

# Trauma Theory As a Method for Understanding Literary Texts

## *The Psychological Basis for Postmodern Hermeneutics*

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I first encountered *Beowulf* as a college freshman in 1981 taking a survey course in British literature. I read an excerpt in the course anthology that mainly consisted of the three monster fights. It must have included Unferth's challenge, too, as I recall having a class discussion about Beowulf's swimming contest with Brecca. I found it intriguing, though I did not get a lot out of the initial encounter. My academic life led me away from the poem until a little more than a decade ago when I had an opportunity to teach *Beowulf*. I read it for the first time in its entirety and became captivated by the epic, though often befuddled by Beowulf's elusive characterization and by the narrative's loops and switchbacks and flash-forwards. A year or two later, starting to get serious about a Ph.D. in English, I read Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, a novel that many consider quintessentially postmodern; and while confronting Tyrone Slothrop's elusive characterization and the narrative's loops and switchbacks and flash-forwards, I kept having *Beowulf déjà vu*.

In my ignorance, I thought I was the only one seeing the Old English poem as postmodern. I soon discovered otherwise, that a growing number of scholars had begun to look at *Beowulf* as a postmodern text. What was more, numerous older texts (including works by Shakespeare, Laurence Sterne, and Herman Melville, to name but a few) were being studied as "postmodern." But what I did not discover was any scholar saying *why*. That is, no one in any serious sort of way had tried to account for this phenomenon, for "postmodern" texts being produced centuries before "postmodernism." Thus my dissertation topic had sprouted an egg-tooth. Over the next few years, taking courses and reading and researching on my own when opportunities presented themselves, I came up with various hypotheses (I was enamored of chaos theory for a time) and each kind of worked but mostly did not. Then I came across the work of Cathy Caruth, Laura Di Prete, Anne Whitehead, and Lynn Worsham, and what these scholars were doing with trauma theory as it applied to literary production.

Suddenly it began to make sense: If postmodern literature was born of twentieth-century trauma culture, then "postmodern" texts in other centuries may have been spawned from the same sort of traumatic zeitgeist.

— from Chapter 5

