

*Poetics of Trauma in Olga Ravn's *My Work*: Towards Matricentric Writing*

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Abstract. Over the past two decades, numerous novels and memoirs have explored contemporary motherhood. In contrast to idealised portrayals of mothers, new narratives of motherhood have emerged that foreground the subjective maternal experience. The evolving discourse often invokes ironic and critical self-consciousness, addressing questions related to work, sexuality, and identity. The works frequently explore the more complex and often troubling aspects of motherhood, including controversial topics such as maternal ambivalence, maternal trauma, voluntary childlessness, and queer mothering. *My Work* (2020) by the Danish author Olga Ravn belongs to the emerging canon of new motherhood narratives. It is a work of autobiographical fiction, documenting the periods of pregnancy and the early years with a child. *My Work* deals with the subjective maternal experience, exploring issues related to maternal subjectivity, ambivalence and trauma, blending personal narrative with broader cultural critique.

In this paper, I discuss Olga Ravn's novel *My Work* through literary trauma theory and explore how trauma and survival, disruption and continuity, absence and loss shape the poetics of Ravn's novel. After outlining the basic features of traumatic experience and trauma literature, I will explore the poetics of *My Work*, more specifically, how stylistic features attributed to trauma literature, most importantly those of fragmentation and repetition, are employed to convey the lived experience of postpartum trauma. My focus will also be on the ways in which postpartum trauma reconfigures patterns of temporality, narrative coherence and voice. To conclude, I will show how the novel represents a working-through of an experience of discontinuity of narrative identity and a creation of maternal subjectivity.

Keywords: maternal subjectivity; postpartum trauma; literary trauma theory; contemporary motherhood narratives; narrative discontinuity

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, numerous novels and memoirs have explored contemporary motherhood. Literary representations of mothers often adhere to the normative notions of idealised motherhood², reproducing cultural stereotypes that, as Frye notes, “embrace the necessity of selflessness for a mother, identify the female body with mothering, and capitulate the essentialist notions of womanhood” (Frye 2010: 195). In contrast to these idealised portrayals, new narratives of motherhood have emerged that foreground the subjective maternal experience. The evolving discourse often invokes ironic and critical self-consciousness, addressing questions related to work, sexuality, and identity. The works are formally complex and defy genre boundaries, combining autobiographical material with fiction, literary criticism and critical theory (Heal 2019: 118; Frye 2010: 188–189; Juhasz 2003: 405). Notable examples of such motherhood memoirs include, for example, *My Life's Work* (2001) by Rachel Cusk, *Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson, *Motherhood* (2018) by Sheila Heti, *Notes to Self* (2019) by Emilie Pine, as well as *My Work* (2023) by Olga Ravn, which is the focus of the current article. Narratives of disrupted or non-traditional motherhood are at odds with the popular ideal of motherhood and the societal expectations of the “good mother”³, questioning the cultural consensus related to motherhood and mothering (Almond 2010: 2, 6; Wahlström et al. 2023: 5–6). These works frequently explore controversial topics such as maternal ambivalence and trauma, voluntary childlessness, and queer mothering. Maternal trauma brings us to the borders of the “dark side of motherhood” (Almond 2010: 226), “a facet of the maternal experience that society prefers to repress from the cultural imagination in favour of the idealized figure of the ‘good’ mother” (Lazzari & Segéral 2021: 13). Although such topics have been explored by various authors, they have not become commonly accepted. Maternal ambivalence⁴ remains, with the more traumatic maternal experiences like miscarriage and post-natal depression, stigmatised

² In the context of this paper, the notion of normative motherhood refers to the cultural consensus and cultural expectations around contemporary motherhood, and is understood as a regulatory discourse and cultural ideal that prescribes how mothers should behave, feel, and live and is usually internalised by individual women, as outlined by Andrea O'Reilly and other feminist critics working in the field of motherhood studies.

³ According to Barlow and Chapin, a “‘good mother’ promotes the well-being and development of her children and is almost always patient, protective, nurturing, and generous” (2010: 326).

⁴ Maternal ambivalence refers to mothers’ mixed maternal feelings of love and hate towards their children and “the anxiety, shame and the guilt that the negative feelings engender in them.” (Almond 2010: 2, 6).

and underexplored subjects in both literary works and cultural discourses more generally (Wahlström 2023: 6; Lazzari & Segéral 2021: 2–3). According to Lazzari and Segéral, “voices of … traumatic motherhood are only beginning to be heard” (2021: 2).

My Work (2023)⁵ by the Danish author Olga Ravn belongs to the emerging canon of new motherhood narratives. *My Work* is a hybrid narrative, blending life writing with fiction⁶ to engage with the unrepresentable, more specifically with the invisible and subjective maternal trauma, exploring prenatal anxiety, maternal ambivalence and depression, blending personal narrative with broader cultural critique. The novel is fragmented and multivocal in form, combining various genres such as (meta)fiction, essay, poetry, journal entry, letter, and medical procedural log to explore the isolation, dissociation and disorientation of early motherhood. It is a layered narrative where the boundaries between author, narrator, and character are blurred. The text is composed of short, disjointed sections that mirror the protagonist’s fragmented psychological state and the ruptures caused by postpartum trauma. Events unfold out of sequence, with memories, reflections, and present experiences interwoven.

