

“The Scar Will Always Be There”: The Post-Soviet Melancholia in Gundega Repše’s Novel *Conjuring Iron*¹

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Abstract: The article discusses the cultural and narratological aspects of melancholic understanding of history in postmodern Latvian fiction. The first part of the study offers a brief overview of Latvian fiction of the 1990s and early 2000s with a special attention to the interrelated questions of history, trauma, and representation. The second part shifts from cultural contextualization to defining melancholic temporality and highlighting narrative ways of expressing it in fiction which addresses trauma, collective and individual, from a post-traumatic place in time. The third part analyzes the indirect and disjointed engagement with Soviet occupation in Gundega Repše’s novel *Conjuring Iron* (2011). This is done by focusing on the poetics of unnarrated as a sign of prolonged mourning and by thinking about the epistemology of a fragment.

Keywords: postmodernism; trauma; melancholia; narrative; Gundega Repše

The Question of History

The traumatic experiences of the 20th century, associated mostly with the Second World War, the following years of Soviet occupation and its aftermath, have become an important subject matter in contemporary Latvian fiction. It is exemplified by the historical novels series titled “We. Latvia, 20th Century” (2014–2018). The novels in the series were written by thirteen authors, and they embrace all the major historical changes starting from the 1905 Russian Revolution and ending with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the difficult transition to capitalism. Before this project renewed the lost splendor of historical fiction, many Latvian writers were indulging in postmodernist poetics, partly, to problematize the traditional realist desire to conjure “the virtual reality of make-believe” (Ryan 1997: 168). It was achieved by thematizing the fictionality of literature (Berelis 1989; Ozoliņš 1991; Vēveris

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1995; Bankovskis 1997; Zelmenis 1999). There were also authors of older generation who described the experience of Soviet deportations (Liepa 1990; Vanaga 1991) but their novels were considered to be based on the illusion that realism can express deeply traumatic events (Berelis 1999: 304) and were thus stimulating postmodern-oriented writers to question the idea of history as something that could be represented directly. Collective traumas, in more creative fiction, entered the realm of melancholia which was supported by the inclination towards the irrational and the poetic.

It is not surprising that some of the more traditional postmodern practices might be lacking in the situation when multiple cultural processes, which had much longer time to develop in the West, in Eastern Europe are happening "at an accelerated tempo, in big leaps forward and breakthroughs" (Kvietkauskas 2011: 1). In the case of Latvian fiction, what is absent is historiographic metafiction which "challenges hegemonic cultural discourses by re-contextualizing them and offering alternative versions thus foregrounding epistemological and ethical questions involved in writing history" (Nünning 2004: 359). This type of postmodern fiction was not developed in Latvia despite the fact that many writers, during the 1990s and early 2000s, were fascinated with non-linear sequencing and intertextuality which are crucial elements of historiographic metafiction. (Consider D. M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel* (1981) which follows Frau Anna G, an imagined patient of Sigmund Freud, and consists of letters, erotic poetry, case history of a patient, and two chapters on Babi Yar massacre. The novel represents trauma not just on the level of events described; it embodies it in the fragmented structure (see Lougy 1991).) What differentiates Latvian fiction from postmodern recontextualizations of history is the tendency to subjugate postmodern techniques to the examination "of fiction itself" and "of language use in relation to human intentionality" (Elias 2016: 293) instead of delving into historical plotlines. History in the fiction of the 1990s is, rather, confronted from a contemporary perspective than patiently stretched out. History can appear to be summed up in a definitive statement, which is not something that the reader arrives at after working through the structure of the discourse, but which already exists as a truth in the words of the narrator. Gundega Repše's fiction, as I will show, illustrates this quite clearly. But, first, it is necessary to understand the aesthetic context of her approach.

