

## Writing Trauma

### Review of *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature*

by Stanislav Kolář, Zuzana Buráková and Katarína Šanderová  
(Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach, 2010)

The history of humankind is unfortunately rich in wars, genocides, violence and other catastrophes. Such events often “scar the face of humankind profoundly and irrevocably,” as Stanislav Kolář says in the book’s opening. Individual lives, regardless whether spent in generally peaceful times or in times of great historical upheaval can be scarred in similar ways. Loss, misfortune, distress, suffering are all part of human life and have always inspired literary responses. We speak of trauma when the extent of suffering “becomes extreme.” Then “our response to it may have pathological features,” as “our psyche is unable to cope with the distress and our experience becomes that which psychologists term traumatic.” (5) Trauma as reflected in works of art, mostly how it is depicted in fiction, is the central theme of this collaborative work.

In the introduction Kolář explains the term “trauma” and outlines some of the theory of trauma studies, a still developing discipline which originated in psychoanalysis and draws on medical as well as historical and literary research. Although the discipline is broad and diverse, Kolář focuses his discussion mostly on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), on transmission of trauma within a family or among generations, and on the im/possibility of representing trauma by linguistic and aesthetic means. Kolář clearly identifies the challenges writers have to face when attempting to conceptualize trauma in works of fiction and he asks many unsettling questions (11-12) that might not have a single (nor simple) answer, yet must be addressed and considered when discussing the literary reflection of historical traumas. Does such an aestheticizing of history or “fictionalizing” of real traumatic events deprive them of their moral and cognitive significance, or does this function to the contrary?

What seems to be missing in the introduction, however, is a literary context. Since this book discusses “selected works,” one would expect the introduction to also contextualize these works by at least briefly outlining literature about historical traumas (or collective traumas) and perhaps explaining the rationale behind the text selection. Without this, the choice of works seems random, leaving the reader to speculate on why literature, for example, about the trauma of slavery, the genocide of Native Americans or the 9/11 attacks that form an equally important part of post-war fiction are not even mentioned. The selection of texts thus unwittingly confirms some critics’ complaints that trauma studies so far are mostly Euro-centric (see for instance the collection of essays *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*, edited by Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, 2003).

The first chapter analyzes diverse texts of American fiction that address the trauma of the Holocaust. Drawing on his recognized expertise (see for example his earlier book *Seven Responses to the Holocaust in American Fiction*, 2004), Kolář offers an insightful reading of Edward Lewis Wallant’s novel *The Pawnbroker*, Saul Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*, Cynthia Ozick’s short story *The Shawl* and novella *Rosa*, Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything is Illuminated* and finally Dara Horn’s *The World to Come*. His discussion of the literary

reflection of trauma thus includes several literary genres and spans almost half a century of literary history, with Wallant’s 1961 novel representing one of the earliest American works of fiction about the Holocaust and Horn’s novel, published in 2006, one of the latest. Although Kolář refers somewhat to trauma studies theory (especially by LaCapra) throughout the chapter, the question still remains as to how this helps in analyzing and/or understanding the chosen texts. This question arises partly from the fact that the mostly medical knowledge of the symptoms of PTSD is applied to literary texts written as works of fiction (not as first-hand survivors reports) and by writers who themselves did not have a direct experience of the death camps. Undoubtedly this is partly because the application of trauma theory to literary works remains mostly on the surface, relating to characters’ traits and behavior as if the characters were medical case studies. Although one may easily agree with the quoted assertion by Ruth Leye, that “the Holocaust [...] can be fully understood only in the light of our knowledge of PTSD” (20), this chapter still does not fully explain why this should be true for Holocaust literature as well. The question remains at least partially unresolved as to how the study of PTSD is important for the understanding of Holocaust fiction.

