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Małgorzata Hołda
University of Lodz

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 **Małgorzata Holda**

University of Lodz

Narrative, Insecure Equilibrium and the Imperative to Understand: A Hermeneutics of Woundedness

ABSTRACT

Addressing trauma as a phenomenon which happens on the level of the human psyche and body, this article explores the impact of the interlocking nature of human lingual and bodily being in discovering a fuller possibility of interpreting and understanding woundedness. The non-transparent and problematic character of trauma calls for a hermeneutic investigation in order to gain a far-reaching insight into what happens *with* us and *in* us in traumatic experience(s). The imperative to understand the situation of affliction is an unending task which not only relies upon extant understandings but continually *pro-vokes* new ones. I argue that the process of healing, encompassing the spoken and bodily narrative, does not establish a secure equilibrium, but rather searches for self-restoring, healing energy and commences ever new understandings of what needs to be comprehended and healed. This article offers an examination of trauma as featured in three short stories by British authors: Rudyard Kipling, D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, to exemplify the possibilities of literature to shed light on the intricate nature of traumatic experience. It interrogates the ways in which literature, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis meaningfully converge.

Keywords: hermeneutics, literary narrative, psychoanalysis, trauma, woundedness.

INTRODUCTION

Literature offers distinct possibilities for approaching and articulating what is inaccessible to straightforward understandings of confronting trauma. Cathy Caruth makes this claim exceptionally powerfully in “Literature and the Enactment of Memory,” the second chapter of her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*.¹ Literary embodiments of trauma grant unusual access to the “listening” to trauma and the possibility of understanding. Attempting to evoke traumatic experiences, literature operates in the liminal spaces of narrative construction and the use of language. Literary texts inspire hermeneutic readings of traumatic event/s enacted on a metaphorical level. In its psychologically shattering nature, overwhelming pain, confusion and embarrassment, trauma cannot be fully rendered in either speech or memory, but because of this very limitation it calls for interpretation, explication and understanding. Hermeneutics of woundedness acknowledges the call for the interpretation of the apparently impenetrable realm of traumatic experience to unravel those senses which seem to escape facile explication and encourage us to go deeper into the intricacies of trauma. Hermeneutic investigation of human woundedness explores the way in which trauma affects a human being, how the self experiences his/her vulnerability and how it is reflected in that of another. In its preoccupation with a response to the vulnerability of the Other (*répondre à la vulnérabilité*), hermeneutics of woundedness recognizes conversation and touch as two vital tools in the healing process, inviting us to delve deeper into an understanding of our being-in-the-world as a lingual and bodily being. The fashion in which a literary narrative addresses trauma opens a path to comprehend that which cannot be stated overtly. In the narrative’s incongruities and displacements, the reader can better sense trauma’s stigmatizing and unresolved impact.²

It is commonly claimed that in post-traumatic syndrome the afflicted party remains mentally in the past. The state of latency and unintentional

¹ See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (26–58). Unexpectedly to readers’ expectations instead of analyzing a literary narrative, in chapter two of the book, Caruth explores the French film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* by Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras (1959). Offering a close reading of the storyline and dialogues, the author elaborates the narrative’s (screenplay’s) possibilities to grasp the otherwise unfeasible and unintelligible reality of trauma. The more specific explication of the role of literary narrative in understanding trauma can be found in “The Wound and the Voice” (Introduction) and “Addressing Life: The Literary Voice in the Theory of Trauma” (Afterword), where Caruth uses the example of Freud’s employment of Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Liberated* to interrogate trauma.

² Cf. e.g., Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*; Denborough, *Trauma: Narrative Responses to Traumatic Experience*; Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*.

retrospection are identified as crucial elements of traumatic experience, which can be defined accordingly as “response sometimes delayed to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations* 4). The impossibility of stepping out of the excruciating pain of the past creates a situation of permanent repetition of the back-and-forth paradigm in which moving forward in self-development is constricted by an inevitable and involuntary moving backward.³ The continuous reliving of the past is dictated by the search for a rational explanation of what happened. An attempt to understand often adopts the form of a narrative as to narrate means to symbolically relive the past in a different and more disclosive way. The wounded party seeks the reason for experiencing trauma in the hope of breaking through the unresolvable in the understanding of a hurting experience. Rationalizing, however, stumbles against its own constraints and the limited possibilities of unveiling the crux of the traumatic event prevail.

