

## Means of Representation of Traumatic Experience in Trauma Fiction and Vladas Kalvaitis' *Sustiprinto režimo barakas*

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### Abstract:

*Trauma fiction is now known as a literary genre. Literary texts on traumatic experience share many techniques and means of representation of trauma that are considered to be characteristic to the genre of trauma fiction. The article describes some of the most common techniques and means of representation of trauma and tries to discuss whether Vladas Kalvaitis, a Lithuanian poet and writer, uses them in his novel Sustiprinto režimo barakas (2011) to convey traumatic experience in Siberia successfully. The paper comes to a conclusion that thematically Sustiprinto režimo barakas by Vladas Kalvaitis could be seen as a trauma novel. However, the author almost does not employ the literary techniques that are very common in trauma fiction. Probably the author wants to show that the narrator has overcome his trauma, since he tells his story about the events that took place fifty years ago. However, sometimes it seems that not everything is told. In other words, there are gaps in the content of the novel that make the reader wonder whether the narrator has actually come to terms with his traumatic past and is able to speak about it. The inability to speak about traumatic past is typical to trauma narratives.*

**Key words:** trauma fiction, trauma theory, literary techniques in trauma fiction, representation of traumatic experience

### Instead of Introduction

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead claims that the term “trauma fiction” suggests a paradox: a traumatic event or

memories about the traumatic event haunt an individual but resist representation at the same time (Whitehead 2011, 3). The author raises the question of how then fiction can tell about traumas and thus suggests that it is possible to do so in different ways through the relationship between fiction and trauma (Whitehead 2011, 3). According to Whitehead, trauma theory and a new interest in it have provided writers with possibilities and ways to understand traumatic experience and search for ways to represent it (Whitehead 2011, 3). *Sustiprinto režimo barakas* (2011) by Vladas Kalvaitis (b. 1929), a Lithuanian poet and writer, is a novel based on the author's experiences from the time he was deported to Siberia (during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania) to spend five years in a forced labour camp. The paper discusses the techniques and means of representation of trauma that the author employs or does not employ in his novel to convey traumatic experience. The paper provides some information about the development of trauma fiction and briefly describes the techniques first.

## **Trauma and Fiction**

In *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead expresses an idea that fiction has changed because of its clash with trauma or has been influenced by it, since writers have started using imitation of certain symptoms to represent traumas (Whitehead 2011, 3). Some of such means of imitation are repetition, fragmentation and a lack of chronology. It is also interesting to note that trauma fiction is related to post-modern and postcolonial literatures and borrows certain means of representation from them (Whitehead 2011, 3). In fact, "trauma theory can prove to be useful in analyzing and understanding colonial traumas such as forced migration, sexual, racial and political violence, dispossession, segregation, genocide, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma, to mention but some" (Herrero and

Baelo-Allue 2011, xvii). In addition, the understanding of trauma theory is very much related to the relationship between experience and event (Whitehead 2011, 5). The introduction of *Trauma Fiction* maintains that “[t]rauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities” (Whitehead 2011, 5). If trauma is not fully experienced when it happens, it does not stay in the ownership of the traumatised and cannot be described at any time; it haunts the traumatised as a memory that is repeated again and thus trauma is experienced later than at the instance of the traumatic event (Whitehead 2011, 5). Moreover, Cathy Caruth thinks that trauma symbolises a deep history crisis, since “[t]he traumatized [...] carry an impossible history within them, or they themselves become the symptoms of the history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth 1995, 5). As Whitehouse puts it, this history crisis is reflected via “the broken narratives and disruptive lives which have emerged out of the debris of recent traumatic events” (Whitehead 2011, 5). As in the real world, traumatic stories in fiction become fragmented, since writers try to imitate reality to convey trauma in a realistic way.

