In the past twenty-five years, there has been a proliferation of discourses on and discussions about trauma — medical, historical, literary, everyday — and its impact on individuals as well as on collectives. In a literary context, the depictions of trauma and its effects in modern fiction, informed by different discourses on trauma, have and have had important consequences for narrative structure and strategies. For instance, Dominick LaCapra observes that many narratives with a focus on trauma “do not unproblematically instantiate the conventional beginning-middle-end plot, which seeks resonant closure and uplift [...]” (LaCapra 2000, 182), and Ariela Freedman identifies a “modernist shift in the dynamic of narrative towards a traumatic and recursive structure” (20). Laurie Vickroy points out that trauma in what she calls trauma narratives “go beyond [...] subject matter or character study”, since these fictional narratives “internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures” (3). Narrative techniques that are used to express traumatic memories and experiences are, for instance,
repetition, fragmentation, gaps or ellipses, lack of chronology, and shift of verb tenses. This essay examines the relation between the depiction of trauma and narrative forms and strategies in Kaye Gibbons’s novel *Ellen Foster* (1987) and Margaret Atwood’s short story “Death by Landscape” (1989), and the ways this relationship is expressed and explored in these particular works. Despite their being less fragmented than a novel such as Per Olov Enquist’s *Kapten Nemos Bibliotek* and (perhaps) less obviously obsessed with trauma than a book such as Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, I will argue that trauma in Gibbons’s and Atwood’s texts is the key to understanding the meaning of narrative structure and strategies as well as to a deeper understanding of subject matter and the main characters.

**Trauma and Narrative**

Although the depiction of trauma is productive in terms of narrative forms and strategies, which this essay will demonstrate, trauma and narrative are sometimes seen as close to mutually exclusive notions. Since trauma refers to an overwhelming experience of violence, injury, and harm, the victim of trauma fails to understand what has happened, when it happens, and the traumatic event is compulsively relived and repeated later in the victim’s life in, for example, nightmares and hallucinations. As Cathy Caruth puts it in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Indeed, Mieke Bal states that the phrase traumatic memory is almost a contradiction in terms, “a misnomer”, since, unlike other kinds of memory, it resists narrative integration. The reason why traumatic events in the past nonetheless are “discussed in terms of memory — as traumatic memory” is
because they have a “persistent presence”:

Traumatic memories remain present for the subject with particular vividness and/or totally resist integration. In both cases, they cannot become narratives, either because the traumatizing events are mechanically reenacted as drama rather than synthetically narrated by the memorizing agent who ‘masters’ them, or because they remain ‘outside’ the subject. (Bal viii)

Thus, unlike narrative memory, which is flexible and always has an addressee even if s/he is only implied, traumatic memory is repetitive, inflexible and lacks a social aspect: “Traumatic memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 163). Consequently, traumatic memory often isolates the people who are subject to it and cuts them off from their social context, which is apparent in both Atwood’s short story and Gibbons’s novel. That the resistance to narrative and narrative integration of traumatic experiences and memories makes them especially challenging for the storyteller will become evident in my examination of *Ellen Foster*.

Not surprisingly, many critics and theorists, such as Caruth and LaCapra, who share an interest in narrative and trauma use Freud’s work as a starting-point for their discussions. LaCapra, who sees psychoanalytic theories as useful for social and political as well as individual purposes, has developed Freud’s notions of *acting out* and *working through* trauma. Acting out is signaled by repetition or repetition compulsion: “people who undergo trauma […] have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if [they] were still fully in the past, with no distance to it” (LaCapra 2001, 142-43). In contrast, working through means that people, through memory-work, are able to gain some
kind of critical distance to traumatic events and memories and are able “to distinguish between past, present, and future” (143). So, “[w]orking through involves repetition with significant difference – difference that may be desirable when compared with compulsive repetition” (148). Nevertheless, LaCapra sees acting out and working through as related processes, as a nonbinary distinction, and not a dichotomy or two totally different categories (150): working through involves a certain amount of acting out, and like acting out, “working through is not a linear, teleological, or straightforward developmental (or stereotypically dialectical) process either for the individual or for the collectivity” (148). Working through entails “going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them” (148). Even when an individual or a collectivity has worked through problems they may “recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again. In this sense, working through is itself a process that may never entirely transcend acting out and that, even in the best of circumstances, is never achieved once and for all” (148-49). LaCapra’s definitions of acting out and working through offer useful ways of understanding Ellen’s story in *Ellen Foster*, and in particular the seemingly idiosyncratic shifts of verb tenses in both this novel and Atwood’s “Death by Landscape”.