NARRATIVE AND THE VACILLATING CONTOURS OF HEALING

The hermeneutics of the wound places at its very center an assertion of a possibility to heal in a journey through a fictional narrative. Ancient Greek theatre serves as an illustration of the recreation of traumatic experience, in which the “happening as if” can spur a healing process:

The key to the releasement from the nightmare, which this elementary *muthos-mimesis* permitted, is the fact that it balanced the act of identification with a theatrical representation so that the pain, which could not be lived directly, could be re-lived by being re-presented “as if” it was happening again but this time from a certain distance (the “estrangement” being provided, however minimally, by the theatrical form and plot). (Kearney, *Imagination* 132)

Richard Kearney’s investigation of the self’s identification of trauma with that of the Other (which can be called a “mirror effect”) via the visual/auditory/scriptural medium is not only rooted in the findings of psychoanalytic theory and practice back to Freud and Jung, or Levi-Strauss’s anthropology of the myth (myth narratives both articulate trauma and

³ On the pattern of repetition, see e.g., Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (6–8).

are capable of triggering healing), but also resonates with contemporary psychiatric practice. A good example is Irving Yalom's insistence on collective experience as a prerequisite for the cure—the return to “we” rather than the solitary “I” as a possibility to sustain a healthy equilibrium.⁴

If literature sensitizes us to what can only be said indirectly and in ways which defy a typical way of comprehending life events, and if it is capable of evoking and *invoking* situations of healing, Rudyard Kipling's story, “The Gardener,” exemplifies well narrative's distinctive potential to disclose the meaning of human woundedness. Nesting a story of epiphany within a story of enigma, “The Gardener” thematizes the emotional disturbance caused by trauma and sketches mechanisms of repression. The story features the drama of a mother who lost her son in the wake of the Great War.⁵ The acute pain experienced by the protagonist, Helen, is amplified by the impossibility of disclosing the truth about her motherhood. Allegedly an aunt, she mothers the young man she mourns—the fruit of an illicit relationship. Tangled in an unending series of lies, now bereaved, she cannot fully mourn the loved one. The trauma of her loss is doubled by the past locked in her heart and the unfeasibility of confiding in others.

The partial release of the grip of the traumatic event comes through a reflection of Helen's trauma in that of another—a stranger who confesses her loss of a lover in the war and the love of whom she could not acknowledge. The conversation with another mourner—a mirror held up to Helen's experience—offers a unique possibility to regain equilibrium. This, however, is an insecure one as the truth about the past cannot be learned by those who surround her in daily life. As Dori Laub emphasizes: “The not telling of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life” (64). Possessed by an obsessive need to exorcise the ghost of the past, Helen succumbs to this invisible, psychic tyrant compelling her to remain fixed in what is already gone but never reconciled. The incessant, compulsory need to speak trauma away, to find an appropriate way of expressing it becomes a life task precluding healthy living long after traumatic event:

This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully

⁴ Cf. e.g., Yalom, *Understanding Group Psychotherapy*.

⁵ It is commonly acknowledged that the story alludes to Kipling's own drama of losing his beloved son in the war and the search for his body.

captured in thought, memory, and speech. The pressure thus continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations* 63).

The struggle to tell and the unfeasibility of doing so in Kipling's story continues until its closing lines which unexpectedly reveal the secret of Helen's life. The narrative ends with a conversation at the cemetery in which the enigmatic figure of a gardener reveals the truth about her motherhood:

"Who are you looking for?" "Lieutenant Michael Turrell—my nephew," said Helen slowly and word for word, as she had many thousands of times in her life. The man lifted his eyes and looked at her with infinite compassion before he turned from the fresh-sown grass toward the naked black crosses. "Come with me," he said, "and I will show you where your son lies." (Kipling)⁶

However, the recognition of truth does not provide an unequivocal resolution as the story's denouement poses the question of who the gardener is.⁷ Its closing lines seem to allude to the Redeemer's unassuming presence and compassion towards those who mourn their loved ones (John 20:15).⁸ Recognizing in the gardener the resurrected Christ, some critics assert that Kipling's story hermeneutically includes the spiritual beyond—the possibility and efficacy of supernatural healing. Thematizing the trauma of mothers who lost their sons in the Great War, "The Gardener" takes an important place among literary works dealing with post-traumatic syndrome. A similar situation, involving the disinterestedness of the outer world and a mother's lonely struggle to deal with her trauma, is vividly captured in Siegfried Sassoon's poem "The Hero" (1917):

"Jack fell as he'd have wished," the mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
"The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
In the tired voice that quivered to a choke.
She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.

⁶ All citations from the story are taken from Kipling, "The Gardener," <https://greatwar.nl/books/gardener/gardener.html>

⁷ For the manifold interpretative possibilities of the encounter between Helen and the enigmatic gardener, see e.g., Maunder (107).

⁸ See e.g., Einhaus (87–88).

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
 He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
 That she would nourish all her days, no doubt
 For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
 Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
 Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,
 Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
 Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
 To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
 Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
 Except that lonely woman with white hair.

