

Literary Engagement with the (Traumatic) Past

[Review of *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* by Beata Piątek (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014)]

The current years marked by the hundredth anniversary of the Great War (World War I) and the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War have inspired many literary scholars toward theoretical and analytical reflections of literary works dealing with both of these painful, tragic and traumatic events of 20th century history. The anniversaries have also inspired new debates on the im/possibility of writing trauma, of recreating history within a work of fiction and on the ways human memory (including fictionalized memory) operates. Beata Piątek, a researcher and lecturer on contemporary British fiction, British history and comparative studies in literature and film at the Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University in Krakow, has contributed to this debate with her thought-provoking book *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction*. In it, she explores the notion of collective memory in the historical novels of Pat Barker and Sebastian Barry as well as traumatic memory and individual memory and their connection to identity in novels by Kazuo Ishiguro and John Banville.

In the book's opening, Piątek explains that it was the hypothesis that "our culture is marked by an uneasiness about the past" which inspired her research into the ways "literary explorations of the past lead to the examination of wounds, whether personal or national."¹ Piątek claims that contemporary novels move beyond the mere representation of traumatic events by engaging the reader as a co-witness and a vehicle through which a therapeutic working through of trauma can be facilitated.²

In order to grasp as fully as possible the complex issue of fictional representations of history and trauma, the first chapter of Piątek's book is devoted to outlining the theoretical context of her literary and critical analyses, centering on three key terms – history, memory and trauma. She confirms that all three are interrelated and that the recent discussions on the nature of memory have come forth to a great extent as a by-product of larger debates on history and historiography.

As the cultural historian Milena Lenderová explains, for centuries history was dominated by huge political events built on sources of a diplomatic nature, and it was not until the last decades of the 19th century that cultural history began changing the way European thinking approached the subject (though the concept *Geschichte der Kultur* had been introduced at the end of the 18th century within the circles at Göttingen University). Eventually in the latter part of the 20th century, historians and historiographers began to devote attention to the everyday life of the voiceless majority (so-called *Alltagsgeschichte* or *histoire du quotidien*)³ or, in the words of Piątek, creating a space for a more human-centered and subjective history.⁴ In the English-speaking world, the seminal work of Hayden White in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the nature of historical fiction and the affinities between the work of historians and fiction writers influenced historiographic

1 Beata Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014), 11.

2 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 12.

3 See Milena Lenderová, "Hledání kulturních dějin [In Search for Cultural History]," in *Z dějin české každodennosti* by Milena Lenderová, Tomáš Jiránek and Marie Macková (Prague: Karolinum, 2011), 394-403.

4 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 15.

debates in direct relation to literary theory. Literary studies received another important impetus for their engagement with history, memory and trauma in the form of trauma theory. As Piątek points out, the formal study of trauma is relatively new and was initially used to describe “belated symptoms in passengers who had survived some of the first railway accidents”⁵ and later applied to the symptoms of so-called shell-shocked soldiers of WWI. It is significant, Piątek claims, that the vast majority of trauma research is in some way related to war veterans or Holocaust survivors. She also draws attention to a difficulty involved in the common usage of the term trauma, namely that it refers both to “an event so extreme that it leaves the subject wounded psychologically, and that psychological wound [itself]” since in fact these cannot truly be separated.⁶ An event becomes traumatic precisely because it casts a deep psychological wound, therefore it may be at times confusing that the term can refer both to an event and its result. Another problem involved in the current use of the term trauma is its trivialization, especially in media, where it becomes synonymic with stress.⁷ For that reason Piątek emphasizes that she only uses the term trauma in the meaning established by psychiatrists, i.e. to refer to *event* so extreme that it cannot be properly assimilated and processed by our memory and thus keeps coming back in unbidden recollections. Particularly instructive is Piątek’s inclusion of certain criticism of the weak points and possible pitfalls of trauma theory. Having thus defined her terminological base, the author proceeds to the impact of these theories within literary studies.

Section I of the book discusses literary representations of historical trauma. As Piątek states in accordance with critics echoing psychiatric research, as for example Soshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominic LaCapra, “literary fiction is a particularly well-suited medium for explorations of trauma.”⁸ Firstly, she turns her attention to the novels of Pat Barker and Sebastian Barry. In an insightful and well-argued analysis of Barker’s *The Regeneration Trilogy* (1991-1995) she shows the novelist’s engagement with the historical theme of World War I through the lenses of contemporary discussions on economic and identity criticism. By framing her narrative in current theoretical trends, in Piątek’s view Barker effectively dismantles many stereotypes connected with the WWI and its literary representations. Although *The Regeneration Trilogy* may seem a realistic historical fiction with some characters directly based on historical figures (for example Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owens), the narrative is profoundly experimental. Barker “has chosen to interrogate the ways in which the myth of the Great War and British literary canon represented class, sexuality and gender.”⁹ She enters into intertextual discussions with variety of sources, for example Foucault’s discourse understood as means of control of social practices, with Elaine Showalter’s explanation of shell-shock as a male hysteria stemming from the powerlessness and confinement of the trenches, Freud’s psychological theory, etc. Barker herself acknowledges many of her inspirations in her “Author’s note;” nevertheless, Piątek locates another source, Paul Fussell’s *The*

5 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 34.

