4. Reconstruction, Representation and Creative Misreading

In the previous chapter we examined how social structures can feed into the recognition and creation of a traumatic experience and the means in which the traumatic works against reigning discourse, thereby creating a discourse for itself. The creation of a discourse of trauma as opposed to a theory of trauma is directly connected to the idea of rehabilitation and recasting. It aims at creating a body of text or a common world of uncommon experience.

The recasting of these experiences with due respect to the subjective integrity of the event would require a massive effort of reclaiming and reconstruction; a challenging task in any situation made more so by the fact trauma entails deep chasms of memory and experience. As discussed earlier, the traumatic refuses the mediation existing paradigms of reference, expressing itself through a self-referential, self-reflexive mode which is simultaneously universal and subjective. Located problematically between excess and absence, the trauma narrative needs to negotiate the manoeuvring of a hyperbolic reality into the abstract mundaneness of inadequate language.

In his essay “Language”, Heidegger discusses the scope of language and its influence on the idea of the human. He states as a given the idea that man is different from other living creatures because of his ability to wield language and that, “Human expression is always a presentation and a representation of the real and the unreal.” (43) There is a careful distinction placed here—the real is expressed and the unreal calls for a representation, it needs to be cast in real terms so as to gain a presence in language and expression. To use a Heideggerian construction, the unreal needs to be called into being through the representation of its difference from the real. Language acts as a bridge which invokes the spaces between expression and reification in its most basic sense.
The traumatic text involves multiple renegotiations in terms of creation and transmission. The recasting of paradigms of meaning and negotiating the terms for what it means to recount an unspeakable experience to an implied reader who can only partially relate the reflection of reality captured in the text, necessitates a transformed understanding of the narrative practice and the appropriation of memory.

4.1 Reconstructing the Traumatic Memory:

The traumatic event is an isolating experience that can cut off an individual not only from her sense of normalcy and faith in social structures but also in the more immediate scheme of perception. The recollection and representation of past ordeals into lucid relatable text involves a massive effort of memory and re-creation, and the fact that the narrative depends upon memory works against its favour. Time is programmed to rub away the keenness of any memory and render most unbelievable experiences even more fantastic. In the case of the traumatic memory this is especially problematic. Unlike everyday memory, the traumatic memory is loaded with issues of recollection and recreation. In the literary light, this is a fatal flaw indeed considering the fact that recognition, whether through mimesis or anti-mimesis, is a crucial requirement for creating a text. The nature of the physical event greatly influences the magnitude and scale of influence wrought by the traumatic encounter but also defines the strategies used for cultural coping and social intervention.

The general idea of memory characterises it as a mediating archive of experiences that act as an intermediary between past action, present existence and future possibilities. Based on this rudimentary description we generate several classifications of memory. In terms of age we have the categories of childhood, adolescent and adult. On the basis of numbers we classify memory as personal and collective or community-based. In terms of a macroscopic
temporal frame we classify memory in terms of history and personal memory. Further categories include cultural memory and of course the basic subjective memory. Psychoanalysis informs us of repressed memories, dissociated memories, false memories and screen memories.

The proliferation of categories of recall is symptomatic of modernity's obsession with the negotiation of the past, be it in terms of archival memorial or constructivist rhetoric. The surge of interest in the vagaries of memory and the creation of living sites of memory, to borrow a phrase from Pierre Nora, indicate an attempt to reclaim the past. While this is not a novel episode in intellectual history, this trend gains dimension in context of catastrophe and trauma. First, recollections of disasters need to be salvaged from the effects of the large scale coping measures discussed in the previous chapter. The legibility of these narratives is questionable simply because of the kind of erasing process from which they emerge. In the case of traumatic memories, the very idea of recall itself is problematic. The traumatic memory is not recalled as much as it reoccurs through repetitive intrusions while remaining elusive to recollection and representation. And in the case of witness text, the starting point for literatures of trauma, there exist paradigms of social and collective memories which may obscure or over-enhance the record such that it gains or loses its resonance.

In the introduction to *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (1999), Mieke Bal makes an astute distinction between the effect of repression and dissociation. She writes, "repression interrupts the flow of narratives that shape memory, dissociation splits off material which cannot then be reincorporated in the main story" (ix) Consequently, the reconstruction and assimilation of the traumatic event into mainstream narrative requires a representational negotiation that cut across these categories, thereby decentering the narrative and creating a motley universe where the usual guidelines of reason, logic and ethics are skewed.
4.1.1 Traumatic Recall: Recollecting Realities

The recall is central to the treatment of the traumatic condition both in therapeutic as well as in literary terms. In practical therapy the symptoms decide whether the patient should be assisting in forgetting or remembering the event. In some cases the temporary dulling of the causative trauma is necessary to alleviate the patient’s suffering, in others it is the retrieval of a repressed or dissociated memory that provides relief. The traumatic memory is further problematic because it is simultaneously a problem of amnesia and remembering; it is a problem of both presence and absence. PTSD and Dissociative Identity Disorder are differentiated based on these parameters. Roger Luckhurst writes,

> PTSD associates trauma with its intolerable presence in the psyche. Multiple Personality Disorder, however regarded the symptoms of dissociation and splitting as the displaced result of a trauma that remained fundamentally absent from the psyche, walled off from conscious access by a subject that splintered into various ‘alter’ personalities. (505)

The distressingly contradictory psychological characteristics of traumatic memory make it a difficult subject for representation. On the one hand the individual suffers from dissociative memory or memory blanks in relation to the traumatic event with only repetitive behavioural patterns to provide the clue. On the other hand, it manifests as uncontrollable and random re-experiencing of the traumatic event in the form of graphic flashbacks and nightmares. The individual is rendered unable to function in society simply because the memory repeats itself, haunting them at unexpected junctures. Leys writes,

> The flashback takes the form of recurring intrusive images or sensations associated with the traumatic event, or of a sudden feeling that the traumatic event is literally happening all over again. The victim feels as if he has returned to the perceptual
realities of the traumatic situation, and it has become orthodox to interpret such
flashback experiences as the literal return of the dissociated memories of the event.

(241)

At the same time they are unable to retrieve the exact cause of their distress. At times, the
neurosis manifests in physical symptoms such as motor paralysis, tics and physical pain. The
memory transforms itself into an anatomical malady which physically impedes normality
turning the body itself into a site of traumatic memory—a scenario which explains the early
misconceptions of pathological roots of traumatic neuroses. This situation is further
complicated by the fact that neurobiological theories of trauma maintain that the traumatic
memory is generally inscribed in sensory body-memory rather than in the narrative memory
characteristic of normal cognitive processing. Consequently retrieval becomes a task of some
difficulty. Judith Herman endows the therapist with the role of a witness, who records the
projection of these wordless memories so as to provide clarity and comfort to the traumatised.
She writes,

The survivor’s initial account of the event may be repetitious, stereotyped and
emotionless. One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as
‘prenarrative’. It does not develop or progress in time and it does not reveal the
storytellers feelings or interpretation of events. Another therapist describes traumatic
memory as a series of still snapshots or a silent movie; the role of therapy to provide
the music and words.

...the therapist plays the role of witness and ally, in whose presence the survivor can
speak of the unspeakable. (175)

The task of creating a lucid recollection out of the wordlessness of the traumatic
brings about a crisis in signification and a tension between remembering the event and
controlling the overwhelming effect of traumatic flashbacks. The fact that rehabilitation can only be attempted after the sharpest rub of the memory has been dulled makes the task of representation further problematic.

The immediate aim of therapy is to alleviate the psychological suffering of trauma and to reintroduce the patient into ‘normal’ life. This either involves the calming of a particularly inflamed memory from the immediate recall of the psyche or the retrieval of the lost memory such that present day symptoms can be soothed. The first case is usually used for short term remedy and rehabilitation whereas for a long-term reconciliation, the retrieval and reintegration of the traumatic memory with the conscious memory of the patient is unavoidable. The lapse of time between the temporal scheme of the traumatic event and the point of recollection further complicates this already problematic situation. Consequently, manoeuvring the traumatic memory requires a three-fold process of forgetting, partial recollection and the translation of the same into tangible signification. Ruth Leys writes,

Traumatic disorders are thus simultaneously disorders of remembering and forgetting: the traumatic “stimulus” seems to be recorded in the brain with unparalleled vividness and accuracy but, precisely because the traumatic event is ever so shattering, the memory of the trauma is radically dissociated from symbolisation, meaning and the usual process of integration. (239)

The proliferation of cinematic metaphors in the explication of traumatic recall is indicative of perceptual interpretation implicit in the process. The psychoanalytical conceptualisation of the traumatic memory, as propounded by Freud, maintained that the memory gained traumatic features at a later stage, having passed through the stage of latency, to be associated with unsavoury and uncomfortable incidents. The condensation of these distorted memories becomes the object of psychoanalytic study and interpretation. Radstone
writes, “In psychoanalytical theory... a memory becomes traumatic when it becomes associated, later with inadmissible meanings, wishes, fantasies which might include an identification with the aggressor” (17). This idea of identification brings us to one of the central tensions in the formulations of trauma theory— the discord between the mimetic and antimimetic approaches to trauma theory.

Ruth Leys studies this extensively in her genealogical study of Trauma Theory *Trauma: a Genealogy*. Leys positions the trauma debate around the idea of mimesis. She claims that the uncomfortable implications of loss of autonomy over the self, implied by the identification of the patient with the aggressor or dependency on the interpretive notions of a therapist entailed by the mimetic discourse, spawned the reaction of an antimimetic study of trauma that saw the memory as something unassimilable and uncachable, thereby making all the re-enactments of this buried memory a reaction of a dissociated mind that is cut off from total recall. In short, the mimetic theory entails a “dissociation from the self” and the antimimetic theory a “dissociation from the memory” (16). Susannah Radstone paraphrases Leys’ argument in these terms.

Ruth Leys’ genealogy of trauma links the rise of an anti-mimetic theory of trauma to the defence of an (ideological) commitment to the sovereignty and autonomy of the subject... For Ruth Leys, the ideological-political implications of the anti-mimetic tendency within early formulations of trauma theory are clear: its advantage was that it allowed the traumatic subject to be theorised as sovereign, if passive. (15)

The sovereignty of the subject has deep repercussions on the recollection and recounting of the mnemonic narrative since it calls to question the relation between the subject and the external. The mimetic theory of trauma entailed an identification of the victim with the aggressor or the rupturing event which manifests itself in repetitive patterns of
behaviour. The anti-mimetic theory, on the other hand, theorised the repetitive impulse on the presence of a hidden memory embedded in the subconscious which calls for attention through the manifestation of flashbacks and traumatic nightmares.

It is in this context that hypnosis becomes such a crucial part of the trauma equation. As mentioned in the second chapter, the use of hypnosis hoped to retrieve unconscious memories by sending the patient into a state of trance which would be more conducive to interpretive probing. The problem with this approach, as discussed earlier in connection to the Nancy-Salpetriere clash, was that it did not account for hypnotic suggestion, the most direct manifestation of the mimetic tendency. The presence of negative elements such as screen memories, false memories and mnemonic blank spots rendered the hypnosis approach a fallible cure at the most. Hypnotic suggestibility becomes an issue because it creates an environment conducive for the creation of a false memory. The mind is confounded by the hidden memory. Grasping at explanations for its lost state, it will settle for any logic, even one that is untrue. Furthermore, the idea of a supine, unconscious subject being analysed by an external, conscious therapist reeks of a mental manipulation which outrages the will. For these reasons, the mimetic understanding of trauma did not hold much attraction to the idea of an autonomous will.

