THE TRAUMA OF HISTORY IN H. DUNMORE'S NOVEL ZENNOR IN DARKNESS

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Abstract: This paper deals with the notion of historical trauma exemplified through the analysis of Helen Dunmore's novel *Zennor in Darkness*. Dominick LaCapra's conceptualization of historical trauma as a form of "loss" in the context of large-scale tragic events serves as the foundational framework for this study. The article illuminates the causes of trauma during World War I along two distinct axes. On the one hand, the novel explores this issue through the biographical episode of the renowned English writer D. H. Lawrence, who appears as the book's character and whose anguished rejection of the war is intensified by his status as an outsider and transgressor within the Cornwall community – a position shaped by his outspoken anti-war convictions and fiercely independent spirit. On the other hand, fictional characters in the novel provide access to the traumatic on a mass scale, exhibiting grief, fear, paranoia and suspicion of anything foreign or strange, as well suicidal tendencies.

Keywords: historical trauma, loss, escape, pessimism, D. H. Lawrence, Cornwall

1. Introduction

Historical trauma is a comparatively recent theoretical construct, though it is unanimously recognized as a tangible psycho-social reality. It is one of the varieties of a broader notion of trauma, for which M.-L Kohlke suggests a definition that stresses

> the double temporality of traumatic consciousness, whereby the subject occupies at one and the same time, both the interminable present moment of the catastrophe which, continuously re-lived, refuses to be relegated to the past, and the post-traumatic present that seems to come after but is paradoxically coterminous […] [C]onsciousness operates simultaneously within multiple incompatible time-zones of being (30).

While this description underlines the psychological essence of trauma, Dominick LaCapra, one of the world's leading experts in trauma studies, distinguishes between structural and historical trauma. While the former is described in psychoanalytic, Lacanian terms, the latter is referred to particular events with more or less contingent historical causes. LaCapra elucidates this difference: "Without conceiving of it as a binary opposition, I am pointing to the significance, even the relative strength, of the distinction between absence and loss" (47). He understands absence as the Lacanian "lack" characteristic of *structural* trauma, which makes the victims *act out*, that is, *relive* it, *returning* to the past; while "loss" is the inherent quality of *historical* trauma, which is *relieved* in *working through* the past. In other words, structural trauma is caused by damage of some systemic inequity (discriminating cultural norms, policies, and institutional practices), and historical trauma is a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations caused by groups' or community's traumatic experiences of slavery, genocide, forced displacement, war, etc. While structural trauma usually reinforces social injustice, historical trauma influences present-day experiences through public narratives, and can lead to distress or resilience.

Helen Dunmore's novel *Zennor in Darkness* (1993), like a number of her other oeuvres, elaborates on the thematic domain of experiencing the trauma of history – World War I in particular. This issue is presented through the perspective of D. H. Lawrence, the famous early 20th-century British author. An episode from his biography is chosen by H. Dunmore to show the very conception of trauma through the interaction between the subject and history. Lawrence travelled more widely than most other novelists of his time, and this fact allows for a broader outlook on the events of history. When seeking refuge to engage in his creative activities and transferring himself and his German wife Frieda to Cornwall, Lawrence was faced with the brutal situation: he was regarded as a German spy by the police and eventually evicted from Cornwall. This experience turned out to be traumatic for the writer and was later reworked into the famous "Nightmare" chapter of his novel *Kangaroo* (1923). Besides, the trauma of history is also presented through a collective image of the local community in Zennor. Examining these two axes of the traumatic, the article will argue that mass consciousness is susceptible to global changes to the extent which often exceeds reasonable boundaries, and that arbitrary victimization, mass paranoia expressed through over-suspicious and irrational behaviour, and war mentality are the triggers of historical trauma.

2. An artist and war

With the world's dramas and tragedies, the historical science that records them keeps a straight face for the reasons of objectivity, statistics, generalizations and categorizations. Psychology and sociology focus on the processes of diagnosis, treatment and adaptation. And fiction personalizes these experiences, employs emotionally coloured imagery and tonal shifts, making us peep into the very "cauldron" where the trauma is conceived, evoking empathy. As K. Krockel points out,

> [the reader] bears witness to the author as a survivor of history. Reading literature as testimony is modelled on the practice of psychiatric therapy between doctor and patient: the relationship between author and reader is one of empathy which sets boundaries upon the range of interpretation of the text and discourages the tendency to impose a moral critique upon the author (153).