*Ellen Foster* and “Death by Landscape”

In Gibbons’s novel, which is set in the American South in the 1970s, or early 1980s, pre-teen Ellen Foster tells her own story about her problems with her biological relatives and her search for a home and a new, non-abusive family. After her mother’s suicide, Ellen stays for a short while with her father, who is a Vietnam veteran (a fact of which she does not seem aware) and a drunk. He physically and sexually abuses her, which leads to her being placed in the home of an art teacher, until Ellen’s grandmother,
her “mama’s mama”, claims her — purely out of meanness and vengeance, it seems. Ellen’s aristocratic grandmother hates her father, who she considers to be “trash”, and punishes Ellen for being his daughter and the result of her own daughter’s marrying down. After the deaths of Ellen’s father and grandmother, she moves in with an aunt and her daughter, a situation which Ellen does not see as permanent. The first-person narrator tells her story, which is the story that she does not tell the psychologist at school, after she has found a “new mama” and a home. Most of Ellen’s story (which spans about two years) is told in retrospect, which means that it shares some features with autobiography and the Bildungsroman, but her narrative is also heavily inflected by trauma, which can be seen in, for instance, the use of breaks and verb tenses.

In her traumatic interactions with her relatives, Ellen is clearly a victim and survivor, but her narrative also traces her friendship with a black girl, Starletta, and depicts Ellen’s relationship to her and other black people. This is a strand of the narrative which exposes Ellen as a perpetrator of the Southern cultural trauma of racism with slavery as its originating wound, and the importance of this part of her story is highlighted at the end of the novel when she confesses her earlier feelings of white superiority to her friend.

In contrast to Gibbons’s novel, Atwood’s “Death by Landscape”, which is set in Canada, employs a third-person perspective. However, it is limited to and focalized through the main character Lois rather than providing a more omniscient narrator’s point of view, a choice of narrative perspective which, as I will show, is important in terms of trauma and narrative. The present-day frame of the story is that Lois, a widow with grown sons, has just moved from a house into an apartment. She is happy that the apartment is “big enough for her pictures” (Atwood 109), which are now crowded together on the walls. Lois bought these pictures of North-American landscapes “way back then” not as an investment,
although they have become valuable, but because “[s]he wanted something that was in them, although she could not have said at the time what it was. It was not peace […] Looking at them fills her with wordless unease. Despite the fact that there are no people in them or even animals, it’s as if there is something, or someone, looking back out” (Atwood 110, my emphasis). The impossibility to say what attracted her in the pictures at the time she bought them and the “wordless unease”, or anxiety, that they still fill her with at the moment of contemplating them in the new apartment, in the story’s “now”, are indications of trauma’s resistance to knowledge and narrative integration.

In the last few pages of Atwood’s short story, the reader is returned to Lois’s apartment and the present on Lake Ontario while most of the story consists of her recollections of Camp Manitou, a summer camp for girls where she spent her summers between the age of nine and thirteen, and particularly her “first canoe trip and her last” (111), when she was thirteen. It is during this canoe trip that her American summer friend, Lucy, mysteriously disappears and almost certainly dies – although her body is never found – when the two of them are up on a cliff. Lucy’s disappearance turns out to be the cause of Lois’s trauma, which has had an enormous impact on her life after the fatal canoe trip. The landscapes of the pictures that cover the walls in her apartment are reminiscent of the landscape in which Lucy disappeared, and the invisible presence that haunts the pictures and looks back at Lois when she looks at the pictures is Lucy.

Stories to “Get Along”?
In the telling of different parts of her story, Ellen shows that she is aware of the power of narratives, as well as some of their limitations. As mentioned above, trauma implies a lack of knowledge, which counteracts narrative integration; and Ellen knows that it is
gaining knowledge by piecing together the story of her grandmother’s covert machinations of Ellen’s and her father’s lives after the death of Ellen’s mother that makes her endure the mental abuse she suffers at her grandmother’s house:

I may not have the story exactly straight but what I do not say or know to say is just not important enough anyway to change the main things that happened.

Knowing or thinking I knew all she did helped me get along at her house.

[…]

When I found out her story I figured I’d march myself right up to Hollywood and get a Sherlock Holmes job. It took some real figuring to piece it all together and mainly I had to keep myself from adding more to the story than actually happened. (Gibbons 74)

Her comparing figuring out the story to detective work, or a “Sherlock Holmes job”, is congruent with psychoanalytic investigation, and, as Peter Brooks points out, “[t]he urgency of narrative explanation in modern times is […] well represented in that nineteenth-century invention, the detective story, which claims that all action is motivated, causally enchained, and eventually comprehensible as such to the perceptive observer” (269). Nevertheless, although Ellen sees the story about her grandmother’s manipulations in terms of knowledge that helps her endure in a traumatic situation, she is obviously aware of different problems related to storytelling and truth-claims: possible disorder, omissions, missing pieces, and additions. She also acknowledges that thinking that she knows what happened is as important or valid in this situation as actually knowing. Ellen is sorely tempted to add some Gothic, melodramatic elements to the story: “the story would go a lot smoother if
he [Ellen’s uncle] was murdered with a piano wire by my mama’s mama who had on a black hood” (Gibbons 74-75), but, well aware that this temptation “comes from reading too many old stories” (74), she tries to keep the narrative under control in order to make a truth-claim for her story even though she may not have it “exactly straight”. Ellen’s observations suggest that certain stories call for a particular kind of conventions or certain elements and that narrative smoothness or coherence may be problematic.

