action when he lets Luke think about Corrine as a divorced woman (McInerney 2006, 353).

Before concluding this chapter, I have to make a remark that one has to be careful in using the word “trauma”. Sasha, for instance, says that “we’re all traumatized by what happened in September” (McInerney 2006, 195). There is no doubt in my mind that everyone was shocked by 9/11 but it is important to see the difference between a shock and a trauma. Codde says that by using the word “trauma” in the wrong context, “you diminish the meaning of the word” (Codde 2009, personal notes). Moreover, many of the characters seem to interpret the absence of the towers as a personal loss. By doing so, they will not be able to work through their trauma in an appropriate way, as LaCapra already mentioned (cf. supra).

The online review by Dylan de Thomas, praised the chapters dealing with the aftermath of 9/11. Unfortunately, “for the new two-thirds [...] it ultimately proves to be just another entry in the overflowing coffers of the Adultery Novel”32. I agree that the adulterous relationship between Luke and Corrine takes up a large part of the novel but I do not think this novel can be classified as just another love story. When McInerney was accused of exploiting 9/11 in his novel, he pointed out that “he didn’t really have any choice. New York is his subject. The destruction of the Twin Towers was the single most important event in the city’s history. To have ignored it would have been perverse” (Skidelsky 2006, 52). My opinion may not be as objective, as I enjoyed reading several of McInerney’s

32 http://contemporarylit.about.com/od/fiction/fr/theGoodLife.htm (consulted 28 April 2010)
novels, but I still feel *The Good Life* is as much of a post-9/11 novel as *Saturday* by McEwan. Both authors incorporate the attacks in their novels to give shape to their main story lines. Alain De Botton remarks that McInerney “does what a good novelist should: he takes an abstract idea and gives it life” (De Botton, 21).
5. Conclusion

In order to draw the right conclusions from my analysis, I need to refer back to the theoretical framework. In my attempt to define the concept of trauma, I used a definition by Cathy Caruth. This definition said that “in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11, my italics). After the analysis of three post-9/11 novels, I can definitely say that Caruth’s definition includes the most common symptoms that appear with trauma patient. The protagonists in the novels clearly experienced an overwhelming event, namely 9/11. They reacted to this catastrophe with some delay and their acting-out mostly included repetitive behavior and nightmares. In addition, the failure of language is one of the more apparent intrusive phenomena when analyzing literary works. Novels, in my opinion, are best suited to represent this failure. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how they represent these trauma symptoms. I have to remark that it is important to say that Caruth’s definition fits with what is written in the novels instead of the other way around. Stories and narratives do not adjust themselves to trauma theory. Rather, trauma theory tries to provide an adequate description of what the term “trauma” really entails. Although some authors may possess knowledge about trauma theory, most of them just describe the normal reactions of people in times of trauma. They do this without knowing that there is an entire theoretical framework in which these reactions are explained: trauma theory.

In the novels I analyzed, the acting-out was done in other ways besides repetitive actions or nightmares. In Foer’s novel, the main characters especially struggled with testifying and Foer portrayed this in an excellent way. By integrating another medium in his novel, namely photography, he enhanced the quality of his traumatic narrative. In my opinion, the novel is exceptional because of its young narrator as well. Nine-year-old Oskar’s character combines a childlike naivety and a mature talent for observing the world around him. This makes the novel very different from other post-9/11
novels. For instance, the second novel, by Ian McEwan, approaches 9/11 in a different way. He uses the attacks as a background for his story. The growing sense of unsafety and threat forms the subject of this traumatic narrative. By situating the story on the other side of the Atlantic, he provides his readers with a new view on the state of the world. The form and theme of the novel are more traditional. McEwan chooses a realistic approach to represent the terrorist attacks. Moreover, instead of struggling with testifying, his characters are able to talk about what happened. Henry does have trouble with identifying himself as the victim and Baxter as the perpetrator. I think it is wise not to discuss 9/11 directly. McEwan has not witnessed the tragedy from up close and could have received much criticism if he would have discussed the event itself. This privilege is given to the ‘real’ New York writers, like Jay McInerney. His novel does deal with the attacks, without actually describing them. This novel is formally and thematically more traditional as well. McInerney received much criticism on the fact that he used the attacks as the backdrop to a love story (Skidelsky 2006, 52). Nevertheless, he offers his readers a realistic image of how life changed in New York after 9/11. Some of his characters become more withdrawn but most of them do testify about their trauma.

Though these three novels fall into different categories according to Versluys (cf. supra) and they treat the event that is 9/11 in a distinct way, they have many characteristics in common as well. Foer and McEwan both discuss 9/11, two years after the attacks took place. They both use intradiegetic narrators and in this way, they really show their readers how the mind of a traumatized person works. Foer and McInerney let their story take place in New York, at the heart of the trauma. They both received some criticism on their novels as well. Foer was accused of using an inappropriate form, while McInerney’s thematic choice was frowned upon. Thirdly, McEwan and McInerney make use of adult protagonists from the upper class. They also include the community’s trauma by mentioning the protest movement in London, and the Portraits of Grief and volunteers in New York. What I stressed in all the novels – in opposition to An Whitehead – is the intertextuality. I felt that this really accentuated the fact that, although people might not understand each other’s traumas completely, the same symptoms and patterns keep reappearing throughout history. To me, this
formed the perfect illustration to Caruth’s statement that “trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 1996, 24). Last but not least, all the novels have in common that they end without closure.

Because people cope with their traumatic experiences in diverse ways, the way in which these processes are described are very different as well. Therefore, the post-9/11 novel does not exist. In my opinion, it will never exist. Why? Because the ultimate trauma does not exist either. I have only discussed three post-9/11 novels but there are many more to be analyzed. The conclusion will always be the same, everyone deals with trauma in a slightly different way and there is no perfect solution for working through trauma. Many of these traumatic narratives will end without closure, as did the three novels I analyzed. If closure is found at the end of a novel, one may doubt if it is really a traumatic narrative. It will be interesting to see which 9/11-novels are written in the future. A new analysis could then research the effect of time on the traumatic experience 9/11 was. This in turn could be compared to the many Holocaust novels that are written until this day. One could analyze the difference in acting out and working through, after a certain time has elapsed, or the effects of the trauma on the second generation survivors. The possibilities are endless. Because of the complicated nature of trauma, there will never be just one story about one ultimate trauma. To me, there is only one certainty, that “the nature of these journeys – the steps, the sequences are not logical” (McEwan 2005, 56).
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