

# Past Traumas

The Representation of  
History and Peace  
Education



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## *Literature as a Way to Overcome Traumas: Reflections*<sup>12</sup>

It is a well known issue that defining literature is not easy as it seems, and a brief talk on literature as a way to overcome traumas is more difficult. For this reason, what I intend to do is not give answers of how literature can be used to overcome traumas. Instead, I would like to provide some examples from literary works and show how these works can be considered significant while overcoming past traumas.

What is trauma? Of course, it is not a one, univocal concept. Instead, the definition of trauma has been changing through time. A dictionary definition of trauma is as follows: “an experience that produces psychological injury or pain” (dictionary.com). Regarding the definition, a trauma is ‘an experience’ that is a result of ‘a psychological injury or pain.’ This shows how trauma can go deep inside of a person. Stephen Joseph’s (2012) essay entitled “What is Trauma?” defines the term more or less in the same way:

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The American Psychiatric Association's current definition of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), introduced in 1994, states that a person must have experienced or witnessed an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and which involved fear, helplessness, or horror.

By reading Joseph (2012), one can argue that trauma is a term that is used to express the state of mind or a feeling that is related with fear, or a painful psychological experience. However, as Craparo (2013) claims, not all fearful events or catastrophes cause trauma but only some of them. Since trauma is a selective issue, one can ask, 'what literature has got to do with traumas?' An answer to this question may vary, however, for the sake of this paper; I just would like to limit the subject on the relationship between literature and the ways of using it for overcoming traumas.

Regarding this, one can say that: although trauma is usually a personal problem; it can be collective, and shared by more than an individual, such as a traumatic event in the history of a nation, culture, or a country (Volkan 1979). In that sense, trauma, as a term, is departing from the individual and is shared by other members of the 'nation.' Here, it becomes much more complex than just being 'a fearful or painful psychological experience of an individual.'

Then, how trauma can be social? In other words, can we discuss 'trauma' in a social sense? If so, how? If not, why? What I would like to do with this paper is to open a site to discuss these issues and question it, rather than finding exact answers.

It is well known that the case of Cyprus is not unique. In other words, Cyprus is not the only place in this world that suffered because of wars. Of course, this does not mean that what happened in Cyprus was just a 'normal thing.' Instead, when one reads the world history; whether we like it or not, one can see that it was a part of the world history. However, it does not mean that what happened in the past was good. On the contrary, the living experiences of people and trauma are interrelated and the elements can be seen in contemporary Cyprus history.

Based on the official histories of both sides, one can say that each side is focusing on some particular events and stress the issue as a trauma that can help the 'nation' for coming together and 'react against the enemy' (Karahasan 2005; Karahasan and Latif 2010; Kızılyürek 1999; Papadakis 1993; 2008). Having an enemy is a significant element in nation building and, as it is known; 'other' is mostly seen as negative, homogenous, and bad, whereas "we" are the good, the victim, and homogenous (Karahasan 2003; Kızılyürek 1999; Papadakis 1993; 2008). What kind of history deals with all that? Here, history is not just a discipline that studies 'the past.' Recent studies on history shows us the fact that history and the

past are different things (Fischer et. al. 2011). However, before talking about the difference between history and the past, it is significant to note that:

History emerges as the salient factor in the construction of national identity and otherness – what separates Us from Them. Not surprisingly, then, educational practices have been used to create nationalist subjects. Curricula and pedagogies implore students to remember the nation's glories and honour the leaders and warriors who defended the lands and values of the nation. Students are repeatedly reminded of what it means to belong to the nation by reasserting particular values, principles of patriotic responsibility and moral conceptions of right and wrong (Zembylas and Karahasan 2006, p. 15).

The argument on the construction of national identity and teaching of history is, of course, not new and there is a huge literature on it (AKTI 2006; Bekerman 2010; Beyidođlu Önen et. al. 2010; Kızılyürek 1999; Stavrinides 1999; Zembylas and Karahasan 2006). However, the quote demonstrates that both sides of the island tend to use history teaching to legitimise their official discourse (Karahasan 2005; Zembylas & Karahasan 2006; Karahasan and Latif 2010; Papadakis 1993; 2010). In that sense, as aforementioned, the case of Cyprus is not unique and the subject of history and how it can be used in Cyprus became a significant issue especially after 2003, the time

when the checkpoints opened after 29 years of separation. Although separation is still a physical reality, still, most people in Cyprus have the chance to see the 'supposed accuracy' of what they were taught during school (Spyrou 2002). Zembylas and Karahasan's (2006) paper can be seen as an example for 'overcoming past traumas.' Their own personal narratives show the relationship between memory and how personal narratives can be used as a way to overcome nationalist discourses.

Our personal narratives highlight two important aspects in the circulation of stories that are woven through nationalist discourses of education. First, personal narratives of education in both communities provide significant evidence of the ways in which pedagogical practices are constructed around the politics of emotions (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990) such as hatred, trauma, resentment, and anger. The theme of politics of emotions emphasises how emotions are not simply an individual matter, but are crucial to the formation of social norms and collective imaginations (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990; Lupton, 1998). In other words, emotions circulate and play an important part in the constitution of collective identities and power relations within a community (pp. 21-22).

