

Book Review: John Zilcosky, *The Language of Trauma. War and Technology in Hoffmann, Freud, and Kafka*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2021, 174 p.

By Stefano Bellin

The concept of trauma holds a prominent position both in the Humanities and in the Behavioural Sciences. It is simultaneously invoked in a variety of contexts and contested for its fuzziness, Western/Eurocentric pedigree, and sociocultural implications. Given the wide currency that the discourse of trauma has acquired, a study that investigates the roots of the concept and its connection to language, war, and technology is a very welcome addition to the scholarship on modernity. Indeed, as Michael Rothberg writes in the preface of *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, “thinking genealogically about trauma is one essential means of opening it towards possible, alternative futures” (Rothberg 2013, xi).

John Zilcosky’s *The Language of Trauma* is a brilliant case in point. The first, more noticeable, goal of the book is to shed light on the relationship between trauma and modernity. Zilcosky focuses on the experiences of war, bombing, and early railway journeys – three phenomena that bring to the fore the violence of modern warfare and bureaucratic-mechanised work. The study concentrates on Germanophone literature, taking E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*, Sigmund Freud’s *The Uncanny*, and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* as primary examples. These close readings allow Zilcosky to historicise trauma and dissect its aporias, in particular, the difficulty of having one’s trauma recognised – a difficulty that often generates a short circuit, a trauma that grows out of the very slipperiness of trauma and the indeterminacy of its epistemological and ontological status. The second, thought-provoking, goal of the book “is to connect this medical language of trauma with the language of scepticism in romanticism and modernism, specifically, through the two discourses’ obsession with inscrutability” (p. 6). Modern science struggled to pin down the source of symptoms associated with trauma. Doctors ventured several hypotheses about the origin of somatic and psychological manifestations of trauma, such as the *vent du boulet* (“wind-of-the-cannonball”) syndrome, “railway spine”, “railway-brain”, and “molecular rearrangement” in the cerebral cortex. As Zilcosky argues, “the ‘ultramodern’ hermeneutical language of the ‘undetectable pathological-anatomical substrate’ dovetailed with the linguistic scepticism of the literature and philosophy of the period” (p.

7). Just as doctors were ultimately unable to relate the victims' symptoms to a physical source, writers and thinkers became increasingly concerned about language's capacity of representing reality. If for Nietzsche truth is nothing but "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche 1982, 46), for Kafka "the true way passes over a rope which is not stretched high up, but just above the ground. It seems to be intended more for stumbling than for crossing" (Kafka 2012, 188). Zilcosky convincingly connects the incapacity to determine the somatic source of trauma with the linguistic scepticism that characterises modernity. Hence the double meaning of the title *The Language of Trauma*: in an objective sense, as the struggle to name and describe the experience of trauma, and, in a subjective sense, as a language that emerges from trauma to lay bare its own structural limits. One of the defining features of modernity is indeed the hermeneutic crisis that affected both medical semiotics and literary texts. While the doctors who analysed the victims of modern warfare and technology were at pains to link observable symptoms to a hidden or invented physical substrate, writers struggled to find adequate words to narrate new forms of trauma. To explore this intertwined cultural crisis the three chapters of *The Language of Trauma* skilfully weave together modern discourses of medicine, psychiatry, and insurance with aesthetic concerns about the crisis of signification.

Chapter 1 zooms in on Hoffmann's close brush with death in the 1813 Battle of Dresden. The German writer was traumatised by the bombardments and by the grim spectacle of shattered heads and bodies left by the war. This experience fed into the writing of *The Sandman* (1815), a landmark text for the study of the "uncanny effect". As Zilcosky shows, "the great uncanny power of 'The Sandman' issues not only from Nathanael's childhood trauma but also from the return – at the levels of narratorial and authorial perspective – of this repressed shock of war" (p. 22). The blast that kills Nathanael's father recalls Hoffmann's own memory of war from two years earlier. The protagonist of the story develops symptoms of war trauma: psychic injuries without clear physical sources. Yet, as Zilcosky's examination of the subtext of war trauma in *The Sandman* shows, "what turns out to be the most uncanny is trauma itself": "It is always present and absent, known and unknown, on the tips of our tongues yet never spoken" (p. 40).

The second chapter turns to Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (1919) and uncovers its strong connection with the First World War. The essay contains hidden references to soldiers buried alive in the trenches, as well as to amputated bodies and traumatised soldiers but it never explicitly thematises war and its

effects. The fact that war victims remain “hidden” in the texts creates a sort of *mise-en-abîme*, an uncanny effect within the text itself. As Zilcosky shows, “*The Uncanny* stages the same ‘return of the repressed’ that it diagnoses” (p. 43) and reveals how the latent presence of shock can move from subject to subject, infecting us with the other’s trauma. Indeed, “like the war neuroses themselves, uncanniness always concerns *someone else’s* trauma, more specifically, it describes the moment in which ‘our’ perspective disappears into ‘theirs’” (p. 66).

Chapter 3 focuses on Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and on the short stories *A Country Doctor*, *A Little Woman*, and *Josefine, the Singer*, and on the traumas caused by repeated railway journeys, new forms of work that emerged with modernity, and warfare. In his reading of *The Metamorphosis*, Zilcosky shows that the *Ungeziefer* (vermin) Gregor has been turned into embodies the anxiety of indeterminacy typical of modernity, “in which even the victims do not know whether they are ill and in which simulation itself becomes the illness. Gregor’s body is modernity’s prototypical broken sign: a conglomeration of symptoms that does not refer to a clear physical cause” (p. 99-100). However, Kafka did not seek to overcome or eliminate this indeterminacy from his writings. Rather, it turned it into the kernel of his art by mimicking the uncanniness of trauma in the language, narrative, and imagery of his works.

*The Language of Trauma* builds on meticulous research and its argument about the relationship between linguistic indeterminacy and the etiological uncertainty of trauma is compelling. Each chapter demonstrates a remarkable familiarity with the authors and texts discussed, as well as with the medical, legal, and war literature related to the periods discussed. Zilcosky’s work is especially interesting for students and scholars of modern Europe, literary and cultural studies, and intellectual history. My only reservation about the book is that the close readings feel occasionally slightly pedantic and over-detailed. As a reader, I was impressed by the wealth of sources used to develop the argument, but I often found myself asking the “so what?” question when the close readings of Hoffmann, Freud, and Kafka or the contextualization of trauma were not linked to a broader reflection on the findings of this research. I understand that this might have not been within the scope of the book, but some more connections to contemporary debates of trauma and the uncanny would have further enriched this study. Once we have established the link between the indeterminacy of trauma and its literary expressions, what do we make of this connection? What are its implications for us today? What might it suggest to us regarding the future of trauma studies? How has “the language of trauma” changed over time? To what extent the analysis of “the language of

trauma” can be extended or “applied” to non-European cultures? Even though Zilcosky does not aim to fully address these questions in this study, a few more considerations in this direction would have been appreciated. In any case, *The Language of Trauma* remains an excellent contribution to the study of trauma, modern literature, and the uncanny.

### References

- Kafka, Franz. 2012. *Aphorisms*. In *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 188-209.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1982. *From “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”*. In *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann. London: Penguin, 42-47.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2013. *Preface. Beyond Tancred and Clorinda – Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects*. In *The Future of Trauma Theory. Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone. London: Routledge, xi-xviii.