In “Death by Landscape”, Lois’s retracing of what happened during the canoe trip is also described as looking for clues but this occupation is much less rewarding for the protagonist than it is in Gibbons’s novel: “Was there anything important, anything that would provide some sort of reason or clue to what happened next? Lois can remember everything, every detail; but it does her no good” (Atwood 120). Thus, in this short story, looking for clues and trying to piece the story together is a futile, possibly unhealthy activity – a kind of compulsive repetition, or acting out.

The attraction of narrative in Ellen Foster, on the other hand, does not only have to do with knowledge, but also with emotional sustenance and comfort. Ellen tells the story about working with her mother in the garden as if it was a common occurrence and then admits that “she was really only well like that for one season” (Gibbons 49). The strategy of multiplying the story or making it more general is quite conscious on Ellen’s part: “if you tell yourself the same tale over and over again enough times then the tellings become separate stories and you will generally fool yourself into forgetting you only started with one solitary season out of your life” (Gibbons 49). Ellen also acknowledges the comfort of “made up stories” not only in regard to her own reading habits (Gibbons 10), but also after having criticized her aunt and cousin for being naïve liars, making up stories, incapable of facing reality: “But they get some comfort out of the made up stories. And if that helps
them get along maybe I should not poke fun” (Gibbons 96). So although stories and story-telling in *Ellen Foster* are shown to be flawed, unreliable and even manipulative in some respects, they also help the narrator and other characters to “get along”, to survive.

In contrast to the positive effects Ellen Foster gains from repeating one story over and over again, in Atwood’s short story, the repetition of the same story, the one Lois tells about what happened when Lucy disappeared, destroys the truth value of the story for the teller and turns it into fiction in a negative sense: “Lois has told her story so many times by now, to Pat and Kip, to Cappie, to the police, that she knows it word for word. She knows it, but she no longer believes it. It has become a story” (Atwood 126). The camp leader Cappie’s desperate need for a story that makes sense in fact turns into an implied accusation of Lois’s pushing Lucy off the cliff. Twenty years later, which is “far too late” (Atwood 127), Lois understands why Cappie needs this kind of story: “She could see Cappie’s desperation, her need for a story, a real story with a reason in it; anything but the senseless vacancy Lucy had left her to deal with. Cappie wanted Lois to supply the reason, to be the reason” (Atwood 126-27). This serious accusation has added to Lois’s trauma and survivor guilt. In “Death by Landscape” stories or rather the need for a cause-and-effect story is thus shown to be trauma-inducing and damaging instead of emotionally sustaining.

**Breaks, Verb Tenses, Pronouns, Imagery, and Set Phrases**

In spite of its narrator’s positive attitude to and belief in the sustaining effects of stories, Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster* is far from a smooth, coherent narrative, and it records trauma on different levels. Ellen’s narrative shifts back and forth between her present situation at her new mama’s house and the story of the problems in her recent past from her mother’s last return from the hospital followed by
the lethal overdose to Ellen’s arrival at her new home. Her present situation offers her a relatively safe place from which to look back at and work through her past. But her story moves forward also in the present; it is not only told in retrospect. This double movement breaks the frame of the first-person Bildungsroman and conventional autobiography, which are usually retrospective narratives told from the perspective of a fixed but not always defined point in the narrator’s present. Atwood’s “Death by Landscape” with Lois sitting in her new apartment remembering what happened when she went to summer camp many years ago may at first seem more conventional in structure and narrative perspective, but a closer examination shows that also this text is characterized by sudden breaks and shifts of verb tenses. In what follows, I will examine the use of breaks, verb tenses, pronouns, imagery, and set phrases as traces of trauma in the two texts.

The breaks in Ellen’s narrative of the past, when she switches from the past to the present, which are signaled typographically in the text by a blank line, give an indication of how difficult it is for her to think about past traumatic events. As Linda Watts states, “The novel’s dual narrative, with its expertly situated flashbacks, makes the point that this past is very much a part of Ellen’s lived present” (225). The dual narrative with its shifts between the past and the present and, as I will argue, its use of verb tenses does indeed give a literary representation of trauma. However, “flashback” in Ellen Foster could be seen as a term describing Ellen’s flashing back, shifting back, to her present situation when reliving the past becomes too painful for her rather than as flashbacks of the past in the present. All of the shifts from her narrative of the past into a description of her present circumstances seem to be related to emotional distress.

Her present situation at her new mother’s house is in fact a precondition for her narrative. It not only offers Ellen a home and
emotional security with a new mother figure, but also a chance for her to identify with the other foster children: “The other girls know they are lucky to be here too. […] You don’t need to see through the walls here to know when my new mama is alone with one of her girls telling them about how to be strong or rubbing their backs. You can imagine it easy if it has happened to you” (Gibbons 121). Ellen is no longer totally isolated by her trauma, and she can see that there are others with traumatic backgrounds who need what she needs. So, even though her narrative is indeed a monologue that subsumes other voices to the point that there are no quotation marks around the dialogues she reports, a sign of the isolation trauma brings to its victims, it is told in a context of relating to others.