Zembylas and Karahasan's (2006) personal narratives show how official narratives can be a part of collective identity in general.

Up until now, this paper focused on the issue of trauma and its relation with history. I acknowledge that there are some gaps, however I would like to ‘fill the gaps’ later. For the sake of the title of the conference, I would like to focus more on “how to overcome past traumas?” There are different ways to overcome past traumas. At the moment, I would like to focus on one aspect of it. One can argue that literature is one of the most important ways for us to overcome the past traumas, since past traumas are collective and shared by most people in the ‘community’—in our case, the relationship between history and traumatic events that are being used in the construction of a nation.

In her article, “Moving Beyond the Examination of History,” *Martina Sabra* (2012) claims that “Literature as a manageable alternative to a reality etched by violence and chaos; writing as a way of overcoming personal and collective trauma: these are highly-evident features of post-independence Algerian literature.” As she mentions, this feature is not unique to Algeria but can be found in many places. Germany is another example. For the moment, let us focus on Uwe Timm’s, *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* [In the Shadow of My Brother]. This work can be considered as an attempt to overcome ‘past traumas,’ especially the experience of the Second World War and the era of Nazi Germany.



### ***Am Beispiel meines Bruders***

*Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2011) is a literary work that is about settling the past of both Uwe Timm's personal self and Germany as a country. The story of the book can be summarised as follows: Uwe Timm's older brother, Karl-Heinz, who was a soldier in the army SS Totenkopf Division, a special unit, dies in Ukraine in 1943 in a hospital. After he dies, although it is forbidden to keep a diary in the army, officials send his belongings to the family, including a notebook that was his diary. When Karl-Heinz died, Uwe Timm was at the age of three. In a talk on the book in Cyprus on 27<sup>th</sup> of March, 2012, in Goethe Institute, Timm said that he could not be able to read Karl-Heinz's diary for a long time (Timm 2012). Later, when he read it, Timm said he was shocked and questioned not only how Karl-Heinz, his older brother, was a soldier in Nazi Germany but also how his family always talked about him as an honest person, and how, almost the entire country of Germany was either following Hitler or could not find ways to strongly oppose him.

According to Timm (2011):

I tried to write on my brother many times. However, every attempt became just a try. I have read the letters and the diary that he took in the front of Russia during the war. A notebook with light brown colour with an inscription 'Notes.' (Timm 2011, p. 12, my translation).

What the quote shows the fact that it is difficult to write on his older brother because writing on a personal issue can be emotional and subjective. However, in the case of Timm (2011), it is beyond personal because the experience of Timm, a writer who took in part of the student movements during the late 60s, had a brother who was supporting the Nazi regime. It is interesting to see how Timm (2011), as a writer, uses writing as a way to reconcile not just his personal self but also contemporary history of Germany. In that case, what Timm (2011) with this work does can be considered as a significant attempt: he uses literature not just as a way to overcome the past traumas of the individual but a collective trauma of a country. Using his brother's diary as a starting point, he intervenes throughout the book and questions, for example, the German society and why they followed someone like Hitler.

In the beginning of the book, Timm (2011) relates why he waited so long to write this book, he claims that:

Another reason was my mother. It was impossible to write on it while she was alive. I was imagining how she could answer my questions. The dead shall rest in peace. After my older sister, the last person who knew my older brother, died, I became free; here, what I mean by I becoming free is questioning everything and do not think about anything or anyone (Timm 2011, p. 13, my translation).

As mentioned, personal narratives are significant because by looking at them, one can see how politics and things like trauma, anger, and history are constructed in the society. In the case of Timm (2011), it is a journey through the history of Timm's family life as well as an epitome the past of Nazi Germany and how the Germany that we know came into being.

In other words, as Timm (2011) claims several times throughout the book, although the main aim of writing this book is personal, his experience of having a brother who fought for the Nazis —and his memory regarding him is not sharp—and he, as a person, and a writer, activist, and socialist questions almost everything in his society. In that case, Timm (2011) used writing as a way to overcome his past, a kind of healing process that can help him to re-discover himself, as well the contemporary problems in the history of Germany.

In the book, Timm (2011) quotes Stettin's speech that was given to Waffen-SS on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1941, after Germany:

This is a war of world views and war of races. In that war, on the one hand there is National Socialism, German, northern blood and a world that is built upon this idea, a world that we are dreaming of it: a nice world with social welfare, it may have some problems in some details at the moment but on the whole, it is happy, nice, and filled with culture,

same as our Germany. On the other hand, there is a society in 180 million, a mix of races and societies, even it is impossible to spell their names and when people look at them, they can slaughter them without having any mercy (Timm 2011, p. 35, my translation).