Latvian fiction of the 1990s, overall, is characterized by such well-known postmodern features as "self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, fragmentation, indeterminacy, intertextuality, parody, the dissolution of character and narrative instance, the erasure of boundaries – especially between high and low, but also between

genres – and the de-stabilization of the reader” (D’haen 2013: 272). The often perplexing use of these postmodern strategies allowed a writer to refuse the role of a public leader who would lecture readers about their social responsibilities, as it happened during the Soviet times. Similar tendencies can be seen also in Lithuanian fiction of the 1990s with its emphasis on grotesque and ironic representation of previously forbidden themes: sex, ideology, and violence (Gūtmane 2019: 315). However, the connection between postmodern narrative methods and the possibility of working through or acting out cultural traumas is especially weak in the works of that time. The chief interpreter of Latvian postmodern fiction, Guntis Berelis, claimed that the main response it generated among readers and critics was “What is this particular text and does it have anything to do with literature?” (Berelis 2001: 29). He seems to suggest that postmodernism in Latvian fiction, for the most part, entailed transgressive themes and self-reflexive narration and that it had very little to do with questioning the traditional historiographic dichotomy between past and present as ontologically distinct time dimensions. (One exception is Repše’s short story collection “Seven Tales About Love” (1992) in which characters and narrators inhabit heterogenous temporalities.) The potential of putting history out of joint has been attributed not just to Anglo-American postmodern fiction (Hutcheon 2003) but also, more recently, to Russian novels of the 1990s and early 2000s (see Marsh 2007; Etkind 2013; Noordenbos 2016). Alexander Etkind and Boris Noordenbos have applied trauma theory to analyzing the ethical, rhetorical and temporal facets of experimental narratives, although both scholars risk interpreting literature as just a symptom of collective trauma.

The relationship between contemporary Latvian fiction and the history of the 20th century as a subject matter, which tests the limits of representation, began to change after 2011 when Gundega Repše, an extremely polemic writer, claimed that Latvian culture has not come to terms with the nation’s painful past. In her introduction to a collection of stories zooming in on the 20th century, written by twelve authors, she urged Latvian writers to bravely address history in order to disturb the cultural phenomenon she calls “the comfortable present” (Repše 2011b: 6). Since Repše is a writer and not a theorist, she did not specify what this assignment, which ultimately led to her curation of the novels series “We. Latvia, 20th Century”, might imply in terms of narrative form. The idea of heterogenous time is present in her refusal to forget the past. Simultaneously, Repše is throwing shade at the Latvian fiction of the 1990s which, for her, epitomizes self-loathing modesty compared to the ambitious and challenging historical novels of Sofi Oksanen and Herta Müller (Repše 2011b: 6). The critique of self-reflexivity as defining postmodernism (see also Nollendorfs 2011: 9) risks to overlook the fact that postmodern fiction provides

the means for deconstructing preconceived notions of time and helps to understand the uncanny entanglement between cultural and individual aspects of trauma. Interestingly enough, Repše's novel *Conjuring Iron* (2011) illustrates that disruptive narrative strategies, notably discontinuity, fragmentation and indeterminacy, enable the prolongation of mourning which in postmodern fiction is meant to offer "a more vital relationship to a loss" (Clewell 2009: 4). Before the publication of the first contemporary novels on Nazi and Soviet occupation of Latvia (see, among others, Zālīte 2013; Ābele 2014; Bērziņš 2015; Ikstena 2015; Gaile 2016; Repše 2016; Ābele 2017; Zālīte 2018; Gaile 2019), the melancholic way of addressing traumatic history had its place in Latvian prose. Lately it has lost its relevance along with the introspective focus of the 1990s, and a more realistic, outward-looking and plot driven fiction has come about. What interests me in this article, is how history is addressed before this turn.

The Melancholic Narrative

To understand the meaning of melancholia for the post-Soviet literature it is essential to acknowledge the historical material that a writer contemplates. Tony Judt has famously stated that in Eastern Europe "there is too much memory". Whereas Western Europeans concentrate on the years 1940–44/45 as an exceptionally traumatic period, "the Eastern Europeans have multiple analogous reference points: 1918–21, 1938, 1939, 1941, 1944, 1945–8, 1956 and now 1989. Each of these moments in time means something different, and nearly always something contentious and tragic to a different nation or ethnic group, or also to succeeding generations within the same group" (Judt 2002: 172). Dealing with history full of heavy crimes, or returning to just one of them, can involve narrative related processes that signify the presence of trauma. Inherent to trauma is the belated engagement with history and the upsetting of linear and progressive time in affective and uncanny encounters with the past. Traumatic temporality facilitates cross-temporal co-implication between different subjects (Caruth 2016: 15) and, by stressing the rupture in experience, questions the understanding of history as straightforwardly referential.