In her narrative about the past Ellen sometimes manages to keep a critical distance, which is signaled by her use of the past tense, but she sometimes relives the past in the present tense. For instance, the first four chapters – which deal with Ellen’s mother coming home from the hospital, taking an overdose of medicine, dying as Ellen shares her bed, and her funeral – contain frequent shifts between these past events and Ellen’s present situation at her new mama’s house, and the episodes of the past are almost entirely told in the present tense. Chapter five, in contrast, which describes the time just after the funeral and focuses on Ellen’s survival strategies, is completely in the past tense and there are no shifts in this chapter to her present situation. In other words, Ellen’s narrative shows signs of both her acting out and working through trauma.

In “Death by Landscape”, the large middle section of the story – which is framed by two short sections in the present tense about Lois, the widow, sitting in her new apartment – that deals with Lois’s childhood experiences at the summer camp is also characterized by breaks, blank lines, and sudden shifts of verb tenses. Unlike in Ellen Foster’s story, though, the reader is only returned
once to Lois’s apartment in this section of the short story, and then, by the use of irony, this brief return, which is in parentheses, illuminates the critical distance Lois has gained over the years to the stereotyping and appropriation of Native American customs at Camp Manitou:

[Cappie, impersonating an Indian Chief,] tells them they must follow the path of their ancestors (who most certainly, thinks Lois, looking out of the window of her apartment and remembering the family stash of daguerreotypes and sepia-coloured portraits on her mother’s dressing table, the stiff-shirted, black-coated, grim-faced men and the beflounced women with their severe hair and their corseted respectability, would never have considered heading off onto an open lake, in a canoe, just for fun). (Atwood 118)

However, the mid-section contains many comments from the adult protagonist’s perspective that indicate that she has gone over her memories of the summer camp, the canoe trip and Lucy’s disappearance over and over again in attempts at working through the trauma related to them. For example, “Lois realized, later, that it must have been a struggle for Cappie to keep Camp Manitou going, during the Depression and then the war, when money did not flow freely” (Atwood 112), and “She [Lois] has gone over and over it [the shout she heard when Lucy disappeared] in her mind since, so many times that the first real shout has been obliterated, like a footprint trampled by other footprints. But she is sure (she is almost positive, she is nearly certain) that it was not a shout of fear” (Atwood 123). Here again looking for clues is shown to be a compulsive but hardly conclusive activity that seems to destroy rather than reveal the evidence of what actually took place. The past tense is used in this section up until the recounting of what happened at summer camp the summer when Lois is thirteen and goes on
the canoe trip with Lucy. In the rest of the section the verb tenses fluctuate between the present and the past tense. Like in parts of *Ellen Foster*, the present tense in this section is a sign of trauma, of acting out, of reliving the past without critical distance.

The use of pronouns in the two texts also shows signs of trauma. Ellen Foster frequently uses “you”, but I would suggest that this pronoun is seldom addressed to the reader or a possible narratee in the novel. Instead it is a “you” that is a trace of autobiography’s representative self. In generalizing her experience — linguistically speaking, “you” can in most cases be replaced with “one” or “I” in *Ellen Foster* — the narrator achieves some distance to her own traumatic memories, exchanging “I” for “you”: “You have that time when your brain has nothing constructive to do so it rambles. I fool my brain out of that by making it read until it shuts off. I just think it is best to do something right up until you fall asleep” (Gibbons 10). In this passage in which Ellen presents her strategy for repressing unwanted thoughts and memories, she fluctuates between “I” and a more general “you”. Another example that clearly shows that “you” works as a way for the narrator to distance herself and to be able to tell the story is when she reports how she manages when she has to return to her father’s house after she has been abused by him and run away to one of her aunts, who does not let her stay longer than over the weekend. Ellen locks herself up in order to stay out of her father’s way: “I forgot sometimes and he got to me but I got him away from me pretty soon. If you push him down you have some time to run before he can get his ugly self up. He might grab and swat but that is all he can do if you are quick” (Gibbons 43). The uncanny effect of this narrative strategy is that the passages with the pronoun “you” read as fragments from an advice book for abused children, if the reader tries to imagine a possible interlocutor to Ellen’s statements. In Atwood’s “Death by Landscape” the use of third-person instead of first-person singular
in a short story that is so thoroughly focused on and focalized through one main character can be read as emphasizing the isolation brought on by trauma. Without an “I” there is not even an implied “you” or addressee in the story.

