

Conflicting Realities: Trauma and Art

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The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own...Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stages of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it's become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation (Adorno 34).

Theodore Adorno's fears were not entirely unfounded. The cloistering of the terrible into realms of art and academic study smacks of an elitist, cerebral alienation of the intellectual from the reality of trauma and suffering. In fact, he may have had many misgivings about this conference. But Adorno wrote at a time when the traumatic syndrome was less widespread. He did not have to contend with a world where trauma—especially trauma arising from war and conflict—was so immediate and prevalent, that it has almost become 'common'. In fact, the word 'trauma' itself has been appropriated into layman conversation as a simple substitute for 'tragedy'. A bad day is 'traumatic'. Adorno foresaw a future where one was intellectually alienated from the reality of trauma. We, unfortunately, seem to have inherited that future.

The proliferation of violence has created a generation born paranoid. The likelihood of experiencing a traumatic event, or witnessing extreme violence has increased ten-fold since the last century. The number of places without some kind of ongoing conflict is disturbingly low, and

we have tackled this issue by compartmentalising in the extreme. The knowledge of unspeakable events occurring nearby is assiduously shelved, and aired out for occasional sympathetic murmurs, and political haranguing. We have reduced the impact of the traumatic, not allowing ourselves to go beyond the visceral sting of outrage, curling tighter into our individual realities to blot out the uncomfortable truths happening a border, sometimes even a room, away.

Is it perhaps, a result of inundation? Have we so saturated our minds with suffering that we no longer feel? Or have we immersed ourselves in our fear so much so that we—like Godot’s fish—don’t know we are in it? Or is it a simple question of denial and alienation? An attitude that claims immunity because of inexperience?

Before proceeding further, let us look at the origins of trauma as we now understand it. Cathy Caruth writes in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), “...trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon” (11). Roger Luckhurst describes trauma as

something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated or processed by usual mental processes. We have, as it were, nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory yet it is still present in our mind like an intruder or a ghost. (499)

But trauma’s inclusion into mental pathology is a fairly recent one. The theoretical definitions of trauma evolved with each new approach adopted to counter traumatic neuroses.

Trauma was recognized as a significant psychological ailment only with the First World War, where able soldiers were rendered incapacitated by what was then called ‘shell shock’. The war poet Siegfried Sassoon was one such soldier. The catastrophe wreaked by the First World War demanded a new approach to the treatment of shell-shock victims—there were entirely too many to incarcerate and beat into submission. The situation was so rampant that it could not be written off as cowardice, moral weakness or mental defect. As a result, doctors began to employ what would later be called the ‘talking cure’. Patients were coaxed into talking about their experiences during the war and the manifestations of their consequent malaise. They were asked to deliberately create a narrative of their suffering with the intention of achieving a cathartic release. The resulting literature served to subvert the existing metanarratives of glorious nationalism and righteous war.

The Second World War shattered any remnants of the myth of an honourable war. Reason, the bulwark of civilisation, was used as a systematic tool of atrocity. In the previous wars, the opposing parties were either civilised countries engaging in a political tussle or Europeans subjugating other races. However, the Second World War saw a country turning against its own people in a quest for a perverted perfection, creating what is generally considered the defining moment in world trauma—the Jewish Holocaust. It threw into relief that only a civilised mind, employing cold reason, can execute with such precision and at such a scale. Worst of all, the Second World War brought the crushing awareness that the rest of the world permitted this civilised barbarity. That evil could wear the banal face of a government official, just following orders. We never quite recovered from that blow.

Of course, that neither deterred the machines of war nor stopped genocide and oppression. However, it did have the ironically positive effect of encouraging the study of Trauma and devising new ways to help individuals suffering from Trauma-based ailments like Survivor’s

Syndrome, Perpetrator's Guilt and Camp Syndrome. This interest in trauma gained momentum with the Vietnam War. This particular war was also especially crucial because it was one of the first wars to enter the mainstream in terms of visuals on screen. The Vietnam War was widely covered by the media, resulting in an archive of war photography of unprecedented scale. Sontag writes, "The war that America waged in Vietnam, the first to be witnessed day after day by television cameras, introduced the home front to new tele-intimacy with death and destruction"(21). The copious amounts of texts and extensive documentation brought home the new reality of a war beyond imagination. It was not just the result of the war that was appalling, the means in which the war was perpetrated was traumatic in itself. The scale and scope of violence brought with it the ignoble necessity for a new means of categorising the unimaginable—thus, Trauma.