This model of trauma, outlined by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey H. Hartman characterizes trauma as unrepresentable in language. Literary trauma theory of the 21st century goes beyond this notion and studies "the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater considerations of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience" (Balaev 2014: 3). Repše's novel *Conjuring Iron*, however, is closer to the ambiguous referentiality of postmodern representations of trauma than to sincere and realistic fiction

which externalizes the traumatic kernel in a coherent narrative. When signposts of split experience, co-implication and ineffability are spread throughout the text without leading to a consoling “synthesis of the heterogenous” (Ricoeur 1984: 64), the narrative can be labeled as melancholic. On a theoretical level, melancholic narrative encourages to reconcile the early and the recent trends in literary trauma theory by conceptualizing the ambiguous referentiality not just as a limit of representation but also as a form of agency.

It is beyond the scope of this article to reconstruct the history of melancholia and mourning, its counterpart, as concepts in psychoanalysis. At the same time, there is a psychoanalytically articulated temporality, “that reaches language in narrativity,” to use Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of temporality as the structure of existence and narrativity as “the language that has temporality as its ultimate referent” (Ricoeur 2002: 35). In the aftermath of the atrocities of the 20th century, melancholia and mourning have become the paradigmatic reactions to a traumatic loss. They relate to the non-linear temporality of trauma in a sense that mourning is more about distinguishing the past from the present by comparing memory of the lost object with actual reality, while melancholia constructs them as inseparable. In other words, melancholia is the prolongation and deepening of mourning. Despite the difference, the processes of mourning (working through) and melancholia (acting out) does not form a dichotomy but should be viewed as “interacting processes” (LaCapra 2014: 144). Moreover, melancholia, depending on the context and function of a narrative, may be necessary or inevitable. It is interesting to notice that Sigmund Freud developed his views on melancholia and mourning during and right after the First World War and that since then others have continued to look at periods of cultural crisis as causing melancholia (see, for example, Kristeva 1992, Derrida and Roudinesco 2004; Etkind 2013).

Freud’s initial take was that melancholia is a pathological deviation from mourning because in it “the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged” (Freud 2001a: 245). It is the present as a smooth transition from past to future that is sacrificed in the melancholic subject’s identification with the lost other. Later, in “The Ego and the Id” (1923), Freud changed his original conception of melancholia and mourning and claimed that identification with the other is at the center of the formation of the self and that both processes are interactive. Tammy Clewell summarizes this positive turnaround in Freud’s theory: “It is only by internalizing the lost other through the work of bereaved identification, Freud now claims, that one becomes subject in the first place” (Clewell 2004: 61). Repše’s fiction explores the link between melancholia and cultural crisis. Typical to Repše’s novels is the disillusionment with Latvian politics which, in the minds of her haunted narrators, have betrayed the spirit

of The 1991 Barricades. This event is depicted as something pure and original, albeit the following years of "nostalgic tea parties" (Repše 1996: 76) is a poor imitation. In Repše's fiction, the post-Soviet situation functions as a strange double of Soviet occupation: both historical systems are willing to ignore past injustices.