Contemporary British fiction has increasingly embraced a narrative strategy where historical figures – often poets, novelists, or painters – are woven into the fabric of fictional works, not as subjects of fictionalized biographies, but as protagonists or significant characters within a broader literary narrative. This approach is seen in works like Pat Barker's *Regeneratio*n trilogy, which features real-life figures such as psychoanalyst W. H. Rivers (1864–1922), and war poets Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) and Robert Graves (1895–1985). It creates a unique interplay between historical authenticity and imaginative storytelling. The principle of poetic essentiality characteristic of novels that blend history and biography "demands a creative use of evidence" (Schabert 6). This trend reflects an extensive cultural fascination with reimagining the past, blurring the lines between fact and fiction, and exploring the psychological and ethical dimensions of historical figures in fictional contexts.

Helen Dunmore, an accomplished British novelist, poet, short story writer, and author of children's books, was born in 1952 in Beverley, a historic market town in Yorkshire, England. Dunmore's life was shaped by the arts, which she pursued through both her creative output and her teaching career. Dunmore graduated from Nottingham High School for girls, an institution known for its rigorous academic environment. At the University of York, where she studied English, she became exposed to a rich and diverse literary culture, which nurtured her interest in writing. In the early 1970s, Dunmore moved to Finland, where she taught English as a foreign language. Upon returning to the UK, she taught literature and creative writing courses for many years. Her novels, such as *Zennor*

in Darkness (1993), which won the McKitterick Prize, and *The Siege* (2001), a finalist for the Orange Prize and the Whitbread Novel Award, weaved historical and psychological narratives. Her work often explores themes of memory, loss, war, and human resilience, reflecting her ability to connect personal experiences with broader historical and social contexts. Tragically, Helen Dunmore was diagnosed with cancer, and she passed away in 2017, at the age of 64.

The theme of the First World War, which had the most crippling and devastating impact on the whole generation, is in the focus of *Zennor in Darkness*. Dunmore explores the modernist world perception which was definitely shaped by the beginning of the war and encapsulated bitter pessimism paradoxically combined with the desire to escape from metropolis – ugly, rotten, corrupted – to the idyllic environment such as Cornwall, a kind of coveted nook for refuge. This pessimism, shared by other novelists, poets and artists of the time, characterized Lawrence's mindset, too, which he expressed in his letter to Mark Gertler in February 1916: "no prospect of the war's ever ending, and not a ghost of a hope that people will ever want sincere work from any artist" (Lawrence 531). Indeed, artists and writers recreated their pessimistic moods into numerous other pastimes: drinking, promiscuity, and bohemian exploits. Lawrence, in his turn, chose escape. He was persistently voicing his dream of Rananim, a community of kindred spirits of the selected few who would inhabit some remote place on the outskirts of civilization. This utopian project was never implemented, and Lawrence was about to settle down in Cornwall, the place of breathtaking grandeur and beauty.

Describing her novel *Zennor in Darkness*, Dunmore admits: "This was also my first researched novel, set in the First World War and dealing with the period when D. H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda lived in Zennor in Cornwall, and came under suspicion as German spies" (Helen Dunmore Biography). Dunmore's association with Cornwall rests on her life connections with it: a family home in St Ives and fictional settings based on this place, including two novels – *Zennor in Darkness* and *The Lie* (2012). The region is so picturesque and rich in history and numerous fascinating stories (about pirates, sirens, fishermen, and King Arthur), that it could not but attract writers at different times. Such diverse authors as Daphne Du Maurier, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, William Golding, D. M. Thomas and many others were bewitched by the Cornish landscape and its captivating legends.

Zennor in Darkness deals with the period from 1916 to 1917 during which Lawrence and Frieda rented a cottage on a clifftop on the Cornish coast. A dramatic episode connected with their stay in Cornwall is a

hallmark in their biography, and consequently, in the novel. “Lawrence always fascinated me,” Dunmore explains. “I’ve read pretty much everything he’s written. He’s like Updike in a way: that ability to just put things down, so that they’re so present you can walk around it’” (quoted in: Crown). “We know the bare bones of what happened”, Dunmore continues,

> but what was it like for him and Frieda in this landscape? The details intrigued me: Lawrence creating a garden, growing things like salsify, getting in tons of manure. He knew how to do practical things – the ironing, the washing – and his combination of day-to-day good sense and the life of the mind fascinated me. I felt there were some interesting things about that particular period and about what turned him against England (quoted in: Crown).