The novel documents the pregnancy of the protagonist Anna and her early years with her child. Anna learns to navigate the new-to-her landscape of motherhood, while simultaneously trying to connect the seemingly disparate worlds of mothering and living the life of a poet & author. There is constant negotiation between the maternal space (home, body, caring for the child) and the professional/creative space (writing, intellectual labour, public life). The novel candidly explores the bodily and mental aspects of new motherhood, loss of subjectivity and coherence of lived experience. The work also explores the issue of maternal subjectivity and what it means to become a mother.

My Work gives voice to the subjective experience of motherhood and brings attention to the lived maternal experience that has still been neglected in contemporary discussions around mothering and motherhood. The novel can therefore be considered an example of *maternal writing* (Heal 2019). It challenges the idealised notions of motherhood that are similar across cultures and that have become internalised in contemporary women, influencing their expectations and experience of mothering (Barlow & Chapin

⁵ Originally *Mit Arbejde*, 2020. Translated from Danish by Sophia Hersi Smith and Jennifer Russell.

⁶ As Olga Ravn explained in an interview with *The Guardian*, her goal was not to recount her life factually, but to find a poetic form for the radical experience and to recreate the emotional truth of traumatic birth and early motherhood. By blending fiction with life writing, the novel aims to evoke what Ravn calls an “experience of extreme intimacy”; as she puts it, “it is not an autobiography, it is a technique.” (Cummins 2023)

2010: 326; Heal 2019: 118). According to Heal, maternal writing creatively rewrites motherhood, resists genre distinctions and is characterised by formal inventions (Heal 2019: 117–119). Maternal writing is also matrifocal, which means it begins and “holds fast to a maternal perspective” (O'Reilly & Podnieks 2010: 3). Thus, it is “as much as an act of testimony of a subjective experience of motherhood as one of deliberately upending previous discourses (patriarchal, social, psychoanalytical, feminist) around motherhood” (Heal 2019: 118). As an example of maternal writing, *My Work* aims to give voice to the mother, normalise maternal ambivalence and create a discussion around topics traditionally considered taboo.

As a candid exploration of the traumatic aspects of early motherhood, *My Work* can also be discussed as a post-traumatic text that aims to convey a disorienting and isolating experience, and simultaneously, a search for a new continuity in a world altered by postpartum trauma. The fragmented rhetorics of trauma emerge in *My Work* to represent the lived and embodied experience of post-partum trauma, with its distorted sense of time and memory, dissociation and fragmentation of identity. *My Work* not only brings the reader close to the embodied and affective dimensions of postpartum trauma but also engages in a process of working *through* that experience toward recovery, echoing Dominick LaCapra's notion of post-traumatic working-through. The novel also highlights the importance of writing in the process of traumatic recovery, in the search for “a new continuity to replace that which has been ruptured” (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 10).

In this paper, I discuss Olga Ravn's novel *My Work* through literary trauma theory and explore how trauma and survival, disruption and continuity, absence and loss shape the poetics of Ravn's novel. After outlining the basic features of traumatic experience and trauma literature, I will explore the poetics of *My Work*, more specifically, how stylistic features attributed to trauma literature⁷, most importantly those of fragmentation and repetition, are employed to convey the lived experience of postpartum trauma. My focus will also be on the ways in which postpartum trauma reconfigures patterns of temporality, narrative coherence and voice. To conclude, I will show how the novel represents a working-through of an experience of discontinuity of narrative identity and a creation of maternal subjectivity.

⁷ This stylistic strategy is not indicative of trauma writing *per se*. Trauma fiction often self-consciously employs Modernist and postmodernist stylistic features like fragmentation and non-linear storytelling to convey psychological depth, immediacy, or the disorienting effects of traumatic experience, as outlined by Whitehead (2004: 3).

Trauma and literature

During its long history, the notion of trauma has travelled across disciplines from the medical and legal discourse into literary sciences (Davis & Meretoja 2020: 2–3). The beginnings of trauma theory can be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s and the works of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (Bond & Craps 2019: 4–5). The birth of trauma theory is tightly connected with the publication of Caruth's ground-breaking study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Although Caruth's ideas have been widely critiqued, most literary critics working in the field of trauma follow a Caruthian understanding of trauma, as “a belated response to an overwhelming event too shattering to be processed as it occurs” (Bond & Craps 2019: 4).

Dominick LaCapra's seminal work *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) challenges Caruth's ahistorical approach and distinguishes between historical trauma, i.e. specific, time-bound losses (personal or collective, for example, family death or genocide), and structural trauma, i.e. an enduring “anxiety-producing condition” marked by its ambivalence between pain and ecstatic elation that one learns to live with rather than overcomes (LaCapra 2001: 46–47, 50–52, 62ff). LaCapra further differentiates the processes of “acting out” versus “working through” trauma, highlighting that loss as an event aligns with historical trauma, while structural trauma, detached from specific times, can affect anyone (LaCapra 2001: 50).