Ever since Freud used the example of Torquato Tasso's epic poem "Jerusalem Delivered" (1581) to explain the recurrence of repressed experience (Freud 2001b: 22), scholars have privileged literature in understanding the mechanism of trauma. Cathy Caruth claims there exists an epistemological kinship between psychoanalysis and literature because both discourses are "interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (Caruth 2016: 3). Hence a psychoanalytically inspired reading deals with gaps, ellipsis, blind spots, contradictions, silences and other tropes that can signify trauma. At times they are accompanied by metaphors of ruptured experience that can be deciphered only partially because their narcissistic character simultaneously discloses and conceals history as if testing whether the reader or the narratee will recognize the dialectic of events that might have caused the suffering. Narcissism here refers to a poetic strategy of keeping secret "a detailed tracing of the distance traversed" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 42) between the traumatic event (or events) and the moment of telling. In such cases, events are combined in some virtual category which presents trauma as an unquestionable truth. The lack of dialogic relations supports narcissistic clinging to trauma (LaCapra 2014: 61). As it happens in Repše's novel *Conjuring Iron* where the narrator defines Soviet occupation as "a scar over the heart, a scar that cannot be erased by cosmic surgery. And it does not have to be erased. Because the scar will always be there, even if, again and again, it will be forbidden to remember it" (Repše 2011a: 96). Note that the narrator does not specify where to find this traumatized heart, and yet other emotional statements in the novel suggest that it is located in the tormented body of Latvian nation (see Repše 2011a: 16) where it reaches the level of cultural trauma. In this short fragment Repše uses metaphorical reduction of historical time to preserve the presence of trauma.

Literary trauma theory has managed to show that, in the words of Dominick LaCapra, "literature and art might be read in a nonreductive ways as providing a relatively safe but at times risky haven for exploring the problems such as the manifold modulations of acting out (or compulsively repeating) and to some extent working over and through trauma and its symptoms" (Lacapra 2013: 27). Nonetheless, it is still very important to test out narratological tools for analyzing how the experience of trauma finds its language and how it orients narrative towards the prolongation of mourning and enacts particular ethics.

Trauma Beyond Story

Repše's novel *Conjuring Iron*, in terms of form, exemplifies the fascination with fragmentary structures, typical of Latvian postmodern prose. The novel begins with a short story, hectic and functioning rather as an introduction to the following part, an interpretative dictionary that compiles scattered opinions and experiences of the novel's first narrator, Raina, and it ends with a set of conversations between the second, unnamed, narrator and characters who share bits of information about Raina before she went to exile in France. The second narrator, apparently, is working on a biography of Raina. Neither of these forms externalize Raina's trauma in a coherent narrative. In this respect, *Conjuring Iron* requires interpretation that carefully sorts "out the relations between split or rupture, place of first encounter, repetition and subject," to borrow Geoffrey H. Hartman's principle (Hartman 1995: 543). However, there is a sense that this is an especially hard task since Raina treats the experience of living under Soviet occupation as unnarratable. Her engagement with it involves the melancholic processes of collapsing the distinction between present and past and turning trauma into a test for the other. The impossibility of passing the test is secured by abrupt and abstract speech which draws trauma nearer to a trans-historical and sublime absolute.

At the beginning of *Conjuring Iron* the reader encounters the reason behind Raina's melancholia. There is one episode where the narrator's understanding of recent history clashes with that of Harold, her lover, who is described as a "mysterious mix of British and French blood" (Repše 2011a: 10) and who does not share narrator's trauma, finding it completely exaggerated:

And what will you do back home? Who's waiting for us there? We'll live, just live. There are no Communists, your homeland is free. Bullshit, they crawl out like ghosts, shadows, a tuft of soot. Do you know that the best revenge is to live well? And what's a tuft? Stop nitpicking! Have you figured out where we'll stay? What's the real reason you want it? I abandoned my home to those cut-throats. I ran. It's not finished over there. Are you perhaps exaggerating your significance? You'll be a writer again? Perhaps under a changed name? God has given nations times and limits within which to live and search for Him. Hey, you sound holier than the Pope! But because of your dwarf Napoleon, all of Riga's suburbs were burnt down! It was not because of my Napoleon but because von Essen was a yellowbelly. But I'll miss the sun. Are you hoping that it will no longer hurt? Deal with what you have to deal with here and only then we'll go. Promise? It's a spa, not life here, so I don't want to cut open my insides yet again to just *deal*. Remember that they have no need for you. But they have the satisfaction that they've gotten rid of me! I don't want to give them that satisfaction! Forgive and forget, simply finish off that tiger. Some knight

in tiger skin! What do you expect from me? Life. Everything. And I'll give you the same. Nothing will happen to your Provence, it will remain as is for all eternity, whereas my... Again you exaggerate your own significance. No, this is the point on which we'll always disagree. Your stuck up France can't be cancelled, whereas my exhausted, self-tormented Latvia... Stop with this list of differences! (Repše 2011a: 16)