Dunmore did good research into D. H. Lawrence’s biography, which is demanding work, because Lawrence is hard to grasp and be arranged into a comprehensive profile. His response to their arrival in Cornwall on 30 December 1915 (in the letters to J. B. Pinker and Katherine Mansfield in 1916) was: “Outside England”, “far off from the world” (Lawrence 494, 499). Shortly before this date, Lawrence’s novel *The Rainbow* had been banned and actually burned. Below is an excerpt from *Zennor in Darkness* written in the free indirect discourse mode from Lawrence’s perspective:

> He earns his living by his writing, and it has shrunk close to nothing since his novel was seized by the police in November 1915 and prosecuted for obscenity. The book is shameful, say reviewers and prosecution. It is a thing which creeps and crawls. It dishonours the lofty sacrifices of our soldiers (Dunmore 17).

Lawrence felt totally destitute and bereaved. In his desire for escape, he looked to Cornwall as the best place of retreat where he could do his favourite gardening and write the next book in peace. Not intending initially to stay longer than two months, he, however, was absolutely overtaken by the outlandish beauty of the Cornish peninsula and decided to settle there. The Lawrences moved further westward along the coast to Higher Tregerthen, Zennor, and rented a small cottage there. Life began to flow in the most idyllic form at first. Writing to J. M. Murry and Katherine Mansfield on 5 March 1916, he felt he had found “the best place to live in which we shall find in England” (Lawrence 570). While the setting looked idyllic, his experience of the wartime was

extremely trying. Philip Payton pointed out that "England's relentless war machine felt increasingly west", making Cornwall "a vicious maritime battleground" (10). It destroyed Lawrence's Rananim: "But it's not enough any more […] to hide away from the war in the hollow of an empty landscape. There aren't any empty landscapes, though you think there are when you first arrive, full of pure naïvety and hope" (Dunmore 102).

The war had its dire toll even in that remotest corner and even on one of the most pacifist men of the time. While in Cornwall, Lawrence was summoned for medical examination and was declared completely unfit for service. However, the real nightmare began afterwards: because the couple had a lot of very different visitors and because once they sang German songs with their curtain slightly open, the police arrived, bringing many officers to carry out an inquiry. The Lawrences evidently failed in complying with a whole range of prohibitions: not to show a light, not to tar their chimney, not to have "curtains of different colours hanging in the same window" (Dunmore 102). The German language itself was a general prohibition, even in the form of folk songs. Besides, "they must not try out Hebridean lullabies in case the outlandish sounds are taken for coded German. A block of salt in a bag may be a spy's camera" (Dunmore 102). The military police were "tumbling over themselves to produce reports, to magnify gossip, to lurk shamelessly under windows and garden walls. They are ridiculous, really..." (Dunmore 102).

Later the Lawrences returned from town to find their cottage searched, papers missing and an order following shortly afterwards to leave Cornwall within three days:

> If the cottage ever had that virginity of lostness and secrecy which Lawrence once thought it possessed, it is gone now. The red floor is printed over with clumsy bootmarks from yesterday's search. The searchers did not care what traces they left. They wanted the Lawrences to know that their lives had been stripped bare and pawed over. Drawers have been pulled open, small belongings tipped out and searched. Letters and manuscripts have been taken (Dunmore 236).

Jane Costin reassesses Lawrence's expulsion from Cornwall as "a deeply traumatic event that had a profound and enduring effect on his subsequent life and work, a disruption that is an important, but often overlooked, legacy of his time there" (148). Lawrence did experience the acute sense of loss, which is the defining feature of historical trauma. It

was the loss of home, of community ties, of the way of life that used to be fitting for an artistic consciousness.

Dunmore portrays Lawrence both as a bearer and an interpreter of historical trauma: "And now we need more enemies. Even the Germans are not enough any more. So many men are gone, so many are wounded. So many have their minds and spirits destroyed" (Dunmore 95).