The antimimetic stance went against the idea that the subject was truly unconscious of what transpires during the trance because, in the process of hypnosis, the conscious subject is aware that she is being hypnotised. She consciously lets herself enter the unconscious state there by creating a paradoxical sense of consciousness. In this construct the subject is passive but willing. However, this idea of wilfully returning to the site of the traumatic break does not account for post hypnotic forgetfulness and brings in implications of inauthenticity and artificial propagation.
The idea of will is an interesting concept in the context of traumatic memory since the re-enactment of the memory is most often involuntary and inscrutable in its manifestation. The need of psychoanalytic intervention and interpretation of inner activity is a direct analogy to the literary act which is actively involved in this project. Another shared feature is the re-enacting tendency central to the construct of trauma and its therapy. It is has been clinically observed that the abreactive re-enactment brought about visible improvement in the subject, the affective properties of which seemed to cleanse the mind of patient and bring her if nothing temporary relief. However, the generated nature of these overflows made them subject to doubt. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, sometimes the information generated from these re-enactments was only fabrications or misconceptions. Judith Herman writes sympathetically, “Because the truth is so difficult to face, survivors often vacillate in reconstructing their story.” (81) Consequently, the narration traumatic recollections have had to face the ignominy of being scrutinised in terms of child speech. To quote Mikkel-Borsh Jacobsen and Douglas Brick in their essay “Neurotica: Freud and the Seduction Theory” (1996), “…The child, like the idiot or the hypnotised person, is the unreliable witness par excellence; not because he only lies (if only!), but because without external corroboration it is as impossible to prove he is telling the truth as it is to prove the contrary.” (15)

This necessity for external proof further highlights the correlation between the internal and external worlds of the traumatised individual. The case is made unique because the authenticity of the emotional discharge remains unquestionable. It is only the source that denies identification and solidity. There is a fundamental indecision on whether the negotiation of the traumatic should rely on the accurate or the authentic.

The tension between the mimetic and anti-mimetic approaches to the traumatic memory finds a parallel in the literary world in terms of representation of reality and perception of reality. Platonic thought conceptualises the path to knowledge as a pattern of
forgetting and remembering. At birth, the transcendental Truth available in the state of pre-conception, is forgotten in the cloud of sensory distortions and the soul is shrouded in wax. Consequently the individual is born into the world with a smudged recollection of the original Ideas which remain latent in the soul. The individual’s subsequent intellectual and spiritual journey is aimed at recalling the forgotten Idea (Anne Whitehead 2009). The creation of a narrative aims at transmitting the perception of an episode of reality, observed, experienced or imagined, so as to communicate a certain facet of knowledge. Anne Whitehead writes in Memory (2009), “Central to Plato’s philosophy is that knowledge of the truth consists of remembering or recollecting the Ideas that were once seen by the soul. All knowledge is thus an act of remembering, an attempt to recollect these realities.” (17-18)

For Plato, enquiry was the means of achieving this transcendental knowledge. Constant dialogue and debate can reclaim the embedded idea thereby leading to self-realisation. Stretching this metaphor, one can surmise that the creation of a dialectical narrative with an interaction between the unrealised latent knowledge and the enquiring empirical real results in the generation of knowledge. Transposing this inference to the literary act, we conceptualise the narrative project as a recollection and transmission of an internalised truth in terms of perceived reality.

The clarity of connections begins to blur with the introduction of the idea of truth. Plato categorically rejected the idea of the ‘truth’ of literary representation as seen in his famous cave allegory. Any mimetic representation was only a fabrication of perception as opposed to the capture of transcendental truth. For Plato these representations in fact endanger truth by taking on its appearance and distracting humanity from the important task of retrieving the forgotten transcendental truth that lies embedded in their soul. While Plato perceived truth as an unchanging transcendental absolute that can only be accessed through philosophical enquiry Aristotle espoused a more empirical view. He believed that the life had
an immanent meaning or truth that was achieved through action and received through
perception. His formulation of the literary act perceived it as a means to instruct through
imitation, mimesis. The presentation of a life truth in an artistic form produces knowledge
within the audience, allowing them to access a realm of greater purpose. His philosophy of
truth was grounded on action and differed most sharply from Plato's in its handling of literary
truth. While Plato decried all literature as acts of subterfuge, Aristotle maintained that
literature was an alternate world with its own truths. In short, he introduced the concept of the
heterocosmic nature of literature.

The Aristotelian idea of truth grounded itself on the assumption that life has an inner
hidden meaning and that every action was a movement towards this goal. However modernity
has proven that some acts are decisively meaningless and cannot, rather should not, have any
inner resonance other than its own abyssal nature. Some acts simply were and had no
justification. In terms of temporality, this movement from the rhetoric of immanence to the
language of existential pragmatism is fairly recent in the history of human thought. This shift
in perspective brought with it a renewed interest in historical credibility that based itself on
factuality. Veracity was decided through fact rather than 'truth', and truth became a
contingent entity.

Paul Hamilton writes in his essay "Reconstructing Historicism",

Classical theories of truth established trans-historical ideals of transparency to which
we could only aspire. Our knowledge, measured against Platonic standards of timeless
verities is found wanting. We are similarly diminished by Aristotelian definitions of
the end of humanity and skills for realising those ends, telos and techne. Breaking
with this idealism, Machiavelli reduced truth to what was practicable. He thus
relativized his own understanding of past classics with reference to needs and
expediencies of what he took to be the good life as it could be lived in the early 1500s. (387)

This Machiavellian approach presented truth as an entity that, like fiction, needed interpretation, effectively dismantling the idea of a universal indisputable truth. Truth was now understood as subject to its contemporary frame, or in literary terms, its representation. The formulation of a contingent truth also created an opening for the idea of subjective truth and consequently dismantled the idea of a universal truth, solidifying the idea of alternate perspectives and consequently alternate worlds. In response to the loss of Absolute Truth, the focus of veracity shifted to the historical act. History became a marker for time and human existence such that its formulation was considered congruent to tracing human knowledge.

This idea has come under siege in recent years. The common platitude "history is written by the victors" holds true in the socio-political context where the dominant voice overpowers dissenting narratives in favour of perpetuating itself. It was recognised that rather than being a statistical record of human activity, history too was an interpretation of a time and a framed representation that excluded as much as it included. The presence of marginalised narratives dismantled the Absolute of history. The unearthing of the literal skeletons in the historical closet lead to formal critique of the discipline of history and truth was once again subject to doubt. As a result there was a massive mustering of memory based narratives and testimonials to corroborate or refute a dominant historical view.

The idea of Literatures of Trauma finds its genesis at this juncture. The earliest trauma texts were life-narratives of witnesses who testified to the veracity of a certain historical event, namely the Holocaust. Here there were no doubts about the cause of the trauma, what required negotiation was the recording of these experiences of extensive
suffering in a language that was not prepared for this circumstance. In a sense, language was traumatised.

The copious in flow of narratives based on experiences during the Holocaust presented a contradictory claim: the Holocaust was “unspeakable”, but they couldn’t help speaking about it. The writers and observers recognised that language and extant modes of expression are unequal to the task of capturing in fullness the truth of their experience. This however did not deter them from trying. The narratives produced from these representational attempts presents a mode of expression through non-expression and the narrative invokes the reader to imagine the unimaginable and know that it is real.

The act of narrativisation shares traits with the Platonic idea of transcendence in the sense that knowledge, or truth as it were, is never truly concretised in empirical representation, either by virtue by mnemonic erosion or because the perception itself is distorted, which is the case in context of psychological trauma. And in the latter scenario, representing the real in mimetic terms becomes impractical since the perception itself seems surreal. The problem of representing the fragmented and ultra-real nature of traumatic real challenges the narrative art to create a credible form of capture that could “realistically” portray the phenomenon. There is a crisis of legitimation which recognised that the world, or rather the perception of the world, was inevitably indeterminate.

The narrative debate on realism and the modes of constructing the image of reality has a deep significance in the context of trauma since the traumatic experience exists distorts not just present reality but also past perceptions thereby creating a crisis of reference. The modes of narrating general realities may fail in this scenario simply because in trauma, time is out of joint. The universal markers of temporality— past, present and future— are dissociated from the traumatic reality which exists in loop while the world keeps on turning. In his essay
“Whereof we can speak, thereof we must not be silent: trauma, political solipsism and war”, K.M Fierke describes the isolating and anchoring effect of a traumatic past on the present of the individual in these terms:

the individual, fixed on the experience of the past, brings this past into each present interaction. Traumatic memory or time is not the same as everyday memory or time. The linearity of the latter is disrupted. The individual continues to live, relive, remember and re-remember the trauma alongside ordinary life. The trauma is at one and the same time outside normal life, that is, it has no ‘sense’ within a meaningful community, yet becomes constitutive of a reality in which the traumatised is continually fearful of others and vigilant for the threat to occur. (477)

The re-enactment of the traumatic memory is a displacement of the linear understanding of time and a realignment of the general idea of philosophical reference. The memory exists, but it does not. It reappears, but it is not remembered. This simultaneous being and non-being creates a gap in comprehension that problematizes the mediation of language and signification best characterised by Caruth’s explication of Paul de Man’s use of the metaphor of falling, gravitation and the gap between referential understanding and mathematical empiricism. She writes,

in so far as gravitation was a concept, represented by a word—gravity—it remained philosophically incomprehensible, and seemed an “occult quality” or magical invisible entity that made no rational sense with the introduction of gravitation the only thing that was adequate to the world was, paradoxically, was that which didn’t refer (mathematics); and what did refer, language, could no longer describe the world.

De Man’s allusion to this moment in the history of philosophy suggests that it is a paradigm for a problem that is central to contemporary theory: the recognition that
direct or indirect or phenomenal reference to the world means, paradoxically, the
production of a fiction: or otherwise put, that reference is radically different from
physical law. (76)

The ambiguity of truth in language, or rather the insubstantiality of language in the
face of terrifying truth opens up a liminal space in expression. In the literary and theoretical
context, the traumatic by virtue of being a black swan event, wears the cloak of symbolic
obscurity and the tensions of representation inherent in that state. The ‘unimaginable’ implies
a rather rebellious denial of categorisation, and more importantly marks an epoch in the hoary
mimetic manual of literary composition. If the event of trauma is unimaginable, how is it
conceived in the writerly imagination of the author? If the phenomenon is unknowable how is
it presented in text? Trauma finds itself caught within the counter currents of humanism and
anti-humanism. On the one hand, trauma places one in the centre of the world since not only
is it all-consuming in its magnitude, it is also deeply subjective and defined uniquely and
distinctively for each individual. On the other, trauma is the most dehumanising moment
since it shatters any preconceived notions of the requisites of humanity and normalcy,
submerging one in an all-consuming deluge. Reality reminds you of your insignificance. And
yet, reality requires you to realise and realign it so that you may continue within the larger
domain of humanity.