Raina is referring to Communist rule as being part of a larger historical system that could be even called quasi-transcendental. In this system, Latvia is always about to lose its freedom; the names of the oppressors does not matter. Soviet occupation is just the most recent example of this traumatizing pattern. By rejecting Harold's advice to work through the haunting past experiences, Raina guards her trauma from the dialogical process of comparing memory with actual reality and risking to diminish the intensity and truth of her pain. (To be sure, the distinction between individual and collective trauma is not so clear in Raina's statements. Further, she is willing to return home and somehow fight the lasting effects of Communist rule. Collective trauma in the space of Repše's novel can be viewed, according to Kai Erikson's definition, as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community" (quoted in Korhonen 2013: 271). It is a phenomenon that influences narrator's actions and speech.) Raina's understanding of history is grounded in the idea of structural trauma which "is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization" (LaCapra 2014: 82). The possible repetition of history (leading to new collective traumas, analogous to Soviet occupation but determined by future events) is indicated by the use of ellipsis.

To put it in narratological terms, the presence of trauma, whether it is structural, collective, individual or the complex amalgamation of the three, is expressed through the trope of the unnarrated. The unnarrated is a concept mentioned in Gerald Prince's essay "The Disnarrated" (1988) where it pertains to "all the frontal and lateral ellipses found in narrative and either explicitly underlined by the narrator [...] or inferrable from a significant lacuna in the chronology or through a retrospective filling-in" (Prince 1988: 2). Later the concept of unnarrated was picked up by Robyn R. Warhol who examined "the disnarrated, as well as its affiliated figure, the unnarrated, and the larger category to which they both belong, the unnarratable, for the ways they serve as distinctive markers of genre" (Warhol 2005: 221). Although Warhol focuses on realist fiction, her nuanced categorization of unnarratable can be easily applied to analyzing the limits of representation in postmodern takes on trauma. The only thing I would like to add here is that the unnarratability of certain traumatic events might be the case not simply because they "exceed

or transcend the expressive capacities of language” (Warhol 1994: 79), but because there is a pragmatic or moral reason for keeping the narrative short-spoken. This would mean to recognize the unnarrated not just as a reaction to an unspeakable event, but as a conscious action of retaining the force of trauma.

Such cases, although signifying trauma, exist beyond the category of supranarratable as “what can’t be told because it’s “ineffable”” (Warhol 2005: 223) and are closer to Jeniffer Bjornstad’s rendering of the paranarratable. If Warhol defines it as “what wouldn’t be told because of formal convention” (Warhol 2005: 226), Bjornstad shows that paranarratable can express also the unwillingness to fill in the blank spaces “preferring to leave out the distressing details” of traumatic events (Bjornstad 2016: 282). Two of the Raina’s phrases – “It’s a spa, not life here, so I don’t want to cut open my insides yet again to just *deal*” and “No, this is the point on which we’ll always disagree” – suggest that trauma is accessible but that the listener and the circumstances are wrong. Simultaneously, Raina states that working through trauma is not enough, which highlights her belief that communists have a haunting presence back in Latvia and that her melancholia (refusal to forget) has great political potential.

Another possible reading of the unnarratable concerns how the conversation between Raina and Harold affects the narrative moving further. Since Repše does not use reporting verbs in the quoted passage, it is difficult to tell whether Harold interrupts Raina or she wants to leave something unsaid. Considering the fiery character of their conversation, she is rather interrupted. This aspect, on the level of narrative act, suspends Raina’s trauma between the subnarratable (that which can be potentially deduced from previous references to Napoleon and communists and can thus be left out) and supranarratable (that which preserves its ineffability because those historical references do not fully explain the individual dimension of the melancholic view of the present). The conversation, not solving anything, illustrates the power of Raina’s trauma, as well as highlights the idea that the specific nature of what is unnarratable vary not only according to nation, period, audience and genre (Warhol 2005: 221) but also to the memory episteme of the one who receives a limited story.