Moreover, as Watts has observed, there is a specific kind of imagery in Ellen’s narrative that conveys trauma: “She refers repeatedly to her pain in this disorderly and dangerous environment as ‘the spinning.’ […] Ellen describes her household as if it were a runaway roller coaster or a grotesque carnival whose master lost interest and suddenly forfeited control” (225). The spinning does not only occur in the house of Ellen’s parents, though. There is one significant instance of it when Ellen runs to Starletta’s house after her father has sexually abused her while calling her by her dead mother’s name: “Down the path in the darkness I gather my head and all that is spinning and flying out from me and wonder oh you just have to wonder what the world has come to” (Gibbons 38). This image gives an indication of how shattered Ellen is by her father’s abuse and her need of gathering herself and creating a strong fortified “I”. Ellen also experiences the traumatic spinning in her other relatives’ houses where she is forced to stay, and her physical shaking at her new mama’s house is obviously an after-effect of trauma, a bodily sign of the spinning: “there have been more than a plenty of days when she has put both my hands in hers and said if we relax together and breathe slow I can slow down shaking” (Gibbons 121). At her Aunt Nadine’s house on Christmas, the spinning starts as a result of Ellen having to watch her pampered cousin Dora opening presents and Ellen’s being a stranger and treated as one in this household: “So what do you do when the spinning starts and the motion carries the time wild by you and you cannot stop to see one thing to grab and stop yourself? You stand still the best you can and say strong and loud for the circle of spinning to stop so you can walk away from the
noise” (Gibbons 110). The worst attack of spinning Ellen describes is at her grandmother’s house when her grandmother accuses her of being an accomplice with her father in killing her mother: “And through all the churning and spinning I saw her face. A big clown smile looking down at me while she said to me you best take better care of me than you did of your mama” (Gibbons 73). The “clown smile” is part of the traumatic imagery in Ellen’s narrative that appears to be related to the carnival or fun fair.

The paragraph with the clown smile is preceded by a reference to “the magician”, a figure connected to the imagery of the fun fair that recurs but is never explained nor properly integrated into the narrative. The reference to this figure always seems to be related to painful anxiety on the narrator’s part, and the opacity of the references to the magician makes it a trope of trauma in Ellen’s narrative.

The first mention of the magician is at the funeral of her mother, when Ellen does not want to watch when the coffin is lowered into the grave:

Is she in there?
It is all done with lights said the magician.
Where is she? Not in the box. You cannot rest in a box. (Gibbons 22)

There is another reference to the magician when Ellen visits her black friend Starletta’s house on Christmas after the death of her mother. Starletta’s parents have bought a gift for Ellen who wonders, “What is it? Is it in the box? What could it be in a box for me?” (Gibbons 32). The repetition of the word “box” reverberates with Ellen’s thoughts at the funeral, and the questions are followed by “Open it up. Forget the hocus-pocus said the magician” (Gibbons 32). Since Ellen appears to associate boxes with coffins and
this event takes place fairly soon after her mother’s funeral, the reference to the magician, as a trope of trauma, may seem uncomplicated in this situation. However, I would argue that the magician appears here as much as a sign of the cultural or national trauma of racism as a sign of Ellen’s being traumatized because of her mother’s death. Her relief when the sweater in the box “does not look colored at all” is telling as she has just refused to eat a biscuit, because “[n]o matter how good it looks to you it is still a colored biscuit” (Gibbons 32). Here Ellen sees blackness as a contagious illness, so she avoids eating and drinking in Starletta’s house. There are a number of other indications in this episode of Ellen’s racism. For instance, she relives, acts out, this episode in the present tense, which underlines her lack of critical distance to racist views at this point of her narration.

In “Death by Landscape”, trauma is represented by actual pictures: the paintings of landscapes on the walls of Lois’s apartment. To the protagonist, they are all pictures of “the same landscape they paddled through, that distant summer” (Atwood 128), and the trauma related to this landscape seems to have had a greater impact on Lois than anything else she has experienced: “She can hardly remember, now, having her two boys in the hospital, nursing them as babies; she can hardly remember getting married, or what Rob looked like. Even at the time she never felt she was paying full attention. [...] as if she was living not one life but two: her own, and another shadowy life [...]” (Atwood 127-28). As Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart have put it, “Many traumatized persons [...] experience long periods of time in which they live, as it were, in two different worlds: the realm of trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life” (176). The paintings stand for both the haunting absence and presence of Lucy in the adult Lois’s life. Having refused to ever go back to the scene of the event or to any place with a similar landscape, she looks at the pictures and won-
ders, “How could you ever find anything there, once it was lost?” (Atwood 128). Like the child Ellen, she thinks of a coffin as a box, when she muses about a dead person occupying space in the form of a body that can be put in a box and buried in the ground: “But Lucy is not in a box, or in the ground. Because she is nowhere definite, she could be anywhere” (Atwood 128). So, when Lois “almost hears” something that reminds her of what she heard when Lucy disappeared — “a shout of recognition, or of joy” (Atwood 129) – she sits fixed and stares at the paintings: “she looks into them. Every one of them is a picture of Lucy. You can’t see her exactly, but she’s there [...]” (Atwood 129). In Atwood’s short story, then, as the title of it suggests, the landscape paintings help convey the complexity of trauma and its effects on the protagonist.