In physiognomic terms, a standard event is coded in the brain through language. The
traumatic event, insurmountable in its accidental onslaught, is registered in the immediate
kinaesthetic memory of the body rather than the conditioned narrative of the ‘normal’
memory. More importantly, the brain itself works to deny access to the said memory,
protecting the psyche from further damage. This “unclaimed” nature of the memory, to
borrow Caruth’s phrase, makes the representation of this event a strange combination of the
known and the construed.
The traumatic neurosis is not merely the fruit of an event, it is the displaced inner reaction of the psyche to this unnatural stimuli. The reification of this already elusive entity within the ellipses of capricious text is a formidable and seemingly impossible task. Yet, regardless of this representational dilemma, writers continue to write lingual testaments of the terrifying creating textual memorials. The truth is that trauma has no single definition— it becomes in writing. It is, in a certain sense, written into being because that is where it achieves a shape, fraudulent though it might be. As Harold Bloom observes in his book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997), "... The strong imagination comes to its birth through savagery and misrepresentation." (86) The traumatic, frustratingly intangible, comes into form through representation, and any representation will be a misrepresentation simply by virtue of being transcribed in language.

4.1.2 Language, Representation and the Traumatic

Language is a conveniently translucent medium for expressing the amorphous nature of trauma. Intelligence and argument allow us to shield ourselves with denial while professing human individuality and solipsistic sovereignty, ignoring the possibility of destabilisation. As a result, when an emotional shock creeps up on our unprepared psyches, it destroys every illusion of solidity. And yet, we continue this thread of reasoning simply because that is the only way we seem to be able to exercise control over life. This is evident in our art as well. Terry Eagleton writes,

the fate which brought low the heroes of antiquity reappears in the modern world as logic. To which one might add the Gods stage a come-back in the form of Reason, providence in the shape of scientific determinism, and nemesis in the guise of heredity. Infinity lingers on as sublimity, and the traumatic horror at the heart of tragedy, still a metaphysical notion in the case of Schopenhauer’s Will, will be
translated by Jean Jacques Lacan as the Real, which has all the force of the metaphysical but none of its status. (225)

The Freudian idea of trauma describes it as a scenario arising from excessive emotional excitation penetrating the defences of the psyche thereby dismantling existing modes of representation and realisation. The Lacanian concept looks at trauma as an encounter with the Real: that which denies signification. It says something with respect to the foresight of the literary forbearers, that they made provisions for expressing the obscure and the inaccessible.

The earliest theory of sublimity was put forward by Greek critic Dionysius Longinus in his work *Peri Huspos* or *On Sublimity* (1890). Sublimity may be defined as, “the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated... Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling of that which lies beyond thought and language” (Shaw, 3). The sublime refers to that which is beyond words, but through this very negation it gains a definition. For Longinus, grappling with the sublime entailed a struggle to overcome the bounds of rational expression and enforcing the willing suspension of disbelief through powerful rhetoric. Longinus’ sublime was a transcendental style which hinted at wonder and awesome stature through reverent language. It called for extremely embellished diction suiting the magnitude of its ineffable subject. In its original capacity, it was used as an inciting form of address which excited the populace by implying an awesome magnitude but is distinct from bombast and false rhetoric. The Sublime was infused with the transcendental aura of divine inspiration.

It is this bent toward the immortal that lent later readings the sublime shades of divinity and, more significant to our context, the element of the terrifying. Christian theology contributed to an understanding of the sublime at a philosophical and supernatural level. It
moved on from the purview of language and rhetoric into the realm of the metaphysics. The body of Christ is embedded into the Logos—the word/reason/knowledge—that rules the world; the logos that prescribes order in the form of words. In a certain sense, the words make the Word of God. This elevated Word was characterised by a deeply pious, non-material approach, lending it an elevated and mystical mien.

St. Augustine is a key figure in propagating this transcendental theory of the Sublime. He leaned heavily on Plato’s theories of transcendental truth which differentiated between the physical and the ideal, or the Truth. Augustine described the Sublime as an unchanging truth that is fixed and uninfluenced by interpretation or representation: it remains the same under any circumstance; the true ideal, undisturbed by change. He implied that we cannot grasp the magnitude of this unchanging truth simply because our minds cannot help being distracted by the material. Philip Shaw paraphrases the argument in the following terms: “rather than from language, our commitment to the world of words ensures that our apprehension of this truth [of the Sublime] cannot be sustained” (21). He pits the temporary and capricious drive of eros with the constancy of agape, stressing the difference in approach and bringing in a greater moral and ethical implication to the idea of the Sublime. It became a Platonic ideal of sorts which encouraged the seeker but can never be attained. The Sublime was perceived as a hint of the divine and therefore mortally inaccessible.

Bringing the Divine into the picture complicated the nature of the Sublime, since it became more than a moment of linguistic magnificence and exquisitely articulated imagination. It was now charged by an all-powerful Being that controlled fates and was capable of bone-numbing violence in the name of Divine retribution. Seventeenth century cleric Thomas Burnet was influential in connecting the erstwhile benevolent ideal of the sublime with the awesome metaphor of the Apocalypse. It was a terrifying, devastating
power that denied favour on a whim and cannot be negotiated with. It is a grand, untamed power that embodies a "terrible beauty", to borrow a phrase from Yeats.

It was with this connection that we find writers locating the sublime in Nature. Nature in all her glory and all her fury became the pinnacle of the Sublime measuring itself in the negative definition of the professedly inadequate verse: a trait particularly pronounced and developed in the thought of the Romantic Era. The Romantics attempted to vault the division between the words and the material through their art.¹

Returning to the early eighteenth century, the idea of the sublime being not quite a thing of beauty gave it a dimension that had been missing earlier, it came to imply a combination of pleasure and pain, the overwhelming wonder of the experience coupled with the fear or the threat of the unexplainable, an idea that is developed by Edmund Burke in his analyses of the idea of the sublime. For Burke terror was the cornerstone of the sublime experience. He conceptualised the sublime as a large spectacle of awe-inspiring proportions which invokes deep fascination and not a little fear for oneself. Burkes understanding of the sublime was also coloured by his preoccupation with beauty and the invocation of a 'real' response. The blandly beautiful was superficial and obscuring to the invocation of deeper feelings. For Burke, the sublime was in the extraordinary which is not necessarily congruent to beauty or the transcendental.

As a the idea of the sublime began to carry a strain of the material terrible, since that would be the most effective means of garnering a genuine reaction. The human reaction to danger is real and unfeigned and therefore, true in the basic sense. Perhaps for this reason, Burke held the sublime as an intrinsically awesome element that invoked terror and fear. Along with this formulation, Burke, the consummate empiricist, located the real in sensory perception and propagated an almost completely secular theory of the sublime where divinity
Surendran 134

did not authenticate a reaction. He focussed on the reactions augured by the senses. Burkes preoccupation with the sensory may find its roots in the writings of John Baillie who, in his 1747 treatise, categorically stated that, “the eyes and ears are the only inlets to the sublime.

Taste, smell, nor touch convey nothing that is great and exalted; and this may be some farther confirmation that large objects only constitute the sublime” (Baillie sec V). Baillie pointed out that the sublime need not have a divine source or a fixed marker in language. He pointed out that material aspects of reality which are not great by themselves may earn elevation by virtue of the connections drawn between them and the perceiver (Shaw 44). The sublime of Nature is internalised in the sublime of the mind to create an inner expansion, which in turn is communicated into the material. Therefore the sublime is communicated by way of the sensory but understood in terms of interpretive discourse. This interpretive malleability of the Sublime makes it a mercurial entity whose source is indeterminate. Consequently the sublime morphs from being a transcendental idea to a liminal entity that slips back and forth between the material and the amorphous heavens.

Bringing the sublime down from the heavens to mortal ground was conducive to Burke’s empirical inclinations. However, his preoccupation with sensory knowledge made him sidestep certain important considerations crucial to any kind of reading and interpretation. After all, as Terry Eagleton says in the chapter “Tragedy and Modernity” from his book Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic (2003), “If sensory experience is the touchstone of reality, then structure, design, causality, temporal identity, and the like, all those schemas which might lend shape to the self, are no more than hypothetical inferences from the stuff of our sensations” (223). In this regard, the lingual nature of the sublime becomes problematic because, no matter how verbose the description, language can never realise the real in its tactile tangibility. Consequently, the role of language is further marked by its obscurity. Unlike painting, drawing (and in later years, photography and films), non-
pictographic language—with its deferred system of meaning and arbitrary signs—was not the empirical ideal. The literary representation of reality became subject to “the entanglement of the objective and the emotional” (Shaw, 50). Naturally, scepticism on the credibility of the account followed. Yet, for Burke, this obscurity was important since he considered it as the marker for the sublime. The most terrifying thought is the most difficult to express; which is why human beings continue to struggle with discussing and depicting Death, though it is such a painfully commonplace phenomenon. Extremes are inaccessible to language; it can only hope to refer to a similar but never accurate comparison. But it is this very fallibility that makes language a prime mode of expression since it allows for an abstractness which in turns allows for a multiplicity of reading and understanding. The sublime is therefore different for each individual because every person has a different limit for the unimaginable and the inexpressible. Nothing is as terrifying as the unknown and the very fact that the imagination cannot know or conceive that fearful terror further obscures it in a miasma of menace. The unknown fear, by virtue of being beyond known evil, becomes that much more potent—thereby creating a connection between the tangible known and the shadowy unknown. This tying together of two essentially separated idea through the veil of language is the object of the Burkian sublime. Shaw writes,

Burke argues that the sublimity of the phrase a ‘universe of death’ [Burke’s quotation of Paradise Lost] is brought into being by a power unique to language. The cloudiness, uncertainty and terror of this idea is intimately linked with the combinatory power of language; it is words and words alone that allow the mind to link disparate entities together. (53)

Burke’s sublime was the terrifying absolute that was overwhelming in its power yet expanding in its experience. For him, the sublime found expression by reflecting the greatness of the minds power of cognition and reason, as it experiences its own expansion.
This idea too can be attributed to John Baillie, who described the contradictory nature of his understanding of the sublime so,

The sublime dilates and elevates the soul, fear sinks and contracts it; yet both are felt upon viewing what is great and awful. And we cannot conceive a deity armed with thunder without being struck with a sublime terror; but if we regard him as the infinite source of happiness, the benign dispenser of benefits, it is not then the dreadful, but the joyous sublime we feel. From these associations there arises different kinds of sublime, where yet the sublime is the predominant; and from these associations, likewise, results a greater beauty to it. (Sec IV)

The artistic attempt to describe this power becomes the moment of internalisation and negotiation with the otherworldly and the superlative. The language of the text, its tone and tenor, humanises the Sublime suffused in its syllables by bringing this pristine ideal into contact with cognisance wrapped in the folds of profane and sullied human words. The Sublime retains its sublimity by virtue of its constancy notwithstanding its defacement through language and literary negotiation—it is unchanged even through the distorting vitrine of language and text that declares its sublimity. In a certain sense, it is a sublimity born of abnegation, defined through its pollution and imperturbability. This unchanging element, when translated into the literary act, pointed towards the presence and relevance of a certain ruling voice, a neutral power that sat in judgement over the actions and characters delineated in the text. There was an omniscient voice of reason that instructed the reader to follow a certain thought, pointing to the theme of the text; the God of the text, so to speak.

