The Possible Wor(l)ds of Healing: Poetics and Politics of Repair

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> Mis juhtub meie identiteeditundega, kui kaotame kodu, tuttava keskkonna, isegi oma peegelpildi? … Sõda ei ole ainult väline häving, see killustab ka inimese. … Oli aeg, mil mu loomingus valitses toorus ja häving. Nüüd algab paranemise protsess: habras, kõhklev, nagu idu, mis pressib end läbi asfaldi. Ja see idu sisaldab juba uut versiooni minust.
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> Viktoria Berezina, Interview to Indrek Grigor[2,3]

The first special issue of *Interlitteraria*, "Trauma and Healing: Textual Witness and Narrative Restoration. Miscellanea" (Vol. 30, No. 1, 2025), explored trauma as a multidimensional phenomenon – psychological, cultural, political, and affective – tracing how it circulates through stories, bodies, and across generations. It emphasized the urgency of understanding trauma not only as an intensely personal rupture but also as a collective, socially mediated, and processed condition, highlighting the ways in which memory, witnessing, and representation shape responses to violence and loss. That discussion also underscored the need for new vocabularies as ongoing conflicts around the world, from Ukraine to Israel/Palestine to Iran, continue to upend civilian lives

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[2] From the catalogue of Viktoria Berezina's exhibition *Mürast moodustuv nägu* (21.06.–28.09.2025, 6, 8).

[3] What happens to our sense of identity when we lose our home, our familiar surroundings, even our own reflection? … War is not only external destruction; it fractures the human being from within. … There was a time of raw, honest destruction. Now begins the process of healing: fragile, hesitant, like a sprout breaking through asphalt. And within that sprout is the new version of myself. (Translation by Viktoria Berezina). Viktoria Berezina is a Ukrainian artist who lived for eight months under Russian occupation in Kherson before fleeing the war and resettling in Tartu. After the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, she wrote daily letters to Estonian gallerist Raul Oreškin, who translated and published them on his gallery's website, where they were followed by thousands of readers. Since arriving in Tartu, Berezina has held two solo exhibitions and has become an active participant in both Estonian and diaspora Ukrainian cultural life.

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and challenge established frameworks for defining and representing trauma. As such, the study of trauma necessitates critical revision and reconceptualization, along with attentiveness to its cultural embeddedness, political context, and affective, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions.

Building on this foundation, the present issue – *Trauma and Healing: The Possible Wor(l)ds of Repair* – shifts the focus from trauma as rupture to healing as an ongoing, situated, and creative process. While the first issue emphasized the persistence and relational dynamics of traumatic experience, this volume extends that conversation by exploring how practices of repair take shape across narrative, relational, and imaginative registers. Exploring the concept of narrative imagination, Hanna Meretoja emphasizes that narratives not only represent past worlds but actively shape what can be thought, felt, and enacted in the present. "Narratives enlarge and diminish the spaces of possibilities in which people act, think, and reimagine the world" (2018: 2), she argues. Highlighting the unequal distribution of these possibilities, Meretoja notes that "while oppressive narrative identities are imposed on some, others are encouraged to imagine ways to best fulfill their creative potential. The most vulnerable are reduced to damaging silence; the most powerful voice stories that change the world" (2018: 299). Her framework underscores that narrative labor is ethically and politically consequential, yet inherently constrained: the capacity to envision alternative futures is not equally available to all, and struggles over narrative agency are inseparable from broader structures of power and violence.

Veena Das grounds this emphasis on possibility in the fragile, everyday labor through which worlds are made and unmade after violence. Her questions, "What is it to inhabit a world? How does one make the world one's own? What is it to lose one's world?" (2007: 6) highlight that both harm and healing take shape not through dramatic events but through slow, tentative reengagement with ordinary practices, gestures, and relations. Against narratives framing recovery as transcendent or exceptional, Das shows that "life [is] recovered not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary," where "there [is]…a mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary" (2007: 7). This attachment of the event to the everyday, "as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it" (2007: 1), reveals how catastrophic violence unsettles the very criteria through which ordinary life is lived. Das describes this disruption as a "failure of the grammar of the ordinary," an experience of "world-annihilating violence" in which basic forms of sense-making break down (2007: 8). Yet it is precisely within this fractured ordinariness that the slow work of repair takes place: in the tentative, fragile gestures through which individuals begin to re-inhabit a world that has been undone.