The experience of trauma is not easily narrated. It is often seen as “beyond language” due to the various limits the traumatic sets on the autobiographical and testimonial forms of writing (Gilmore 2001: 6, 14). Thus, ever since the beginnings of trauma theory, literature and the arts have been seen as helpful in conveying the traumatic and gesturing toward the unrepresentable. Through figurative language, literature can evoke what cannot be directly understood or articulated. Trauma theorists Felman and Laub “regard literature and art … as a mode of witnessing, of accessing reality, when all other modes of knowledge are precluded” (Bond & Craps 2019: 67). According to LaCapra, literature can be a way of “getting at trauma in a manner unavailable to theory” as a means of “bearing witness to, enacting, and, to some extent, working over and through trauma” (LaCapra 2001: 83, 136). Taken together, both the theoretical perspective on trauma and the emergence of trauma literature highlight the important role of literature in making sense of what is otherwise unspeakable.

Trauma narratives are fictional accounts grounded in personal or collective traumatic experiences that “help readers to access traumatic experiences” (Vickroy 2002: 1). Trauma narratives have generally focused on large-scale and historical traumatic events, like genocide or slavery, and more recently also on domestic abuse, traumatic mother-daughter interactions, cultural trauma and

rape (Jensen 2019; Vickroy xii; Yang 2023). Writers may also make use of the discourse of trauma to offer socio-political critique and show how “political structures can create and perpetuate trauma” and as a “means to explore and understand gender identity formation, memory, and creativity” (Vickroy 2001: 3–4). Laurie Vickroy (2001) notes that trauma narratives raise important questions about our understanding of subjectivity. They challenge the Western notion of the highly individuated self and our ability to navigate loss and fragmentation in our lives (Vickroy 2001: 2). These narratives do more than recount traumatic experiences; they highlight the difficulties in expressing such experiences and encapsulate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties associated with trauma within their form and structure (Vickroy 2001: 3). According to Meg Jensen, autobiographical and fictional narratives of trauma often share “a language of suffering”, i.e. a limited set of rhetorical strategies of disruption, fragmentation and dissociation, mirroring the effects of trauma on the human mind and body (2019: 20).

According to Lazzari and Segéral, even though “trauma studies have been booming ... since the publication of Cathy Caruth’s study ...”, and several studies have shown that postpartum PTSD is a significant health concern for new mothers⁸, “surprisingly little critical attention has been given to the intersection of motherhood and trauma” (Lazzari & Segéral 2021: 3). Traumatic narratives often deal with intergenerational postmemory and interactions between traumatised mothers and their daughters, but less attention has been given to the subjective traumatic experience of mothers. The aspect of postpartum trauma has only recently become a topic to be explored in contemporary literature and literary criticism. Lazzari & Segéral’s *Trauma and Motherhood* (2021) is one of the first critical handbooks on trauma and motherhood that “repositions motherhood studies in the twenty-first century through the lens of trauma theory by exploring the new challenges surrounding conception, pregnancy, and postpartum experiences” in film, literature and theatre (2021: 1). This paper bridges a gap in literary scholarship by using trauma theory to examine post-partum trauma within a matrifocal narrative. It specifically argues that applying this lens foregrounds the nuanced, subjective dimensions of maternal experience and reveals the complexity of maternal ambivalence and trauma.

⁸ According to Schobinger et al. (2020), up to 30% of women consider their childbirth experience to be traumatic. See also Ahsan et al. (2023), Beck (2015) and Cleveland et al. (2022).

Poetics of Trauma in *My Work*

Anna, the protagonist of *My Work*, experienced a difficult birthing experience, both mental and physical, and when the child was first placed on her chest, “she felt nothing” (Ravn 2023: 53). Expecting to experience great bliss, instead, she felt helpless and lost. Anna was unable to speak, or to move herself, felt dissociated from herself and her child, “white noise enveloped her like a woolly mitten” (Ravn 2023: 53), and while her husband was in skin-to-skin contact with their newborn, “she assumed she’d been forgotten” (Ravn 2023: 54). Throughout the work, the plot repeatedly returns to this moment of the birth, and Anna, even years after the birth, feels like she is “still in the delivery room”, compulsively working through “the white noise”, looking for a way out. In addition, although both she and her child survived, she experienced the postpartum period as being almost as traumatic as giving birth: “carrying this destruction while being a mother; it seems criminal.” (Ravn 2023: 234). Anna had trouble bonding with the newborn and yet still felt unable to share parenting responsibilities with her willing husband. She was shocked to find herself suddenly bound to the child both mentally and bodily, her breasts filling up with milk every few hours, limiting the distance she could travel between feedings. Thus, instead of happiness and instantly bonding with the newborn, Anna experiences a range of symptoms that could qualify as postpartum trauma, most importantly dissociation (Ravn 2023: 15, 174), feeling of helplessness, disruption of identity and loss of subjectivity (Ravn 2023: 17), a changed relation to time (Ravn 2023: 4, 124), memory loss (Ravn 2023: 6, 158, 218), a recurring experience of terror (Ravn 2023: 63, 64, 156) and acute anxiety and fear (Ravn 2023: 163, 173).