In the introduction Kolář promises to “touch on the question of the way in which trauma influences the formal aspects of literary work,” (13) and in the first chapter, he indeed illustrates how “the technique of fragmentation has become a very appropriate form of translating traumatic memory into narratives” (13). Even if fragmentation is not a technique unique to fiction dealing with trauma, Kolář shows how it can be employed as a means for expressing temporal confusion, a condition often described by victims of traumatic events. Unfortunately, other parts of the book barely touch upon the issue of literary form.

In the concluding part of the first chapter, Kolář points out how for “obvious reasons” American fiction about the Holocaust mostly focuses on the survivors and “contrast[s] the prewar and the postwar lives of the protagonists to emphasize the extent of their loss.” (55) This approach might not only naturally reflect the position of American writers as outsiders to the experience of the Holocaust. But stressing that “America itself traumatizes the survivors, and prolongs their suffering” (55) might imply a sense of guilt and criticism of American anti-Semitism as well as the political inability (or unwillingness) to help Holocaust victims both during the war and even afterwards.

The second, much shorter chapter, authored also by Kolář, focuses on the trauma of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. Surprisingly, it does not deal with any work of fiction, but with a book of survivors’ testimonies, the well-known “detailed reportage” *Hiroshima*, written in “an objective, impartial matter-of-fact style” (61) by the *New Yorker* journalist John Hersey. Kolář uses Hersey’s work to illustrate an important element contributing to trauma, the unintelligibility of the event epitomized by the ever-present bewildered question: “What do you think it was?” (63)

The following chapter, written by Zuzana Buráková, returns to the earlier theme of the collective trauma of the Holocaust as a founding trauma, one that co-creates collective as well as individual identity, particularly post-modern Jewish-American identity (69). She again analyzes Foer’s novel which had been discussed in the first chapter, then expands her analysis by including the collection of short stories *There Are Jews in My House* by Lara Vapnyar along with Gary Shteyngart’s novel *Absurdistan*. Using these works, Buráková points to the importance of memory and of writing and re-writing of history (Toni Morrison’s concept of rememory might have been useful here as well) and argues that this is an important aspect of American ethnic literature. In her discussion of Vapnyar’s stories, she blurs to a degree the terminology introduced in the book’s

opening by conflating trauma (as experienced by the victims or survivors) and guilt (as experienced by the trauma agents or perpetrators).

The final chapter of the book reveals all the major flaws of the publication. Suddenly shifting to British literature and away from collective or historical trauma, it highlights the thematic unbalance of the book, the lack of contextual considerations and the vagueness of its use of the term trauma. Katarína Šandorová, the chapter's author, turns to what LaCapra calls a structural trauma. Unlike historical trauma characterized by a loss, a structural trauma is ahistorical and connected with absence (14-16). Even LaCapra's distinction between the two kinds of trauma is vague, and Šandorová does not shed any new light on it. Focusing on Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, Joanna Trollope's *A Village Affair* and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, she argues that trauma can stem from the conflict between one's sexual identity and the expectations and values of society. Šandorová even names "education and the knowledge which is acquired at school and in the family" as "traumatizing phenomena," (97) further obscuring the meaning of the term. Because this chapter lacks any firm engagement with the previously introduced trauma theory, it also fails to justify how one's fight for personal fulfillment against conformity (a theme not infrequent throughout western literature at least since the nineteenth century) can be compared to works dealing with events such the annihilation of one's family or surviving a death camp. Rather than providing insight into such broad understanding of trauma by analyzing the novels, the chapter stays on the surface by plainly describing the unfolding of the plots of the selected novels.

Nevertheless, despite some of its flaws, the book offers both a solid introduction into trauma studies and a well-argued, well-written analysis of several key works, particularly those of American Jewish literature. It is a valuable contribution to the study of the literary reflection of historical trauma, even if its treatment of structural trauma still leaves a bit to be desired.

Finally, the book as printed could have used a reader-friendly font rather than a tiny albeit unquestionably economical typeset that requires reading with a magnifying glass.

Šárka Bubíková