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The Role of Literature in Reconciling Trauma on Personal and Social Level

Kristýna Bušková

ABSTRACT:

This paper outlines the role of narrative in experiencing and reconciling trauma from the viewpoint of psychology and illustrates the role of literature in trauma reconciliation. It argues that personal trauma related to social and political context cannot be fully reconciled without prompting a parallel reconciliation process on the social level. Literature is seen as a possible vehicle for initiating and facilitating such process. This point is illustrated by an example of two autobiographical books dealing with personal experiences from the Czechoslovak Communist era.

KEY WORDS:

trauma – literature – Communism – Czechoslovakia

Only recently has the existence of psychological trauma as a valid state of psyche been acknowledged and described (HUNT 2010). Contrary to the slowness of science to identify the phenomenon of psychological trauma, literature has always been a vehicle for expressing one's traumatic experiences. For instance, in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* there are several scenes describing the experience of trauma. In part 1 Henry has just come back from war and something is noticeably wrong with him (HUNT 2010: 15):

Tell me, sweet lord, what is't what takes from thee
Thy stomach, pleasure and golden sleep?
Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth,
And start so often when thou sit'st alone?
Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks,

And given my treasures and my rights of thee
To thick-eyed musing and cursed melancholy?

Today we might read it as follows:

Why, Henry, do you have an eating disorder and sleep disturbance?
Why are you depressed, experiencing symptoms of hyperarousal and social anxiety?
Why are you anaemic, and why have you lost your sex drive?
And why do you experience intrusive thoughts and depression?

The poetic language of Shakespeare is apt at touching our feelings, enabling us to process what we feel. While psychology is good at describing things, literature represents one of the most suitable means to reconcile trauma. Why that is and how it is done, from the psychological point of view, is the subject of this paper.

Trauma can be experienced as a “cut into the soul” following a horrifying experience (SCHAUER, NEUNER & ELBERT 2005: 5). In Greek its literary meaning is wound. Nowadays we know that this cut into the soul affects the brain functioning and, if left unprocessed, may result in a mental disorder. Today we understand trauma as “the experience and psychological impact of events that are life threatening or include a danger or injury so severe that the person is horrified, feels helpless, and experiences psychophysiological alarm response during and shortly following the experience” (IBID.).

Trauma has a fundamental affect on autobiographical memory and therefore on the personal narrative identity. As we grow up, we build assumptions about the world, our place and value in it and what it means to be human, about our abilities to protect ourselves, our family and close people in instances of danger (see also CRITTENDEN & LANDINI 2011; POWER & DALGLEISH 1997). These assumptions underlie our meaning structures, in other words what the meaning of life is for us and who we are (FRANKL 1992; JANOFF-BULMAN 2002). We convey these assumptions and values through narrative. With the help of narrative, we see and interpret experiences in the light of things that happened in the past and in the anticipation of future events (CARR 1986). As such, “our experience automatically assumes temporally extended forms in which future, present and past mutually determine one another as parts of a whole” (CROSSLEY 2000: 534). Although we may not always be aware of it, in our life narrative

we always project into the future, as many existentially and phenomenologically minded writers have emphasized.

Political conflict as well as any other seriously negative experience threatening to our life and our loved ones, either physically or psychologically or both, have the power to breach narrative structure of our identity, forcing us to reconfigure ourselves (CROSSLEY 2000). Janoff-Bulman (2002) described this process as an “ontological assault” in which the basic assumptions about oneself and the world are shattered. The meaning of one’s life is then thrown into question. Importantly, the narrative characteristic of projecting into the future is suddenly shaken up and ceases to be granted.

Traumatic experiences attack all types of memory structures underlying personal life narrative. A traumatic experience is stored in the form of a “recollective experience” (TULVIG 2001). Within this experience, the brain stores information on what the person could see/hear/smell with his/her senses (e.g. I smell burning bodies) ; what he/she thought at that time (e.g. they will kill me too) how she/he felt emotionally (e.g. helplessness, anger) and what the bodily reaction was at that time (e.g. freezing, accelerated heartbeat). Usually, these sensory-perceptual representations, also called hot memories (POWER & DALGLEISH 1997), are well remembered but lack any autobiographical structure that would represent them as a general event (e.g. my third week in Auschwitz) and place them clearly in a person’s lifetime period (SHAUER, NEUNER & ELBERT 2005). This hampers the possibility to narrate traumatic experiences. This inability then causes discontinuity and incoherence in the life narrative. The end result is a state of trauma.