Right after quoting Stettin, Timm (2011) thinks about the relationship between people like Stettin and his brother. He asks, whether his brother took in part of the ethnic cleansing of Jews or the Partisans. Here, Timm (2011) points out that: on the one hand, people who fought for the Nazis were educated people, for example, most of them knew Mozart, Holderlin etc. but still it did not prevent them to take in part of killings or supporting the death of the Jews or anyone who was against Hitler's policies. In Timm's (2011) words: "Culture or education empowering people, did not make them to resist —on the contrary, it did not work out" (p. 57).

At the end of the book, he comes to a point that this small diary becomes an important document that helped him to reveal his personal feelings as well as re-evaluating a period in the history of his native country. As the title of the book suggests, although he is 'in the shadow of his brother,' with the process of writing and reading works as a kind of healing process, both for Timm (2011) and for Germany. Whereas, that sort of thing cannot be in history teaching.

Mostly, textbooks deal with the past in a different manner than literature. Textbooks fictionalise the facts (Karahasan & Latif 2010) through a narrative, however, the difference between a literary text and a textbook lie on the fact that in literary works it is already known by readers that it might be based on ‘truth’ or ‘facts’ but they are not the ‘truth’ themselves. Neither the literary work argues that it ‘reflects reality’ nor the experiences but it is a re-presentation and/or re-evaluation. On the other hand, textbooks argue that they are narrating, mostly, the official and the true version of history (Karahasan 2005; Karahasan and Latif 2010; Kızılyürek 1999; Papadakis 1993; 2008).

One of the most significant things about literary texts while overcoming traumas is that they create a site where different parties can talk each other. In other words, literary texts and/or artworks create dialogue and that is very important, if we want to overcome past traumas.

### ***Birds of a Feather as a Way to Overcome Past Traumas*<sup>13</sup>**

Another recent example for creating dialogue and opening ‘new fields’ to overcome traumas is a documentary, *Birds of a Feather*, which is based on oral history and directed by Stefanos Evripidou and Stephen Nugent. The significance of this documentary lie on the fact that by focusing on oral history and the multiplicity of narratives, the documentary

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13. More information regarding the documentary can be found in Karahasan (2012).

shows how problematic to have a one, single history not just in 'two different nations' but it is almost impossible to have a 'grand narrative' of the 'same nation.'

As inhabitants of the four villages of Peristerona, Katokopia, Afania and Maratha speak throughout the whole documentary, we see that the stories of the individuals begin to change according to the settings, time, and their surroundings. Right at the beginning of the documentary, we watch a Greek Cypriot claiming that an event did not take place as it was told whilst another Greek Cypriot supports the Turkish Cypriot's version of the story. This shows us how prone to change or interpretation oral history can be. This of course should not be perceived as a negative aspect but on the contrary, should be welcomed as a positive process. Why? Simply the fact that the two sides are sitting together, despite their disagreements and listening and talking about each other's' versions of events in itself can and should be perceived as a positive step. If we are to quote Yannis Papadakis from the documentary: "Each side is screaming. It is nor trying to talk to the other side." If we were to describe the situation of Salih Niyazi and Andreas Kyriakides, chatting at the village coffee shop in Peristerona through Derrida's (2001) views concerning forgiveness (Karahasan 2012, p. 60).

This is an important attempt in order to overcome the past traumas. In Derrida's (2001) words

As soon as the victim 'understands' the criminal, as soon as she exchanges, speaks, agrees with him, the scene of reconciliation, the scene of reconciliation has commenced, and with it this ordinary forgiveness which is anything but forgiveness. Even if I say 'I do not forgive you' to someone who asks my forgiveness, but whom I understand and who understands me, then a process of reconciliation has begun; the third has intervened. Yet, this is the end of pure forgiveness (p. 49).

As it can be read from Derrida (2001), what literary/artworks do is to give a chance for different parties in creating dialogue. Although '*forgiveness is madness*' and '*forgiveness only forgives the unforgivable*' (Derrida 2001), still these artworks are useful because they help the parties to exchange information, listen to each and that help the phase for reconciliation. In other words, "What the documentary tries to do is open a path towards reconciliation through a common language and dialogue" (Karahasan 2012, p. 46).

On the whole, there are many ways to overcome traumas, the unwanted accumulation of the past and literature/artworks are just one among many. The significance of literary works is important because people who write/shoot these works are a part of the society and

it makes people to realise the multiplicity of events as well as perceptions of people in the society that they are living in. It is also an attempt to speak the same language, which is a way towards reconciliation as Derrida (2001) argues.

In conclusion, what Enzo Bianchi (2010) says about dialogue can be seen in literary works and how it can be used to overcome past traumas. In his book, *L'altro siamo noi*, Bianchi says that “il dialogo non ha come fine il consenso ma un reciproco progresso, un avanzare insieme [the dialogue does not end with a consensus but a reciprocal progress that we move forward altogether] (p. 14, my translation). If we would like to overcome our past traumas, we need to create dialogue because only through dialogue we will be able to listen each other and that will be the key towards reconciling the past in order to move forward.

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