

**THE NEVER-ENDING PRESENT: TRAUMA AND NOSTALGIA**  
**PINTÉR JUDIT NÓRA**

**THESIS**

In my dissertation I examine how traumatic and nostalgic memory function, and how these phenomena affect the subject's present and identity. These phenomena are examples of the past manifesting itself as a component of the present for the subject. My theoretical framework relies primarily on phenomenology and Freudian psychoanalysis. Examples are drawn from the historical and aesthetic experience of the Holocaust.

The dissertation deals with the relationship between these two phenomena, and furthermore with memory, changes in meaning, and the history of the notions of trauma and nostalgia. We examine the structure of traumatic experience, examining whether it has the same structure as an 'everyday' experience or an aesthetic one. Where the traumatic experience diverges, we examine how it operates together with recollection.

In the course of the examination it will come to light that trauma and nostalgia have a serious lesson for the subject's identity, namely that the identity has many parts that cannot be narrated and are indeed not even part of consciousness.

My approach is partly phenomenological and partly psychological. This is a result of my education and my belief that work is most fruitful when it blends various approaches. One of my most basic notions that 'unconscious' is not a noun but an adjective; I regard this as an invisible blueprint for experience. That means I posit certain processes that make up unconsciousness and try to deal with this issue in the framework of transcendental phenomenology: How can something appear in our consciousness that is itself not conscious?

The first chapter lays out the foundation for all our subsequent research. It surveys the phenomenological and psychoanalytical approaches to the unconscious, time, recollection, and the imagination, and attempts to coordinate these. An important research field within Husserlian phenomenology is time-consciousness which, like psychoanalysis, deals with the past and our

unconscious relationship with it. Our goal is to make the psychoanalytical notion of the unconscious fruitful for phenomenology. That helps us understand how a traumatic or nostalgic memory remains living for the subject.

## Trauma

The second part of my work takes the Holocaust as a collective and individual trauma of European history and deals with the effects of traumatization in general, with the possibilities for the integration of trauma into memory and identity, as all these appear in texts dealing with the Holocaust including literary works, essays, and philosophical reflections. In these trauma narratives one must deal primarily with *interpretations*. These offer, both for the author and the community of receivers, meaningful and coherent stories they can accept as theirs, stories that aid the processing of events and their integration into individual and cultural memory.

Processing historical traumas such as the Holocaust is a problem not only for survivors but for future generations, as it requires finding ways to re-incorporate and historically integrate the event into a coherent narrative. We may follow this process of integration by considering the testimonies, autobiographies, and memoirs of authors like Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Tadeusz Borowski, and Imre Kertész, as well as philosophical interpretations of Arendt, Adorno, Blanchot, and Jankelevitch, as well as the reception of these works. The task of integration and interpretation has not yet been accomplished. It is indispensable to deal fairly with the current state of the process of integration. What is the status of the original texts and memories in the light of cultural memory? In order to answer such a question one has to deal with the work of Giorgio Agamben, Julia Kristeva, Ágnes Heller, Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Simon Critchley, Dominick LaCapra, and others. Our research should cover the shared horizon of psychology, aesthetics and narratology.

Consequently trauma, as it smashes the framework of our reflections upon history, identity and the meaning of these – setting out from the psychological term of post-traumatic growth – can trigger processes that prepare the acquisition of a new and valid perspective, and as such it might become a foundation for value creation. In this respect the work of Imre Kertész gains an eminent importance.

Both in his literary works and in his essays there appears the possibility that from the experience of a trauma believed to be resistant to processing, there is nonetheless a pathway to value creation, for learning and building. This creation involves realizing the necessity of creating a new, more realistic view of the human condition involving both psychology and philosophy. In my judgment, dealing with the Holocaust should always involve a moment of self-reflection à la Kertész. It is also indispensable to analyze the contradiction between the Kertész' approach and that of other writers who denied the possibility of reconciliation and often committed suicide decades after the events, writers like Jean Améry and Primo Levi. In addition I examine the impact of Kertész in the field of the discourse of cultural memory and identity.

## Nostalgia

A third chapter deals with the phenomenon of nostalgia. How can one remember unpleasant memories with nostalgia? How does a memory become nostalgic at all? Is nostalgia recollection, fantasy, or melancholy? Is the subsequent history of a nostalgic experience subject to modification through experiences and newer understandings such as everyday memories? To what extent do the principles of experience apply to nostalgia, and to what extent does the phenomenon possess a proper structure?

There are a variety of memories -- happy or sad, collective or individual, real or imaginary -- which may make us feel nostalgic. What might be the common feature of these memories? They are somehow familiar. But what does it mean if something is familiar to me? Our first home is our childhood itself, with all its physical, spiritual and otherwise meaningful attributes. Its familiarity is composed of many habits, values, and scenes: the tone in which our parents spoke with us, a look they would give us, smells we smelled, things which surrounded us. It could be secure, sad, dangerous, wayward, warm – any number of things. Familiarity thus appears to us as the most singular and proper feature of memories and the atmosphere that distills from these elements.

The significance of childhood lies in the essential effect of this quality of hominess on our later life, since this will determine the situations and relationships (or even the smells) that make us feel at home. This feeling will direct us in decisions and choices. If something is homey for someone then she is tied to it; she cannot alienate it from herself, even if this relationship is ambivalent or full of struggle. Therefore it has a certain kind of compelling strength, one that almost tempts her to get entangled in it.

As a 'home' is a place for the most elemental familiarity, it is simultaneously a place where one can find her way and predict the course of things, where everything that happens there is evident to her. One can move easily within the compass of a familiar situation, knowing its rules. Furthermore these schemas of the 'mental homeland' appear in one's later understandings: one can interpret a situation within these original frameworks.

#### Trauma and Nostalgia

The fourth section deals with the works of Imre Kertész. Kertész' recollection of the Holocaust has two psychological elements: the problem of survival and the trauma of the concentration camp that has become nostalgic for him over time. Writing is the only cure. I examine this process of self-healing and the interplay of trauma and nostalgia in his essays and literary works. Kertész' psychological *ars poetica* that self-healing comes through writing. Hence we would like to observe how the psychological, aesthetical and ethical dimensions interact.

In the last part we compare the phenomena of trauma and nostalgia and analyze their relationship to personal and narrative identity. We examine whether trauma builds identity in some special way, or destroys it. We criticize the theory of Ricoeur on narrative identity and work up the concept of "traumatized and unconscious identity."