Literary as well as a non-literary narrative expression has a great power to aid integration of these haphazard memories and alleviate suffering of both the body and soul. Through attempts to write down what the person went through she starts the process of reconstructing the autobiographical memory which brings almost immediate relief (Zhang, personal conversation). It is because of this quality of narrative expression that writing a narrative account of traumatic experiences became an essential clinical tool to heal trauma (IBID.). Although there is no need for the narrative account to have literary qualities in artistic sense, there are endless literary examples of books which served at least partially therapeutic purpose to their authors. This “abreactive” function of any written expression, including the literary one, is described at length in Zbyněk Fišer’s study (present volume). He describes how literary expression with its variety of genres allows for expressing feelings and experiences which appear

absurd when lived but can be given new meaning when expressed through irony, e.g., leading eventually to reconciliation of a given situation. Similarly, poetry allows for expressing one's feelings without the need to put them in precise and comprehensible context which might be difficult to produce for people who for instance find themselves in an incomprehensible situation of political imprisonment (see ČÁSLAVOVÁ, present volume). Also, a literary expression in complex traumatic times which often test our humanity is a means to keep one's humanity and culture (SHANTALL 1999). Remaining a "caring and humane person" may be considered as the biggest resistance at times when somebody wants to take our humanity away from us (IBID.).

Equally important, a written (not necessarily) literary expression conveys a possibility to have one's voice heard, letting the world know what happened and demand justice (CHESTER 1992). This was shown as being one of the crucial aspects of successful trauma therapy with survivors of torture and other society inflicted traumas. A whole new system of a so called testimony therapy was developed by Lira and Weinstein and published under pseudonyms Cienfuegos and Monelli (cited in SCHAUER, NEUNER & ELBERT 2005) in Chile during Pinochet regime. Victims of traumatic experiences such as torture and political imprisonment or genocide have difficulties to have their voice heard in society precisely because of the fragmented nature of traumatic memories and the related difficulty to put them in words. Often these people are being marginalized by the general society which strips them of their societal voice and attempts to instil fear in them. Testimony therapy combined psychology with politics in that clinicians helped people recover and integrate their traumatic memories into their life narrative and write them down so as to be passed to human rights organizations in a form of written testimony. Within literature, similar function can be fulfilled by diary writing or autobiographical writing which is intended to be in some form presented to others (either directly published or left behind with hope that one day somebody will find it and the world will get to know what really happened).

The book called *Deník: řekněte jim, že sametová...* [Diary: Tell them Velvet Revolution ...] may be considered as one such example (MEJSTŘÍK 2010). Martin Mejstřík was one of the leading representatives of protesting students during the 1989 Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia. In 2010 he published his diaries which he had been writing since high school. These diaries are framed by his contemporary reflections on what was happening and what he was writing about then. A striking feature of this book is that it is 350 pages long and not

easy to finish. Mejstřík's descriptions are very detailed and in his current reflections we can read a sense of preoccupation with his own experiences, which were so unique, closely intertwined with historic context, and at the same time so demanding to reconcile within one human life. The book powerfully reproduces the author's mood with all his expectations, excitement, worry, fear, sadness as well as joy. His account is however tainted by the current political developments which, 20 years after the Velvet revolution, the author is very sceptical about and finds it difficult to reconcile in the light of his original expectations. In between lines we can read subtle accusation of some of the key participants of the revolution and a feeling of anger for the way they entered in the modern Czech history:

Velvet? [Revolution]

This term (Michael Kocáb brought it with him to Řetězová ulice where we stayed during the strike but it is said that American journalists came up with it) this velvet bon mot aggravates me. It is a slap in the face of those people who went through Národní Třída surrounded by the militia; there were three to five thousand of these people.

It is possible that somebody liked it. It sounds so nice: velvet revolution. It sounds so soft, smooth... Not a single eye manages not to shed a tear of emotion.

Marketing wise it was perfect.

It may be that it worked in someone's favour. We were going too much with the flow and were flabbergasted and we may have not adhered to the right scenario in the first days.

Are you saying a revolution? Tell the youngsters a velvet revolution!

And the revolution was over.

Up to 600 people were wounded, of which several dozen had semi-severe to severe injuries. A few people sustained permanent, serious injuries.

Still a velvet revolution?

Try to crash your skull against a post. Try to crush your genitals. Try to break your spine, smash your kidneys. Then we can talk about "Velvet revolution" (MEJSTRIK 2010: 334).