6 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 32.

7 However, it is not only in popular media where such trivialization of the term appears. Such misappropriation of the term was pointed out in the review of *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature* by Stanislav Kolář, Zuzana Buráková and Katarína Šanderová, where one contributor conflates trauma and guilt, and another conflates trauma with simply any distressing experience. See Šárka Bubíková, “Writing Trauma,” *American and British Studies Annual* 4 (2011): 202-204.

8 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 184.

9 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 64.

Great War and Modern Memory (1975) with which Barker seems to “enter into a dialogic relationship.”¹⁰ Barker’s trilogy presents various characters affected with the trauma of WWI; at the same time though, as Piątek aptly illustrates, it shows how the war profoundly influenced British society and dismantled several of its core cultural values. Piątek concludes that Barker proceeds to treat the war “as a cultural trauma” and that her trilogy is “one more intertext in the process of negotiation and debate about the war.”¹¹

Pat Barker’s *Another World* (1998) moves according to Piątek from the presentation of individual trauma to the issue of transgenerational trauma, as the family of the novel’s protagonist all seem to react and suffer from their grandfather’s traumatic experience in the trenches. Similarly to her trilogy, Barker again uses other texts as “partners” for literary and textual interaction. Thus for example Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* forms a background to her treatment of the issue of childhood innocence or the lack of it. By presenting all characters as both perpetrators and victims of violence and adverse circumstances, Barker in Piątek’s view falls precisely into the trap which critic of trauma theory Dominic LaCapra warned against, namely turning the entire society into “pathological wound culture.”¹² The author concludes that Barker’s fictional treatment of transgenerational trauma may itself lead to the trivialization of trauma. In *Double Vision* (2003), Barker even seems to move on to present the entire world as traumatized, violent and murderous. The novel focuses on the moral dilemmas involved in (photographic) representations of violence and war atrocities, as the main character is a former war correspondent. Inspired by Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), Barker’s text also includes a debate centering on similar ethical problems concerning paintings by Francisco Goya. Piątek concludes that Barker’s *Double Vision* deals with trauma transfer and by “portraying the omnipresence of violence in the contemporary world, [Barker] collapses all violence into one and comes very close to trivializing the experience of trauma.”¹³ On the other hand, despite the novel’s ubiquitous violence, Piątek claims that Barker does offer a certain hope for the future in the human capacity for empathy.

Using George Lukács’s definition of a classical historical novel, Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction and Illan Pappé’s term “bridging narrative,”¹⁴ Piątek proceeds to analyze several novels by Irish writer Sebastian Barry. She shows how Barry’s writing moves from historical novels (such as *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, 1998) to historiographic novels (*The Secret Scripture*, 2008) to bridging narrative in *On Canaan’s Side* (2011). Barry’s earlier novels offered a revisionist history of Ireland which created controversies among its readers and reviewers. As Piątek says, in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* Barry creates a “world of binary oppositions” where all the nationalist characters are presented as evil while those loyal to the British crown are good. To her, Barry is “determined to have his protagonist mired by history and keep him innocent of violence at all cost.”¹⁵ In her analysis of Barry’s novel *A Long, Long Way*

10 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 54.

11 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 72.

12 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 78.

13 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 85.

14 As Piątek explains, the term was coined by Palestinian historian Illan Pappé to describe narratives with a conscious effort at the reconciliation of warring parties; these narratives can come into existence if historians on both sides work together to arrive at a mutually acceptable assessment of the conflict’s history. Although coined by a historian, the term is well suited to describe Barry’s later novelistic efforts.

15 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 90-91.

(2005), Piątek compares its themes and formal strategies to Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy*, as the central event of both works is World War I, with the resulting individual as well as cultural trauma. She also shows how the theme of trauma influences and penetrates the novel's structure. Piątek draws parallels between other works of Barker and Barry:

*There is an intriguing correspondence between Pat Barker's and Sebastian Barry's recent novels. Like Barker, Barry also arrives at great generalizations about the source of evil in the contemporary world, which for both writers lies in war and violence. Both writers are almost naïve in their pacifist message, and both present the process of writing one's story as therapeutic.*¹⁶

Piątek points to similar pitfalls of Barker's and Barry's historical revisionism, particularly to their tendency at seeing the world as victim culture, i.e. a "world permeated by violence and populated by victims, each nurturing his or her traumatic past."¹⁷