Kant picked up from where Burke left off by pointing out the inadequacy of an unvaried dependency on the empirical. He theorises the Sublime as that which is born from the clash between sensory knowledge and the knowledge of the intellect. It is not a 'natural'
phenomenon that can find its place in the pre-established a priori classifications but something that defied them. Shaw describes the Kantian analytic of the Sublime as something that distorts our ability to gauge the temporal and spatial bounds of the phenomenon and secondly challenges our pre-established ideas of determinism. He writes,

‘whereas natural beauty’ provides judgement with an echo of its own capacity for self-determination, so that nature appears ‘preadapted’ or ‘purposive’ to this faculty, the sublime, by contrast, appears to frustrate judgement, to the extent of questioning its autonomy. The sublime, in short, is presented here as an affront or ‘outrage’ to our powers of comprehension. (78)

The sublime becomes the point of confusion, the destabilising element to the calm assurance of the informed mind. Reason cannot make sense of what the senses perceive as real, thus demanding that reason expand itself. Kant sees this as an educative moment where reason widens itself to embrace the new, but what happens when this expansion causes a rupture? One is reminded of Baidou’s formulation of the event and the notion of a rupturing truth.

The Lacanian idea of trauma finds connections with this approach to expression and knowledge. The sublime is an expression of the idea of the absolute, the Real as propounded by Lacan. The Real is impossible to integrate into the symbolic order that forms the psychic structure of the mind. Civilisation has lulled us into a strangely contradictory of cocoon of aware ignorance: we know of the existence and magnitude of danger in our world, yet when we come face to face with the reality of this danger our world buckles. Comprehension becomes problematic, negotiation inadequate and logic, the safety-net of our psyche is rendered as fragile as a spider web.

A traumatic event is ‘unnatural’ in the sense that it cannot be included in the purview of natural defensive adaptations that the psyche adopts during the course of its development.
There is no knowledge that can prepare oneself to face the event, neither is there room to negotiate the experience into the manageable schema of our rationale. It is too real to be real, gaining surreal qualities that turn the experience into something movie-like and thus further alienating it from the mind that encapsulated it in the first place. This unreality of the real is a strange allegory for the literary craft, simply because there is an unreal reality propagated and endorsed within the text which raises a simultaneous immersion and incredulity. It is this inaccessibility of experience that places literatures of trauma in a curiously ambiguous territory in relation to representation and interpretation. And like the psychoanalyst, the reader and the writer are required to trace a possible root cause, to try and make sense of the irrational.

This idea of the irrational is reflected in the present idea of the sublime as propagated by theorists like Derrida, Lyotard and Zizek: It has taken the step from the sublime to the ridiculous. The postmodern condition, crippled as it is by constant violence, buffeted by political and ethical turbulence, and our inability to agree on anything, holds a sceptical view of the transportive power of the sublime, seeing it rather as a symbol of the cavernous gap between the theoretical and the practical. Either, it gets relegated into the ranks of propaganda, condemned to be complicit in the great Ideological Agenda, as proposed by Zizek. Or it takes the amorphous form of breaches in meaning framed by the loss of faith in an immanent telos. Regardless of the approach, the sublime has lost its transcendental charm and has been brought sadly down to earth, marked by a sense of constant suspicion and cynicism.

Lyotard sees the sublime as the moment of crisis, a rupture in the scheme things which is beyond the parenthesis of prescribed behaviour and thought; a disruptive moment that refuses the autonomy of the rational and arises in and through dispute. The violence of inherent in this conceptualisation of the sublime emphasises the necessary fragmentation of
meanings entailed in its perception. Derrida takes a similar tack by implying that the sublime is a fruit of textual ambiguity which captures the liminal zone between the material and the immaterial. In both cases there is a movement away from the transcendental philosophy espoused by Kant. Kant regarded the Sublime as that which can be experienced in its inexperience, it can be accessed only while working within a certain frame or parergon—it is defined in terms of the limits of reason as opposed to the freedom of imagination, i.e. it is defined through the limitations of the frame and is that which is outside its bounds. Derrida locates the notion of the Sublime in the multiplicity of meaning and mercurial transformations of the transient real and its comprehension basing it upon the ambiguity of meaning inherent in extant reality and perception.

Connected to this is the Lacanian idea of the sublime, fuelled as it is by the Freudian idea of sublimation. According to Lacan, the sublime is a symbol of a void of the "fundamental emptiness, 'the-beyond-of-the-signified' without which no signification will occur" (Shaw 135) and which goes beyond the pleasure principle, tipping the scales of reason and throwing judgement into disarray and dismantling knowledge systems. Zizek solidifies this theory by equating the sublime with the pervasive nature of ideology and politics, where every action inevitably points to an overriding, sublime ruling ideology. Furthermore, he made the connection between the relevance—or rather the irrelevance and insignificance of a social code of meaning in the face of a negatively defined sublime. The fragile absolute is not known to us, and therefore to attempt to grasp it is a doomed project. The elusive Real becomes the symbolised in the sublime and is marked by discord until a suitable denouement sublimates the terror of the void marked by the Real into the "glory of the Thing" (Shaw 147).

In a certain sense, the Real itself is the traumatic. John Mowitt writes in his essay "Trauma Envy", that "the appeal to trauma as the concept... through which one gains access
to the Real or... through which the dialectic character of the Real is made manifest through a failure of symbolisation that is, properly speaking, traumatic, if not trauma itself” (287). It is the inexpressibility of the traumatic through language, the traumatisation of language itself that transforms the traumatic from a psychological syndrome to a cultural malady which cripples the idea of human self-reliance and autotelic intelligence.

This creation of a traumatic Real creates a zone of deferred or denied symbolisation that translates into an ambiguous state of non-being. For Zizek, therefore, the sublime is now located in the unlocatable; it is the suspended in a split state between the signified and that which has no name, the `void` as it were. The Zizekian notion of a politically charged sublime translates into an idea of the traumatic as defined by negation or rather an abyss of signification.

This finds a parallel to the traumatic phenomenon. The nature of trauma makes an etiological and epistemological strain of thought inadequate to the task of meaning making. It is located both within and without, simultaneous and deferred. Like the sublime, trauma too bends the bounds of spatio-temporal definitions making normal benchmarks irrelevant and redundant. In fact, it makes it necessary to study the structures of consciousness powering the prevalent concepts of normalcy and the natural so as to formulate patterns of reconciliation and Kantian expansion of reason. In his theorising of language and the act of interpretation, Paul de Man situated the locus of literary hubris in the misguided belief in a solid unshakeable meaning. According to De Man, critical analysis cannot hope to glean an absolute meaning, rather that there can only be ‘misreading’ of a text. Meaning is never static and rarely singular. Consequently language becomes a mercurial vessel for its transmission, a situation further problematized by trauma’s liminal yet visceral character. This contradictory negative signification is captured in Derrida’s critique of the Kantian concept of parergon. Shaw writes, “The parergon... is that which cannot be thought within the terms of the system
since it discloses the fundamental point of contradiction on which the system is founded; it renders the sublime both possible and impossible.” (120) This idea opens up the sublime to an interpretive fluidity it lacks in its original formulation and refreshes its significance, most relevantly in the sense that it allows for the contingency of human nature and the changing parameters for the limits of human activity. This approach is particularly relevant to the representation of the traumatic which is an expression of the terrible as opposed to the classical idea of a thing of beauty, because the human race constantly surpasses itself in perpetuating new forms of violence.

In this context La Capra’s idea of the ‘negative sublime’ (LaCapra 2001) becomes a significant development in the journey of the sublime. La Capra stressed on a sublime that produced an inhibiting resonance rather than a transcendental one. The negative sublime emphasised the aspect of violence, anchoring the signifier in its horror rather than invoking transcendence. La Capra contrasts this with the Nazi sublime that used a sacrificial rhetoric of duty and purification to justify and even inspire the fanatical hatred necessary to carry out their atrocities. The negative sublime reinforced the terror of the signified without leaving room for the rhetoric of absolution creating a linguistic wound of sorts. It did not point to a higher meaning but rather it negatively charged the action to highlight its adverse and terrifying aspect.

While the metaphor of the sublime is the obvious choice for the linguistic communication of the traumatic, it does raise certain pertinent issues. The original sublime implied an absolute, couching the traumatic in terms of sublimity, negative or otherwise, runs the risk of transforming the experience into a non-negotiable monument which may be used as a justification to perpetuate violence. La Capra addresses this issue in his book Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001). While the idea that the traumatic is an excess that denied signification is a pertinent formulation, it also raises the contradiction that representations of
the said excesses are routinely produced. Furthermore, the presentation of a situation in terms of the newly constructed secular sublime may lead to its transformation into a non-negotiable monolithic ideal that refuses intellectual and critical engagement—a very dangerous situation. The appropriative impulse inherent in any absolute are equally or more potent in the context of the sublime allowing for its manipulation into doctrine. LaCapra marks this tendency in context of the Holocaust,

The possible role of the Nazi sublime should be understood as one factor (not a total explanation) of Nazi ideology and practice...Its possible role nonetheless attests to the importance of distinguishing between the different modalities of the sublime and being as careful as possible about its invocation, especially with respect to a dubiously homogenizing and possibly evasive use of it in one's own voice to apply to the Holocaust as an undifferentiated scene of excess and unimaginable horror. (94)²

The challenge of remaining immune to the simplifying totalising impulse the sublime ideal is admittedly difficult; however the very fact that language is unsure of its purchase on the slippery slope of trauma's interpretive curve makes the act of representation a preventive measure against this possibility.

The fact of the matter is the trauma text is a strangely overlapping anomaly which deals with a brush with creaturely mortality while being engaged in the problem of continued living. The traumatic experience is a dystopian distortion of the idea of an out of body experience. This liminality finds a correlative in the problem of representing trauma.

Lawrence. L. Langer writes in the preface to his book *The Age of Atrocity*,

the artist struggles to invent images equal to the horror of the ... events, we encounter the dilemma of a culture imaginatively unequipped to respond to the reality in which it is enmeshed.
To be in touch with the intolerable, and to remain psychologically whole, is the vexing challenge that confronts us. (xiii)

In the context of trauma, the psychological integrity has not been maintained. If not actual madness, the individual is riddled with internalised complications that leave them disoriented in a world that seems unaffected by their tumultuous experience. In the case of writers or psychologists working in connection to trauma, the generally benevolent notion of pathetic fallacy gains an almost pathological dimension in the form of emotional transference. Transference is the psychological term used to describe the projection of the traumatic condition onto the non-patient such that she feels the same symptoms as the traumatised person. Objectivity, if that were even possible, is compromised.