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The mother in the poem exemplifies all mourning mothers "with white hair," living in the shadow of "gallant lies," which are spoken to them, and cherishing the story of their heroic sons. Just as it is in Kipling's story, trauma in the poem is depicted as an experience of unspeakable pain. It does occur beyond words—speech cannot render it.

Considering the extent and depth of its impact, traumatic experience can be viewed as a profound experience, a notion which Nicholas Davey introduces in his essay "Lived Experience. *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*" and defines in the following way: "Profound experience is never transparent. . . . Such experience withholds aspects of itself, is never amenable to fill conceptual determination" (328). To deploy the notion of *profound experience* in the hermeneutics of the wound seems to be well grounded as the term subsumes traumatic experiences in their radicality and disparagement of the assumptions of "normalcy." What happens in profound experience exceeds the "normal" level of expectation. The presumed lines of thinking and context do not apply, and the level of familiarity is low. Thus, making it comprehensible to the Other often means surpassing the unsurpassable. But what does it mean to surmount that which presents itself as a conceptual impossibility? Narrative can reflect a lived experience, but it is not done fully and unambiguously. Both the exigency and *aporia* of narrating our experiences stand at the very heart of existence as a human being: in our humanity. The need to speak and an impasse in conveying what we genuinely want to convey are central to profound experience.

The impossibility of narrating traumatic experience rests on its tightly folded nature, its apparent strangeness and oddity until the point when it becomes translatable to the experience of the Other, until it finds a legitimate place in the lived experience of the Other. However, there arises the question of translatability's efficacy. Elaborating on the notion

of profound experience Davey muses: “Learning from these experiences is not simply a matter of undergoing an intensity of experience but concerns dwelling in their content, drawing it out, patiently bringing to life what lives on within it which has yet to be lived out” (328). The living out of what lives within an experience, the patient bringing to life of what it contains, amounts to a hermeneutic stripping of the layers of meaning enfolded in a painful event or series of events. The expression “to dwell in its contents” seems to be very appropriately used in the context of a traumatic experience as it signifies a prolonged, and possibly exhaustive, look at the experience from a variety of perspectives. It pinpoints a gradual, hermeneutic unveiling of the content of trauma.

Profound experience is often a poignant one and its very core: “depends, then, upon a fusion of the inheritance of what has been lived and is now held in both memory and tradition, with the promise of what that inheritance anticipates as coming, the as-yet-to-be-lived potentials within inherited experience” (Davey 328). There is an interesting connection between experience, the memory of it and “the as-yet-to-be-lived potentials within inherited experience,” which indicates the possible constellations of what may occur as predicated on that which was. The interplay of the remembered and the anticipated, which Davey indicates, brings to the mind Gadamer’s fusion of horizons,⁹ understood here as the fusion of the past and the future with the present in the role of mediator.

THE CORPOREAL INSCRIPTION OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CURE

An attempt to understand and explicate the nature of post-traumatic syndrome, the state of a mental discord and deep suffering, often comes through a recourse to bodily experience, especially when the traumatic experience leaves its mark upon the body. In the trauma caused by either mental or physical affliction, the human body is the site both of feeling pain and of the possibility of its release—the body remembers the wound and is the potential ground for the healing process. The healing practice recognizes the interrelationship between the verbal and the physical aspects of trauma and the positivity of healing through the body, specifically in situations in which working through trauma via the narrative delivered by the wounded person does not suffice.

⁹ For an explication of Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons see e.g., Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

D. H. Lawrence's story "The Blind Man" is an engaging interrogation into the intricacies of a healing process which involves two basic levels of communication: speech and physical contact. The narrative embodies the relationship between human beings when conversation is not enough to communicate, and this peculiar insufficiency provokes both a deeply felt dilemma and a dubious kind of fulfillment. Dramatizing the hope to elevate pain due to the presence of the Other, Lawrence's story encourages us to transcend the immediate and facile understandings of human pain. Importantly, this story like Kipling's, was written after World War I and addresses the trauma of the war. For this reason, the way in which it thematizes trauma strongly resonates with the specificity of post-war traumatic syndrome. Set in the aftermath of the Great War, the narrative features a triangle: Maurice, the titled blind man, a war veteran, his wife Isabel, and Bertie, her acquaintance from the pre-war time for whom she feels suppressed affection. Maurice's predicament—his blindness—gives birth to a totally new way of perceiving the world: "It was a pleasure to stretch forth the hand and meet the unseen object, clasp it and possess it in pure contact. He did not try to remember, to visualize. He did not want to. The new way of consciousness substituted itself in him" (Lawrence). At the story's climax, which occurs in darkness in the farm's barn, Maurice asks Bertie to touch his scars. The intimate encounter between Maurice, whose life has been marked by the loss of his sight during the war, and Bertie, who has only a secondhand experience of war atrocities, does not merely dismantle the binary opposition of light and dark, lack and fulfillment, intuitive knowledge and rational perception; it also invites us to seek a deeper understanding of the motivation behind human intentions, choices, and deeds in a situation of pain.