In *My Work*, many narratological devices are used to convey the experience of trauma, for example, intertextuality, repetition, and fragmentation. Among these, I will focus on fragmentation and repetition, as they are the most distinctive and consistently employed narrative devices in the book. I will examine fragmentation on two levels: fragmentation of character/protagonist and fragmentation of narrative structure. This is followed by a discussion of repetition, particularly as it relates to the fragmentation of narrative structure.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is a poetic device that appears across diverse genres, but has been particularly prominent in Modernist and Postmodernist literature. In these contexts, it functions as a formal strategy to reflect the disjointed nature of human consciousness, the accelerating pace of modern life, and the

psychological ruptures associated with trauma (Naishtat 2025: 2002; Jensen 2019: 20; Yang 2023: 2–3). An important aspect of the fragment is its discontinuity, which contrasts it with a segment (Naishtat 2025). Within trauma narratives – both autobiographical and fictional – fragmentation serves as a representational mode that mirrors the disruption of memory, identity, and narrative coherence often experienced by trauma survivors (Jensen 2019: 20; Whitehead 2004: 85; Yang 2023: 2–3).

My Work employs fragmentation to dramatise the experience of postpartum trauma and to disrupt the idealised notion of stable and unified motherhood. It occurs mainly on two levels: fragmentation of character/protagonist and fragmentation of narrative structure. Complex in form, *My Work* is composed as a collage, incorporating diary entries, letters, poems, medical records, and extended prose passages. The text is also in intertextual dialogue with other texts, for example, poems, novels, non-fiction, and artist biographies. Intertextuality is a common feature of trauma fiction that has been used to convey the experience of trauma (Whitehead 2004: 85). It can increase the sense of dissociation associated with traumatic experiences, but at the same time, it can also be used to bridge gaps and create dialogue with other texts. The formal heterogeneity of *My Work* is further accentuated by the use of blank space, brief paragraphs, and disjointed chapters that resist linear chronology.

The fragmentation of characters occurs mainly through the disintegration of narrative identity and of narrative voice. *My Work* is a multivocal text, thematising voice and the question of silence in multiple ways. Firstly, one can argue that the character of Anna emerges to give voice to maternal ambivalence and unspeakable dimensions of motherhood, because, as noted above, “certain things cannot be written in the first person, so they are transferred to the second or third” (Ravn 2023: 289). Anna’s oscillation between enforced silence and an urgent compulsion to speak makes it possible to connect her to the discursive double-bind associated with trauma and testimonial discourse. Furthermore, the fragmentation of Anna’s narrative identity is mirrored in the instability of the narrative voice itself, which shifts, splinters, and resists coherence. This is further complicated by metaleptic (and metafictional) intrusions, where the boundaries between narrator, character, and textual author blur, producing an uncanny effect that destabilises the reader’s sense of narrative authority and selfhood.

According to Rimmon-Kenan, “we lead our lives as stories, and our identity is constructed both by stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves, and by the master narratives that consciously or unconsciously serve as models for ours” (2001: 11). Thus, our identities are stories, and narrative can be seen “as a subjective construction of “identity” (2001: 12). Trauma or a serious

illness can create a sense of rupture in our narrative identities (2001: 11). In *My Work*, after the birth of her child, Anna experienced a discontinuity in her identity and felt “cut-off from herself” (Ravn 2023: 61). Her ‘new’ identity, the mother, was governed by a myriad of normative and idealistic discourses that saw the mother not as an agent or subject but as an *other*, or an object. Anna experienced this new identity as all-pervasive and at odds with her previous role as a writer, a central component of her sense of self. Suddenly, her “life [was] divided into separate entities that had to fight among themselves for the right to exist. The child, the mother, the partner, the father, the woman, the family, the couple, the individual, the writing, the housekeeping, the work.... How to live in such a divide? ... How to connect these murky worlds?” (Ravn 2023: 61).

Her former life as a writer and her new world as a mother seemed incompatible with each other: “If becoming a mother has been the most life-changing experience of her life, must she refrain from writing about becoming a mother to be a good mother?” (Ravn 2023: 288). She could no longer write without fearing to damage her child, “because to write is to be a bad mother” (Ravn 2023: 292), nor did she recognise herself in the dominant master narratives about motherhood. For Anna, writing was an integral part of her identity, and as a mother, she felt constrained and silenced: “when motherhood began, I found that I could no longer write freely. Writing was not accessible, and at the same time I needed writing more than ever” (Ravn 2023: 292). Although taking responsibility for both one’s art and children can be practically impossible, what we see in *My Work* is that for Anna, writing was not possible, not due to the inaccessibility of childcare or other practical matters. It was not a practical issue, but a moral one. She felt as though she ought not to. This brought about a crisis of subjectivity, a disruption of self.