Furthermore, language in a traumatic scenario is a minefield of possible stereotyping. The very fact that this narrative retrieval is essentially a trial and error proposition, the authenticity of ‘authenticity’ comes into question. Is authenticity even a marker in the reading of a trauma text? After all, isn’t trauma the perfect example of the existential Authenticity that literally cut every binding string leaving the individual free and perhaps lost! Dominick LaCapra writes, “The hiddenness, death or absence of a radically transcendent divinity or of absolute foundations makes of existence a fundamentally traumatic scene in which anxiety threatens to colour and perhaps to confuse, all relations” (23).

Trauma which is defined by its signification of a void—an implacable void of meaning, at that—needs a reworking of the usual structures of representation employed in the creation of the text. For one, it is an attempt to dredge out a sunken memory which—in the case of traumatised individuals—is being deliberately obscured by the psyche, and the psychological confusion mirrored through the gap between experience and observation. And
words, unfortunately, cannot say enough. Elaine Scarry writes in the opening pages of her book *Resisting Representation*,

> By the side of the problematically abstract, language sometimes seems full of the weight of the world. By the side of the problematically concrete, language can seem inappropriately quick and cavalier. In both instances, what is overtly at issue is the knowability of the world, and that knowability depends on its susceptibility to representation. (3)

The situation is further complicated by the fact that in the context of trauma, vocabulary itself goes through various circles of influence to either become unequal to the task or gain meanings that make clarity and straightforward signification problematic. Elie Wiesel writes in his preface to the new translation of *Night* (2006),

> I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? . . . All the dictionary had to offer seemed meagre, pale, lifeless. (ix)

For example, the use of words like 'purification', 'chimneys' even 'trains' becomes a loaded choice in the context of the Holocaust. And some phrases, like 'the war on terror' or 'crime against humanity', though still loaded, have lost their relevance simply because of their repetitive use.

Still another facet to the problem is the fact that language simply does not have enough words to express the nuances of the experience. The pain of having your arms pulled out of your sockets, the internalised and normalised pain in your stomach after several months of starvation, the pain losing control over your body as disease takes over, the pain of
outrages dignity when unspeakable things are done to your body because of what you are: all these separate and unique agonies are called ‘pain’. The narrator is rendered handicapped by a medium that can only create a hazy simulacrum of the world of pain that was experienced. The traumatisation of language couple with the loss of an identity—transforming from a person into a body in pain—is a singularly disempowering movement of will. The individual loses autonomy over her being both in physical and mental terms such that she is incapacitated by the event: she ceases to be a person. As Susan Sontag succinctly put it in Regarding the Pain of Others, “violence turns anybody subjected to it into a thing.” (12) In such a context the literary act becomes a formative act in terms of both recreating the person, and the regeneration of language. Language, much like scar tissue forms around the wound of the traumatic. It admittedly cannot truly touch it, but by creating a membrane of signification around it, language effectively helps cope with the trauma in the most effective way. This is true in the case of practical therapy as well, Judith Herman writes,

the “action of telling a story” in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory. With this transformation of memory comes the relief of many of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The physioneurosis induced by terror can apparently be reversed through the use of words. (183)

Suzette Henke also espouses this view through her formulation of scriptotherapy. In her path-breaking book Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing (2000), Henke describes how the creation of written narratives can help reintegrate the shattered selves and world views of traumatised women. She discusses the works of established women writers with a traumatic past, examining the means in which these writers appropriate their past and regain control. In the creation of the text the victims gain a sense of agency that has
been wrested from them through circumstance such that they can, in a sense, return to themselves.

At the same time, it is an unavoidable truth that no text is innocent—especially, not a text that deals with human suffering. The tendency towards a Manichean reading of a text makes it easy to slot the trauma condition into neat opposite boxes: victim-oppressor, guilty-absolved, outside-inside, past-present. But the trauma text is unique in its overlapping of categories. The usual dichotomies may exist on a superficial level but in its true dimension, these categories overlap, interchange and rearrange themselves. For example, the traumatised individual occupies a position of strangely empowered disempowerment. The act of creating a text about one's personal experience places one in the centre of the text and overrides the voice of the erstwhile oppressor; the very victimisation becomes the mode to strike back.

Similarly, while the victim-oppressor category is viable at the basic level, an attentive reading of a trauma text shows that there are layers of guilt that implicate not just the perpetrator but also taint the survivor. The trauma scenario defies categories because of the fact that the survivor may be as grey a character as the villain in the story, or may even be the actual villain of the story. In the pursuit of survival the individual is forced to compromise on principles of humanity such an extent that he is no longer innocent in anyway. Giorgio Agamben brings home this point in his series of essays collected in the third of his Homo Sacer series Remnants of Auschwitz, by pointing out the presence of a 'grey zone', (21, 22) a space where categorisation of good and evil cannot work simply because their natures have been irremediably tainted and merged. The rules of the camp are different from the rules outside; what is a justified act in the camp is unpardonable outside and what is right in the outside world becomes not only impractical but also endangering inside the camp. The survivors who emerge face the task of reconciling these two worlds and in the process find they are guilty anyway. A similar but opposing situation is that of perpetrator guilt. The
perfect example for this would be case of the Vietnam War veterans. Several hundreds of soldiers returned home eyes peeled back in the deadly thousand yard stare, unable to comprehend the atrocities they saw and committed. The vast majority of veterans who returned home were completely incapacitated by their actions and the dissociation and displaced guilt that they felt was one of the key impulses in the reinvigoration of studies in trauma. The fact that the perpetrator, who is in no way blameless, is as much a victim of the system as the victim herself is a difficult and destabilising situation. The notion of responsibility is incredibly problematic in such scenarios since culpability becomes difficult to pin down.

In the case of individual or personal trauma where the lines between victim and perpetrator are clearer, the victim’s feelings of guilt are compounded with shame. Not only is she ashamed of and disturbed by her loss of agency and her inability to protect herself, she is also haunted by her possible complicity in her experience. Self-blame is a characteristic feature of personal trauma, possibly because it presents an illusion of having had some control over the experience. Judith Herman writes,

> it is the victims, not the perpetrators, who feel guilty. Guilt may be understood as an attempt to draw some useful lesson from disaster and to regain some sense of power and control. To imagine that one could have done better may be more tolerable than to face the reality of utter helplessness (54)

Helpless as she is, the victim is often deemed culpable for her suffering. This is especially true in the case of rape where the moral and social systems distort the experience so the victim is deemed in some way actively responsible for her fate and or even an active participant in it. Judith Herman writes,
Conventional social attitudes not only fail to recognize most rapes as violations but also construe them as consensual sexual relations for which the victim is responsible. Thus women discover an appalling disjunction between their actual experience and the social construction of reality... They are treated with greater contempt than defeated soldiers, for there is no acknowledgement that they have lost in an unfair fight. Rather they are blamed for betraying their own moral standards and devising their own defeat (67).

The doctrine of blame gets translated into self-abusive patterns which later manifest as psychological disturbances and social dysfunctionality. The disjoint between crime and the justice becomes the focal point for the continued traumatisation.

In “The Witness”, Agamben draws the important distinction between the judiciary and justice and the subtle but telling difference between moral responsibility and penal responsibility. He points out that law is a prescribed mode of action and therefore any beyond the prescription becomes beyond the limits of a trial. As a result the carriage of justice is more in terms of codified crime and congruent sentence rather than the ethical notion of justice and injustice.

The notions of responsibility colour the dynamics of the already complicated trauma text with the element of unstable culpability and unjust impunity. The law prescribes what is right and wrong and sits in judgement over the tried individual based on these formulations; the idea of good and evil is not the true priority. Foucault’s formulations, as discussed in the previous chapter, point out that the notion of deviancy and consequently crime are greatly prescribed by dominant discourse and what is propagated and repeated as common practice. In a traumatic scenario these supposedly universal values collapse and a new alien social
system takes its place. The denizens of this strange universe cannot be judged on the same lines as those residing in the normal world.

This shifting scheme of meaning translates into ambiguity of sin in the traumatic scenario. In a strange way, this is a throwback to the Calvinistic belief in the ultimately sinful nature of man: your existence in the world makes you a sinner. The very act of surviving in a scenario of the traumatic kind may entail the individual’s complicity in heinous acts, yet what else can one do but try and live. And the survivor is aware of this debasement, she knows that she is just as twisted as her oppressor because she has survived; she coped with it, and worked with it, she did not die of it. And it is in this crucial point that the witness knows that her attempt at testimony is technically incomplete simply because she cannot witness the ultimate atrocity: death.

In his book *Surviving Trauma: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (1989), David Aberbach writes,

Long after the trauma, survivors may suffer guilt at having survived. Their natural sense of relief and triumph can blight their well-being. Questions gnaw at them: why was I saved? Why did others die in my place? Why did I not help others more? This guilt may be interpreted as a significant part of the meaning of survival, a testimonial to a humanity that has not been destroyed...However, survivors themselves rarely speak of their guilt in an affirmative sense, this is reflected in the literature of and by survivors. (13)

Beneath the foundation of the trauma syndrome is a deep and abiding element of guilt which manifests in a deferred and transferred nature, much like traumatic re-enactment. In fact this guilt itself may be a symptom. The appallingly late theorising of the Holocaust was partly because of political manoeuvrings and mostly because the effects of the camp began to
be noticed on a large scale only several years later. This plays back to the idea of latency as discussed in the early half of the thesis. Concentration Camp syndrome, survivor guilt, second generation transference in the form post-memory issues and the consistent return to the site of total annihilation are all manifestations of traumatic guilt in different degrees and motives. The guilt of being in the present while others are not and consequently remaining anchored to the past thereby negating the present. This anchoring to the past effectively negates the very survival that causes the survivor their guilt. They are caged in another life, another time.

The term ‘survivor’ is a misnomer because the Survivor never truly survives. The person who emerges out of the event is not the same as the one who began the descent. Their experiences render the ‘normal’ world irrevocably abnormal leaving them unable to reconcile their reality with that of ‘normalcy’. The trauma text, whether in the form of witness narratives or fictional representation aims to communicate the destabilising that is central to their universe such that the reading community is broken out its cocoon of superficial empathy and is able to generate a sense of continuity to the narrative of an event that should not be forgotten, if not for ethical purposes, then at least to support the reframing of a social template where responsibility regains its ethical value.

4.2 Narrative Exercises: Memory, Representation and Authenticity

The classic understanding of the artistic process requires the artist to visualise his piece so as to create art. For creating a piece based on a personal traumatic scenario, this trope is rendered obsolete because any visualisation is still within the framework of the imagination and the traumatic entails the unimaginable. The fantastic nature of the traumatic makes a trauma text easily discreditable; a real danger considering the fact that the trauma text always has a message that is not always in tune with the dominant discourse. For this
reason, the availability of a text of trauma can be considered symptomatic of the cultural and political leanings of a place. In fact, one can go so far as to say that the number of narratives on a certain subject is directly proportional to how much it favours popular ideology. The incendiary memory becomes a torch that must be carried into the distant horizon of history and there is a burning need to keep the memory alive. Public memory is radically bivalent; it has its reach not only into the past also into the future reinforcing points of view and directing perspectives and principles. To quote from French historian Pierre Nora’s work “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”.