To classify the unimaginable automatically implies that the previously inconceivable has come to pass. Consequently, all of reality becomes unstable. In the case of literature, this has a deep theoretical significance since language automatically gets derailed—the signifier and signified lose sight of each other and words themselves change in the face of trauma. Language is too abstract to pin down the sharpness of pain, too concrete to capture the visceral nature of horror. The situation is further complicated by the fact that traumatic memories are essentially inexpressible. According to the neurobiological theory of trauma, unlike normal memory, traumatic memory is not stored in a narrative or lingual form. Rather, it is recorded kinaesthetically through an instinctive sensory imprinting. Consequently, the person may not be able to grasp the actual events in its fullness, but will be wracked by crippling flashbacks triggered by associated stressors connected to the causative event. Furthermore, in a natural protective instinct, the mind shields itself from a repetition of the trauma it underwent by setting up False Memories or Screen memories

that distort the traces of recollection or black the memory out entirely. Sandra Bloom writes,

At the time of the trauma they [the subject] had become trapped in “speechless terror” and their capacity for speech and memory become separated. As a result, they develop what has become known as “amnesia” of the traumatic event—the memory is there, but there are no words to attach to it so it cannot be either talked about or even thought about. Instead the memory presents itself. (6)

This mnemonic aporia coupled with linguistic inaccessibility is where the Trauma Theory of Deconstruction was conceived by the Yale School of Deconstruction. This theory placed trauma as the touchstone for a new kind of signification, where representation and interpretation are not based on a known reference, but an unknown one that is beyond imagination. Language becomes irredeemably clouded because the referential link is decidedly severed both in terms of simple vocabulary as well as cognitive conception. The Yale School placed Trauma as a new tangent in narratology and at the epicentre of an ethical turn in literary theory regarding the narration of history and the interpretation of texts dealing with trauma. They considered trauma a gaping blackhole of expression where everything is rendered silent or merely as noises which hit us with just an impression of the event, never the pristine truth. They conceived of trauma as the meeting place between memory, history and survival, playing out the conflict between the “...crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life...” to borrow a phrase from Caruth.

The trauma text is, an act of memory, a refusal to forget. But, what is being reiterated—the source of the conflict or its result? In its most positive form, the trauma text is a survival text. In its most logical form, it is a warning, or a guide book to atrocity. At its worst, it is a brand that instigates. Susan Sontag discusses the motives of the traumatic image,

or rather the impact of the traumatic image with respect to the viewer's context. We assume that everyone wants peace. However, for some the cost of peace far outweighs the trauma of war. Their normal lives and identities have been so saturated with the fight that they cannot forget. In such a scenario, the trauma text acts as a source of incitement, not warning.

In the case of large historical trauma, the documentation can help establish the series of events to a certain extent. However, this narrative also has multiple versions. There is the historical record, the 'textbook' version which parades as a factual archive while being the version sanctioned by the state. There is the collective memory, created by an amalgamation of opinions and facts, usually corroborated by a place which becomes the icon of the memory. And there is personal narrative, the deeply subjective and unique account of the individual. These three levels raise a very basic question—which version is authentic?

Besides the general issues of factual lacunae, the inflammatory nature of trauma makes its artistic expression an easy vehicle for propaganda. Sontag writes, "...photographs of victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate, they simplify, they agitate"(6). After all, trauma literature, witness writing in particular, does not pretend objectivity.

In the case of Trauma fiction, the situation gets further complicated. Using a historical trauma as the context of a work of fiction requires an appropriation of the event by someone who is essentially an outsider. The sanctity of the traumatic event is breached by the interloping artist who wishes to invoke the unspeakable. And the literary analysis of such a text brings us dangerously close to the murky waters of *schadenfreude* and Adorno's predicted future. Furthermore, the idea of creating a text from atrocity suggests an appropriation of suffering, emphasising the fact that the event has been 'framed' to suit a certain perspective, stained

with fabrication. It is created with the aim of attacking the reader's psyche, creating a visceral reaction to the pain captured in the text. And this aim automatically implies a motive not as pure as the reader would like to believe. Writings of the Holocaust have come under fire for this very reason. The Holocaust canon has raised itself into an ideological monument that cannot be questioned. This made it an easy vehicle for furthering a divisive agenda that has not served to soothe conflict.

