

Aleksandra Szczepan

*Traumatic realism: Towards the rhetoric of trauma*

Traumatic realism, the key category used in my work, seduces with a semblance of terminological transparency. On the one hand, it refers to the fundamental aspects of literary historical knowledge which treats realism as a notion untouched by fears of fundamental comprehensibility; on the other, to the category of trauma as the new mantra of humanist interpretations: perhaps surrounded with a layer of psychoanalytic ambiguities, yet relatively palpable as a category coming from life itself, equipped with a handy set of 20<sup>th</sup>-century tragedies serving as examination material. However, after a brief stage of self-contentment, it becomes clear that even the use of the notion requires from us taking a position on one of the sides in the discussion on realism—concerning its possible efficiency as a theoretical and descriptive notion, susceptibility to becoming a mere convention, as well as “effectiveness” (in Barthes’ terms). Moreover one must address with suspicion the category of trauma as an outpost of the alleged authenticity of literature, as well as rethink the very aptness of using the category of traumatic realism in reference to literature and its intuitively felt capacity. Is traumatic realism a kind of aesthetics, poetics, or theory of reception? What can be regarded as a distinctive feature of this kind of writing, or what kind of reading can be regarded as a definition of realism as a method of interpretation? What kinds of texts actually represent it? Is it just the literature of testimony or rather the broadly understood “traumatic literature,” including both the autobiographical writings of writers of the second and third generations, as well as openly fictional works on trauma, and war literature in general? Does the above-mentioned capacity of the notion require us to determine its historical belonging? Does the use of the category allow to engage vocabulary of a completely different literary provenance? I will be most interested in this aspect.

Having examined the most relevant and original formulation of this term—proposed by Hal Foster (*The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) and Michael Rothberg (*Traumatic Realism. The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000)—it seems obvious that the specific heterogeneity and ambiguity of the term are, in fact, inseparable from the implied problems of poetics of a text and its reception. However, what is especially important for me, in Rothberg’s definition of traumatic realism is the not fully articulated problem of the relation of this category to the poetics of a given literary text. Yet, it is not only the combination of questions from aesthetics and ethics, but also poetics and theory of reading, that produce its problematic nature and invest it with a particular value. Moreover, the resulting capacity of the category and the possibility of its application in diverse forms of literature do not necessarily have to be negatively valorized. First, traumatic realism can be treated as a language of description proving the community of experience, as a terminological frame, following thus the tradition of 20<sup>th</sup>-century theories of realism (Brecht,

Lukács, Auerbach) that aspire to be grand narratives. This framework would embrace minor discourses founded on a weak resemblance of the represented traumatic experience where the extreme appears through the banality of the everyday and finds in this dialectic relationship its mode of expression. What needs to be emphasized is that traumatic realism does not claim its right to a-historicity; and while it is valid to be used in reference to the broadly understood traumatic literature, for certain, the core of this kind of writing was produced after the Second World War: the testimonial and war literature. Secondly, the inseparable nature of the problems of the poetics of the text and the engagement of the reader postulated by traumatic realism emphasizes the questions crucial for the general reflection on literature, making thus the realistic-traumatic idiom an extraordinarily strong and creative theoretical vocabulary.

What is particularly interesting, if we focus on the problem of the poetics of trauma, or—in this context—traumatic realism construed as a kind of aesthetics and articulation, the characteristic of the poetics of traumatic text is based usually on a negative description: the narrative is non-chronological, without plot, incoherent, dispersed, difficult to be put together, torn apart by the structure of concealment, repetitions, associations, and silence to suggest what it cannot speak about. What I find compelling and I would like to focus on is this apophatic nature of poetics of trauma, where that which is supposed to be expressed, described and recognized can only be not-said, marked, indicated. Therefore, I would argue that seeking a descriptive language for this kind of literature we may also use the classical rhetoric that problematizes the question of silence with two main figures of thought: *praeteritio* or omission, which suggests not speaking about something in order to focus the listeners' attention on the omitted; and *aposiopesis* (*interruptio*, *praecisio*, *reticentia*) understood as a sudden halt in the middle of a sentence, a pause which breaks the statement and abandons its theme, focusing the public's attention on an unexpressed thought. This pair of rhetorical figures actualizes two modes of negative speech. *Praeteritio* would paradoxically be a figure of expressed silence that seemingly calls a spade a spade, yet in fact indicates only the inefficiency of speech that tries to express it, the overwhelming burden of what remains on the other side. It is a stream of speech so characteristic of the postmemory narratives by Polish writers, where the “verbose carapace” (Paul Connerton) indicates the unexpressed. Whereas *aposiopesis* is about becoming silent, as it breaks and removes what cannot be said to the sphere of complete silence.

This rhetorical shift in the description of literature dealing with traumatic memories would have anthropological tone: I would like to consider *praeteritio* and *aposiopesis*—following pairs like allegory and symbol or metaphor and metonymy—as an expression of philosophical assumption that rhetoric is a set of fundamental, possible answers to how a human being transposes the real.