This disruption of identity is dramatised via a fragmented narrative voice, one that not only reflects Anna’s fractured sense of self but also aligns with a key stylistic hallmark of trauma poetics. As Whitehead notes, a “dispersed or fragmented narrative voice” is central to the formal strategies of trauma narratives (2004: 85). Anna, governed by the normative patriarchal and psychoanalytic discourses, no longer recognises herself and starts seeing herself as “an other”, repeatedly asking the rhetorical questions “who is Anna?” (Ravn 2023: 15, 154), “what does it mean to be an Anna? Does she speak with one voice?” (Ravn 2023: 234). The fragmentation of voice thus not only mirrors her internal disorientation but also serves to destabilise the idealised notion of a mother, whose sole aspiration is to care for her children. Throughout the narrative, Anna simultaneously occupies multiple, sometimes conflicting subject positions, and the narrative voice shifts accordingly, splintering, merging, and reconfiguring in ways that enact the very instability it seeks to represent.

The disruption of voice is most evident in the shifts in personal pronouns. In the first chapters, Anna often writes in the 3rd person, or refers to herself as “the Patient”, or the abbreviated version “Pt.” (Ravn 2023: 181, 183). The language is sterilised and medicalised to convey the feeling of loss of control and lack of speech to describe the experience. She refers to herself as “she” and “an Anna”, and at times it is not clear who is writing about whom: “Someone (myself?) writes about a woman with my own name ... mercilessly scrutinising me and keeping a record of my every move. Someone who considered me a she, a hysterical.... A woman looking at someone who looks like herself from a distance; she describes this person.... The third person is a helpless woman.” (Ravn 2023: 7, 289–290). The third-person perspective is thus used to create a sense of self-alienation, characteristic of survivors of trauma.

The fragmentation of the protagonist (character) and the dissociation from herself are dramatised in the text by the figure of the double, or the *doppelgänger*. The double is a common feature of Gothic literature written by women, for example, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Yellow Wallpaper*, literary works that *My Work* is in intertextual dialogue with and that are now being considered the classics of feminist literature. In *My Work*, Anna starts seeing her double, reminiscent of the “woman in the wallpaper” in Perkins Gilman’s *Yellow Wallpaper*: “There are two of us here. Me and Anna. Anna and I. Anna arises.... She looks like a girl I’ve dreamt of many times who is always about to die. Is Anna sick?... It’s true, there’s something dangerous about Anna. She is my double, and therefore she can take my place, eviscerate me. Should I preserve this danger or render her harmless?” (Ravn 2023: 308). According to Anne Whitehead, when trauma fiction closely follows the plotline of a familiar or a canonical text, it creates sense in the reader that “the character is following an inescapable trajectory”, as a way to “evoke the Freudian notion of the repetition-compulsion” (Whitehead 2004: 85, 94). But although the plot and the overall claustrophobic atmosphere of *My Work* remind the reader of *Yellow Wallpaper*, Anna does not end in madness. Anna breaks with and rewrites the story of the madwoman in the attic by giving her the pen and allowing her to write, creating “space for the pain” and imagining “a future happiness” (Ravn 2023: 156). Intertextuality and the familiar motif of the double are thus used to counter a cultural stereotype, revise a canonical text and provide a new perspective. Used this way, trauma fiction allows “formerly silenced voices to tell their own story” (Whitehead 2023: 85). In engaging with these texts, *My Work* establishes a continuity between Anna and the mothers before her, those who wrote against the grain and fought for the right to write and be heard.

In addition to the fragmentation of character, *My Work* is fragmented on the level of plot. According to Yang, trauma narratives often use fragmented narrative, a technique “mirroring both the inherent nature of trauma and its external portrayal” (Yang 2023: 1). *My Work* disrupts the narrative structure by not following a traditional Aristotelian narrative arc with a beginning, middle and end. Instead, the novel plays with the expected structure: the novel is composed of 13 ‘beginnings’, 28 ‘continuations’, and nine ‘endings’, making it seem that there are various books inside one, with different endings and beginnings. The notebooks are not arranged chronologically. Instead of the expected chronological trajectory from pregnancy to childbirth and then the first weeks and months with the child, narrative time flows in various ‘jumps’ in time, through flashbacks, repetitions, and analepses, echoing the temporal disorientation related to trauma and the changed relation to time associated with new motherhood.

I would argue that *My Work* is an example of maternal writing that restructures narrative by realigning the past, present, and future, not necessarily to create more coherence, but to convey the lived experience of new motherhood. The fragmentation of narrative primarily occurs through temporal disruption, which exemplifies the protagonist Anna’s altered relationship with time. She reflects, “When I breastfeed, there is no such thing as time ... Without time, without love, without civilisation. In the depths of breastfeeding, I’m lost and displaced, part of timeless nature” (Ravn 2023: 124). After becoming a mother, Anna loses her sense of time, yet she becomes meticulous about timekeeping, particularly concerning her child’s development. Many chapters note the date relative to the birth of the child, meaning the birth of the child constitutes a chronological rupture, redefining the protagonist’s experience of time.