Rather than treating healing as resolution or a return to a prior state, the contributions assembled here highlight repair as iterative labor, a process continually negotiated through form, affect, and communal engagement. The articles focus on literary works, including fiction, autobiographical novels, and poetry, alongside oral, archival, and digital sources, such as oral histories, letters, diaries, family tales, collective histories, and video blogs, to trace how individuals and communities negotiate memory, reconfigure embodied experience, and generate ethical and imaginative possibilities following disruption. In the context of different narrative, relational, and imaginative practices explored, healing is neither straightforward nor universal. It unfolds in ways that can be reparative, experimental, or at times illusory, shaped by the ethical, social, and political contexts in which it occurred. Healing is never a neutral or purely therapeutic process of moving on; it is always also a politically charged construction. The "worlds" of healing are not given but made, shaped by socio-cultural and political contexts, and by linguistic architectures created through poetics: the specific narrative strategies, genres, temporalities, and forms that authors choose to articulate their pain. Through iterative engagement with the past, attentive witnessing, and the creation of relational and imaginative frameworks, individuals and communities negotiate memory, sustain connection, and imagine alternative futures. Stories, whether in the form of oral testimony, life writing, poetic or experimental texts, or material artifacts, mediate this work, providing structures for meaning-making while also revealing the limits, contradictions, and complexities of repair. By attending to the poetics and politics of repair, this volume extends the conversation initiated in the first issue, highlighting that trauma and healing are closely intertwined: understanding one requires attention to the practices, ethics, and aesthetics through which attempts at the other are enacted. This volume foregrounds the ongoing labor of narrative as a vital means of negotiating, surviving, and remaking worlds after rupture, whether through authentic repair or through illusory, coerced, or performative forms of reconstruction.

The iterative and sometimes contested nature of narrative repair reflects a broader challenge emphasized by trauma scholars: experiences of rupture that exceed ordinary frameworks of meaning are inherently difficult to narrate, resisting simple representation or closure. Caruth's notion of belatedness – "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located" (1996: 8) – captures this paradox: trauma is known only through its repeated return, its haunting presence in symptoms and stories. Laub further emphasizes that not knowing trauma, or remembering it dissociatively, is not a passive shutdown of perception or memory: rather, it is an active, persistent, and often violent refusal – an erasure and destruction

of form and representation (Caruth and Laub 2014: 59–60). At the same time, within the field of cultural analysis, trauma studies has been critiqued for a Eurocentric orientation: the focus has often been excessively on the impossibility, insufficiency, or even undesirability of verbal and narrative representation, privileging literary, modernist, or "antinarrative" forms while leaving little room for orally or non-verbally mediated "vernacular languages of trauma" (Bennett and Kennedy 2003: 10–11, see also Kaplan 2005, Schaffer and Smith 2004). Such approaches situate trauma within intersecting narratives of colonialism, migration, and systemic violence, providing a broader and more inclusive framework for understanding narrative repair. Among others, Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory expands the field beyond these limitations by demonstrating how memories enter into productive dialogue across communities and media, creating "new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice" and illuminating the public sphere as "a malleable discursive space in which groups…come into being through their dialogical interactions with others" (Rothberg 2009: 5). By highlighting the productive interplay of memories across communities, Rothberg's framework reinforces the ethical and relational dimensions of moral repair, showing how justice and recognition can be pursued collectively as well as individually.

Scholarly work on the experience of the Gulag and Stalinist repressions has also highlighted the limits of standard trauma paradigms in contexts shaped by state violence, surveillance, and collective repression. Researchers emphasize the need for frameworks that are attentive to the cultural and historical specificity of such experiences and the ways they are mediated through self-representational formats, archives, and collective memory (Gheith 2007; Merridale 2010; Tumarkin 2011; Saramo and Savolainen, eds., 2023). Literature and essayistic interventions provide crucial avenues for exploring these dynamics. In her recent *The Same River, Twice: Putin's War on Women* (2025), Sofi Oksanen examines sexual violence as "one of the world's oldest weapons, because it is cheap, effective, and traumatizes for generations without need for logistics, technical maintenance, or modernization … [it] traumatizes and disintegrates the bonds of entire communities and families for generations, and it can create deep changes in a region's demographic structure" (2025: 22, 44). Oksanen shows how persistent and often stigmatized forms of violence, especially sexualized violence, are systematically overlooked in international security and justice frameworks, making them easier to repeat and more difficult for the international public and institutions to document, process, and prosecute. As she writes, "One form of justice is listening to victims and giving them visibility" (2025: 35), yet such recognition is rarely extended to

victims of sexual violence, whose suffering seldom enters public memory. By foregrounding this structural erasure, Oksanen highlights that trauma, its recognition, and its repair are inextricably linked to the social, political, and ethical conditions that determine whose suffering is acknowledged, whose stories are heard, and whose wounds become part of public memory. Her intervention highlights not only the generational impact of such violence but also the profound failures of justice that shape the possibilities – and limits – of healing.