Maurice goes through the process of healing via organic contact with the world of nature. Fully engaged in the farm work which brings about consolation and accords with the predominant traits of his personality—primitivity and simplicity—he develops an exceptionally strong, sensual perception of the world: the only consciousness of his seems to be bodily consciousness (Ragachewskaya 50). The most bizarre meeting between him and Bertie showcases a situation in which language's awkwardness and failure to express sadness and misery collides with the highest level of the exigency to genuinely self-express, and in which bodily sensations (the reactions felt in the wounded body) are the only form of knowing, communicating, understanding and, possibly, also of healing trauma on a deeper level.

Asking Bertie to touch the scars on his face, Maurice seems to plead with the Other to partake in his wounds, to experience indirectly the pain he had felt. The import of physical presence in healing cannot be overestimated.

The research on bodily interaction in today's theory and practice of therapy is evolving as an important rediscovery of the fundamental, primordial, and irreplaceable role of touch in therapeutic treatment. An acknowledgement of the importance of physical presence to the wounded party—"Not only to interpret, but to bear bodily witness. Not just to talk, but to receive and 'hold' the suffering" (Kearney, "Healing Touch" 3)—is viewed as central to recovery. In the story, the act of touching causes the distance between the two men to shrink. In an attempt to come to terms with his pain, Maurice subconsciously succumbs to the mechanism of transference of his ailment onto the Other. The healing process which is to happen not in words but through the body is quite a challenge, however.

Although the interpretation of the story offered here may seem to depart from the prevalent ones which acknowledge Lawrence's skepticism regarding the official forms of Christianity,¹⁰ it shows how a hermeneutic investigation, which embraces the less obvious and the marginalized, allows a new light to be shed on Lawrence's fictional imaginings and his attitude to religion. The story's climactic point alludes to the Biblical scene of St. Thomas touching Christ's wounds (John 20:24–29) masterfully depicted in Caravaggio's painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (c. 1601–02). Figuring a surprise on the face of the doubting disciple, Caravaggio's exceptionally striking portrayal of disbelief rests on the intimate closeness of Thomas's frowning forehead and Jesus's holding his hand and guiding it into the wound (García-Rivera 120–23). However, Lawrence complicates the resonance of the Biblical story as the experience of touch in the narrative is not only an acknowledgement of the Other's pain, in which the revelation of truth is confirmed and sealed; it is also a deep recognition of one's own vulnerability and despair. Maurice's gladness and satisfaction stand in sharp contrast to Bertie's discomfort and horror:

"Touch my eyes, will you?—touch my scar." Now Bertie quivered with revulsion. Yet he was under the power of the blind man, as if hypnotized. He lifted his hand, and laid the fingers on the scar, on the scarred eyes. . . . Then suddenly Maurice removed the hand of the other man from his brow, and stood holding it in his own. "Oh, my God" he said, "we shall know each other now, shan't we? We shall know each other now." (Lawrence)

St. Thomas's stupefaction resounds in Bertie's, although it takes on a different meaning. Touch here is nourishing for the wounded and disparaging for the apparent healer who becomes stigmatized. The scene also encourages us to detect sexual undercurrents in Bertie's bafflement and

¹⁰ See e.g., Wright (21–35).

embarrassment, noted already in the early criticism of the story. Analyzing Lawrence's sketching of male characters, Herbert J. Seligmann highlights that "[t]hey remain virgin in iron constraint which prevents their finding ever again a love to replace the mother love they despair of. Such is the charming, graceful and cultivated Bertie Reid, whom the friendly, loving touch profoundly shocks" (7). Importantly, this story and other fictions by Lawrence focus on the representations of the male body rather than female, which is suggestive, as critics highlight, of the author's aesthetic admiration of maleness and probably his personal, appreciative attitude towards his own male body.¹¹ The ambivalent and highly ambiguous nature of touch in "The Blind Man" welcomes a hermeneutic interrogation which encompasses multiple and diverse psychoanalytic interpretations.¹² Significantly, Bertie, the potential healer is also a wounded healer who suffers from "incurable weakness," which "made him unable ever to enter into close contact of any sort" (Lawrence). Lawrence describes Bertie as "nothing"—"At the centre he felt himself neuter, nothing," which is evocative of the character's traumatic past. Undeniably, Bertie's fear of physical contact gives a new resonance to the role of touch in the story. Possibly, his predicament can be interpreted as denied homosexuality and the final touching in the narrative as the act of acknowledging and sealing of the rather discomfiting or unapproved of proclivity (especially when one takes into account the time when the story was published).

