

Back to Trauma and Beyond

Stanislav Kolář, Katarína Šandorová & Zuzana Buráková, *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature* (Košice: Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach, 2010)

Trauma studies are an interdisciplinary field of humanities, which emerged as a distinct subdiscipline approximately in the late 1990s. The recent Slovak collection, *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature*, offers an excellent introduction to this relatively new branch of studies, followed by analyses of relevant American and British literary works. The book is not only cutting-edge but also very lucid and well-structured, including theory and practice in appropriate proportions, covering some of the most traditional themes such as the Holocaust as well as applying the term “trauma” to less evident subjects like lesbian fiction. However, the book may seem somewhat uneven due to differences in quality between the essays; a problem which could probably have been resolved with more attentive editorial support. Despite certain questionable passages, this publication of the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice provides English and American studies in Central Europe with a valuable and useful handbook, bringing into focus some new possible ways of interpretation.

The rapid career of trauma studies might be the result of their highly pragmatic approach; the lack of which is such a frequent charge against the humanities. The key concepts of trauma theories, as we understand them now, are rooted in the works of psychologists a century ago. The most substantial of them were Sigmund Freud’s two essays, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (1914) and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), but similar ideas and sometimes alternative terminologies were also developed by his colleagues and competitors. It was primarily the shocks of World War I that led to their diagnosis of “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD), which occurs when actual experiences are “so overwhelming that they cannot be integrated into existing mental frameworks” (9), resulting in the belatedness of response to the trauma, repression, repetition compulsion and other memory dysfunctions, leading ultimately to the possible breach of one’s integrity. Similar symptoms were observed later in several further patients with apparently different problems and background stories. However, it was not until towards the end of the millennium that these observations started to be applied to a wide range of phenomena by professionals in a variety of fields: not only psychologists but also historians, sociologists, literary scholars and others. A further significant shift is that while Freud’s emphasis was on the mental disorders and the possible treatment of individuals, current re-

search tends to apply the terminology to trauma-afflicted communities as well. Trauma theories have proved to be valid for such diverse situations as natural catastrophes, war, sexual abuse or socially oppressed minorities, moreover, these recognitions offer effective conceptual frameworks for coping practically with these highly problematic cases. It is therefore no wonder that within two decades the new transdisciplinary branch of humanities has already established its own journals, research centres and university workshops offering master's and postgraduate degrees.

Stanislav Kolař's general "Introduction" to the collection is written in a suitably pragmatic way. In about a dozen pages he succeeds in informing the reader both about the most essential ideas of trauma studies and the structure of the book that he co-authored. After a very brief summary of the etymological and historical background of the new subdiscipline, he gives a concise but thorough survey of its key concepts, primarily relying on the work of Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, but also referring to other opinions, supported by a useful bibliography of convenient length. These few pages are so clear and so comprehensive that they could be recommended to anyone taking their first steps in the field of trauma studies; they might be especially useful, for instance, for university course reading lists. Kolař not only explains basic terminology but also makes refined distinctions which point towards pro-

ductive perspectives in the application of trauma theories. He does so while outlining the structure of the book, clarifying the relations between the themes and views of the succeeding essays. Conspicuously, the governing principle of the collection is to move from the concept of historical toward structural trauma, as LaCapra coined the terms in his substantial *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001): "The traumatizing events in historical trauma can be determined . . . while structural trauma . . . is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization" (82). Accordingly, the current collection first addresses narratives of specific, extreme historical events, then examines the inter- and transgenerational consequences of such situations, finally arriving at such examples for structural trauma present in everyday society which threaten one's identity in more elusive but also more permanent ways than isolated occurrences of violence.

The first two chapters are also written by Kolař. In "Trauma and the Holocaust in the American Novel" he compares five canonical pieces of American Holocaust fiction: *The Pawnbroker* by Edward Lewis Wallant, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* by Saul Bellow, *Sophie's Choice* by William Clark Styron, *The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman; and two further novels representing the same issues from the point of view of second- and third-generation survivors: *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan

Safran Foer, and *The World to Come* by Dara Horn. This complex survey is followed by a shorter analysis, “Nuclear Holocaust and Trauma: John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*” focusing on one documentary, a book of interviews made by Hersey with six survivors of the atomic bomb. The next study, “Finding Identity through Trauma” returns to issues connected to Jewish identity; its author, Zuzana Buráková, approaches *Everything is Illuminated* once again, now from a different angle, and discusses two further, also very recent books, a collection of short stories called *There are Jews in My House* by Lara Vapnyar and a novel, *Absurdistan*, by Gary Shteyngart. Finally, Katarína Šandorová takes a sharp turn and applies the notion of structural trauma to three contemporary lesbian novels: *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters, *A Village Affair* by Joanna Trollop and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson. The whole endeavour is neatly rounded off by the collectively signed “Conclusion” of the three authors. The first, third and fourth compositions are also supplied with their own brief introductions and conclusions, which are well justified by the complexity of the subjects. This carefully organized and transparent structure, including proportionate bibliographies at the end of each section, makes the book not only a pleasant read but also a user-friendly source of further references. I wondered, however, whether a different sequence – placing the two Jewish-related essays

next to each other – might not have been more logical, particularly since they are thematically overlapping (regarding the trans- and intergenerational aspects of trauma, and the novel *Everything is Illuminated* in particular). But current trauma studies are so principally rooted in and closely linked to Holocaust studies that it was undoubtedly correct to start such a heterogeneous collection with Stanislav Kolar’s study, especially as it is also the most extensive paper in the book; and then it seems reasonable to keep his contribution, the first three major chapters together. I found it more disturbing that especially in the second half of the book there are numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes. Such a professional collection would have deserved one more round of careful proofreading, which could have easily eliminated not only cases of mistaken word order or misused prepositions but obviously misprinted segments as well. In addition, it could have also called the authors’ attention to a few questionably phrased statements, such as “Suicide is perhaps not the most fulfilling method of resolving trauma” (76). Perhaps not perhaps.

The first essay by Stanislav Kolar gives a complex and profound analysis of the survivor syndrome as represented in seven illustrative pieces of American Holocaust fiction. It seems proper that the first, longer part is devoted to, by now, classical stories recording the post-war American lives of survivors, while the last of these five books, Spiegelman’s

graphic novel, provides a bridge to the second, shorter section examining inter- and transgenerational effects of trauma addressed by two examples of 21st-century fiction. This arrangement not only offers the reader a good overall picture, but also points out the topicality of these issues. Kolář poses the relevant questions of authenticity and of ensuing difficulties in literary representations of the Holocaust (11–13), also considering whether Holocaust fiction is to be treated as a specific subgenre (21). Then he investigates each of his chosen seven books from the point of view of PTSD, tracing the ways in which trauma blocked communication between characters; how repressed memories return in forms of involuntary flashbacks, nightmares and other mental disorders; and how these phenomena affect the special challenges, possibilities and solutions of narrative strategies in Holocaust fiction. Illuminating references are made to the problematic issues of “universalizing the experience of the Holocaust” (32) and the “Shoah business” (43). The author also makes sensitive distinctions between diverse types of traumas and the differences in their representations, for instance the Holocaust versus the mother’s suicide in *Maus* (40–41), or the modification of effects and responses through generations.

His next chapter, on the reportage about Hiroshima, is not only much shorter but also less literary. He provides ample information on the circumstances under which Hersey’s book was

written and paraphrases much of the personal stories told in it – which leaves relatively little space for reflections, at least compared to the analyses in the previous section. The other possible reason for the change might be that in contrast to the first chapter, here Kolař investigates not a work of fiction but a documentary. Therefore he concentrates not so much on the ways of verbal representation as on the psychological aspects of survivors’ testimonies. Consequently, the reader learns a lot about what happened in Hiroshima and how it afflicted the lives and psyches of its inhabitants, but in respect of theoretical conclusions this chapter may seem slightly less rewarding than the previous pages.

The most exciting feature of Buráková’s essay is her choice of subject: she re-investigates the well-researched aspects of Jewish identity, memory and the relationships between generations in three lately published, hence less widely known books. Each was written in the 21st century, but the first presents a double plot with a contemporary plotline leading to the discovery of a traumatic background story at the time of the Holocaust (*Everything Is Illuminated*); the title story of the second book takes place during World War II (*There Are Jews in My House*); while the last novel leads the reader to a contemporary setting (*Absurdistan*). Foer’s novel demonstrates how the understanding of family histories adds to the maturation of its young protagonists; and, in return, how their working through family traumas might also prevent the

wounds from being passed on to the next generations. The first of Vapnyar's stories discussed here tells of a Gentile woman betraying her Jewish friend in a borderline situation; while the other one illustrates how Antisemitism might work even in an apparently innocent kindergarten environment. Buráková seems to be more successful in applying trauma theories to Foer's novel than to the otherwise well-selected short stories. Although she introduces Maria Root's notion of "insidious trauma" (80) and follows sensitively how one of Vapnyar's protagonists "gradually changes from a witness of the traumas . . . into a perpetrator" (85), the rest of her text might give the impression of an unnecessarily lengthy retelling of the story instead of an acute analysis.