“Historically, a post-traumatic mood makes sense as an aftershock of the great catastrophes of mid-century, the Great Depression and the Second World War” (Farrell 1998, 2). In Lithuania, it could be the period after WWII, including deportations to Siberia that took place till 1953 and consequences of such deportations. Kirby Farrell states that traumatic events damage people and traumatise them, but the majority of such people are able to cope with their traumas and recover (Farrell 1998, 3). On the other hand, a delayed side effect, accumulated stress, is common to the traumatised (Farrell 1998, 3). What is more, it reflects a collective experience because it affects people’s values, their understanding of meaning and causes the haunting feeling of the possibility of death (Farrell 1998, 3). What is also important and should be taken into account is that “events are not

inherently traumatic, since the effect of trauma depends on the socio-cultural context of the society affected and, for an event or situation to acquire the dimension of trauma, it must have destabilized the structures of meaning of a collectivity” (Herrero and Baelo-Allue 2011, xiii). Stef Craps also argues that unlike deconstructivist and post-structuralist approaches, “trauma theory confidently announced itself as an essential apparatus for understanding ‘the real world’ and even as a potential means for changing it for the better” (Craps 2010, 52). In addition, it provides us with a unique “access to history” (Craps 2010, 52). Caruth has expressed a similar idea in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, in which she states that “[i]n a catastrophic age [...] trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (Caruth 1995, 11). In other words, trauma fiction helps to access the past and experience it through reading.

As far as the definition of “trauma” is concerned, there are many different ones. For instance, Kirby Farrell defines trauma as an injury and notes that the term comes from a Greek word that means “wound” (Farrell 1998, 5). Allan Young, an anthropologist, agrees with this definition and adds that till 19th century it was related only to physical injuries, but later psychological traumas were added to the definition (Young 1995, 6). Craps argues that “while the meaning of trauma shifted from a physical to a psychic wound in the late nineteenth century, the concept continued to be thought of in terms of a single devastating blow, as acute stab that breaks the individual’s protective shield, causing serious damage” (Craps 2010, 54). In addition to this, even “current trauma discourse has difficulty recognizing that it is not just singular and extraordinary events but also ‘normal’, everyday humiliations and abuses that can act as traumatic stressors” (Craps 2010, 56). Arthur G. Neal, a sociologist, claims that the “concept of trauma is applied primarily to extraordinary experiences in the personal lives of individuals” and “involves an

element of shock”, while “the most severe personal traumas grow out of abrupt changes in the quality of social relationships” (Neal 2005, 3). Danutė Gailienė, for instance, speaks of repressive shock caused by the Soviet invasion to Lithuania in 1940, because due to its unexpectedness, it was shocking and frightening, since it was easier to crush people if they were frightened (Gailienė 2008, 82-83). She indicates the following causes of fear related to the Soviet occupation in Lithuania: arrests at night, domiciliary visits, news about missing people (Gailienė 2008, 83). This was followed by separation of men from their families and deportations, while in 1941, massive massacre of Jews near their ghettos started (Gailienė 2008, 83). Therefore, trauma can be seen not only as a psychological concept, but also as “a culturally-transmitted marker of communal history and experience” (Johnson 2004, 2). Similarly, Craps states that “trauma is rooted in a particular historical and geographical context” (Craps 2010, 53). Thus, definitions of trauma are not only “culturally specific” (Craps 2010, 54), but also very broad and may differ depending on the context.

## **Trauma Literature/Fiction**

Laurie Vickroy thinks that “[t]rauma texts are a kind of testimonial literary history, a means of recovering cultural memories and traditions of groups often neglected or suppressed by mainstream culture” (Vickroy 2002, 172). Vickroy also claims that “[t]estimonial literature (‘testimonio’) has been particularly effective for politically or socially marginalized people who have not traditionally had access to public discourse” (Vickroy 2002, 172). It has “had a huge impact on twentieth-century culture in preserving personal recollections of collective catastrophes” and concerning not only individuals but also “the individual as representative of a social class or group” (Vickroy 2002, 5, 172). Survivor memoirs and

autobiographies fall into this category (Vickroy 2002, 5, 9).

Vickroy, meanwhile, expands on trauma fiction by saying that

In the last twenty years, an array of fictional works on traumatic experience and its representation have appeared. The narrative approaches in many of these works are informed by theorizing and testimony of the Holocaust, Vietnam, and incest, as well as postcolonial analyses of the psychic costs of colonization and racism. Contemporary writers in this mode include Toni Morrison, Marguerite Duras, Larry Heinemann, Jamaica Kincaid, Pat Barker, Dorothy Allison, and Edwidge Danticat, among others. (Vickroy 2002, 2)

Susana Vega-Gonzalez, when discussing one of Danticat's works, notes that the "passing on of [...] forgotten stories, giving them a voice in the novel's discourse, is the only hope for eternity and remembrance" (Vega-Gonzalez 2004, 17). This is how now not only trauma fiction, but also trauma literature in general works.