As remembering and (re-)writing the past is closely connected to the ways memory operates, the second section of the book focuses on the relationship of memory and trauma within selected novels by Kazuo Ishiguro and John Banville. Before discussing individual novels by Ishiguro, Piątek introduces current trends in criticism of Ishiguro's work, namely that it can very well be understood in the tradition of literary modernism.¹⁸ She also mentions his language, which "tends to hide meaning rather than reveal it."¹⁹ She persuasively demonstrates her understanding of Ishiguro's more recent novels as historical fiction despite the writer's own claim to the contrary. Piątek shows how historical events always form an important background to the narratives, or how, in spite of the events' apparent absence, they profoundly influence the narrators' lives in such a way that the narrators conspicuously avoid mentioning them, as they are too painful to be remembered. Piątek concludes that in this way Ishiguro depicts particular historical events as traumatic and the narratives are then examples of traumatic memory. For example, in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is both a national and individual trauma and the fact that the war brought along the liberating effect of discarding the patriarchal system and replacing imperial power with (albeit forced) democracy "makes it even more disturbing for the nation and individuals alike."²⁰ Piątek illustrates how the trauma is manifested in textual strategies (repetitions on one side, omissions and silences on the other, dissociations to the point of split in the narrative paralleling the personality split of the traumatized narrator, motifs of nightmares and hallucinations, non-linear time, etc.) In Piątek's words, "the trauma in the text is mimicked by the trauma of the text."²¹

Similarly, in *When We Were Orphans* (2000) Ishiguro employs language, an unreliable narrator, and a deliberately confusing narrative style to convey the sense of trauma haunting a protagonist whose childhood was overshadowed both by the historical trauma of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and by personal trauma of the loss of home indirectly caused by the British ruthless exploitation of the opium trade.

¹⁶ Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 115.

¹⁷ Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 182.

¹⁸ Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 120-121.

¹⁹ Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 119.

²⁰ Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 123.

²¹ Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 127.

Piątek also devotes attention to how Ishiguro's novel distorts the convention of the detective genre, how it enters into discussions with several novels of Charles Dickens, and in which motifs it resembles the Greek tragedy of Oedipus. She confirms that reading the novel is an unsettling experience for the reader because the writer uses diverse narrative strategies "to place the reader in the position of a co-witness of trauma."²²

John Banville's novels *Eclipse* (2000), *Shroud* (2002) and *Ancient Light* (2012) are analyzed as examples of the writer's diverse engagements with history. Like Ishiguro's, Banville's protagonists also inquire into the past and attempt to reconstruct and comprehend it in order to come to terms with their own identity. Both writers mimic the symptoms of trauma in the way they use language and plot structure. Banville, too, often places his reader into the position of co-witness. The novels deal with the way people remember, reconstruct the past, and engage with their past as a key to their own selves. Banville presents characters uncertain about their own selves, doubting the self's coherence and knowability, and the possibility of really knowing others. As Piątek states, "while history seems to be virtually absent from the surface of the text and emerges only in the rich intertextual fabric [...], memory completely overwhelms the protagonist and the reader."²³ Although imparted specifically about Banville's novel *Eclipse*, this comment is equally valid for all three of his novels discussed in the book. In this way Piątek shows how both Ishiguro and Banville "deepen our understanding of the human condition by examining the individual mind engaged in the process of remembering."²⁴ Banville's novels are also rich in intertextual references (for example Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* forms an important pretext), occasionally parodying the author himself and his previous works (and their critics), i.e. by questioning the "objectivity" of historical facts by presenting "a failed historian."²⁵ Banville according to Piątek rejects the concept of victim culture that understands injured parties as automatically innocent, thus in their nobility morally superior to their perpetrators by focusing on the character of Axel Vander, modelled on Paul de Man²⁶: "Anti-Semite and a murderer, a fraud and a thief but all this does not make [the character] any less of a survivor of the Holocaust."²⁷ The character is "morally despicable despite being a victim."²⁸ Banville balances such an unsettling presentation of a victim by contrasting Vander with another Holocaust survivor, his wife Magda, who ironically also becomes Vander's victim when he euthanizes her, because to him she is too confused and simply "must go." Through these kinds of complex dynamics the novel addresses the notion of victimhood.

Piątek's *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* is a valuable contribution to the contemporary debate on the role of history and memory in fiction writing, exploring ways writers engage with the notion of trauma both on national as well as individual levels. She demonstrates that by engaging with history

22 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 144.

23 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 154.

24 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 185.

25 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 149.

26 Belgian-born Paul de Man was a literary theoretician, escapee from Nazi Europe, founder of the American school of deconstruction, who was later discovered to write anti-Semitic articles while still in Belgium, and a bigamist. The controversies over his double life are not yet over, as is apparent in the reactions to the new biography of de Man by Evelyn Barish (2014).

27 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 166.

28 Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 168.

and trauma, fiction foregrounds essential ethical questions, and by exploring the nature of human memory it also delves into fundamental epistemological and psychological issues. Her well-researched study is written in a lively style and is therefore accessible to both scholars and students of literature alike. While her initial chapter provides an insightful and well-arranged overview of theoretical frameworks, the following chapters are also instructive in the way she applies them to specific literary texts. While firmly grounded in current prevailing critical methods (with which it sometimes enters into disagreement), to those interested specifically in the works of the authors under scrutiny the book offers a new ways of reading and interpreting the selected novels.

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