Alongside healing, repair emerges as an equally crucial and distinct framework for understanding responses to trauma – one that foregrounds justice, accountability, and the rebuilding of moral relations. Oksanen's emphasis on the social and political invisibility of sexual violence resonates with Margaret Urban Walker's definition of repair as an ethical and political category rather than a purely therapeutic one. Walker notes that victims' needs are "varied and complex," yet consistently require "reassurance, safety, recognition of suffering, and appropriate placement of blame" (2006: 18), demands that cannot be met without structures of justice capable of acknowledging the harm. For Walker, "moral repair is the task of restoring or stabilizing – and in some cases creating – the basic elements that sustain human beings in a recognizably moral relationship" (2006: 23). Understood this way, repair is inseparable from justice: it requires naming the wrong, assigning responsibility, and materially or symbolically restructuring relationships to re-establish trust, hope, and moral agency. Read alongside Oksanen's critique of the structural erasure surrounding sexualized violence, this perspective underscores that trauma, healing, and repair are not merely personal or emotional processes but are deeply embedded in political and ethical contexts that determine whose suffering is recognized, whose stories count, and whose claims to justice are realized.

These critiques are directly relevant to this special issue's focus on healing and repair. If trauma resists closure, healing cannot be conceived as a seamless return to wholeness, but rather as an ongoing negotiation of meaning within fractured temporalities and contested cultural scripts. In this light, narrative becomes a crucial site of work: a medium through which survivors engage disruption, articulate ethical claims, and reconfigure relations to self and world. This issue takes up that challenge by examining how narrative practices, often fragmented, recursive, or multimodal, can function as reparative interventions without erasing complexity or perpetuating harm.

While Meretoja and Das illuminate the ethical, political, and everyday conditions in which possibilities are constrained or reconstituted, Meg Jensen shifts attention to the narrative strategies through which survivors actively renegotiate their experiences and meanings. It is within this framework that

her work offers a particularly productive lens for understanding how post-traumatic storytelling operates. As Jensen argues, for many survivors of trauma, "creative forms of telling may better serve the needs of those who are looking for a way to live in the present rather than searching for the truth of the past" (2019: 18). Through metaphoric, representative, or otherwise refracted narratives, past experiences become "tangible, shareable stories" (2019: 18) rather than undated, intrusive memories; such storytelling can both create a record of events and enable an emotional distancing that supports recognition, justice, meaning-making, and sometimes also healing. Across a wide range of writers and witnesses, this work is carried out through specific rhetorical strategies that enable survivors to shape their experiences rather than simply report them. Building on this insight, Jensen's theoretical account further clarifies why narrative matters in the aftermath of trauma. Drawing on neuroscientific research, she argues that traumatic experience disrupts cognitive and biochemical integration, and that narrative practices, often fragmented, reticent, or metafictional, mirror posttraumatic cognition while enabling survivors to negotiate memory and reconfigure embodied experience. Her notion of "negotiated truth," understood as a "narrative negotiation" and a "negotiation with the truth rather than its documentation" (2019: 3), highlights narrative as an ethical practice in which meaning is actively shaped rather than recovered. Jensen's emphasis on strategy, ethics, and relationality thus offers a key entry point for understanding narrative labor as a reparative process that aligns with the broader frameworks of healing and moral repair developed earlier in the introduction.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks provide a conceptual backdrop for the volume, highlighting key questions and concerns around healing and repair. Drawing on a variety of frameworks and methods, the articles included in this issue explore how these processes are negotiated within specific narrative, political, and affective contexts. The volume opens by situating readers in the immediacy of ongoing crises, foregrounding the urgency of trauma and its mediation, and highlighting how, across different media and positions of witnessing, narratives both shape and are shaped by the violent conditions of their productionin which they are produced. Yulia Kurnyshova and Andrey Makarychev's "Fake Healing and Popular Biopolitics: (Pro)Russian Narratives in the Occupied Mariupol" examines the biopolitical manipulation of care in the context of occupation. Through a visual analysis of pro-Russian video blogs produced in Mariupol, the authors demonstrate how propaganda utilizes the language of healing and restoration to consolidate ideological control. Their article highlights how trauma can be co-opted, revealing the dangers of simulated healing as a tool of power. Iryna

Koval-Fuchylo's "Why I Record Interviews with Ukrainian Refugees: An Attempt at Autoethnography" shifts the focus from propagandistic simulations of care to the practice of authentic witnessing. Drawing on participatory observation among Ukrainian refugees, her article highlights the ethical and psychological significance of storytelling under conditions of displacement. The interviews she conducts reveal how narrating one's experience can offer relief, foster self-understanding, and sustain the fragile resilience of everyday life amid ongoing uncertainty. Koval-Fuchylo's contribution foregrounds the dialogic and relational dimensions of narrative labor, emphasizing the ethical responsibility borne by the listener, recorder, or interlocutor. Paul Longley Arthur's "Paper Life: Nadia Olijnyk's Notebooks" extends this exploration into the material realm. By attending to the physicality of handwritten notebooks of his grandmother, Nadia Olijnyk, a Ukrainian postwar refugee who settled in Adelaide, Arthur underscores how memory and trauma can be preserved and transmitted across generations. The notebooks act as vessels of endurance and intergenerational custodianship, highlighting the affective and archival dimensions of narrative repair.