The request for touch in the story strikes a sinister chord which disconcerts the affirmative aspect of human embodiment. There is something uncanny about the need to transgress the barrier separating the self from the Other and in the self's abandonment of the comfort zone in terms of physical closeness: "The experience of touching implicates that we are always both, touching the other and being touched by the other" (Wierciński, *Hermeneutics of Education* 18).¹³ When persuasively, or almost forcefully asked to be acted out, touch deeply affects the surrendering party and becomes a painful experience. Does Maurice perversely (is his second name, Pervin, a signal?) ask for the touch to intentionally afflict the Other, or is his request a desperate call for understanding and approval? The possible answers multiply, and the query remains unresolved.

The narrative not only echoes and vitiates the healing message evoked in the touch after Christ's resurrection, but, in a similar vein, alludes to, follows and subverts the Biblical stories of healings which involve touch, with the

¹¹ Cf. e.g., Cowan (63–65). See also Becket (64–65) and Schultze (85–88).

¹² Cf. e.g., Schapiro (61–67). Schapiro emphasizes "[t]he failure of mutual recognition and the collapse of intersubjectivity into erotic domination and submission" (61). See also Ragachewskaya (79–84).

¹³ Cf. Freud (217–56).

episode of Christ healing a blind man at Bethsaida as the most significant (Mark 8:22–26).¹⁴ The indissoluble oneness of healing and touch in the Gospel (other than relating to the sense of sight, although inspiring us to search for the affinities between acts of healing in the Bible and Lawrence’s story) is vividly depicted, for instance, in the story of a woman suffering from hemorrhage for twelve years. The healing occurs when she touches Christ’s garments (Mark 5:25–34). Biblical intertexts abound in Lawrence’s narrative. Its rich symbolic meaning can be traced back to the Old Testament story of Jacob cheating Esau out of Isaac’s blessing (Genesis 27:1–29). Hearing the voice of Jacob, the blind Isaac doubts Esau’s identity but he gives his blessing on account of recognizing the first born by touch. As in the

[s]criptural narrative, the only mode of knowing and recognizing in “The Blind Man” is touch. The trajectory of the healing process leads meaningfully through a course of recognition. To recognize and to be recognized is shown as indispensable in the “I” and “Thou” relationship thought to be the basis for healing and believed to bring about an equilibrium, which, however, is not a stable one as the pattern of domination and submission forces its way into the apparent regaining of mental and bodily integrity. (Shapiro 67)

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In “The Blind Man” touching is both a cure and an incident of a lack of tact. Playing on the etymological meaning of tact (the Latin root word “tangere” means “touch”),¹⁵ the narrative poses questions rather than solves the enigma of touch (the word also connotes negative meanings).¹⁶ The inexplicable nature of what happened during the war compels Maurice to strive to search for a new possibility of understanding. However, this also generates the need to have his trauma witnessed, and since he stumbles against the impossibility of that, in an act of despair he engages the other human being to assume the role of a witness, to give testimony to what is beyond understanding, and whose unfathomable nature puts him in an unending circle of the need to explain. As Laub emphasizes, trauma’s “incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure . . . precludes

¹⁴ The Old Testament’s innumerable evocations of blindness (Genesis, Isaiah, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Samuel, to mention just a few books containing references to blindness) indicate both spiritual and physical darkness which recurs in the deep reaching messages in the portrayal of recovery from blindness in the Gospel: blind Bartimaeus regaining sight (Mark 10:46–52), a blind beggar (Luke 18:35), the healing of two blind men (Matthew 20:30).

¹⁵ See e.g., Wierciński, *Hermeneutics of Education* (18); Kearney, *Imagination* (97–98).

¹⁶ Touch: “late 13 c. ‘make deliberate, physical contact with,’ from Old French *tochier* ‘to touch, hit, knock; mention, deal with’ (11 c., Modern French *toucher*), from Vulgar Latin *toccare* ‘to knock strike.’” (“Touch”).

its own witnessing, even by the victim” (65). To translate the event to the experience of the Other ends in failure—the unfeasibility of the task is deeply perplexing. The apparently unresolvable nature of trauma is emphasized in Levine’s and Frederick’s classic study thus:

Trauma occurs when an event creates an unresolved impact on an organism. Resolution is accomplished through working with this unresolved impact through the felt sense. Reliving the event in itself can be valuable, but too often it is not, traumatic symptoms sometimes mimic or recreate the event that caused them; however, healing requires an ability to get in touch with the process of the traumatic response. (128–29)

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Maurice’s formidable request is an expression of the one-of-a-kind yearning to recreate, to relive his trauma; however, as it is not approved of by the Other on the conscious level, genuine healing does not occur.