The story behind Raina’s trauma, in the remaining pages of the novel, is constructed in an ambiguous fashion. On the one hand, prefacing her dictionary, Raina invites Harold, now the narratee, to create (not simply find) the meaning of her life in a way that could help him to better understand her current pain. This would mean that the unnarratability of Raina’s trauma was either temporary or functioning on a higher degree of indeterminacy. On the other hand, the narratee must now work through an essentially disjointed narrative:

To avoid lying too much, I went on an expedition to myself, noticing previously passed-over areas, people, events, writings, composites and cutouts of flesh that supposedly was once my own. I put together a dictionary for you. Only you can create my life for yourself, adding letter to letter, word to word, swapping them, crossing them out, correcting them, finding the appropriate synonyms, to suppress or highlight subtexts. Searching for me, creating your own language. (Repše 2011a: 27)

Almost all of the entries, either directly or indirectly, circle around the Soviet occupation. At one point, Raina defines them as "myriads of experience" (Repše 2011a: 52) which change their constellation from one act of reading to another. Some entries address Raina's trauma by means of co-implication. Consider her definition of hunger: "Every time I desire caviar or Swiss truffles, I am my mother's hunger" (Repše 2011a: 47). In this short but very telling sentence Raina cancels the distinction between past and present as irreducible time dimensions and represents the experience of Soviet deportations as being open to an uncanny repetition. The sentence also consolidates narrator's experiential reality which is not something narrated but more like hinted at. Raina's dictionary, arranged alphabetically, instead of proceeding according to a plot, has no discernible story, only multiple fragments of a non-existent totality. The very epistemology of a dictionary (offering closed off units of knowledge (Grishakova 2018)) is at odds with putting trauma into a story, which is important for the transitioning from melancholia to mourning. Some of the longer entries have the elements of a plot, but, taken as a whole, Raina's dictionary, similarly to the beginning of the novel, resists storytelling. To conclude my paper, I want to return to the ethical side of Repše's fiction.

Conclusion

As it has been argued before by Dominick LaCapra, trauma often finds its expression in experimental and non-redemptive narratives "that are trying to come to terms with trauma in a post-traumatic context" (LaCapra 2014: 179). This connection is considered to be quite natural because of the structural kinship between the shattering experience of trauma and the postmodern fascination with discontinuity, fragmentation and indeterminacy. One way of thinking about such literary works is through the concept of weak narrativity:

Weak narrativity involves, precisely, telling stories “poorly,” distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to evoke narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it; in short, having one’s cake and eating it too. (McHale 2001: 165)

Brian McHale used this concept to analyze the degrees of narrativity in avant-garde poetry. More recently, it has been referenced in Matti Hyvärinen’s take on the resistance to story in narratives that refer to something traumatic:

In addition to this weak narrativity, there is also an aspect we may arguably call ‘resistance to story and sequence.’ By ‘resistance to story’ I mean a narrative strategy which does not foreground the events of the past, or the construction of a distinct and sequentially clear storyworld, but rather one which privileges the moment of telling, the narrative discourse and reflection over all dramatic sequences of events in the past. (Hyvärinen 2012: 32)

Here I would like to add that weak narrativity or resistance to story can also have a moral and cultural agency which allows to conceptualize narratives of trauma not just simply as cultural symptoms but as active participants in the process of creating or keeping alive a deeply melancholic sense of history. This kind of strategy, exploring different negating tropes, might become valuable in situations when there is a pressure to tell the story in a clear and linear manner which would differentiate between past and present in order to simply move on. Repše’s disposition toward co-implication, non-linear sequencing and metaphorical reduction could be viewed as an intervention in memory politics. *Conjuring Iron* embodies (or rather puts in action) certain mnemonic values about what, to quote Kurt Danziger, “ought not to be or need to be remembered, how the shards of memory should fit together, which kinds of tasks memory should be expected to serve” (quoted in Brockmeier 2015: 77). However, this kind of cultural interpretation would lack precision without the analysis of particular narrative tropes that express the persistence of trauma.

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