In Gibbons’s novel, Ellen uses a number of set phrases or clichés in her narrative that originate from her social and cultural environment, and they may be seen as adding an endearing, precocious quality to her narrative voice: for example, on buying a box of candy bars, Ellen points out, “It is best to buy in bulk” (Gibbons 26). These phrases also sometimes stand in for or cover up the unspeakable, for instance in the statement above when the sexually abused Ellen finishes with “you just have to wonder what the world has come to” (Gibbons 38). However, in the episode at Starletta’s house, it is clear that these traces of socio-cultural conditioning at least partly work in sinister ways. After having observed that Starletta’s father has never bothered her and that “he is the only colored man that does not buy liquor from my daddy”, Ellen concludes with a set phrase: “I do not know what he spends his money on” (Gibbons 30). This phrase serves as a racist filter and prevents Ellen from making a conscious connection between Starletta’s Christmas presents and what her father spends his money on. His green coat and hat – “Castro has a hat just like it” (Gibbons 30) – may indicate that he like Ellen’s father is a Vietnam-war
veteran, but one who has managed to come back as a member of a functional family. Because of her racism, which is supported by her materialism, Ellen, though, is blocked from seeing that the only functional nuclear family she visits is Starletta’s. So, although Ellen is unconditionally welcomed into Starletta’s home and the parents of her best friend show genuine concern and care for her, she is unable fully to see what they offer due to the dynamics of racism, which creates tension and anxiety in the narrator and leaves gaps, contradictions, and unintegrated traces in her narrative.

Opening Instead of Closure?
Trauma informs the beginning and the ending of Ellen’s narrative, but in ways that provide neither a straight-forward relationship between the two nor closure. The novel begins with Ellen stating, “When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy” (Gibbons 1). On the first page, Ellen goes on to elaborate one of her favourite imagined ways to kill him and then concludes, “But I did not kill my daddy. He drank his own self to death […] All I did was wish him dead real hard every now and then. And I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive” (Gibbons 1). In terms of this opening, the ending may be puzzling: Ellen’s narrative continuing beyond her achievement of a new home with a new mama and foster siblings and ending with a confession of racist guilt to her black friend and an acknowledgement that Starletta’s situation is and has been worse than her own. Nevertheless, as LaCapra points out,

one way a novel makes challenging contact with ‘reality’ and ‘history’ is precisely by resisting fully concordant narrative closure (prominently including that provided by the conventional well-made plot), for this mode of resistance inhibits compensatory
catharsis and satisfying ‘meaning’ on the level of the imagination and throws the reader back upon the need to come to terms with the unresolved problems the novel helps to disclose. (LaCapra 1987, 14)

Thus, I would argue that the narrative makes sense in terms of Ellen’s having to work through both being a victim and being a perpetrator of trauma, a cultural or national trauma that is still an open wound. In her discussion of autobiography and trauma, Leigh Gilmore reminds the reader of “the double meaning of trauma in Freud”, that the word trauma “may signify either a new wound or the reopening of an old wound” (27). She continues, “The power of trauma to outlast the duration of its infliction is crucial to the sense of wounding that makes the term so resonant. [...] Slavery no longer exists in the United States, but the wound it represents has not healed. Certain historical harms as well as injuries done to children suit the doubled meaning especially well” (Gilmore 27). Gilmore’s examples of historical trauma resonate with the concerns of Gibbons’s novel and of its narrator, but in this narrative trauma is doubly doubled, since Ellen acts out and attempts to work through overlapping personal and national traumas, both as victim and perpetrator. As Ellen puts it, “Every day I try to feel a little better about all that went on when I was little. About all I have big to straighten out is me and Starletta” (Gibbons 121). LaCapra points out that in regard to historical trauma it is of utmost importance to make a distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders:9 “[N]ot everyone traumatized by events is a victim. There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma, which must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices” (LaCapra 2000, 196). Ellen, then, suffers from trauma both as a victim of different kinds of abuse inflicted
on her by her relatives and as a perpetrator of racist ideologies and practices. She acts out her racism in her limited understanding of Starletta’s family and her sense of white superiority. Ellen’s racist attitude is firmly entrenched in and by her social environment, and displays remnants and revenants of an ante-bellum and a segregated pre-Civil-Rights South.

The sense of guilt that Ellen tries to abjure by insisting that she did not kill her mother, father, and grandmother is finally tied to the crime of racism, which Ellen confesses to her victim and friend, Starletta, who thus becomes a narratee of sorts in the novel’s last few pages. This ending may be seen as Ellen’s becoming what Gilmore terms a “knowing self”: “The knowing self in contrast to the sovereign or representative self does not ask who I am, but how can the relations in which I live, dream, and act be reinvented through me?” (Gilmore 148).10 Ellen appears to have moved away from an absolute, trauma-induced need to establish a self-reliant, sovereign self towards a point where she can acknowledge someone else and exist in relation to other subjects. As mentioned above, she also recognizes that her trauma is fractal, partly due to her being a victim of trauma and partly due to her being a perpetrator of trauma.