Lawrence emerges as a figure navigating suspicion and hostility within the Cornish community. The narrative not only reimagines Lawrence's personal plight but also positions him as an acute observer of the collective anxieties and wounds inflicted by war. He simultaneously represents the concept of traveling as a way of establishing ties with "one's own soul" and his religion of non-conformity with the war-waging machine, which ultimately makes him a transgressor. Lawrence in the novel analyses the war machine speaking about his conscripted Cornish friend, John William:

> 'He is joined to a machine. He is not free to act as a man any longer. He is part of a machine of colossal stupidity. And I think your cousin knew it. […] It would have been easier for him if he had been able to sink into a state of mindlessness and forget that he was a man with a soul of his own for which he was responsible.' […] The war has fooled England's soul out of her.' (Dunmore 203)

Dunmore enters Lawrence's mind in a way, speaking in his voice, presenting him and his writing as a recorded testimony of the inception of historical trauma. Lawrence's pacifism, individualism, anti-militarism, critical outlook, and non-conformity are vividly expressed throughout his fictional discourse. His presence in the novel is inclusive and meaningful for understanding the modernist sentiments towards war.

3. War and collective trauma

Being faithful to biographical facts, the novel, however, it is not only about the Lawrences' two-year stay in Zennor. There are two parallel plots: while one is related to Lawrence and Frieda, the other intertwines the life of the couple with the agonized, war-mangled consciousness of the Cornish citizens whose sons left for the WW I fronts with most of them never to return. This illustrates a more concrete and profound loss experienced on a mass scale. Helen Dunmore vividly depicts the pervasive phenomenon of conscripted soldiers leaving their homes for the first time in their lives to face the battlefields. Dunmore commented on this in her interview: "we are shaped by that, we are the product"

(LBF 2014). This laconic sentence defines historical trauma in a very precise and succinct wording.

Cornwall was the place from which thousands of young men were sent to the front lines of the First World War, and more than 6,300 of the 350,000 population were killed. Characters in the novel, such as Clare Coyne, her father Francis, and her cousin John William, a soldier on leave from the war deeply scarred by his experiences, exemplify the notion of historical trauma and embody the personal, familial, and communal dimensions of it. Through their stories, Dunmore illuminates the pervasive and enduring impact of war, not only on those who directly experienced it but also on their families and communities, thus offering a nuanced portrayal of trauma's ripple effects across generations and social fabrics.

The traumatized soldier's character serves as the narrative's most visceral representation of personal war trauma. His time on leave in his hometown underscores the dissonance between the front lines and civilian life, a common experience for World War I soldiers. Symptoms of shell shock – such as nightmares, hypervigilance, and emotional detachment – render him a stranger in his own community. "'I can't sleep,' he says. His eyes are suddenly empty of life" (Dunmore 79). His trauma is not only a product of physical danger but also of moral injury, stemming from the horrors he has witnessed or participated in: "He is lost to her. He is a thousand miles away, hearing the guns, seeing the ring of faces round him and knowing their chances" (Dunmore 84). By depicting John William's inner turmoil, the narrative personalizes the psychological cost of war, moving beyond historical records to imagine the lived reality of a soldier's suffering: "He stares out at the horizon. 'You don't get anything like this in the trenches'" (Dunmore 81).

Though Clare and John William enjoy a passionate period of romance and intimacy, it is very brief and ends with Clare's pregnancy, John William's return to the front and his subsequent breakdown and suicide: "Surely he shot himself because he could not get the noise of the guns out of his head" (Dunmore 234). This individual tragedy is intensified by the mass character of losses: practically every family had someone off at war, waiting anxiously for any news, reading the lists of casualties in the papers. The constant arrival of telegrams announcing deaths, provoking anxiety for the loved ones at the front, and the visible scars on returning soldiers create a backdrop of collective mourning and helplessness. Francis mourns the loss of the pre-war world – "Every day starts wrong for him" (Dunmore 148) – and the emotional toll on his family, where women are left to manage disrupted households. Clare grapples with fear for her cousin's safety and guilt over her relative

security. These personal struggles illustrate how trauma permeates the psyche beyond the battlefield, affecting those who remain at home:

> There is no language to describe the world she lives in now, where lists of thousands of dead are published in the newspapers each morning as routinely as the small advertisements. She reads the newspaper. Not in *The Times*, but in Grandad's *Daily Mail* there are stories of heroic mothers who give up eight sons, or ten sons, to conscription. Stories of families who have eighteen adult males fighting at the front – sons, cousins, husbands. And all we have is John William (Dunmore 93).

It is worthwhile to point out the personification of war, which cuts the distance between the events in history as something abstract and personal lives. This is a force out of our control, the war that "wants to crush him, he knows that" (Dunmore 100).

> But since conscription the trains had been going north and east heavily laden with boys off fishing-boats and farms and shops. It's taken a long time for the war to get down to them, but it has managed it at last. The war's long fingers can winkle a boy out of a lonely cottage on Bodmin Moor just as easily as it can pluck one out of the Manchester mills (Dunmore 62).