Maurice falls prey to the delusion of attaining understanding, of making the Other a witness to his trauma: “[W]e shall know each other now, shan’t we? We shall know each other now” (Lawrence). But Bertie does not confirm the validity of the anxious question and does not avow the need of the wounded party although he succumbs to the most unusual request. The knowledge which Maurice desperately seeks is the result of his quest to understand his trauma. Although the quiet life on a farm grants a possibility of establishing an equilibrium, the demon of the past needs to be exorcised, the traumatic event surfaces again in a time of seeming serenity and conciliation, and therefore calls for explanation. The unbearable loneliness of suffering prompts a request for an intimate contact in the hope of acknowledging the truth which is too painful to come to terms with: “Stories are very important, but they are not always sufficient. . . . Vital engagement with bodies sometimes seems necessary for more lasting healing to occur. It is not sufficient to recount one’s wounds, one also needs to touch and be touched” (Kearney, “Healing Touch” 13).

Emon Keshavarz notices that “The Blind Man” is saturated with the language of uncertainty, indecision, restlessness and vagueness—in short, it evokes a deadlock in conveying meaning and in understanding trauma. While Maurice dwells in physical darkness, his wife struggles in epistemological and linguistic darkness:

“Yes, I know. And yet—and yet—Maurice is right. There is something else, something *there*, which you never knew was there, and which you can’t express.” “What is there?” asked Bertie. “I don’t know—it’s awfully hard to define it—but something strong and immediate. There’s something strange in Maurice’s presence—indefinable—but I couldn’t do without it”. . . . “I’m afraid I don’t follow,” said Bertie. (Lawrence)

The unequivocal and multi-faceted senses of trauma, its reception by the Other, and the forced intimacy of healing in the story invite hermeneutic insights. A hermeneutic reading of Lawrence's narrative reveals that avowing the polyvalence of meanings, the hermeneutics of the wound does not provide ready answers, but rather, by investigating what is too overwhelming, it attempts to shed light on the most tangled and intimate aspects of the phenomenon of trauma.

EPIPHANY AND THE HEALING POWER OF CONVERSATION

The healing of traumatic experience, understood as profound experience, is often marked by some epiphanic moment which deconstructs the obviousness of what is and opens the possibility of understanding the reality of the self in a completely new way. The indispensability of epiphany in the healing process is effectively captured in James Joyce's short story "The Dead," which unlike the first two stories discussed here was published before the Great War and addresses a different problematic—it focuses on the evocation of sufferance caused by a lack of fulfillment in love. The theme of loss which binds the three stories analyzed in the present study takes on a different tone here. The loss is not that of the loved one in the wake of the war or the physical injury that occurs in warfare, but it is a bereavement acutely felt because of the death of the beloved and the painful feelings that arise from a mismatched emotional relationship. The story's narrative operates on many levels, the most engaging of which is the thematization of mourning and spectrality. It is no coincidence that the story's action opens on Twelfth Night, Epiphany Eve, commonly believed to be the night of ghosts' visitations, and features a spiritual recalling of a dead lover.¹⁷ The pivot of the story's action, a Christmas gathering, unveils the hidden desires and motivations of its participants;¹⁸ however, even more profoundly, it constitutes the background for a disclosure of an individual drama and the need to break through the silence of an unresolved inner conflict. The inimitable character of Joyce's story rests on the interplay of silence,

¹⁷ For the intricate connection between the Twelfth Night and a love story, see e.g., Shakespeare.

¹⁸ Cf. Wierciński, *Existential Hermeneutics*. In his gloss on Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve*, Wierciński elaborates the significance of *conversation* understood as *conversion* and highlights "the importance of the intellectual debate for a surrender to the hegemony of pious sentimentality, the spiritual over the intellectual, and thus testifying to the discrepancy between the power of the intellect, which *di-vides* and the power of the spirit consolidating and bringing everyone and everything together" (*Existential Hermeneutics* 30–32).

conversation, epiphany and the ensuing transformation. The hermeneutic interpretation of the narrative involves a recognition of the dynamic of conversation which “is steered by the intermingling silences, epiphanies, and conversions. Inasmuch as silence breaks the continuum of the conversation in an unexpected fashion, so does epiphany with its essential prerequisite of suddenness destroy the division between the known and the unknown and contributes to the dynamism of conversation” (Holda 166).