However, I would suggest Ellen Foster offers an opening rather than closure and uplift: that is, closure in the sense of either celebrating Ellen’s achieving a new home and creating a strong, self-reliant “I” against all odds, or celebrating her insights into her own and her society’s racism.11 It is important to recognize how tentative and limited Ellen’s and her narrative’s final insights are and how much they are still acting out trauma. That Ellen’s working through her racism towards becoming an ethically responsible agent is far from an entirely linear, ameliorative process is shown in the last few pages of the novel. Ellen’s elaborate staging of Starletta’s visit shows her close to obsessive need of control and also her
anxiety about how people around her will react to Starletta being black. Moreover, when Ellen makes her confession to Starletta, she does not expect her to respond in any significant way – “She hates to talk” (Gibbons 125) – and it is Ellen who describes and defines both her own attitude and Starletta’s situation. During and after the confession, Ellen still appropriates her black friend in a way that uncomfortably reverberates with racial relationships under slavery: “my Starletta” (Gibbons 126). That Ellen speaks at and for her black friend rather than engaging in a dialogue with her adds to the acting out of racism in the narrative. So, as Sharon Monteith and Giavanna Munafo have pointed out, Ellen’s narrative, Gibbons’s novel, is to a large extent persistently monologic and closes down the voice of Starletta, a voice that could have modified or challenged Ellen’s. Thus, Gibbons’s novel acts out the trauma of Southern racism through Ellen’s voice and narrative. Nevertheless, it also offers the possibility of an opening instead of closure.

Unlike the structure of Ellen Foster, Atwood’s “Death by Landscape” seems to be framed, almost like a painting, with the sections about Lois, the widow, in her apartment, framing the story about the two girls, Lois and Lucy, at summer camp. However, trauma informs the structure as well as the subject matter also of this narrative. In the first paragraph of the story, the reader is told that Lois “is relieved not to have to worry about the lawn, or about the ivy pushing its muscular little suckers into the brickwork, or the squirrels gnawing their way into the attic and eating the insulation off the wiring, or strange noises” (Atwood 109). So, the move from a house with a garden to this apartment seems to be an avoidance of contact with life – vegetable and animal life, more specifically, but the ivy is personified and the noises are not assigned to anything, or anybody, in particular. In the apartment, “the only plant life is in pots” (Atwood 109), safely contained, like the story about Lois’s summers at Camp Manitou might at first appear to be, in
the protagonist’s memory, and, on the textual level, framed by the sections about Lois in her new apartment.

The rest of the first section of the story is concerned with the pictures: a paragraph about the way they are arranged in blocks on the walls of the apartment; one about who painted them and what they look like; another about Lois choosing them and their economic value; and a last paragraph about her wanting “something that was in them” and feeling “wordless unease” when looking at them, “as if there is something, or someone, looking back out” (Atwood 110). Besides the looking, there is no physical activity on Lois’s behalf in this section, and the last section of the story is almost as static or lifeless in this sense: “moving, stirring from this space, is increasingly an effort” (Atwood 127). On the last page of the story, when she almost hears the shout, “Lois sits in her chair and does not move” (Atwood 129). The “death by landscape” of the title, then, ultimately seems to refer to Lois’s death, literally or symbolically, rather that Lucy’s.

The fixity and life-denying qualities of trauma are underscored by Lois’s being physically fixed in her new apartment. She cannot move, trauma has taken over her life, and it is the only thing that is alive in the room. The short story ends: “Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She is in Lois’s apartment, in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is alive” (Atwood 129). In fact, if the apartment sections of the story are seen as the frame of the story, and the paintings are “the holes that open inwards […] like doors” on the walls of the apartment, the frame does not manage to hold Lucy, or Lois’s trauma, in place. Interestingly, this image of the paintings as holes that are like doors, opening inwards, with Lucy entering through them actually turns Atwood’s short story inside out, since the story about Lucy and her disappearance is in the middle section of the short story, and in Lois’s mind. Here Lucy
enters from outside — a sign of trauma’s resistance to narrative integration. The landscape paintings that turn out to be pictures or rather the habitations of Lucy finally deny the story any unambiguous closure.

In conclusion, paying attention to the presence of trauma in these two works of fiction — and, I would argue, many other contemporary literary texts — provides the reader with insights into a number features that otherwise might seem unimportant, random, or not as meaningful as they in fact are when considered in the context of narrative and trauma. Both works exhibit textual traces of trauma in their lay-out, the oscillation between verb tenses, the choice of pronouns, and the use of imagery. There are references to the conventions of the detective story used for psychological purposes in both texts, but looking for clues has different outcomes for the protagonists: in Ellen Foster’s case it is a way to cope with a difficult situation, a way of working through trauma, while in Lois’s case it is more closely related to compulsive repetition and acting out. Both texts address the compelling aspects of cause-and-effect narratives, but also their limitations. Indeed, as my examination of Kaye Gibbons’s Ellen Foster and Margaret Atwood’s “Death by Landscape” has shown, literary depictions of the workings of trauma often upset the temporal aspects of a narrative, and challenge orderly retrospective narration and the notion of (unambiguous or “fully concordant”) narrative closure.