Cristina Demaria and Macdonald Daly state that "new textual forms and textual genres [...] are emerging" to represent traumatic experiences (Demaria and Daly 2009, 11). In addition to "novels, autobiographies, pseudo-autobiographies, collections of testimonies and life stories, historical essays in fictional format, fiction in historical format, and their different mixing and intertwining," other new hybrid forms such as "autofiction", 'otobiographie', 'autography', 'confession' or 'remembrance'" have appeared (Demaria and Daly 2009, 16). As far as novels on trauma are concerned, Sonia Baelo-Allue distinguishes two types of trauma novels: "psychic trauma novels that capture the effect of suffering on the mind of the individual and cultural trauma novels that focus on the social and cultural consequences of the events" (Baelo-Allue 2012, 64). However, despite the variety of texts on traumatic experience, different textual genres share many techniques and means of representattion of traumas with each other.

## **Literary Techniques and Means of Representation in Trauma Fiction**

Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allue claim that “[t]rauma fiction has made use of experimental forms often used in some postcolonial narratives as a vehicle for communicating the unreality of trauma, while remaining faithful to the facts of history” (Herrero and Baelo-Allue 2011, xv). Baelo-Allue is more precise in her article on 9/11 novels in which she argues that “Psychic trauma is anti-narrative since victims cannot put into words what happened to them. Thus, some writers sought ways to represent the experience [...] through experimental literary techniques and the introduction of images to capture the horror of the traumatic experience without simplifying it” (Baelo-Allue 2012, 66). Baelo-Allue also argues that the “literary techniques that tend to recur in trauma narratives mirror, at a formal level, the effects of trauma and include intertextuality, repetition and fragmentation” (Baelo-Allue 2012, 69). Barbara Arizti agrees with Baelo-Allue and emphasises that “[r]epetition concerning language, imagery or plot is one of the most common strategies for translating trauma into narrative” (Arizti 2011, 177). Baelo-Allue, meanwhile, thinks that “[i]mages play an important role in the trauma process and in its representation in trauma novels” in general “since traumatised individuals are possessed by images” (Baelo-Allue 2012, 71-72). Whitehead expresses the same idea by saying that literature/fiction “mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression”, while repetition may “act as a form of binding, which allows the reader to connect one textual moment to another in terms of similarity or substitution and so make sense of the narrative” (Whitehead 2011, 86, 125). Another textual strategy of trauma narratives is fragmentary memories or fragmentary narratives themselves (Arizti 2011, 178). As Arizti puts it, “they generate a

tension between remembering and forgetting characteristic of trauma narratives” (Arizti 2011, 178). Other features are incoherence, flashbacks, and digressions or “events in parallel”, while topographic features may include “[d]ashes and suspension points” (Arizti 2011, 179). Vickroy identifies some of the above techniques and adds some others by saying that “[w]riters have created a number of narrative strategies to represent conflicted or incomplete relation to memory, including textual gaps (both in the page layout and content,) repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states” (Vickroy 2002, 29). She gives an example of works by Morrison, Kincaid, and Duras who “employ repetitive sentence structures and re-create fixed ideas for their traumatized characters particularly when they lose connection with others” (Vickroy 2002, 30). In addition, “[r]epresentation and narrative are linked to what is said and what is not said; in other words, what is repressed” (Lopez Sanchez 2010, 46). It is a very important aspect of trauma fiction as well. Lopez Sanchez has summarised this importance in the following way: “The word that is not there [...] may have more power than the word that is there. When the sentence contains a gap that the reader needs to fill up with the meaning, it is the missing word, the gap itself, which calls our attention by becoming present in its absence, by placing all our scrutiny onto the excess in the frame of reference” (Lopez Sanchez 2010, 47). Thus, there is a great variety of techniques and means of representation of traumatic experience that authors of trauma fiction use to convey trauma.