The climax of “The Dead” treats us to a three-fold epiphany, if not more:¹⁹ the revelation of the past’s hidden truth, the unveiling of the intricacies of a spousal relationship, and a deeper understanding of reality in its truth and pretenses. After the Christmas party, the two leading characters, Gabriel and Gretta, his wife, retreat to a hotel room for the late night, but their departure is preceded by some incident; on leaving, Gabriel catches the sight of his wife transfixed by music—a song, “The Lass of Aughrim.” This seemingly trivial event spurs Gretta’s most tumultuous agitation. In the hotel room she suddenly pulls back the veil and reveals the youthful, romantic liaison she had with a boy named Michael, whom she believes to have died for her. Gretta’s confession prompts an epiphanic moment in which Gabriel acutely learns his unimportance despite being married to her. Traumatic in its character, Gabriel’s bitter epiphany—an event of recognition, the sudden understanding of the superficial reality of their relationship and his marginal and clownish position—becomes the space of the interpretation of the trauma of the Other.

Repressed for years, Gretta’s grief triggered by a song which reminds her of her girlish infatuation pours out in an uncontrollable narrative. The romantic but tragic story which lies dormant in her heart suddenly resurfaces. “The Dead” aptly embodies the element of latency which characterizes trauma and is well explicated by Levine and Frederick:

Symptoms can remain dormant, accumulating over years even decades. Then during a stressful period, or as the result of another incident, they can show up without warning. There may also be no indication of the original cause. Thus, a seemingly minor event can give rise to a sudden breakdown, similar to one that might be caused by a single catastrophic event. (45)

Trauma is what remains when the event itself is no longer active in consciousness. Expressed in words for the first time, Gretta’s traumatic experience of the loss of a loved one becomes a cathartic narrative, followed by tears and fast falling asleep. Feeling himself to be an intruder

¹⁹ For more on epiphany in “The Dead,” see e.g., Orr (35–36) or Cixous (613–14).

on the mourning of the Other,²⁰ Gabriel listens to her story as a wounded healer, suffering from his painful discovery of the illusory nature of passion and love, and thus being negatively stigmatized. Playing the role of the analyst—Gabriel patiently asks Gretta (the apparent analysand) questions to help her unveil the content of the traumatic experience and release her trauma—he becomes the victimized party in this new constellation of affection and search for empathy.

The scene of Gretta's unexpected disclosure of her past is permeated with irony as the drama of memorializing her early fascination is juxtaposed with Gabriel's longing for his wife's response to the arousal of his desire. The incongruity of their longings produces a formidable effect. The absurdity of Gabriel's need for intimacy is amplified when he is unexpectedly compelled to partake in the recollection of the intimate bond between his wife and a man whom he at first assumes to be his rival. Gretta's emotional crisis gives rise to the third epiphany—Gabriel's deepened understanding of reality in its complexity, allurements and lost façade. This is a re-awakening to a transformed life (May 59), to being which includes and honors inner life, which allows one to remain in harmony with the mysticism of the universe and which does not delimit itself to external and petty things only. Surprisingly, while wounded himself, Gabriel faces the most demanding task of responding to Gretta's pain. Delicately caressing her hand and refraining from tactless words, he turns out to be an effective, wounded healer. As Kearney explains:

Wounded healers are those, in sum, who maintain such equilibrium in a subtle interplay of word and touch, narrativity and tactility, effect and affect. To have the "healing touch" means knowing when it is time to listen and when it is time to speak. When to draw close and when to draw back. When to hold and when to withhold. In the final analysis, it's a matter of tact. (*Imagination Now* 134)

Gabriel's healing touch betokens his tactful understanding of the trauma of the Other. The physical touch goes hand in hand with the spiritual one. The untouchable area of mourning is soothed and pacified by the appropriateness of bodily and mental touch.

²⁰ Analyzing a similar situation of confessing the love for a dead lover to a new partner in the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Cathy Caruth draws attention to the manifold betrayal that pertains to the complex reality of the new relationship: "Telling the story of her love affair with the German, telling, specifically, the story of his death, is for the woman a betrayal of the loved one, a betrayal of the one who died, with the one who is alive and listens. What the woman mourns is not only an erotic betrayal, that is, but a betrayal precisely in the act of telling, in the very transmission of an understanding that erases the specificity of a death" (*Unclaimed Experience* 27).

Joyce explores trauma as a quandary in which the vacillating line between knowing and the not-knowing is its constitutive element. However, the discrepancy between knowledge and a lack of it is not just an epistemological issue, but an existential and ethical question which, if unresolved, bears on human conduct and has far-reaching consequences. The interplay of understanding and misunderstanding, concealment and unconcealment, which pertains to a traumatic experience calls for a hermeneutic interrogation, which allows for the location of otherwise undetectable areas of meaning of past experience, since it also acknowledges as legitimate those aspects of the narrated story which are evidently confusing or embarrassing.

