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Trauma and Literary Multilingualism. Introduction to the special section

Since the 1990s, it has been acknowledged in Trauma Studies that language lies at the core of the experience of trauma.¹ This, however, happens in an unusual manner: trauma is in fact an event that challenges the limits of comprehension and language, making it difficult to be expressed and represented. Trauma has been usually defined as an “unspeakable event”² or an event “defined by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately”.³ This is linked to the fact that trauma is a particular form of memory that cannot be fully processed due to its overwhelming range. Still, to be overcome, trauma needs to be transformed into a narrative.⁴ These narratives, also called trauma texts, have been researched to a significant extent. Nevertheless, the role of language in these narratives has hardly been investigated so far.⁵ This is glaring given that, as suggested by Busch and McNamara,⁶ language and trauma relate to each other in innumerable ways. Trauma may “severely impact on a person’s linguistic repertoire”; it can easily “be part or cause of traumatic events” or be used by a perpetrator to traumatize a victim and can “*per se* become a weapon that may be injurious”.⁷ Last but not least “even the absence of language, the denial of the right to speak and to have a voice that can be heard, or the silence in which an event is enclosed can be associated with trauma”.⁸

¹ See Caruth, Cathy: *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1996 and Tal, Kali: *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. New York: Cambridge University Press 1995.

² Caruth, Cathy (note 1) and Dominick LaCapra: *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2001.

³ Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis: *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, transl. by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: W. W. Norton 1973, 465. According to some scholars (e.g. Michael Rothberg, Stef Craps, Veena Das, and Irene Visser) who challenged the idea of the irrepresentability of trauma, however, trauma corresponds to an event which could be represented in a pluralistic way.

⁴ See van der Kolk, Bessel and Onno van der Hart: *The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma*. In: Cathy Caruth (ed.): *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1995, 158–182.

⁵ For an exception see Busch, Brigitta and Tim McNamara: *Language and Trauma: An Introduction*. In: *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 41 (2020), no. 3, June, 323–333.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 323–333.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 327–328.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 328.

Even less attention has been paid to the role of multilingualism in trauma literary texts, although there are numerous examples of trauma texts in which different languages structure the fabric of the narrative. This is true for some literary works on the Shoah, fascism, colonialism, racism, exile and migration, language loss etc. In fact, experiences of trauma are often set in multilingual backgrounds where languages carry a symbolic power; as such, the intersection of trauma and multilingualism represents a productive area in which both trauma and multilingualism studies could further advance.

This special section – the first one in the history of the publication platform *Polyphonie* – is dedicated to the interface between trauma and multilingualism in literary works. It continues a discussion that has been launched via various channels, such as in a special issue of the *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*⁹ and at the interdisciplinary workshop on language and trauma at the University of Essen-Duisburg in 2023.¹⁰ The three contributions that form this special section analyse trauma and multilingualism in different contexts, genres and from different perspectives. This breadth, that includes analyses of contemporary theater, of a poem by Yoko Tawada and of contributions to a Japanese-American newspaper shows that the nexus between trauma and multilingualism can be found in various contexts. It is therefore timely to study a phenomenon that might give us new insight into how trauma is processed and may be expressed.

Dandelion Epaud's article focuses on the contemporary plays *Tous des oiseaux* by Wajdi Mouawad and *Leçons de ténèbres* by Patrick Kermann. These two dramas use different multilingual approaches to represent diverse reactions to trauma. Whereas Kermann uses a realistic representation of characters and events, Mouawad's play has confusion at its core, with voices floating in the air and ghosts lamenting about their lost ability. Epaud's analysis demonstrates how multilingualism maps the characters' biography and relationships bringing to the surface what is usually hidden and materializing struggles and pain. Most of all, it creates new ways to make sense inside the languages themselves.

Veronica De Pieri's article analyses Yoko Tawada's poem *Hamlet No See* (2011?), written in Japanese/English and translated by the author herself into German. De Pieri reads it as a poem that deals with the trauma caused by the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident in 2011. She investigates how the multilingualism performed by Tawada helps to narrate trauma related to radiophobia, i.e. the exaggerated fear toward ionizing radiation. This is done for instance by

⁹ Co-edited by Marianna Deganutti and Sandra Vlasta, in print.

¹⁰ Organised by Brigitta Busch and Judith Purkarthofer.

intertextual and intercultural references to the famous soliloquy “To be, or not to be” in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The juxtaposition of the Japanese/English and the German version of the poem on the same website (where the poem was first published) furthermore underscores its multilingual nature and the need to read the two versions in parallel.

Finally, Katsuya Izumi's contribution is dedicated to the *Manzanar Free Press*, a Japanese-American internment camp newspaper. It was published between 1942 and 1945 in the Manzanar internment camp, the most well-known among the ten camps across the USA where Japanese-American people were interred after the Pearl Harbor attack by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Force in 1941. In his contribution, Izumi focuses on the poems and subjective jottings in Japanese and English published in the newspaper and asks how they express the traumata of the Japanese American internees. He is particularly interested in the aspect of (auto-)censorship that is expressed both in the content of the texts and by the choice of texts that were translated into Japanese or originally published in this language. Furthermore, he investigates the different, at times conflicting experiences of the various generations of internees.

The three contributions give an impression of the diversity of texts and contexts in which multilingualism and trauma intersect. What they share is the major finding that multilingualism can serve as a possible vehicle to narrate trauma. Through (often very individual) multilingual poetics and aesthetics, these texts offer either a first or an alternative perspective of traumatic events. Thus, officially accepted versions of traumata may be challenged and retold in a new way, or individual trauma narrated for the first time. While studies on autobiographical memory¹¹ and trauma, as well as research conducted on linguistic memories,¹² have demonstrated that the quality of the communication of past events is clearer and more faithful in one's first language, literary texts seem to allow to work in different directions. For instance, the emotional detachment in other (second, third, fourth...) languages enables writers to better cope with trauma and annexed feelings (anxiety), as psycholinguistic studies have already suggested.¹³ In fact, for writers who experienced trauma first-hand, the necessary distance

¹¹ Rubin, David: Beginnings of a theory of autobiographical remembering. In: C. P. Thompson, D. J. Herrmann, D. Bruce, J. D. Read, D. G. Payne, & M. P. Toglia (eds.): *Autobiographical memory: Theoretical and applied perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers 1998, 47–67.

¹² Pavlenko, Aneta: *The bilingual mind and what it tells us about language and thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014.

¹³ Bond, Michael Harris and Tat-Ming Lai: Embarrassment and code-switching into a second language. In: *Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 126 (1986), 179–86; Javier, Rafael and Luis Marcos: The role of stress on the language-independence and code-switching phenomena. In: *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, vol. 18 (1989), 449–72; Foster, Rosemarie Pérez: The bilingual self: Duet in two voices. In: *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 6 (1996), no. 1, 99–121 and Dewaele, Jean-Marc: *Emotions in Multiple Languages*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010.

needed to cope with this event is often granted by other languages. Similarly, authors and multilingual narratives dealing with traumata experienced by someone else might be able to create distance for their protagonists and readers by applying a multilingual aesthetics. Moreover, the way trauma is linguistically (multilingually) and stylistically represented by different generations (second, third etc.) might also have a key impact of the way trauma is elaborated.

We hope that the contributions in this special issue will form the basis for further research on the nexus between multilingualism and trauma which we believe to be a fruitful new subfield of the flourishing studies on trauma and language.

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