The temporal disruption in *My Work* is exemplified by repetition, for example, of looping images of an unnameable terror, recurring memories of childbirth and the first days at the hospital, hinting at the latency and repetition inherent in traumatic connections of time and memory (Caruth 1996: 11; Whitehead 2004: 86). Repetition is a key literary strategy in trauma fiction that “suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression” and “can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot” (Whitehead 2004: 86). *My Work* is structured around the notion of repetition on various levels, most importantly on the level of imagery and plot.

One example of repeated imagery is the figure of the knife, which keeps recurring throughout the novel (Ravn 2023: 71, 100, 240, 244), exemplifying the experience of intrusive and repetitive thoughts about death, suicide and dying. Apart from repetitive imagery, *My Work* is structured around repetition on the level of plot. The narrative repeatedly returns to the birthing moment,

the birthing room in the hospital “this room/I carry with me/from now on” (Ravn 2023: 50–51), mimicking the effects of trauma in the persistent repetition and return: “The scene doesn’t end but repeats endlessly until it is worn down to a dry crackle.” (Ravn 2023: 74). She experiences flashbacks and repeating mental images of the experience that come and go seemingly without her will. In addition, the delivery room is visited on multiple occasions through poems, diary entries, medical logs, etc. (see, for example, 19, 50–51, 53–57, 74, 218–219, 234, 320–321).

The repeating images of the childbirth and delivery room exemplify both the repetitive nature of the traumatic memory as outlined by Caruth, as well as the nature of traumatic survival, “carrying this destruction while being a mother; it seems criminal” (Ravn 2023: 234). According to Caruth, survival is not “the fortunate passage beyond a violent event”; instead, it is characterised by a compulsive repetition of the traumatic event and the “incomprehensibility of one’s survival” (Caruth 1996: 63–64). In the quote below, one can notice how the traumatic event continues to have an effect on survival:

When the child was born, there was no time to recover. There was no time to recover from the child. You bleed from gaping wounds and must care for an animal that’s screaming. The stitches tug at your skin while you pace around at night. There is no moment of calm in which to recover. Life simply presses on at a faster pace. The child’s arrival was devastating, and ever since there has not been a moment to gather strength” (Ravn 2023: 324).

We can thus see how *My Work* employs the notion of Caruthian “double-telling”: both relating the traumatic event (childbirth) and the “unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth 1996: 7). We see that for Anna, the trauma is ongoing, that survival is also traumatic, and although the physical wounds might have healed, mentally Anna is “still lying on the delivery table” and can’t get out (Ravn 2023: 321).

Towards continuity: Acting out or working through?

This experience of being trapped in a compulsive repetition loop of trauma can also be seen as a form of acting out, one of the two modes of responding to trauma as outlined by Dominick LaCapra. Acting out is conceived as “an arrested process”, whereby one remains trapped in trauma (LaCapra 2001: 29). In these repeated scenes of childbirth and looping narrative fragments of terror, Anna is, like Freud described melancholy, “a depressed, self-berating, a traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition … and remains narcissistically

identified with the lost object" (LaCapra 2001: 56). And characteristically, as outlined above, Anna, experiences a confusion between past and present, self and other, and is "possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes" (LaCapra 2001: 29). Anna seems to be forever locked in the looping images of the delivery room and the first moments with the child, mourning the loss of her bodily autonomy and her former identity as a writer.

But *My Work* does not blindly follow the Caruthian event-based model of punctual trauma that calls for one extraordinary event or "an unexpected accident" to trigger a traumatic response. Instead, it shows that trauma can comprise small chronic everyday things, such as caring for an infant with a lack of support or time to recover. In these formulations, we also see that the experience was traumatic because Anna had other expectations that had been culturally ingrained by idealistic notions of motherhood. She expected to step cleanly into motherhood, but instead found the experience difficult both mentally and physically:

I believed the story. I stepped inside. I expected to find happiness. But the entire room was made of pain, built by it. Blood ran from my nipples, blood ran from my eyes, blood ran from the tears in my vagina and my rectum, blood ran from the internal wounds in my uterus, blood ran from the child, from his mouth, from his anus, and everything was blood and nothing was happiness.... I'm still lying on the delivery table. I can't get out. (Ravn 2023: 320–321)

Additionally, Anna found it difficult to recover from the traumatic birth and step into the role of mother, since the subject position was governed by normative discourses that objectified and silenced the mother (Heal 2019: 119). The maternal "I" seemed impossible to occupy, and even years after birth, she feels that "no one has noticed that the night they welcomed the child, I died, and what now walks among them is not a human, but the discarded channel for the child's arrival" (Ravn 2023: 321).