The early theorising of trauma literature focussed on the problems of expression and the inadequacies of language in context of trauma. However, in the 21st century, theorising about trauma has evolved from the idea of a mute trauma to the possibility of a 'poetics' of Trauma. The extensive presence of trauma has contributed to producing a grainy solidity to the idea of the Negative Sublime. The study of Trauma as a social and historical neuroses has led to the creation of a certain mode of expression. This is a tantalizing idea; as a species, we love wrestling the irrational into a semblance of sense. James Berger writes,

Theories of trauma are immensely appealing. They presume to provide a logic to the most radically irredeemable, unassimilable, unsymbolizable phenomena. I would argue that in literary studies trauma theories actually offer a poetics... There is something morally, intellectually, and aesthetically satisfying in these directions of thought. They suggest levels of experience deeper than language and consciousness... There is no language for that moment of pain and dissolution, but gradually language forms around it. I am struck in much writing about trauma by the use of the word 'precisely' when the relation being described is not precise at all. An enormous, inconceivable, visceral condition is rendered algebraic by means of terminology.

This precision about the inconceivable is why I refer to trauma theory as a sort of poetics. (52)

The effect of this turn in the study of trauma is double-edged. On one hand, it acknowledges the prevalence of trauma and the need to address it, presenting the lonely survivor with a community of individuals who have looked into the abyss and listened to its breath. On the other hand, it creates an illusion of comprehension.

The reification of trauma in text or art is a dangerous affair - especially because the trauma text is often only a step away from prurient sensationalism. This is compounded by the fact that trauma is intrinsically subjective, and the text will fail if the reader/ audience fails to make the connection. In *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), Ruth Leys presents two diverging instances of trauma. The first was concerned with the rehabilitation of Ugandan girls kidnapped by rebel armies and trained to kill even their comrades if they attempted to escape. The second was a court case where a woman claimed to suffer from trauma due to sexual harassment. It would be easy but also horribly unfair to dismiss the latter as unimportant. What makes an event traumatic is the extent to which it shatters the prevailing normal. The state of the Ugandan girls is blatantly horrific. The case of the harassed lady is horrific too, because the security and integrity of her existence is compromised.

Comparing traumatic incidents is as unjust as it is inevitable. Once the traumatic event materialises into tangible representation, it automatically finds a similar event because that is how language works—through reference. In the case of war trauma, this comparability is exacerbated by the number of wars being fought simultaneously across the globe for similar, if not the same, reasons. The production of images and texts of suffering has doubled not just because of instances of violence, but also because of increased options for reporting and publishing these events. Media has branched into faster and more graphic representations of violence. None of us can deny the presence of conflict

in our lives. We may not be at the battlefields, but the battles turn up unerringly on our screens, news papers and airwaves, and remind us of all conflicts that have been skipped or excluded. Watching someone else's pain or suffering has become inevitable and routine. Almost to the point that we have forgotten that suffering should not be inevitable.

These truly are times that try men's souls, but it is also the age of extreme alienation. A president watches his troops kill a terrorist in a cave. And we watch images of him watching. We have become removed from the immediate and use the fantastic to express reality. The surge in the number of superhero movies and fantasy franchises are symptomatic of disenchantment with the everydayness of real suffering. We resort to artistic representations to resolve our inner dissociation, making the real seem unreal. Sontag writes,

...a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation. The attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 was described as 'unreal', 'surreal', 'like a movie', in many of the first accounts of those who escaped from the towers or watched from nearby. (After four decades of big-budget Hollywood disaster films, 'It felt like a movie' seems to have displaced the way survivors of catastrophe used to express the short term unassimilability of what they had gone through: 'it felt like a dream.'). (22)

Is this a result of a placebo effect created by the theorisation of suffering? Negotiating the traumatic in artistic or literary representation runs the risk of disintegrating into pseudo-sympathetic babble, alienating the experience from human interaction. The perception of suffering and catastrophe as 'unreal' points to an inner shift. The mind is aware but does not acknowledge. As Sontag points out, there is a distinct difference between acknowledging violence and protesting against it. The image is a powerful tool to corroborate the authenticity of an account, solid

evidence. The audience or reader is aware of dual realities: (a) the immediate reality of her daily life with personal angsts, and (b) a darker more horrible reality of war, violence and brutality. Both these realities coagulate, creating a reality which seems unreal. Consequently, we retreat into mental apathy.

One can attribute this apathy to heartlessness, but that is naive, not to mention evolutionarily incorrect. The other popular reason is the surfeit of images of carnage. But such an argument is ridiculously reductive. Sontag addresses this accusation,

The view...that our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images—might be called the conservative critique of the diffusion of such images.