Notes

1 “Trauma from the Greek meaning ‘wound,’ refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm” (Gilmore 6). The interest in psychic trauma and the usage of the term appear to have increased considerably since the American Psychiatric
Association officially acknowledged Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in 1980 (Caruth 1995, 3), and Laurie Vickroy confirms that “[n]arratives about trauma flourished particularly in the 1980s and 1990s with increased public awareness of trauma and trauma theory” (2).

2 The explicit presence of trauma in 20th-century literature can actually be traced back to the modernists. For a recent study on trauma and narrative in modern literature see Ariela Freedman’s *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf*.

3 As LaCapra states, “In fact there are forms that both contest it and suggest other modes of narration that raise in probing and problematic ways the nature of losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence. Indeed most significant novelists from Gustave Flaubert through James Joyce, Robert Musil, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett to the present experimentally explore alternative narrative modalities that do not simply rely on a variant of a conventional plot structure, and their novels have earlier analogues, especially in the picaresque and carnivalesque traditions (novels such as Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy, for example)” (LaCapra 2000, 182). LaCapra also aptly points out that “It is curious that theorists who know much better nonetheless seem to assume the most conventional form of narrative (particularly nineteenth-century realism read in a rather limited manner) when they generalize about the nature of narrative [...]” (LaCapra 2000, 186).

4 For a more developed discussion of *Ellen Foster* in terms of the *Bildungsroman*, see Monteith.

5 See Munafo and Monteith for extended discussions of race relations in *Ellen Foster*.

6 “Freud apparently was fully aware of the analogies between psychoanalytic investigation and detective work. Faced with fragmentary evidence, clues scattered within present reality, he who would explain must reach back to a story in the past which accounts for how the present took on its configuration” (Brooks 270).
Giavanna Munafo misses this aspect of Gibbons’s novel, although she refers to verb tenses more than once in her article. Here is one example: “At this point in the novel, Gibbons’s two alternating narratives converge: the predominantly unhappy story of the events that lead up to Ellen’s ultimate rejection of her ‘natural’ family (told in the past tense) and the predominantly happy story of her life as a member of the ‘Foster’ family (told in the present tense)” (52). Ellen’s story about her “natural family” is not only told in the past tense. She relives parts of it in the present tense.

Leigh Gilmore calls attention to “the paradox that the autobiographer be both unique and representative” (8).

LaCapra makes a distinction between structural and historical trauma: “One may argue that structural trauma is related to transhistorical absence (absence of-at the origin) and appears in different ways in all societies and all lives” (LaCapra 2000, 194). In other words, structural trauma is a condition of human existence, while historical trauma is specific and often inflicted by violence: child abuse, hate crimes, the Holocaust, etc. Not everybody is subject to historical trauma. LaCapra also points out that “‘Victim’ is not a psychological category. It is, in variable ways, a social, political, and ethical category” (196).

“When writers establish an alternative jurisdiction for narratives in which self-representation and representation of trauma coincide, they produce what we can think of as an alternative jurisprudence by a knowing subject. I use ‘knowing’ to suggest a process, even an ethic, that is not directed toward a judgment in which the subject is ‘known,’ but through which it models an engagement with what is difficult, compelling, intractable, and surprising. The knowing subject works with dissonant materials, fragmented by trauma, and organizes them into a form of knowledge” (Gilmore 146-47).

In the context of interracial friendship, Sharon Monteith similarly argues that the novel’s utopian possibilities “are left unfulfilled and that the ending remains far too ambiguous to be a culmination of all
the ideas raised by the plot” (61-62).

This comment about the novel acting out the trauma of Southern racism may appear to implicate the author in the acting out. There seems, in fact, to be such an implication. Kaye Gibbons “began writing a poem from the viewpoint of the black girl who becomes Ellen’s best friend, but the story gradually metamorphosed into a novel” (qtd. in Munafo 59), a novel that excludes the black girl’s point of view entirely. In one of her other novels, Gibbons planned to write the story of a black midwife, but then decided that she should be white (Munafo 59). Munafo suggests that “The tension apparent in Gibbons’s account between the desire to tell a black tale, as it were, and the drive to interrogate white racial identity may be at the heart of Ellen Foster’s final uneasiness” (Munafo 59). Furthermore, Gibbons has stated that “I am Ellen Foster and I admit it” (qtd. in Watts 220), which means that she is indeed involved in Ellen’s narrative, although her skilful use of narrative strategies to depict trauma also suggests some critical distance.
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