

REVIEW ARTICLES

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**Beata Piątek. *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction.*
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pp. 197.**

It has been claimed that literary criticism has directed both memory studies and trauma studies into unknown territories, opening new vistas of research and scholarly investigation. If this is the case, then Beata Piątek's book on the intersections of history, memory and trauma in contemporary British and Irish fiction, published by the Jagiellonian University Press, illustrates the point superbly, adding new dimensions to a by now well-established academic pursuit. In the humanities, a true "memory boom" (Huyssen 1995:8; Berliner 2005:197) was noticed in the second half of the twentieth century, with numerous publications bringing to the fore such issues as the relationship between the historical past and its reconstruction, post-memory and counter-memory, as well as drawing attention to gendered, lost and silenced memories. But it was not until the 1980s that the debate on memory gathered momentum. Szacka (2006:17) believes that one of the reasons for the new interest may have been the 1980 appearance of the English translation of Maurice Halbwachs's *La mémoire collective*, simultaneously in New York and Chicago, the latter edition with an introduction by Mary Douglas.

In the wake of the research of such scholars as Pierre Nora, Paul Ricoeur, Jan and Aleida Assmann, and Paul Connerton, memory is no longer viewed as personal and subjective, or as the fac-

ulty of an individual. Its social, collective, cultural and political aspects have been well described and documented. From “a topic for poets and their visions of a golden age” (Huysen 2003:2) it transformed into “a social, cultural and political force to challenge, if not reject, the founding myths and historical narratives” (Meusburger, Hefferman and Wunder 2011:3). Thus, as a psychological, sociological and philosophical notion memory belongs to the category of “travelling concepts” (Bal 2002:24), whose designation implies movement between academic disciplines and change of meaning. It is therefore vital to establish in what sense it is used in Beata Piątek’s book. A cursory glimpse at the titles of selected subchapters – “Historical Revisionism and Cultural Trauma”, “From Cultural Trauma to Victim Culture”, “The Movements of the Mind Remembering”, “Mummification of Childhood”, or “The Invention of the Past” – reveals that memory is understood by the author as multi-dimensional and multi-layered, depending on the agency of both individuals and groups, an unstable entity subject to distortions and disruptions.

Since the 1990s, when Trauma Theory entered the field of literary criticism, important analytical and methodological tools have been provided by psychoanalysis to comprehend fully texts engaging “with the notion of traumatic memory” (Whitehead 2009:114). The pioneering role in this respect should be accorded to American scholars. The volume *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, edited by Soshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), followed by Cathy Caruth’s two influential studies – *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) – paved the way, and have now achieved canonical status. In literary criticism, considerable attention is currently given to diverse forms of cultural representations of memory and their therapeutic/restorative power. Traditional forms of life-writing (memoir, autobiography, and diary) and also fictional narratives, undergo substantial generic transformations to address the issue of the “unrepresentability” of traumatic memories, and highlight the fragile link between trauma and testimony, as well as between traumatic experience and defensive amnesia. Beata Piątek’s *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* falls into line with the above-mentioned volumes, continuing the tradition of literary scholarship that invites critical reflection.

It is a thorough and thought-provoking study of fourteen novels by two British (Pat Barker and Kazuo Ishiguro) and two Irish (John Banville and Sebastian Barry) writers. Published in the years 1976 – 2011, all the analysed texts concern trauma and the relationship between memory and history, although they focus on events and places as diverse as the Great War, Irish history at the time of De Valera’s Presidency, Shanghai in the 1930s, or post-atomic bomb Nagasaki. The book opens with a theoretical chapter, which presents the state-of-the-art information on Trauma Theory and Memory Studies. Referring to the work of Cathy Caruth, Ann Kaplan, Soshana Felman and Dori Laub, the author introduces the most important terminology, defining shell shock, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, inter-generational trauma, as well as discussing the relationship between memory, history and fiction. The content of this chapter is wide-ranging and the observation astute. The reader is familiarized with a number of important concepts, e.g. Pierre Nora’s *lieux* (and *milieux*) *de mémoire*, Dominic LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement” and “vicarious victimhood”, and the

distinction between “facts” (an epistemological category) and “events” (an ontological category) elaborated by Jan Pomorski.

The remaining four chapters are divided into two parts: Part One – *History and Trauma* – deals with the novels by Barker and Barry, illustrating the novelists’ attempt to demythologize the Grand Narratives of national history. Part Two – *Memory and Trauma* – discusses the novels of Banville and Ishiguro, where history is viewed through characters’ individual life-stories, providing a microscopic perspective of common men.

The discussion on the work of Pat Barker contains insightful and illuminating analyses of *The Regeneration Trilogy* (i.e. *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, *The Ghost Road*, 1991 – 1998) and two later novels – *Another World* (1998) and *Double Vision* (2003) – all dealing with the topic of World War I. Piątek demonstrates that Barker’s preoccupation with the history and myth of the Great War evolves, coming “dangerously close” (51) to the glorification of victim culture and the domestication of violence in *Double Vision*. Barker’s feminist critique of history as Grand Narrative is deftly interpreted with the effective use of the theory of cultural trauma put forward by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Neil J. Smelser. To experience trauma on the collective level, society’s whole existence must be threatened, and the experienced situation must be understood to be indelible and to have a negative effect, conditions fulfilled by World War I. While Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy* presents WW I as a cultural trauma of the whole nation, it may be simultaneously read as entering into a dialogue “with the accepted, patriotic version of the history of the Great War” (64). Interrogating the myth of camaraderie across class distinctions and subverting the notion of common patriotic feeling, the British novelist lays bare the persisting structure of a patriarchal, divisive society.