### **Means of Representation of Traumatic Experience in Vladas Kalvaitis' *Sustiprinto režimo barakas***

*Sustiprinto režimo barakas* by Vladas Kalvaitis is a novel about Vladas', who is the protagonist and the main narrator, experience in forced labour camps in Siberia. The account is



given after fifty years since his return from deportation. The author of the novel himself was deported to Siberia, therefore, his novel is based on his own experience and the protagonist is given the author's name. However, it is not a conventional novel. It consists of novellas and also includes fourteen letters (to Vladas' grandmother) and poems, for example, "Ta naktį" ("That Night").

As mentioned above, it is usually difficult to write about traumatic experience that is "often theorized as unspeakable, as an experience that cannot be funny and cohesively recounted or reduced to language and narrative" (Fofana Ibrahim 2009, 260), and the experience of deportation is considered to be traumatic in many ways. First of all, deportees are displaced from their homeland. Then the "boundaries of their bodies are violated" (Sheffer 2010, 151) while travelling in cattle cars. At the same time or as soon as they arrive at camps they lose all or most of their personal belongings (e.g. Vladas is forced to exchange his father's good expensive coat into some rag and bread that later turns out to be not bread but only a carton full of paper, cotton and cloth (Kalvaitis 2011, 13-15)). The deportees live in poor conditions, do hard labour (e.g. work in mines), suffer from cold, hunger (e.g. Vladas lost 20 kilograms of his weight and weighted only 38 kilograms and 800 grams after some time in the camp (Kalvaitis 2011, 37)) and sexual, psychological and physical violence used by fellow deportees, guards or officers of the camps. In addition, the feeling of close death is always in the air. The narrator tells how he wakes up at night because he feels drops of some liquid falling from above of the bunk bed he is sleeping in. It turns out to be blood of the person who has just been killed by a fellow prisoner while sleeping on the upper bunk. Thus, these and other experiences can be seen as affecting the narrator and other deportees and being traumatic.

Descriptions in the novel are very detailed and wordy, which is not common to trauma narratives, since traumatic

memory resists language and representation. The novel retains a linear narrative — from the time Vladas arrives at the camp till he is allowed to leave although (imaginary) letters to his grandmother interrupt the narrative. However, it does not seem that the letters, in which Vladas describes his life from birth till deportation, create fragmentariness in the narrative of the novel. They could rather be seen as flashbacks and memories of his pretty happy days before the deportation. On the other hand, after traumatic events the traumatised start dividing their lives into “before” and “after” (Neal 2005, 12). This division is revealed through the use of the regular font for the narrative about the camp experience and *italics* for the letters about the life before the camp. Only on page 242 the two narrative lines merge into one.

What is also important in trauma fiction is the layout of the text. Some authors choose to create images with the help of text layout, for instance, in some 9/11 novels, while others create textual and/or content gaps (Vickroy 2002, 29). As far as *Sustiprinto režimo barakas* is concerned, there are a lot cases when a half, less than a half page or full blank pages without text are left. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that the author wants to represent gaps in traumatic memory that are typical in trauma narratives although it could also be the case. A more plausible explanation would be the editor's choice to put every novella, poem or letter on a new page, while the gap on page 379 could simply be an editing mistake. In addition, in some novellas, for instance, in “Juodoji Pirštinė” (“Black Glove”), sentences are in **bold** font but it does not seem that this is meaningful in any way. It is difficult to say whether it is so because of the lack of proofreading on the part of the editor or it is an intentional author's play with the text.

Shifting viewpoints or multiple narrators is one more characteristic of trauma fiction. In *Sustiprinto režimo barakas*, there is one main narrator Vladas, who was seventeen years old when when he was deported to Siberia and released at the age

of twenty two. Fifty years after the release he tells about his experiences. However, a part of the story in "Egzekucija" ("Execution") (Kalvaitis 2011, 71-77) is told from the point of view of a man who is being beaten because he has been accused of stealing bread, novella "PPPPPPPPPPPP" (Kalvaitis 2011, 89-95) is narrated by Piotras Pavlovičius Pliakovas, a former professor, while "Natis" (Kalvaitis 2011, 96-100) from the point of view of Natis, a dog. The rest of the novel (435 pages long) is told by above mentioned Vadas, thus the characteristic of multiple narrators in trauma literature applies to *Sustiprinto režimo barakas* only to some extent, since more than ninety-five per cent of the novel is narrated from the point of view of the main narrator. The reader can also experience that the narrator quite often switches from "I" to "we." Thus, the use of the former focuses on individual experiences of Vadas, while the latter one on the collective ones.