Memory is life borne out of living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived...(8)

The State can and does manipulate the flow of images and materials to influence the point of view of the dominant public. It makes available a steady stream of conditioning information that primes the recipient to accept and transmit a certain point of view and more importantly reject an alternate point of view. In a nutshell, the State makes history, and history, as David Ludden writes in his article “When Amnesia is a handy tool”, “...is the memory-maker that keeps some events safely in the past, detached from the present, while it keeps other events very alive, often with dramatic embellishments”. This characteristic materialises in the form of a mediated ‘globalised memory’ that puts forward a perspective favourable to the more the dominant powers. The mnemonocide perpetrated by the state is best elucidated by the fact that we remember some tragedies more than others. By replaying specific catastrophes, the State is able to wield an emotional baton to conduct the cacophony of our fury and thus further profitable violence and safeguard power. As Pranay Sharma writes in his article “Our Selective Archive”, “Truly power is about determining what people
remember and what they forget". The power of the state rests in the fact that they can regulate the media and also curtail the freedom of art making alternate points of view contraband. To quote David Ludden once again, "Forgetting is less about erasure than about censorship...Media makes some memories work as meaning-makers by making some events in the present and past positively equivalent and making other connections inappropriate, nonsensical, even unthinkable."

This is especially relevant in connection to the presence of discursive lobbies favouring a particular experience over another. Norman Finkelstein discusses this possibility in his book *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (2000). He argues that the main reason for the detailed study of the Nazi Holocaust and its consequent establishment as a monolithic archetype is less a case of humanitarian empathy and a more a fruit of domestic and international political ambition of American Jewry and the U.S national interest. He writes,

American Jewish elites remembered the Holocaust before June 1967 only when it was politically expedient. Israel, their new patron, had capitalized on the Nazi holocaust during the Eichmann trail. Given its proven utility, American Jewry exploited the Nazi holocaust after the June war. Once ideologically recast, the Holocaust...proved to be the perfect weapon for deflecting criticism of Israel. (15)

Finkelstein further adds that, “the Holocaust framework apprehended anti-Semitism as a strictly irrational Gentile loathing of Jews... Invoking the Holocaust was therefore a ploy to delegitimise all criticism of Jews: such criticism could only spring from pathological hatred” (17-18).

In the case of a large scale trauma with a historical significance and the continued political utility, the opportunities for misreading and misappropriation are rampant and
deadly because it can actively suppress not only the cause of the oppressed but also our
ability to empathise and respond. There is a definite taint of demand and supply that seems to
be at work in the generation of objects of memory which projects and protects through
surplus. This generic proliferation of a certain type of narrative and the creation of a single
perspective is dangerous to not just the significance of the idea of the traumatic but also to
our ideas of empathy.

Trauma is not a genre, it is a condition. The trauma text acts as a carrier of this
condition, transferring it through language. It marks the bounds of what might be the
unspeakable and the unforgivable; in a certain sense it defines the bounds of humanity
through negation. Hence, the examination of the processes of writing and the reading the
trauma text become crucial not merely to the understanding of the text but also to reflect on
the generally accepted idea of validated and invalidated suffering. The trauma text can
mitigate or vilify an act depending upon its allegiances and it can validate a certain point of
view, thereby making a useful tool for ideological indoctrinating. Especially since most
trauma texts strive to impose themselves as true experience on the reader’s psyche.

A life-narrative account holds the certificate of being an authentic lived experience.
However, it also carries the stain of being too close for clarity and is discredited by the fact
that the personal narrative of a traumatised writer’s psyche is not completely trustworthy. In
the case of the observed account, the writer faces the daunting task of trying to describe the
indescribable, and keeping a fairly stiff upper lip while they are at it. To remain perfectly
objective in the face of a traumatic event—even as an outside observer—is beyond the
capabilities of the average human being. However, since critical practice seems to prize it
more than any other quality, a dip in objectivity is assumed to be directly proportional to a
dip in credibility. Besides this, there is the obvious fact that an observer lacks the experiential
grasp of reality and therefore, she operates at a disadvantage in terms of accuracy. An
autobiographical account is too personal to be trusted and an objective account is too removed to capture the reality of the situation.

The idea of post-memory is relevant in this context. Theorised by Mariane Hirsch, postmemory presents a different mode of traumatisation based entirely upon memory. The multiple levels of guilt: the guilt of the survivor for having survived, the doubly irrational guilt of the second generation—the “hinge generation”, as Hirsch calls them—for not having shared in the horror of their predecessors are not the only causes for this traumatisation. The memories passed on from the originals to their descendants overwhelm the lives of the latter such their present existences are overpowered by the memories of their parents and family. Their condition exists between direct and vicarious traumatisation such that their individual life is haunted by memories that are not their own. In such a scenario, while writing about the experience becomes a self-alienating exercise further distancing the individual from reality, she is also aware that she is presenting a received past which is so much a part of her own that she knows no existence without it—it is precisely in its continuity in the life of the future generation that postmemory finds its definition. Hirsch writes in her essay “The Generation of Postmemory”:

The “post” in “postmemory” signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath. Postmodern, for example, inscribes both critical distance and profound interrelation with the modern; postcolonial does not mean the end of the colonial but its troubling continuity... it reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture...postmemory is not a movement, method or idea; I see it, rather, as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove. (106)
A text of postmemory exists in the liminal zone between experience and observation creating a narrative that is simultaneously real and unreal. It is perhaps because of this representational conundrum that authors took to fictionalising their realities. By invoking the trope of fiction, they relegate their narrative into the realm of the unreal, but their backgrounds and allegiances proclaim the truth of their writings. Hirsch herself uses the example of Art Spielgelman’s Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus A Survivor’s Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986) where he represents the life and recollections of his Holocaust survivor father by depicting the different races as different animals creating an unreal effect only to juxtapose it with real photographs to reinforce the ultimate reality of the text.  

LaCapra critiques this seemingly indecisive choice that leaves the inference up to the reader, since this underscores the displaced and unsure quality of its calibration. However, this same uncertainty can signify the possibility of multiple possibilities. Trauma itself is the supposedly impossible coming to pass. It is evidence of the truth we universally declare but rarely acknowledge; that the truth is contingent and there is no single truth.  

D.M Thomas’ controversial novel *The White Hotel* (1981) is an apt example for the mixing of fact and fiction to create an authentic representation of trauma. This surreal novel presents a study of multiple examples of hysteria and trauma creating an amalgamated universe where the real and the fictional are merged so as to create a fluid universe where the real, unreal and surreal coincide: much like the condition of trauma. He peoples this fiction with real people and real life incidents that lend his fiction a factual veracity and deliberately mixes genres to capture the disjointed nature of the perception of trauma and to further ‘factualise’ the narrative.
It begins with a series of everyday and academic correspondences between eminent theorists of hysteria including Freud, Ferenczi, Sachs and Kuhn which introduces the reader to the well-spring of the novel, namely the densely symbolic and erotic poem which offers the reader a first glance into the mind of the protagonist Lisa Erdman alias Anna G—an obvious reference to Freud’s famous patient Anna O, a connection further emphasised by her actual name ‘Elisabeth’ which she shares with another patient of Freud’s⁵—and gives an indicator of the events of the text. Titled “Don Giovanni”, after the opera on which this poem was apparently first written, this seemingly irrational pastiche invokes the White Hotel as an obscure symbolic space which is the receptacle of her libidinal overflows and acts as a liminal zone in which Eros in the form of love-making and Thanatos as destruction co-exist. The loaded choice of title underscores the erotic nature of the poem and the illicit relationship it invokes. Most telling is the fact that the Hotel burns as Don Giovanni does at the end of the opera and as did Anna G’s mother.

A simplistic reading would reduce this text to a representation of the patient’s psyche in a state of hysteria. Besides this obvious feature, the function of this piece and its presence at the commencement of the text effectively traumatises our reading. The memory of the obscure poem haunts the reading of the text with the reader unconsciously attempting to make logical connections, therefore interrupting the flow of the narrative. Furthermore, the poem is also a site of temporal displacement. While the automatic response is to look to the past for the interpretation of this hysterical overflow, Anna G’s poem anticipates her future as well, invoking a Bergsonian ideal of horizontal time and toppling our interpretive frame.

He moves onto a similarly surreal narrative, “The Gastein Journal”, which begins with a train journey where the female protagonist, who is still only known as Anna G, takes a journey to meet her family only to change her route in favour of spending time in a hotel with the man she met on the train. Much later we know that Lisa’s own mother had rendezvoused
at hotel with her lover, where she was killed in a fire and her adultery exposed in death. This part of the novel has a fantastic quality that seems to simultaneously employ elements of realism and surrealism along with an emotional detachment which can narrate the pornographic and the catastrophic without any sense of shock or dismay. The hotel is a utopian dystopia— or rather a dystopian utopia, given that it is constantly attacked by catastrophes— where life and love-making occur simultaneously with unnatural death through fire, drowning, falling and being buried alive. This narrative too has unveiling and obscuring effect. The supposed improvement in terms of narrative lucidity from fluid poetry to more structured prose is an illusion that quickly falls apart and the apparent clarity only succeeds in further confounding the reader. Added to this is the fact that this hysterical outpouring begins with the future— "The Gastein Journal" opens with the protagonist's dream in which she is attempting to escape pursuing soldiers. The end of Lisa Erdman’s life is at the hands of Nazi soldiers, but it is not she who is attempting this escape.

The next section “Frau Anna G” gives the reader Freud’s case study of Lisa Erdman’s treatment where our clouded knowledge of the protagonist and her experiences is finally given more clarity. The reader is informed of her hysteria and its manifestations, a chronic cough, breathlessness and pain in her left breast and left ovary. This last feature is again a movement into the future — before her death Lisa is injured at these two points. In this sense, Lisa’s body itself becomes a site of memory and a being out of time. It carries the scars of the past, and also invokes the future through its pain.

“The Health Resort” brings the reader into the field of Lisa’s actual life thus clarifying and sometimes negating the inferences provided by the fictional case study. The reader’s perception of the protagonist moves from Anna G to Lisa Erdman, a telling shift because her identity itself changes and, more importantly, her identity itself is a cause of her neurosis and ultimately her death.
This section uses traditional mimetic mode of representation through prose wherein the events of her life and its effects follow a logical progression and adhere to a linear narrative pattern. But here too there is an intrusion of a traumatic memory, not only of her hysterical symptoms that are never truly cured, just as her memories are never truly clear, but also of her therapy. The return of the journal returns her to the imagined site of her trauma thereby allowing for a certain renegotiation while acting as a material metaphor for the intrusion of traumatic memory.

What is telling is the fact that Lisa reads her own case study and arrives at her cure, or at least reconciliation, where her doctor had failed. Lisa’s own interpretations clarify Freud’s inferences. She herself removes the veils of the crucial screen memory regarding her mother’s liaison with her uncle and her aunt early complicity in the adultery. She finally moves out of the hysterical neuroses of her identification with her mother and renegotiates her feelings of neglect from her father and brother. Furthermore, the reader is given clarity on her feelings and response the affair in her youth and can easily trace the effects of complex neuroses that lead her from one bad relationship to another and her contradictory desire and fear of having a child. One is given a sense that a certain level of clarity and order has finally been established.