Although in *My Work*, Anna is "still lying on the delivery table", compulsively returning to the traumatising event, it can be argued that the repetitions are not literal and thus do not merely mimic the repetitive nature of traumatic memory. *My Work* revisits the scene of childbirth repeatedly through a range of textual forms – medical logs, poems, diary entries, and prose fragments – each offering a distinct perspective. This formal multiplicity enables a reframing of the traumatic event, allowing for critical distance and alternative viewpoints. Revisiting the event via different, at times conflicting, subject positions represents the multiplicity of voices and focalisations (patriarchal, medical, psychoanalytical) related to motherhood, each assigning

different meanings and affective valences to the event. Such narrative strategy both critiques the normative discourses and facilitates the process of making sense of and integrating “previously disjointed sensory and affective memories” associated with postpartum trauma (Vickroy 2002: 8). Where memory fails, the text turns to confabulation and fiction as mechanisms for constructing a likeness of experience, what might be described as a rendering of qualia, or the felt texture of subjective experience (Jensen 2019: 120). So, these repetitions could also be seen as an attempt to work through trauma. According to LaCapra, working through is “an articulatory practice” whereby one recognises the difference between the past and present, and can understand that “something as having happened to one back then which is related to, but not identical with, here and now” (LaCapra 2001: 57). It allows critical distance, renewal and imagines a possible future.

Postpartum trauma can involve both an experience of loss and an experience of absence. As seen above, in addition to a traumatic childbirth, Anna experienced a loss of identity and bodily autonomy (“like a split body sharing the same skin” (Ravn 2023: 173)), and an absence of maternal feelings or an instant connection to the child (“When they placed the child on her breast after the birth, she felt nothing” (Ravn 2023: 53)). In *My Work*, we see how postpartum trauma can also bring about a confusion of absence with loss, for example absence of maternal feelings is mistaken for loss, which leads to guilt and shame (“Giving birth was a sorrow. With the sorrow came shame” (Ravn 2023: 315)).

I wish to argue that *My Work* employs both acting out and working through postpartum trauma, as outlined by LaCapra. According to LaCapra, working through can be applied only when working through loss or historical trauma, although in some cases it can also be applied to absence and structural trauma (LaCapra 2001: 56). Working through loss differs from working through absence. While working through traumatic loss involves the process of mourning and could also include the modality of acting out, working through absence does not include mourning. An important aspect of working through absence is recognising absence as absence, and learning to live with it through critical and reflexive work. It can neither be overcome nor subject to the process of mourning since this would result in endless melancholy (LaCapra 2001: 58–59).

Although Anna’s experience of postpartum trauma is represented as a disruption of her sense of time and self, and dissociation from herself and her child, the novel does not end in “endless melancholy” or Anna’s dissolution. Although we see Anna mourning her past self and ‘acting out’, Anna is still able to imagine the possibility of a future beyond, thus she is working through and

gradually learning to let go of the ‘lost object’ and recognise absence as absence. Throughout the novel, Anna strives towards wholeness, asking the question, “What is a whole Anna?” (Ravn 2023: 61).

LaCapra has outlined various modes of working through absence. One of these is “self-critical thought and practice”; thus, the process of writing can be seen as a kind of narrative therapy that helps one overcome traumatic experiences and leads toward healing (LaCapra 2001: 57; Henke 1998: xii). Anna employs writing to reflect on her experiences, to confront painful memories and reconstruct a sense of self and continuity: “That’s why we’re writing this book, isn’t it? To shrink the incongruity, to make it easier to become a mother?” (Ravn 2023: 239). Through repetitive storytelling that employs varying narratological points of view and through intertextual dialogue with other texts, the narrative becomes an attempt to understand, work through, survive, and imagine a life beyond. Anna’s attempt to write a book about her experience proves to be a kind of therapeutic lifeline and a “holding space”⁹ (Meg Jensen 2019: 4): “This book will be a container, a vessel for what a mother is not allowed to be: torn, in doubt, distraught, unhappy” (Ravn 2023: 296). Anna’s book looks into the future, imagining happiness; thus, the pain is not only to wallow in (or act out), but to work through. “A book that creates space for pain and from this space engenders a possible future happiness. A book that can save me. A book I write to survive” (Ravn 2023: 156).

In *My Work*, a kind of healing is represented by Anna’s return to 1st person voice and the courage to write as a mother: “Look, I’m writing. I’m writing again. So something inside me must have changed” (Ravn 2023: 290). Writing retrospectively, she realised that “writing in the third person was born out of a powerlessness in the face of experience. To write in the third person was to create someone else to endure the pain. One invents her. Her name is Anna.” (Ravn 2023: 289). In the course of *My Work*, Anna’s voice moves from the dehumanised “Patient” through the third person voice (“she”/“Anna”) to first person narrative. The novel ends with Anna nearing the due date of her second-born, written in clear first person prose.