The narration of trauma by a wounded party happens in a non-linear and often indirect way because the unveiling of truth causes pain and indicates vulnerability. Significantly, trauma involves a pattern of repetition examined by Freud.²¹ After Freud, Cathy Caruth effectively explores yet other constitutive element of traumatic experience which interlocks with the repetitive scheme—namely, latency:

The breach in the mind—the psyche’s awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not the direct perception of danger, that is, that constitutes the threat for the psyche, but the fact that the danger is recognized as such one moment too late. (“Trauma, Silence, Survival” 50)

Necessitating repetition in the form of a return to the wound, in its orientation toward a potential reopening of the past experience, paradoxically, trauma engenders an impasse in understanding. Trauma can be understood thus as the state of remaining silent about the harmful past until silence is broken and the scraps of memories are brought together to form a more coherent whole.

CONCLUSION

Hermeneutics of the wound interrogates the ways in which a human being is affected by trauma, how it dislodges vulnerability and how the vulnerability of the wounded party is reflected in that of another.

²¹ Richard Kearney investigates the fort/da paradigm in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory indicating that for the Vienna thinker the basic issue was to explore “how are humans so wounded that they prefer to return to their pain compulsively than follow their normal ‘pleasure principle’? His answer was the existence of a death drive (*thanatos*) that accompanies our life drive (*eros*) and sometimes overwhelms it” (“Healing Touch” 2).

Recognizing conversation and touch as two vital tools in a healing process, hermeneutic investigation of trauma sensitizes us to the human's being-in-the-world as a lingual and bodily being. It encourages us to take full cognizance of language as a vehicle of interpreting, explaining and understanding trauma. On the one hand, speaking trauma away in conversation brings us to a deeper and far more comprehensive grasp of it; on the other hand, though, it does not generate a possibility of complete understanding and healing. The undecidable, the uncertain and the vague pertain to the very character of a therapeutic conversation.

Assuming the elusive nature of language, the healing process makes use of the fissures, hesitations and repetitions in speech as they are the very territory in which the potential for a cure, and, thus, psychic equilibrium can be found. The state of balance which ensues as the result of therapy is not something stable, though. It is not achieved once and for ever in a solidified form; rather it is a hermeneutic space of dynamic interplay between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the threatening and the hopeful, the challenging and the consoling. Even if the wound heals, the scar remains, as healing does not restore precisely what had been before. The processual nature of healing presupposes a reconciliation with the true self, which is not only (re)discovered but reborn. Reading *from* the speech of the wounded party, hermeneutics of the wound reads also *from* the afflicted body. Human bodily being is the locus of the physical and psychical sides of trauma. The inclusion of the human body as the terrain of interpretation and understanding trauma gives a fuller account of human vulnerability and directs attention to possible ways of healing.²² Just like the spoken narrative, the human body tells the story of the wound and is the site of a possible cure.

The short stories examined in the present study reveal some fundamental truths about trauma and the healing process, but also unveil those regions of meaning which are specifically disclosable via the indirectness pertaining to narrative. Trauma is a multi-faceted phenomenon and healing is not something which can be easily completed. Rather it is a process which does not always end satisfactorily but is open to new possibilities of surmounting human pain. Kipling, Lawrence and Joyce explore both language's possibilities and its insufficiencies (the powerlessness which remains deeply interwoven with the finite nature of human existence)²³ to

²² See e.g., Kearney and Treanor (editors), *Carnal Hermeneutics*—a cumulative comprehension of a variety of meanings which ensue from the human carnal embodiment. presented by diverse scholars.

²³ For the power and powerlessness of language to convey all that pertains to a human being's being-in-the-world cf. Gadamer (9–17). See also e.g., Wierciński, *Existential Hermeneutica* (76–79).

account for trauma. The non-transparent nature of traumatic experience calls to hermeneutically employ the power of language in a healing process in the patient movement from *re*-pression to *ex*-pression, but also to deploy bodily contact to investigate that which is behind verbal expression. The renewed access and reevaluation of the self on the verbal and non-verbal level not only indicate the indissoluble oneness of body and soul but the true possibilities of healing recognized by carnal hermeneutics. The language of trauma in its very essence is the language of unfathomability. The acuteness of traumatic experience rests on its inalienable character. In many ways the survivor's post-traumatic stress is the effect of the difficulty of the traumatic event, in its enfolded character, being understood by the Other. Nevertheless, as the analyzed stories reveal, the possibility of recovery comes in the reconnection of the wounded party with his/her true self, which often occurs in the passage from disintegration to an integration of the reality of the self with that of another and of the outer world.

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Małgorzata Holda, PhD in English literature (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń), PhD in philosophy (The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Kraków), is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of Lodz. She is Junior Fellow of the International Institute for Hermeneutics. She is the author of *Paul Ricoeur’s Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject* (2018) and *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer’s and Virginia Woolf’s Hermeneutics of the Beautiful* (2021), as well as numerous articles on philosophical hermeneutics and Anglophone modern and postmodern fiction.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3772-6297>

malgorzata.holda@uni.lodz.pl