This is especially pertinent with regards to Lisa’s trauma of identity. Her abuse and harassment at the hands of the sailors because of her Jewishness, though her mother was Christian explains her constant denial of that aspect of her identity and offers a further explanation for her resentment of her father. It also explains why she could not live with her anti-Semitic husband. While she would have liked to erase the Jewish side of her identity which causes/ caused her so much suffering, she cannot stand the deriding of the same and she could not reconcile to the idea that her spouse hated a part of her he of which he is not aware.
It causes her suffering but it is indivisibly a part of her which will manifest itself whether she
wills it or not—much like the presence of a traumatic memory.

These realisations and Lisa’s own acceptance of these explanations present a
possibility that Lisa’s tragic life finally finds a measure of peace when she meets and later
marries Victor Berenstein and gains motherhood by accepting his son Kolya as her own.
However this short spell of peace is immediately overthrown by the next section “The
Sleeping Carriage” which automatically invokes the beginning of the narrative itself while
indicating the subject of the chapter—the Jewish massacre at the Babi Yar ravine. This
harrowing and glaringly detailed chapter has the double authenticity of scorching lucidity and
also of being a true event in the historical sense, impressing upon the reader the horrible
meaninglessness of the deaths especially after the hopeful picture of the previous chapter.
The scene of chilling horror is couched between the beginnings of an idyllic family life and
“The Camp”, where we finally learn the meaning of the White Hotel: death. Through the
narrative in the camp, D. M. Thomas effectively achieves what true witness texts cannot, a
testimony of the dead.

The authenticity of the novel in terms of communicating the traumatic condition
cannot be faulted. D.M. Thomas creates a world which is quite literally a reflection of the real
world. The main protagonist is based on a real person, her doctor is the real Freud presented
in fiction. Similarly the stylistic devices used to communicate the disoriented and irrational
nature of hysterical outpourings are suitably inscrutable. His movement between genres:
poetry, surreal prose, a medical case study, a third person narrative of personal life, and a
third person narrative of a collective large scale trauma move the neuroses from the internal
to the external realm of representation in a stylised but undeniably authentic and accurate
representation (He bases his representation of the hysterical condition on Freudian
theorisations, whose verifiability is self-apparent). Thomas makes the novel a site for the
convergence of two disparate forms of traumatic neuroses—subjective hysteria and historical trauma—by manipulating the representational tools of language and genre, and his work gains added impact through his fictionalisation of the historical. The White Hotel which consciously undermines these boundaries of personal, public, private, historical, real and unreal becomes a vehicle for credible incredibility.

However, it is his use of an episode from history that makes The White Hotel an interesting conundrum for the ethics of representational authenticity and veracity. D.M Thomas was accused of plagiarising Anatoli Kuznetsov’s novel Babi Yar: A Document in the form of a Novel (1970) which contains the testimony of the survivor Dina Pronicheva (who appears as a character in the book), one of two survivors from the ravine. Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel is a predominantly testimonial narrative styled in the documentary form, self-evident in its subtitle, which includes Pronicheva’s testimony. For all rights and purposes it is a witness text. It is a testimony mediated by fiction whereas Thomas’ narrative is undeniably fiction mediated by the historical. The documentary nature of the ‘source’ is presented in contrast with the artistic moulding apparent in Thomas’ fiction cause a complex disquiet. The knowledge that the most horrible part of the novel was not fictional has a doubly decentring effect: on one hand it is appalling that such an event actually happened on the other there is a lingering feeling that questions all the fictions and realities the text offered till then and more importantly questions our acceptance of the event as non-fictional fiction or fictional non-fiction.

Thomas has been interspersing the fictional with the non-fictional throughout the text but it is this part of the text that caused the most outrage, regardless of the fact that this source is duly acknowledged by the author. Within the discourse of postmodernism, where the ‘play’ of texts, meanings and narratives is an always already condition, this appropriation is less a crime and more an artistic tack. However it was the use of the testimonial material that raised
a furore in the literary field. While the appropriation of a testimony to further artistic aims reeks of a bourgeois indifference and ethical irresponsibility, this argument is reductive and simplistic, especially in the context of The White Hotel, which couches the Babi Yar chapter between normalcy and the end, consequently highlighting its solidity. It seems more pertinent to read Thomas’ representation of the Babi Yar episode as a re-presentation of a memory, a resetting of a testimony to throw in relief the jagged edges of represented trauma.

The true source of outrage is that Thomas’ deliberately authenticated—in the sense that he uses factual verity and theoretical premise to ground his creation—narrative questions the dominion of the cultural monolith that is Holocaust studies and the monopoly of the documentary genre for the creation of an authentic representation of a traumatic memory. His narrative, undeniably ‘authentic’ as it were, questioned extant notions of representation of the Holocaust even in fiction.

The trauma narrative does not practice the artistic hypocrisy of objectivity. It is an unabashedly subjective and personal declaration that lends the narrative certain credibility since the text professes to provide a raw and unmitigated view of an event refusing to let the details of the experience be turned into banal statistics. It is a narrative as opposed to history; it is a collection of lived memories whereas the historical is a collection of incidents and dates. It is for this reason life-narratives of trauma are often invoked as symbolic metaphors of a certain event, they have the power to influence the reader’s empathic engagement. D.M Thomas faced the most criticism not for the fact that he artistically appropriated from reality and from another text— which in the postmodern context is no crime— but the fact that he appropriated a symbolic monument, the Holocaust, in the interests of fiction and art. The question to be asked here, David Aberbach aptly puts it, is “Where is the line between truth and fiction in creativity deriving from loss?”(24)
There is an undeniable voyeuristic quality attached to the spectacle of trauma; it is this element that makes the field defensive towards the idea of aestheticisation in any form especially in terms of tailoring to suit a certain palate. There is an amusing contradiction here: a text describing historical trauma does not pretend to be free of discourse. Yet it flinches at the allegation of artistic tweaking to suit a certain audience. This defensive attitude may have its roots in trauma’s tendency to disintegrate into sensationalism minus substance which misuses the empathetic engagement of the reader with the story. Gillian Whitlock writes in her introduction to the book Trauma Texts (2009),

‘trauma’ has become a portmanteau term that covers a variety of disparate experiences; the ‘addiction’ to the narratives of pain and suffering, and the vogue of violent emotion and shocking events; and the migration of private zones of the body into public domains.

This is especially true of the genre of the autobiography where the private and public spheres lose their boundaries. This public airing of a private ordeal can easily become sordid sensationalism, thereby making it very difficult to define the literary and the ‘worthy’ in the field. While in the case of the representation of a historical trauma this breach of the private sphere is not so glaring simply because it is a shared memory shaded by multiple recalibrations through multiple perspectives. In the case of a personal trauma this unveiling of a private memory in the public sphere can be equated with sleaziness. The creation of a memorial culture around the idea of trauma is an automatic act of social appropriation which is ultimately employed in keeping alive a memory. What is forgotten or ignored, however is that no memory is one dimensional and every experience changes with the vantage point. To ignore or vilify a certain version or treatment of a monument of memory is to perpetrate the same act of suppression that the trauma text hopes to fight.
The reception of the text and its general mien and direction, ambiguous though these quotients might be, are the only markers to determine the authenticity of the narrative and the integrity of its mission. In his article for the New York Times, “On Literary Celebrity” (June 13, 1982) D.M Thomas writes while commenting on the more favorable reception of *The White Hotel* by the American reading community as opposed to the European,

The more favorable American attitude towards psychoanalysis may have helped; also, may be, a greater willingness to see the holocaust treated seriously in literature. I don’t deny—how could I?—the darker motives of the psyche. “Thanatos” can take the form of wanting to read about the holocaust. But I don’t think the darker motives are paramount; the response of which I have been most aware has been an entirely healthy identification with the inner life of a woman, and shock at her destruction. (6)

D.M Thomas is neither witness nor Jewish. His allegiances are towards the artistic and trope of the traumatic is made real through the text’s movement between unreal, real and surreal, thereby retaining the honesty of the representation and engaging the inaccessible by underscoring its presence in the accessible.

The constant debate about the credibility of experiential knowledge versus objective inference becomes a central theme in the case of trauma. Especially since the representational pitfalls of traumatic neuroses are specific to the traumatised individual. The observation of trauma does not face the kind of mnemonic negotiation inherent to the salvaging of a traumatic memory. At the same time, the observational distance lends it an intellectual credibility and, in a deferred sense, a greater emotional credibility as well. The empathy garnered in and from an observed narrative carries the onus of an independent emotional connection—the writer feels the passions and the turbulence and notes them with sincere emotions even though she did not personally go through them. *The White Hotel* presents a representation of multiple traumas and is loyal to the authenticity of that task, thereby
displaying the provisionality of 'true depiction' and reinforcing the fact that every representation is in effect only a representation.

Richard Terdiman writes, “In periods of uncertainty and transition, against the growing misfit between customary modes of expression and their transforming referents, writers think through again the registers of consciousness, sociality and existence.” (69) The idea of creative intervention in a text of trauma is a very sensitive issue since trauma literature, which is greatly comprised of witness accounts, fashions itself in terms of being a life guide. It has an ethical and moral overtone that requires the utmost honesty from the writers. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the response to the event is as important—sometimes more important—than the event itself. The measure of the authenticity of the text cannot be isolated to the veracity of the factual events.

The very act of creating a literary text is a tense exercise that requires the writer to be doubly mindful of the creative element and negotiate between the aesthetic impulse and the need for reverence to the subject. The task of representing the traumatic experience becomes a balancing act between factual authenticity and the attempt to make sure that the emotional element of an experience far beyond the comprehension of common consciousness is not devalued. The author is expected to internalise while elevating thereby overcoming the smoke of metaphor and the mirrors of text. The trauma text constantly moves back and forth between “...a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life”, to borrow a phrase from Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience. The survivors are, technically, the lucky ones, but they have no sense of victory and more a sense of loss: a double loss, since it is not merely the loss of one’s normal structures of meaning and consciousness, but also a loss of one’s reality itself. The survivor’s reality is different from that of the general populace, and the world at large seems not only indifferent but also terrifyingly ignorant of the possibility of the truth of the survivor’s life.
Authenticity is a key element in the acceptance of a trauma text; it will not be able to achieve its basic aim of empathetic connection if it comes across as fake. The trauma text has a double responsibility to truth, or to the appearance of truth, simply because it professes to be a kind of survival guide. The trauma text acts as a kind of text book, educating us to the possibilities and probabilities of trauma and telling us what to expect—though this latter hope is a wasted exercise since trauma revolves around the idea of the unexpected. Indirectly it is also telling us how to behave in a similar situation and, more importantly impressing on the reader the fact that survival is possible. The key question here is, whether the existing paradigms for authenticity and credibility may be applicable to the study of an experience as elusive as trauma. This brings us back to the rather thrashed out but still relevant idea of the reality of truth and vice versa. More importantly, it calls attention to the notion of definition. With a subject as deeply personal as trauma, the benchmarks for what may be included within its rubric become a question of representation and consequently interpretation. The act of recollection becomes less about remembering and more about what must be remembered.