I call this argument conservative because, it is the sense of reality that has eroded. There is still a reality that exists independent of the attempts to weaken its authority. The argument is in fact a defense of reality and the imperilled standards of responding fully to it. (108-109)

It is a sign of privilege to find the reality of war surreal. Being unaware of that privilege signifies a failure of imagination and empathy. If there is a shortage of attention or an absence of empathy, it has less to do with an excess of images and more to do with perception. Sontag pragmatically points out that shock fades and repetition habituates. However, there is a discourse of passivity at work here. According to Sontag, emotional distancing occurs as a result of the lack of action and the consequent internal movement from empathy to sympathy. Sympathy is a thought that stays a thought. She writes,

The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anaesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings of rage and

frustration...So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. (102)

The most hard-hitting images of conflict are the ones that capture this deep, unforgiving helplessness. In an article titled “Syria’s Civil War: Yet another ‘Iconic Image’?” Hamid Dabashi discusses the footage of Omran Daqneesh and fumes against humanity’s impotence. He writes,

In the silent bewilderment and steady gaze of Omran Daqneesh there is the indictment of the entire Earth on which he lives. No fingerpointing to a murderous president here, an obscene king there, or an indecent ayatollah elsewhere, will ever wipe that dusty bloody face or close those piercing, inquisitive eyes.

Dabashi rages at the intrusive and pointless mythologisation of suffering. The image is not an icon; it is the picture of a boy in shock whose world has lost all meaning. Dabashi is furious not just at the media for creating a tag called ‘iconic’, but at his own inability to change things. However, it is a response, as opposed, to resignation. The image and the story create a disquieting ripple. We cannot un-see the image of that lost boy. We cannot forget the three-year-old washed up on a Greek beach. We cannot forget, we cannot pretend. We cannot remain blind.

In the face of the terrifying, we become something alien to ourselves. We become a part of an awe-full movement of consciousness, surviving which we will be forever estranged, bewildered by an unnatural world. We have gazed into the abyss and it has stared long and hard into us. However, applying Nietzschean logic, if the abyss gazes long enough into us, we will eventually stare back and, in the process, invoke sight. While the traumatic image may focus on the helplessness of the situation,

the viewing of the image becomes, to invoke Kafka, the axe to the frozen sea within. Sontag writes,

Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot encompass most of the reality to which they refer, . . . The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget. (115)

By curtailing or catalysing response, art can mobilise impotent sympathy into kinetic response. It has the ability to shake the academic out of her armchair, the patient out of her couch, the soldier out of uniform, the victim out of helplessness—and trauma into text. The key motive of the poetics of trauma is destabilisation. The focus of Trauma Theory must now move into the uncertain area of interpretation, negotiating our psychological inadequacy with the immediate necessity of dealing with atrocity. Trauma signals the end of a certain conception of reality, but it is not the absolute end. At its most negative, it points to a darker future with the prospect of nihilistic chaos. But at its most positive, it is a story of survival, and the possibility of regeneration.

In the essay “Dancing in Cambodia”, Amitav Ghosh discusses the landscape and perception of Cambodia before and after the Khmer Rouge. In the colonial era the dancers of Cambodia epitomised oriental mystique, and exquisite opulence. The dancers symbolized the nation and its glory. Ghosh describes their performance for the higher strata of French society in 1906, where the European audience was enthralled by their otherworldly grace and sparkling allure. The scene shifts to 1988. The large-scale obliteration of the traditional arts under Pol Pot, left hardly any dancers, and the art was almost lost. The genocide and economic depression had taken a toll on the newly formed nation. The few remaining dancers perform for the first time after decades of

subjugation at a barely salvaged auditorium for the motley crowd of survivors. Ghosh writes,

Eva Mysliwiec, who had arrived recently to set up a Quaker relief mission, was one of the few foreigners present at the first performance. When the first musicians came onstage she heard sobs all-around her. Then, when the dancers appeared, in their shabby, hastily made costumes, suddenly everyone was crying; old people, young people, soldiers, children—‘you could have sailed out of there in a boat.’

The people who were sitting next to her said: ‘We thought everything was lost that we would never hear our music again, never see our dance.’ They could not stop crying; people wept through the entire length of the performance.

It was a kind of rebirth: a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living. (45)

The relevance of art is to create these paradoxical moments of grief and joy, reminding us of what has happened, and what might be. It presents opportunity, for both endings and beginnings. As Boris Pasternak wrote “Art has two constant, two unending concerns: it always meditates on death and thus creates life.” Art has to be created after Auschwitz. To not do so is to admit defeat.

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