The book allowed the author to express and try to reconcile his preoccupation with the events and at the same time give his own subjective testimony of what the revolution was really about. It is interpreted through narrative notion of time, where historical and personal events unfold in time as a logical sequence. The urgency with which Mejstřík wants to shake his readers feels very real and is at the forefront of the book. It is equally important to say that his attempt at it failed so far. Only a handful of copies sold. It is not possible to tell whether

it was because of the book's (excessive) length and difficulty to process every detail of the author's life within which events relating to his historic role in the fall of Communism are integrated and narrated, or whether the Czech society is not ready to reflect on their role in the revolution and the subsequent post-communist developments.

In her book *Divný kořeny* [Strange Roots] Hana Frejková also ponders a sensitive turning point in recent Czechoslovak history: the Stalinist period of the 1950s. Her father Ludwig Freund was a Jew, born in a Sudeten area of Czechoslovakia and a communist. Because his economic views were incompatible with the Stalinist system and the Communist Party needed to identify an 'inner enemy' to leave ideally every individual in Czechoslovakia with feeling of threat that would justify their totalitarian policies, Ludwig Freund was executed in one of the political trials in the 1950s. Frejková's mother was a German actress from an upper class family who moved to Prague and was also a communist. What role Frejková's parents' family roots and identity, and the then social context of Central and Western Europe played in their political views, behaviour and Frejková's initial belief that her father must have done something terrible, given he was executed, forms in a way a literary research question that she attempts to answer in the book. In the book she acts as both the main character and the literary researcher, the author. The reader is presented with a careful, almost scientific multi-layered analysis. She builds the story around archive materials, letters from prison, interviews with her mother's family in Germany and observations of her feelings and thoughts from these family gatherings. The factual material is balanced out by her emotional reactions to it, although the intellectual analysis predominates. She does not smother the reader with her emotions but still manages to convey the emotional weight of her childhood experiences.

On that ill-fated day I was told that my father was a traitor. So we repudiated each other. We cast aside the most fundamental things in life, the values that determine the life meaning. [...] Even now the thought of it makes me cry. I would like the most to etch it into paper until it gets pierced how much it hurts! It threw us into a mill and squashed us. (FREJKOVÁ 2007: 90)

The tone and content of the book is not accusatory but conveys a quest for comprehending what happened, with hope that it would lead to both personal and social reconciliation of the period of Communism. In this, Frejková's style of writing is in direct opposition to Mejstřík's, although both books represent personal narrative attempts to influence societal reconciliation of the highly

problematic period of 40 years of Communism. The book was well received and became a success. For the author the book came after she had been through a ten year process of psychoanalysis in which she was slowly working through her traumas followed by years of building her own life. The book is thus more an outcome of her previous reconciliation process and a highly mature reflection on the issue. Contrastingly, for Mejstřík, the book appears to be the primary vehicle of working through his memories and assigning them new meaning. What normally stays safe behind closed doors during this vulnerable process is made public here. Also, the society may be more willing to reflect on the 1950s in which most currently living people were young children or not born yet compared to doing the same with the Velvet revolution and the subsequent events the effects of which have a direct, for the majority more tangible, bearing on our current situation.

For successful reconciliation of personal trauma, the reaction of audience (in case of these two books represented by the society) is crucial. Both books touched on traumatic experiences which have personal as well as social relevance and both of them touched on events bound up with sudden and rapid changes, affecting the country on a large scale. When social events are viewed as rapid and adverse and as being imposed on the culture, the society takes a collective stance to their integration (or the lack thereof) into the cultural memory; a process parallel to the personal process of integrating traumatic experiences/memories into autobiographical memory (SZTOMPKA 2000). People may collectively become preoccupied about these events, trying to ensure that they will never be forgotten and thus never repeated. Alternatively, they can dissociate the events and act as if nothing happened, looking solely into the future. This tends to happen when people do not see any way to prevent adversities from happening again or when they themselves experience feelings of personal guilt and shame in relation to these events and therefore do not want the culture to confront them with it (see also JUŘÍČKOVÁ, present volume). Here, literature may play an important role in filling in the gaps in and challenging cultural memory, urging discussion involving both prominent and silenced voices to take place on a social level, which would ideally result in reconciliation for individuals as well as society as a whole (see also KRATOCHVIL, present volume); Frejková's and Mejstřík's books represent such attempts. There is no full personal reconciliation of society-inflicted traumas without reconciling them within social context too. Equally, no society can heal unless its individual citizens heal too. Literature has the power to substantially shape and help this

process. It can alleviate suffering, heal and consequently improve functioning of cultures as well as individuals.

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