Referring to Sebastian Barry’s four novels: *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998), *A Long Way* (2005), *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and *On Canaan’s Side* (2011), Beata Piątek successfully depicts the metamorphosis of the novelist’s approach to Irish national history – from schematic, one-dimensional characters that people the pages of the first book, portrayed through a black-and-white, politically biased vision of historical events, to a complex, nuanced and multi-faceted presentation of diverse lives’ trajectories in *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and *On Canaan’s Side* (2011). The Irish writer’s narrow, ideological, revisionist stance gradually gives way to a total rejection of the possibility of objective history, while historical metafiction replaces a simple bipolar view.

Two sections of the book that deserve special attention are the analyses of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of the Hills* (1982) and that of Pat Barker’s *Another World* (1998). Trauma, described by Gilmore (2001:6) as “self-altering” and “self-shattering experience of violence, injury and harm” cannot be articulated. It often reveals itself in nightmares and silences. When experienced collectively by an ethnic, religious, or national group, it causes serious damage, subjecting people to a hurtful experience which leaves a mark on their collective memory and consciousness. In the proposed close reading of Ishiguro’s novel, set in post-1945 Nagasaki, Piątek contends that the narrator’s traumatized, repressed memories enter the text on the level of its narrative structure, so that we can discern trauma on the level of the story and trauma of the text. The novel’s gaps

and contradictions, the distortion of logical sequence, as well as the high level of uncertainty and indeterminacy, force the reader to put together scattered fragments of the protagonist's life-story, the task being "similar to that of a therapist listening to the testimony of a trauma victim" (127). Thus, the main character's traumatic experience finds reflection in the broken, non-linear representation of events (traumatized narration, hence "trauma of the text" co-existing with "trauma in the text"), which, in turn, puts the reader in the position of co-witnessing trauma, and through LaCapra's "empathic unsettlement" generates "the affect of trauma in the readers" (45).

One might extend the analysis further, following a ternary model of narrative suggested by O'Neill in *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory*, which is used in narratological studies. O'Neill distinguishes three narrative levels: story, text and narration. Story is understood as "the realm of characters" (O'Neill 1996:34), text – as the realm of the narrator, and narration/discourse as the realm of the implied author. At the bottom level, the level of the story itself, which is the fictional reality and the world of "what really happened" (O'Neill 1996:34), trauma in *A Pale View of the Hills* refers to the character/narrator Etsuko, who has lost her family and who deliberately represses her awful memories (trauma in the text). At the level of text, trauma authenticates the narrative voice through numerous gaps and omissions, hallucinations and nightmares (trauma of the text). Finally, at the level of narration, which corresponds to the narrative level of the Implied Author (Cobley 2014:125), trauma engages the reader in co-witnessing. Such a reading might add a broader scope to the approach proposed by Piątek, following Irene Kacandes's claim that novels concerning traumatic experience make explicit requests for the reader's co-witnessing through narrative strategies.

Another subchapter worthy of note is "The Past Invading the Present – Transgenerational Trauma in *Another World*." Basing her discussion on the concepts proposed in the 1970s study *The Shell and the Kernel* by two Hungarian-born French psychoanalysts, Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham, especially their notion of "transgenerational phantom", Piątek argues that Barker's novel recognizes in a family secret the transgenerational trauma of fratricide passed to subsequent generations. Transgenerational phenomena, discussed in psychoanalytical theory, link the secrets of ancestors with the unconscious of their descendants, finding reflection in second- or third-generation subjectivities. Thus, trauma may be unwittingly inherited and invisibly passed on.

Beata Piątek's slim yet dense volume is slightly marred by a few inaccuracies and a flaw. Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* is a novel, not a collection of essays (19), Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* appeared in 1984, not in 1981 (27), Ilan Pappé is an Israeli not a Palestinian historian (116, footnote 19), and the term "cultural memory" was introduced by the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, not the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (27), as recognized in a number of important publications, e.g. Whitehead (2009); Saryusz-Wolska (2009); Gomille and Stierstorfer (2003). The flaw is the lack of an index.

Moreover, claiming that Halbwachs "tries to treat individual memory and collective memory as analogous" (30) seems far-fetched. For Halbwachs, memory is a social phenomenon while collective memory is a construct which is determined and shaped by the present. Although societies and

communities do not remember as such, and it is individual people, members of these groups, who preserve memories, still as members of groups (groups formed through kinship, common religion, social class bonding) individuals become enmeshed in shared thoughts, ideas and concerns, becoming part of the social milieu of a given group. Halbwachs's study concerns social factors, not individual consciousness. He writes about "social frameworks of memory", by which he understands "the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of society" (Halbwachs 1992:40). Thus, how individuals, families, religious and ethnic groups remember certain events depends on and is shaped by the situation in which they find themselves in the present. The profound role of Halbwachs's ideas for the development of memory studies lies in moving "the discourse concerning collective knowledge out of a biological framework into a cultural one" (Assmann 1995:125).

Beata Piątek's study offers an invitation to re-assess the literary output of four major contemporary writers of the English-speaking world: John Banville, Pat Barker, Sebastian Barry and Kazuo Ishiguro. Wide-ranging and rich in its corpus of critical reading, well informed by research in the field of psychoanalytic theory, trauma and memory studies, it is an absorbing piece of scholarship, challenging and thought-provoking, aiming to open new critical perspectives. It demonstrates unequivocally the profound role of literary fiction in forging, shaping and expressing the collective and cultural memory of nations as novels become agents of remembrance and media of memory. Discussing issues of the personal trauma and cultural trauma of collective experience, exploring the mythologized versions of historical events against the backdrop of the unknown past, the book throws into stark relief complex intertwining relations between identity, memory, history and narrative, where the strict boundaries between the personal and the national become blurred.

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