No representation, for that matter recollection, is complete. It works within frame of relevance and involves a certain motive which powers the choice of included or invoked memories. The authenticity of the memory, a conceived in black and white terms, is always already compromised because of this factor. Consequently every memorial act is a motivated act that is charged by an ethic of memory and its propagation.

4.3 The Ethics of Remembering

While therapy requires the temporary erasure of a traumatic memory, literatures of trauma focus the recovery and the sustaining of these memories. For the survivor of trauma, the representation and narration of an incident of trauma is necessary not only to validate her
suffering but also to produce an awareness of an alternate perspective that world consciousness needs to negotiate. Joan Scott says in her essay "Evidence of Experience",

> Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of the world of transparent objects. In this conceptualisation, the visual is privileged; writing is then put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is the reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience. (776)

The act of remembering is not just a communication of these received perceptions but also an interpretation of the past in context of the present. It is a contingent performance of interpretation coloured by the motives of the individual and the social scheme she operates in: the recounting of an experience automatically creates hierarchies in the recall which are directly influenced by the emotional and contextual forces buffeting the individual. As a conscious act (or an act of consciousness) it is a subject to external necessity, as well as unconscious tendencies and impulses i.e. it is neither completely internal nor exclusively determined by externality.

The recollection and retransmission of the misty memory into translucent text is not merely an act of reification and interpretation, it is also matter of consciousness with deep ethical implications. Susan Sontag writes in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*,

> Remembering *is* an ethical act, has an ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we have with the dead. So the belief that the remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans who know we are going to die, and who mourn those in the normal course of things die before us. (115)
“Never shall I forget”, declares Elie Wiesel. This emphasis on being a living testament has two possible implications. Firstly, it may stem from the feeling of guilt. What causes a person who has endured great trauma to undergo the undeniably distressing process of recounting the harrowing process? It would seem natural to want to forget and move on. This writing impulse is owing to the fact that the survivor cannot not be writing. She cannot help attempting to communicate her knowledge because the survivors themselves would never describe themselves thus. They must live with the conflicting feelings of relief at being alive and able and guilt at being the ones to survive or still remain in trauma. The survivor trudges through life labouring under their crushing memories and the lost dead draped over their shoulders, murmuring endlessly of their death and the survivor’s ‘undeserved’ life.

The traumatised individual, having gained some form of control over the vagaries of their personal memory, is charged with the responsibility of transmitting the knowledge; if not for its own sake, then for the sake of those other unable to do so. The survivor carries the onus of hope and resilience making them a living proof of redemption at the same time reminding us of our innate cruelty. Their role as the scribe for this battle between terror and tenacity becomes an act of purgation which places them in the periphery and the centre at the same time. On one hand the centre is occupied by the event itself and the people who feature in the narrator’s life. Yet the voice is that of the individual and her personal perspective. This contradictorily central but displaced state makes it possible for the individual voice to permeate the text while rendering the text a chronicle of collective experience.

At this juncture it is significant to observe the formulation of a social or collective memory. Theorists like Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora stressed on the creation of a collective archive based on spatiality or sites of memory claiming that the place itself acts as a memorial of the events. (Whitehead, 2009) While this has been proven beyond doubt, what is subsumed in the idea is the other fact that every episode of collective memory is
generated through the transmission of personal memories. Furthermore the idea of collective memory also raises the question: which collective? Though it may seem like an exercise in maximal downsizing, the presence of multiple perspectives in endangered in the scenario of collective memory. Sontag comments,

"Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory—part of the same spurious family of collective guilt. But there is collective instruction.

All memory is individual, irreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story of how it happened... (85-86)"

Consequently, the recollection it may be a mode of assertion either in cohesion with or in opposition to the perceived collective narrative. The survival text calls upon the author to relive the most traumatic moments in their life and go on to put it down in indelible words that will be a constant reminder of this painful past. The motive behind this is not merely catharsis but also defiance. After all, the fact that after suffering much suppression the survivor is able to give voice to his tale is in itself a slap in the face of the oppressors who he had to escape from as well as to the indifferent populace that pretends ignorance and impunity or attempts to arrange the experience in generic order. The normal cannot go on without knowing that it is a fragile cover for a deep and abiding disquiet. The trauma text is a testimonial, carrying the onus of experience and more importantly another view of reality from the inside of the cracked bell jar of modern civilisation.

This quality finds a parallel in the resistance to comparison inherent in the field of trauma texts. The anxiety of influence weighs heavily on the leaves of the trauma text. At the same time there is an ethical pressure to keep the narrative pristinely credible—a self-defeating artistic gambit. Every episode of trauma seeks to represent itself unique and
incomparable, singular in its scale of catastrophe. To be likened to other situations of suffering relegates the narrative into an indistinct mass of painful complaints, a fate so similar to indifference that it cannot be borne. Literatures of Trauma attempt to create a counter-sublime, to borrow a phrase from Harold Bloom. The daemonisation of the writer’s perception or experience of the traumatic renders it unique and therefore distinguishes it from the preceding narratives.

The fact of the matter the only way we can ‘understand’ an instance of suffering is to liken to another: we function through relativity. It is perhaps this fear of generalisation that pushes Primo Levi to make a case for incomprehension. He writes, in his seminal work If This Is A Man, “Perhaps one cannot, what’s more, one must not, understand what happened because to understand is almost to justify. . . [And] If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened can happen again.” (395-396)

The rehabilitation of trauma is a back and forth between memory and forgetfulness. It is ironic that the very quality that is responsible for our presence at the top of the food chain, namely our extraordinarily well-developed brain—is also the reason for our psychological agony. The human brain is wired to technically remember everything. It is for this reason we are considered the master mimics. We observe and recollect and recreate in patterns tailored to suit our particular needs. This trait unique to the human race is also the reason for its trauma. The human mind cannot forget the ordeal it went through, even if the actual memory in all its detail may avoid them. The first task of rehabilitation is to facilitate the erasure of the memory from the immediate so that the individual may return to normalcy. But this is only a stop gap cure since the memory, as we discussed in the first half of the chapter, persists. The individual has to relearn how to function in the world and this learning is not complete without the holonic reintegration of the psyche. We must forget to move on, but to continue we must know.
Comprehension may be impossible, but recognition must be achieved so that it can be avoided. The idea of a necessary knowledge feeds into the notion of a discourse of truth and authenticity which the trauma text destabilises with its ambivalence towards factual veracity. The process of representing the seemingly unrepresentable requires the innovation of narrative practices that incorporate the features and vagaries of the traumatic experience while allowing the narrative to be relatable to the reading community. As a result the re-enactment of the trauma in text needs to manoeuvre the event into language and communicate the nature of the experience in the process of the creative manipulation to re-present the truth.


...the reciprocity of feeling and knowing is very illuminating. Knowing, because it exteriorises and poses its object in being, sets up a fundamental cleavage between the subject and the object. It ‘detaches’ the object or ‘opposes it’ to the ‘I’. In short knowing constituted the duality of subject and object. Feeling is understood, by contrast, to be the manifestation of a relation to the world that constantly restores our complicity with it, our inherence and belonging in it, something more profound than all polarity or duality.

This relation to the world, which is irreducible to any objectival polarity, can be certainly named but not recaptured in itself. We can name it anti-predicative, pre-reflective, pre-objective, or hyper-predicative, hyper-reflective, hyper-objective as well. But because we live in a subject-object duality that has structured our language, this relation can be reached only indirectly. (85)

Memory and its representation become a means of knowing, of reaffirming and reiterating. The representation works not only as a recollection but also as a reminder. The representational act becomes the mode by which the individual not only attempts to awaken
the world from its blissful ignorance and stony lethargy, but also a means of affirming her individual past. The writer attempts to articulate an authentic truth so as to create a body of thought that may create a space for these erstwhile homeless narratives. As Michel Foucault observes in his piece “Self-Writing”, “…writing has, to use an expression that one finds in Plutarch, an ethopoietic function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into ethos” (209). The survivor will not allow the jagged existence of their past to be negated by indifference and demands attention to their story: it becomes an act of self-assertion, so to speak.

Perhaps this is what spurs the survivor on to write out the pain: to remind them that their past actually happened, and the world must acknowledge it, telling us to remember death so that we may understand how to live. They attempt to infuse their experiences into an unawakened earth, thereby reaffirming what happened to them, while acknowledging the worth of those who died. Through this reliving they reconnect to an unreal world, lending its phantom reality a breath of solidity and reconstructing the skeleton of a lost self. It reminds the slumbering humanity of its insurmountable mortality and the fallibility of its exalted intelligence.

Notes

1. Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* (1817) can be considered a manual of his observations on this attempt. He followed Kant’s formulation that combined the materialistic with the idealistic but took the theory a step further by delineating the incompleteness of language in achieving the ideal bridge. However he theorised that it is through this very gap that imagination expresses itself and gives voice to the sublime, even if it is only an echo.
2. The identification of a single event as the upper limit of horror is not only grossly partisan it is also ridiculous in the light humanity's expanding arsenal of means modes of violence. The marking of the Holocaust as emblematic of modern evil has a deeper resonance which has much to do with its temporal position. The Holocaust came into light when the world began to break and shrink anew. The massive migration of different races and the rehabilitation of the survivors lead to a movement of knowledge as well. The end of the war opened up communications not only of victory but of awful atrocities committed in the name of order and purification: two of the strongest rhetoric used to uphold colonialism. The idea that the civilised world could produce such evil was a blow to the idea of western civilisation; it was a moment of civilizational trauma. This line of thought is the key reason for the Holocaust's dominion over the idea of ultimate suffering.

3. Sontag provides the perfect example of such blindness when she describes how General Franco's atrocities were completely ignored and refuted as libel regardless of the presence of photographic evidence. People are only willing to see what they want to see. She writes,

...images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties as having been staged for the camera. To photographic corroboration of the atrocities committed by one's own side, the standard response is the pictures area fabrication, that no atrocity ever took place, those were bodies the other side had brought in... or that, yes, it happened and it was the other side who did it, to themselves...(11)
4. The sequel published in 1992 shows the simultaneous stories of Art Spiegelman's struggle with the guilt of having become successful through his depiction of his father's story and Vladek's continued navigation of the camps and his eventual freedom. It is a telling fact that the end of Vladek's narration—his reuniting with Anja—is on the same page as his death in the next panel and the shared tombstone marking their ultimate reuniting. Art meanwhile continues to tell the tale, as the evidence of the sequel proves. The simultaneous narration of the stories from two different times, usually at the behest of the author in the present is a significant trope for the understanding of postmemory and the impulses that trigger the creation of a text of trauma.

5. Elisabeth's is the last case study featured in Breuer and Freud's path-breaking Studies On Hysteria (1893-1895) which revolutionized the field of psychoanalysis. See Smith, 1-269

6. And yet, for all its influence and its righteousness, it is interesting to note, the trauma narrative is hardly ever recognised as a legitimate proof for an event. It is too marginal to be used in a serious capacity, yet too serious to be truly trivialised. This vacillation in approach is curiously similar to history of the development of Trauma Theory in its early days, where the condition was too obvious to be ignored, yet it was too trivial to be taken particularly seriously.