The movement towards the first person subject position, towards maternal writing, also exemplifies how the maternal ‘I’ is born by pulling the mother out of the third position and unravelling those discourses that both objectified and idealised the mother. Through the process of working through, she gains emotional clarity and recognises what needs to be done for her to feel good in her new role as a mother and as a writer. Thus, coming back to narrative

⁹ The term was coined by Dale Winnicott in Winnicott, Dale. 1971. *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock.

identity as outlined by Rimmon-Kenan, Anna's writing could be viewed as a "subjective construction of 'identity'" (12) against the grain of mainstream or master narratives around motherhood and assumptions and ideals of how a mother should be. By revisiting classic texts where the female protagonist's "end in disaster", Anna rewrites cultural scripts that tell women to choose between books or babies, and allows herself to write freely, as a mother. Thus, Anna's move from the third person to the first cannot only be considered an example of the process of healing, but also as a movement towards maternal and matrifocal writing. No longer writing *about* a mother, but *as* a mother, reframing her experience through writing, recognising structural pressures of idealised motherhood and moving toward critical understanding. Anna finds a way to work through her trauma, and by the end of the novel recognises what needs to be done to feel better about herself and her connection to the child. She ends up with a specific goal: "That's how it must be: to create a family life where writing is included.... no longer writing in secret. No longer writing furtively. No longer writing in the shadow of shame, incoherent notes when everyone else is asleep." (Ravn 2023: 287–288) In this way, the novel signals a shift from fragmented identity toward a more integrated and relational sense of self, seeking to reconcile even conflicting aspects of identity.

Thus, for Anna, writing her book – writing about motherhood – proves to be more than a therapeutic endeavour. It becomes a means of enquiring into the possibility of, and envisioning, a new kind of maternal subjectivity, as outlined by Stone, whereby mothers "generate meanings and acquire agency *from* their place in the maternal body relation" (Stone 2013: 3). In this framework, ambivalence is not considered merely negative, but a "creative and constructive force" (Stone 2013: 8), and loss is considered "an intrinsic feature of mothering" (Stone 2013: 9). If subjectivity is formed through experience, as Smith and Watson suggest (2024: 59), then it is through the embodied experience of mothering, of working through the changed sense of time and body, through ambivalence and loss that Anna's maternal subjectivity emerges. The plot's repeated return to the delivery room underscores her suspended position "on the edge of motherhood" (Ravn 2023: 122), and writing about her traumatic experience becomes a way of working through in order to cross this threshold, as she reflects: "For as long as I'm writing this book, I think I will remain in a state of postpartum depression.... Not writing the book is not to become a mother, to remain forever on the threshold of motherhood. To write is to step into it." (Ravn 2023: 296)

Anna ends up completing a book to publish about motherhood, thus overcoming not only the dichotomy of mother vs writer but also managing to create art from her subject matter, from the experience of motherhood. This

can be seen as a movement from the constraining concept of motherhood as an institution towards mothering as an empowering, enriching practice, as outlined by Adrienne Rich (2021), thus working through these conflicting ideas of how a woman should be and finding a way to mother that works for Anna.

Conclusion

Olga Ravn's *My Work* belongs to the counter-canonical body of contemporary literature that creatively reinterprets motherhood. The novel candidly examines both the physical and emotional aspects of new motherhood, the loss of subjectivity, and the coherence of lived experience. Like Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, Ravn dismantles the myth of maternal bliss, yet does so through a fragmented, genre-defying, and lyrical narrative that blends fiction, poetry, and life writing to reflect the disorientation and alienation of new motherhood and maternal trauma. *My Work* serves as an example of maternal writing as outlined by Heal (2019), which highlights the difficulties of inhabiting the maternal subject position and the resulting crisis of subjectivity.

Explored through the lens of trauma theory, the experience of trauma can be traced in the narrative structure and poetics of *My Work*. The novel's disrupted temporality, dissociative voice, and structural fragmentation do not merely reflect maternal trauma, they enact it. In particular, the use of repetition and narrative fragmentation echoes the recursive, nonlinear nature of traumatic memory, while also challenging the notion of the singular identity of the mother. However, *My Work* does not simply emulate the discourse of trauma; rather, it engages with it in a reflexive and generative way. The novel demonstrates that trauma can reside in the mundane and be embedded in the everyday rhythms of caregiving, bodily transformation, and psychological disorientation. By engaging intertextually with Gothic and trauma literature, the novel seems to suggest that the maternal experience resists conventional representation. In doing so, it not only challenges idealised notions of motherhood but also expands the poetics of trauma to include the creative, ambivalent, and plural dimensions of maternal experience.

Despite the fragmented multivocal narrative, the novel holds fast to a maternal perspective and gestures toward recovery, continuity, and the possibility of reconfigured maternal subjectivities. In this way, *My Work* demands a reformulation of how we narrate motherhood less as a linear journey and more as a fractured, ongoing negotiation of identity, labour, and desire. The proliferation of such narratives underscores the urgency of continuing this conversation, challenging cultural norms and expanding the literary vocabulary of motherhood.

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