I also found Buráková's interpretation of *Absurdistan* problematic. The common feature of this novel and the previous stories is its Jewish protagonist, Misha, who moves from Russia to the US; and there is also trauma, namely, the childhood abuse to which his father subjected him. However, I cannot altogether agree with Buráková's oversimplifying claim that "[h]is molestation, obesity and Jewishness are the traumas which Misha must deal with" (91). She seems to neglect absolutely the satirical-political dimension of the novel, although the title *Absurdistan* clearly highlights that this is one of Shteyngart's primary concerns. "Absurdistan" was a name used for countries of the Eastern Bloc, especially for Czechoslovakia in the 1970's and 1980's, for ex-

ample by Czech playwright and later president Václav Havel or in the title of the collection of essays by Slovakian citizen and Hungarian writer Lajos Grendel; and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the term was transferred to authoritarian states still under Russian influence, like Belarus or Turkmenistan. Taking into account the title as well as the plot and some of the satirically exaggerated symbols, I doubt whether the central trauma in the book is really the Jewish inheritance of the protagonist. I would rather suggest that Shteyngart brings the collapse of the political systems in the region just as much into the foreground; moreover, the historical interaction of the two traumas may deserve some further investigation. Also, Misha's spectacular obesity and his father's abusive behaviour do not appear as exclusively psychological factors to be understood realistically but also as metaphors for the excessive former power of the USSR and its burden on its descendants. So while on the one hand I strongly approve of Buráková's calling the reader's attention to this excellent novel, on the other hand I would have appreciated a more comprehensive approach to the subject.

Šandorová suggests in the last chapter that oppressive public opinion can function just as well as a traumatizing factor as distinct, violent events. She comes to this conclusion reading three novels at the intersection of lesbian studies and trauma theories. Here, the problems are similar to the ones I mentioned in the

previous two sections. Just like her colleague, she sets out to explore new and promising grounds, proving her point convincingly in respect of the first novel. Following the heroine's fate in *Tipping the Velvet*, we can see how she is traumatized by the oppression of 19th-century public opinion rejecting the very idea of a lesbian identity; how her inability to integrate her experiences into the available conceptual frameworks leads to her devastation; and how, in the end, working through her life story with the help of an enlightened feminist companion helps her to regain her integrity and to reach a sense of private fulfilment in spite of all the practical difficulties which the couple will still have to face. The succeeding part on *A Village Affair*, however, does not seem to add much to our understanding of trauma; on the contrary, I have doubts as to whether it should be read as a trauma story at all. Of course, it tells about an unhappy lesbian relationship – in this case, between a married woman with three children and a young woman – but I disagree with interpreting *any* crucial negative experience in one's life as a trauma. The protagonist has to face the dilemma of choosing between her family and her female lover; she takes all factors and opinions into consideration; and finally makes the decision to leave both her husband and her lover; thus gaining custody of her children. This is undoubtedly a sad story but it does not go beyond the protagonist's comprehension, it does not confuse her

sense of time or her memory, the failure of the lesbian couple's love is due not to communication gaps or repressed feelings but simply to the rational decision of a mother preferring her children to her lover – to cut it short, Šandorová might not have pointed out clearly enough which elements render the story traumatic. Likewise, the section on *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* would appeal more to the reader if the paraphrasing of the plot were reduced, leaving more space to explain why the book is a relevant and illuminating subject of trauma studies.

To sum up, *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works* seems to be a successfully realized project. Its two principal and unquestionable merits are that it provides its readers with a very pragmatic and useful general introduction to trauma studies on the one hand, and, on the other, it applies possible broader interpretations of the relevant terms to current examples of literature. This second goal, however, might have deserved further elaboration, for the chapters investigating familiar fields are fully accomplished, while the ones trying to break new ground may sound sometimes less satisfying. But that can be tolerated as the almost inevitable fate of pioneers, since in spite of its few disputable points, the book unquestionably provides an excellent summary of trauma studies as well as a promising start pointing towards new directions in the field.

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