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interview

The Spoils of an Existential Journey

An Interview with Writer Jiří Kratochvíl

To close our thematic issue on the representation of trauma in art, we asked a representative of the art of letters for a short interview. Jiří Kratochvíl (1940) is a writer of prose, a playwright and an essayist – aside from dozens of novels, novellas and short stories, he has also written many an intriguing essay on the issues of art, artists and the creative process. In this interview, we will merely touch upon a few of the ideas that he develops in his reviews, reflections and stories – ideas that he considers inspiring for both the author and the reader.

Jiří, you have told me a number of times that to produce a valuable piece of text, the author needs to suffer through it. Do you think, then, that trauma is the basis of literature? Is a traumatic experience a necessary prerequisite for a good poem or a good story?

I dare say, Zbyněk, that with literary production, this has always been the case, and it may not be otherwise. None of us born of a woman, not even the greatest poets and storytellers, from Homer to, say, García Márquez, may avoid the two primal traumas – the physical one and the metaphysical one. The former takes place when we enter life – violently and against our will – thrown out of the nurturing, prenatal sea; and the second one happens when we realize, in time, that our earthly existence is irretrievably bound up with the knowledge of our mortality. And all our experience is rooted deep in these two traumas – constantly and irreversibly. We may easily agree that this is an obvious, unquestionable fact. However, it implies that not even the great humorists or great writers creating works of ineffable peace and tranquility or those playing with semiotics and semantics – not even those are spared the two primal traumas. Moreover, these traumas are necessarily present in their work – though as if hidden behind a veil of narrative. And you may well roll on the floor with laughter while reading

Hašek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*,¹ but if you turn the narrative round a bit, if you see an episode in the book from a slightly different perspective, if you uncover that veil of deception just a little – you will find yourself wallowing in pre-death spasms.

However, let us move from these primal traumas to the so-called “secondary traumas”, only to find out – and I may as well say this beforehand – that they are nothing but clearer, better pronounced variations of those original wounds.

Writers often have a unique sensibility and a feeling for the suffering of others. As such, are they destined to take the traumas of their fellow human beings, or of a social class or perhaps the national traumas connected with certain historical events, and mold them into a work of art?

There is no doubt that Jerzy Kosinski's² novel *The Painted Bird* – a work of such deep, overwhelming force – is inspired by the author's own experience of World War Two. It is one of the best examples showing that secondary traumas, which – unlike the primal ones – may not concern all of us, are nevertheless more tormenting, stronger. There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, we may observe these traumas from a distance, we are not paralyzed by them – but at the same time, quite without our conscious knowledge, we learn a hard lesson concerning our primal traumas – which come to us in disguise. We are observers, unaware that we are looking at our own wounds. We realize this often, but only subconsciously.

How may works of art that overcome or deal with traumas be beneficial to a reader or a listener?

Jerzy Kosinski, a Polish author writing in English, the Italian author Primo Levi, and Arnošt Lustig,³ a Czech author, three very different writers who, using very different literary means descend into the inferno of World War Two in order to bring us, the readers, the great spoils of this existential journey. They offer immensely strong secondary traumas that give us a chance to experience and re-live our primal ones.

1) Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923) was a Czech novelist. His best-known novel *Dobrý voják Švejk* (*The Good Soldier Svejk*) was published in four instalments during the years 1921–1923.

2) Jerzy Kosinski (1933–1991) was a Polish-American novelist. His novel *The Painted Bird* was published in 1965.

3) Arnošt Lustig (1926–2011) was a Czech novelist. He survived the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps.

How do works of art act to open our eyes? Is literature that deals with traumatic moments somehow purifying or cathartic?

You ask me whether literature has a cathartic function, in other words, whether those “spoils”, as I like to call them, are in fact a cistern full of purifying water. Yet, in what sense can literature be purifying? And what kind of purification are we talking about here, anyway? Should it be a ritual immersion bath, like the Jewish Mikveh, or rather catharsis during confession or meditation? What sort of purity might we feel after we have experienced the assault of the secondary traumas that stem from some of the most evil and hurtful of an author’s memories?

In our country, the poet Kamil Bednář was the first to use the term “the naked human”.⁴ I shall use it as well, only in a slightly different context. A powerful experience of a literary text – or any other form of art – has the magical ability to strip us of all things external, all our social interactions and our everyday routines, and we are, for that brief moment, exposed to “original wounds”. Obviously, this exposure is not of a pleasant nature, so it is not surprising that most readers avoid such traumatizing experiences and instead choose a more conventional (and, in this sense, burnt out) reading material. However, the meaning of our existence lies in our constant awareness of these original traumas. They are our most prized knowledge and experience. Awakening these traumas over and over again – this is what we most need in life. These are deadly blows that in the end will kill us, but they are also life-giving blows, renewing our ability to live instead of just surviving. So, this is the only purification or catharsis I can imagine – staying open to our primal traumas.

In the last few decades, abreactive testimony in both literature and the fine arts has become an object of public interest – both literary and non-literary diaries are published,⁵ there are exhibitions showing photographs documenting the illnesses or the last moments of an author or his relatives,⁶ and movie documentaries often carry

4) The notion of the so-called “naked human” was first introduced by Czech poet Kamil Bednář (1912–1972) in his essay ‘Slovo k mladým’ (A Word to the Youth, 1940).

5) See e.g. the novel of contemporary Czech writer Michal Viewegh *Můj život po životě* (“My Life after Life,” 2013) describing his recovery from nearly fatal traumatic aortic rupture.

6) See e.g. the exhibition of curator Vladimír Birgus ‘Vnitřní okruh v současné české fotografii’ [The Intimate Circle in Contemporary Czech Photography] which was on view at City Gallery Prague, Municipal Library, Prague, 15 May – 18 August, 2013.

a message that is both deeply human and aesthetically valuable.⁷ How do you regard this particular type of artistic production and its publication?

Yes, there is a recent tendency in both literature and the fine arts to delve deep into the misery of human existence and to approach death. I think it is a trend that appeared quite necessarily – both literature and the fine arts have always been threatened by the possibility of becoming little more than forms of craftsmanship, to be used for aesthetic relaxation and academic analysis. As such, they would lose the ability to inflict pain. And at that moment, something seemingly barbaric needs to come on stage to elevate hurt and suffering above the aesthetic experience, exposing us to the aggression of the primal traumas, without aestheticising them. This may even go so far as to change our view of literature as a whole. This moment is commonly accompanied by a radical look backwards – in this perspective, Božena Němcová’s correspondence⁸ is elevated above her literary work, and Mácha’s diary becomes more crucial than his *Máj*.⁹

And we could invite other storytellers and artists to our table, but to proceed any further, we would need to approach the problem not just from the position of literary studies, but also from the perspectives of sociology, psychology, psychiatry, eschatology and many others.

Alright – I will save my other questions for next time. We shall meet again in a future issue of this journal. Thank you for the interview.

Zbyněk Fišer

7) See e.g. the documentary film of David Vondráček *Love in the Grave (Láska v hrobě, 2012)*.

8) Božena Němcová (1820–1862) wrote mostly short stories and novellas (e.g. *The Grandmother, 1855*).

9) Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836) is the author of the lyrical epic poem *Máj* (“May”, 1836) considered to be the most significant work of Czech Romanticism. His diaries were published many years after his death; see e.g. Pavel Pavel Vašák (ed): *Šifrovaný deník Karla Hynka Máchy* (“Coded Diary of Karel Hynek Mácha”, 2007).