The imaginary scenes and episodes serve to divest the war of any glory. Deaths of fine young men, the hope and pride of the nation, are mentioned as the effect on the lives of the living, and they are heart-wrenching. The female characters shrivel to nothingness, to the figures of eternal mourning and grief. The most progressive-minded characters begin to perceive heroism and patriotism in the Great War very differently from the image commonly held by the general public.

> And Kitchie doesn't speak alone. As their footsteps clip along the pavement to Clare's door, he is joined by innumerable, swelling voices. The air is thick with them. The war is not going well. After three years it is bloated and invalidish. And each month it grows trickier to handle. Generals shift and scramble and make stratagems and bury their mistakes (Dunmore 95).

John William is a reverberation of the "red badge of courage", a leitmotif of the equalizing quality of any war where blood is interpreted as a signifier referring to exceptional selflessness, courage and heroism, no matter how it was spilled. There is an exemplary episode featuring

the conversation between Clare and Lawrence about John William's death, in which we can clearly see the distinction between the structural and historical trauma, with the former constantly returning to the past and reliving it, and the latter working through it. The first part of the quotation – Lawrence's fictional words – refers to structural trauma: "'I wrote once,' he says slowly. 'It was to another woman… […] Her brother was killed. I wrote to her that I would rather put out my eyes than stand as a witness to this deliberate horror. And I believed it" (Dunmore 202). And the second part alludes to historical trauma: "But now I would not put out my eyes. I need them to look on other things – flowers, and beasts, and a little hut in the mountains. So I set myself to *keep separate*…'" (Dunmore 202). In the same vein, the following quotation can be broken into two parts as well: 1) "'He [John William] was sick to his soul too, though there wasn't any wound to see' […] 'Perhaps that's what is coming – a time when men will go clean out of their minds'" (Dunmore 203). 2) "'Except a man who can sit apart in his own soul and watch the foxgloves come out'" (Dunmore 203). This dichotomy points to a form of healing the trauma of history.

Clare Coyne who practices painting whenever she can and is quite a talented beginner artist, develops a friendship with Lawrence and Frieda despite all talk of the town. Her acceptance of the alien, strange couple, who evoke distrust, suspicion and even hatred in many members of the community, is a mark of a more open and liberal type of consciousness, more advanced and modernist than the conventional minds of a provincial community.

> He is extreme. He is half mad. He is doing himself no good, and he makes enemies everywhere. If only he would keep quiet. Who is he to preach and lecture to us? Can't he understand how people take it? (Dunmore 100).

4. Conclusion

Dunmore succeeds in getting into mass consciousness and pins down the very raw sentiment that prevailed in England during the war years: extreme anxiety, fear, depression, suspiciousness, desperation, apprehension and mistrust – all constituents leading to a prolonged historical trauma. This creates empathy and affect in understanding historical trauma LaCapra spoke of. The world of the novel appears to be larger than the "real" world, because the text contains those truths with which the real world has lost touch. It is worth reiterating that Dunmore's words – "we are shaped by that, we are the product" – are indicative of the way mass consciousness functions, capturing the foundations of historical trauma.

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ТРАВМА ИСТОРИИ В РОМАНЕ Х. ДАНМОР *ЗЕННОР ВО ТЬЕМЕ*

В данной статье рассматривается понятие исторической травмы, проиллюстрированное на примере анализа романа Хелен Данмор «Зеннор во тьме». Концептуализация исторической травмы Домиником Лакапра как формы «утраты» в контексте масштабных трагических событий служит основополагающей базой для данного исследования. Статья освещает причины травмы во время Первой мировой войны по двум различным осям. С одной стороны, в романе исследуется эта проблема через биографический эпизод известного английского писателя Д. Г. Лоуренса, который появляется как персонаж книги и чье болезненное неприятие войны усиливается его статусом аутсайдера и нарушителя в сообществе Корнуолла – позиция, сформированная его откровенными антивоенными убеждениями и ярким независимым характером. С другой стороны, вымышленные персонажи в романе обеспечивают доступ к травматическому в массовом масштабе, демонстрируя горе, страх,

паранойю и подозрение ко всему иностранному или чужому, а также суицидальные наклонности.

Ключевые слова: историческая травма, потеря, убежище, пессимизм, Д.Г. Лоуренс, Корнуолл.