The second section examines the afterlives and transmissions of trauma across time and space, tracing how experiences of violence persist, transform, and are inherited across generations.

Together, these contributions explore imaginative reconstruction, archival memory, and diasporic negotiation as interconnected modes through which the past continues to shape present identities and possibilities for healing. Maryam Adjam's "The Poetics of Postmemory: The Afterlife of Memory in the Wake of a War and a Flight" explores the postmemories of third-generation Estonian refugees in Sweden, tracing how family tales of displacement are transmitted and reshaped across generations. Central to her analysis is the concept of afterness, which captures the lingering presence of past events in memory and imagination. Adjam shows how postmemories inhabit the space between fact and fantasy, requiring imaginative work to interweave fragmented traces into meaningful narratives while bearing witness to history. Giedrė Šmitienė's ""I'm not one of those strong people." Traumatic Experiences in Gulag Letters" highlights the relational and ethical dimensions of correspondence as a medium of survival. Drawing on over 550 letters from Lithuanian women detained in Stalinist prison camps, the article shows how the network of communication preserves both the immediacy of suffering and the social ties that sustain resilience, demonstrating that trauma and its management are deeply relational practices. Martin Nõmm's "Acceptance, Healing, and Reflective Nostalgia in the Works of Elin Toona and Agate Nesaule" examines Estonian and Latvian exile literature, showing how narratives of displacement,

loss, and in-betweenness are mediated through reflective nostalgia. This form of ethical and affective repair enables individuals and communities to acknowledge past traumas without seeking to reverse them, offering pathways for reconciliation, meaning-making, and the sustenance of diaspora identity.

Finally, the volume turns to the intersections of form, embodiment, and literary innovation as sites where repair is enacted. The contributions in this section explore how aesthetic strategies, narrative experimentation, and embodied writing practices can mediate trauma, foster ethical reflection, and open new possibilities for healing. By attending to the materiality of language, the body's expressive capacities, and inventive literary forms, these articles highlight the ways in which form itself can serve as a vehicle for ethical and affective labor in the aftermath of rupture. Gabriella Graceffo's "Somatic Syntax: Ban en Banlieue, Filmic Prose, and the Representation of Trauma" examines how Bhanu Kapil's fragmented, intermedial writing resists linear narrative forms that too easily aestheticize violence. Graceffo shows how Kapil develops a somatic, image-driven syntax that conveys the embodied experience of trauma while challenging the ethical limits of representing harm. Marianne Lind's "Poetics of Trauma in Olga Ravn's My Work: Towards Matricentric Writing" interrogates how postpartum trauma shapes voice and narrative temporality. Attending to fragmentation, repetition, and the emergence of maternal subjectivity, Lind shows how My Work enacts a careful poetics of repair grounded in embodied experience. Rebekka Lotman's "Estonian Elegy: Forms of Mourning in Contemporary Poetry" concludes the section with an exploration of poetic responses to bereavement in twenty-first-century Estonian literature. Proposing a fourfold typology of mourning poetics, Lotman shows how recent elegiac works transform individual grief into broader reflections on memory, cultural identity, and the unsettled work of mourning. Together, these contributions trace a continuum from the political and mediated manipulation of trauma, through relational and intergenerational memory practices, to the aesthetic and embodied enactments of healing. They exemplify the multiplicity of narrative labor, showing how storytelling through media, interviews, letters, and literary form structures, mediates, and transforms experiences of traumatic injury. Across the issue, healing emerges not as a teleological endpoint but as a dynamic, contested, and situated practice. Whether through ideological critique, oral testimony, archival preservation, experimental poetics, or lyric mourning, the articles illuminate the manifold ways narrative mediates the work of repair. Healing is presented as an ongoing negotiation between past and present, self and other, memory and imagination, through which individuals and communities attempt to remake their worlds after rupture. Narratives – oral, written, visual, material – do not merely

record events but also actively reshape memory, selfhood, and relationality. They open spaces for empathy and ethical engagement while acknowledging the fragility and contestation inherent in repair. In this sense, the poetics and politics of healing demand sustained critical attention, not as a promise of closure, but as a framework for understanding how storytelling and imaginative engagement continually generate new possibilities for ethical connection and repair.

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