Vadas very often focuses not on his own experiences but rather on life in the barracks, descriptions of deportees and experiences of other deportees. For instance, the traumatised often have nightmares related to their traumatic experiences. Such dreams tend to repeat themselves and thus haunt the victims. The one who has such nightmares is not Vadas, the main narrator, but one other deportee does and thus is decried. Novella "Kibiras spagečių" ("Bucket of spaghetti") (Kalvaitis 2011, 346-350) tells about Ovanesas who is afraid to sleep because as soon as he falls asleep, he sees an old man who has big red eyes and short fat hands. The man spits cold and ice and says that he loves Ovanesas, and Ovanesas will always be with him. Ovanesas thinks he has these dreams because he has not had enough food for five hours. If he got three loaves of bread or a bucket of porridge, his dreams would disappear. It is evident that Ovanesas suffers from hunger trauma, and thus Vadas decides to help him overcome it by earning a bucket of spaghetti. Eating a full bucket of spaghetti helps for some time but later Ovanesas

starts having nightmares about the old man again. The old man complains that Ovanesas has cheated on him. When Ovanesas informs Vladas about it, the novella ends. Therefore, the destiny of Ovanesas is not known, but the reader probably feels that the nightmares continue till Ovanesas is released from the camp (or even continue after that) or dies. When talking with Ovanesas and discussing his nightmares Vladas does not mention any similar experiences of his own. He probably would have done so, or at least, would have thought about them and the reader would have been able to read about them if he had been experiencing something similar. On the other hand, Vladas' daydreaming about Christmas and Easter meals, such as chicken legs, chocolate tarts and cakes is described at the beginning of page 183. As a result, it may seem that the narrator does not fully open up to the reader about his past.

## Conclusions

It seems that thematically *Sustiprinto režimo barakas* by Vladas Kalvaitis could be considered as a trauma novel. However, the author hardly uses the literary techniques that are very often used in trauma fiction to represent traumatic experience. On the one hand, the narrator tells the story after fifty years since he was released from the forced labour camp. Therefore, the author probably has chosen to portray his narrator as a person for whom it has taken fifty years to establish a relationship with his traumatic past and work through his traumatic experience. In other words, the narrator may have overcome his trauma and, as a result, is able to provide a coherent narrative about his experience. As Baelo-Allue claims, “[f]or survivors to overcome their individual trauma they need to assimilate traumatic memories in their existing mental schemes and turn them into narrative memory, they need to be able to put into words what happened to them”

(Baelo-Allue 2012, 69). Maybe this is what Vladas, the narrator, does.

On the other hand, sometimes the reader feels that not everything is told. In other words, there are gaps in the content of the novel that make the reader wonder whether the narrator has actually come to terms with his traumatic past and is able to speak about it. The inability to speak about traumatic past is typical to trauma narratives. For instance, the narrator does not explain how he feels when he discovers that he has exchanged his coat into rags and a carton filled with cotton and paper. The discovery is provided at the very end of novella "Du daviniai duonos" ("Two portions of bread"), and then a new novella starts on the next page. A possible explanation could be the fact that the author has chosen a narrator who after fifty years is less emotional about his past or does not remember certain experiences. It is also important that the traumatised are often haunted by images from the past, thus it becomes easier to tell about them and provide detailed descriptions of the surroundings rather than explain the feelings.

In conclusion, the novel in question could be seen as trauma fiction and a trauma novel. Although the author almost does not employ literary techniques and means of representation of traumatic experience that are characteristic to trauma fiction, the topic of the novel is clearly that of trauma fiction, while the use of such techniques and means of representation would have helped to represent trauma more effectively. Yet it may be the authors choice to represent the traumatic experience that is not fully revealed because of the difficulty to speak about the traumatic past. Indeed, writing very often becomes a means of healing and reconciliation to some authors as well.

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