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Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement

Introduction to Issue 18

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Trauma, both as an existential experience and a topic of study, has long preoccupied literature, philosophy, history, and psychology; uprootedness, displacement, anguish, destruction, oppression, objectification, and dehumanisation are all embodied in social and historical events that leave permanent scars in collective and individual mindsets. Trauma embodies the following paradox of consciousness: it is too overwhelming to be fully grasped; on the other hand, it is too persistent and meaningful to be lost in the sea of oblivion. From ancient Greek tragedies that dramatise suffering and loss to modern philosophical accounts of critical theory, trauma exposes the fault lines within human subjectivity and the fragile continuity of space, time, and self. Across centuries and disciplines, trauma is treated not merely as the aftermath of a catastrophic experience; it is a pathology of psychical revelation that opens up new pathways concerning what it means to exist, and to live in the tension as well as in the interstices between memory and forgetfulness, belonging and exile, self and other.

Engaging with the philosophy of Simone Weil, we may conceptualise trauma as emerging from the disappointment of misguided beliefs in progress. In her commentary on Book 22 of the *Iliad*, she focuses on the moment when Andromache, Hector's wife, 'summoned fair-haired handmaidens', and 'told them / to stand a tripod over fire and prepare / a hot bath for Hector's return from battle. / She did not know that, far from the bath they drew, /Athena had wrought death through Achilles' hands'.[1] Hector is already dead; he was slain on the battlefield, far from home. And the comforts (hot bath) being prepared for him are now pointless. This is a moment of bitter irony: the reader knows Hector is dead, but Andromache does not. The image of the 'hot bath' here symbolises the deep yearning for peace, reconciliation, and reunion; these longings are violently negated by the realities of war. Weil uses this passage as a warning against the dreamers who anticipate a world free from hardship, 'thanks to progress'.[2] For them, the *Iliad* appears as 'an historical document' to challenge their expectations; for '[n]early all of the *Iliad* takes place far from hot baths'.[3] Hence, the central focus of the *Iliad* is not *kleos áphthiton*, implying worldly fame and reputation, attributed to the courageous men in battle.[4] The deeper message conveyed here is the following: complete rejection of optimistic ideologies that celebrate human progress; these ideologies that conceive history as a linear forward-moving path, towards a new dawn of freedom from oppression and injustice.[5] Human life, she argued, both in antiquity and in the present, unfolds far from comfort and security.[6] In other words, this ruthless denial of peace and comfort results from might (*la force*), which Weil understands as an enduring and inescapable feature of the human condition. For Weil, the *Iliad* demonstrates that such force is not accidental or exceptional; it is profoundly

[1] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 22, 442-6.

[2] Weil S. 2005: 183.

[3] Weil S. 2005: 185.

[4] Adkins A. 1960: 55; cf. Tripoula I. 2024: 126.

[5] In a previous work, I have framed as optimistic all the ideological trends that adhere to the idea of linear historical progress thanks to the spread of market innovation and expansion, or propose a new historical age, in which humanity would be emancipated from suffering and oppression once and for all. Cf. Theodosiadis M. 2025: 5-6, 21; Theodosiadis M. 2021: 13-21; Lasch C. 1991.

[6] Weil S. 2005: 185.

woven into the existence of human life, and only through compromising with its harsh reality can persons cultivate moral attention to partially mitigate its effects. In short, trauma is implicit in the abrupt and cruel disruption of a life anchored in optimistic expectations suppressed by the abruptness of the human condition.

In the present issue of Dia-noesis, trauma is discussed through a variety of prisms and disciplines. Ancient Greek tragedies offer rich insights into the causes and consequences of traumatic memories: Shikha Salma employs gender perspectives by discussing Euripides' *Medea*; Neelima Luthra argues that Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax* respond to war-induced trauma, depicting alienation, the breakdown of language, and cathartic suicides that reflect shifting social and political realities in Athens; Efe Basturk links Agamben's concept of witnessing Auschwitz to Sophocles' *Antigone*, showing how traumatic witnessing exposes the fragility of life under law and entails ethical and political responsibility; Shobhana Sree reinterprets *Clytemnestra* as a traumatic and estranged figure whose chthonic, maternal power challenges patriarchal order and civic law; Oksana Babelyuk and Olena Koliasa focus on how Australian Aboriginal and Ukrainian children's narratives reveal trauma, exile, and cultural displacement, highlighting resilience and the formation of hybrid identities; Christos Antoniadis reflects on time, history, and meaning, using Monty Python's *Life of Brian* to show how humor highlights society's struggle with trauma and life's absurdity; Boyan Dafov focuses on the philosophical account of trauma and exile; Ashita Chadha and Aruna Bhat examine Kashmiri literary narratives through Merleau-Ponty's 'lived body,' showing how trauma from exile and displacement disrupts embodied meaning; Namrata Mohan and Sathya Pramode explore *Coolie Woman*, revealing the oppression of indentured women and amplifying their voices through gendered and postcolonial analysis; Ariadni Polychroniou reconceptualises displacement and precarity to reveal shared struggles and solidarity between refugees, migrants, and citizens; Elina Kushch reflects on the national trauma of the Russia-Ukraine war; Oleksandra Palchevska and Iryna Aleksandruk show how Madeline Miller's *Circe* transforms classical texts, using first-person narration to depict displacement, trauma, and female-centered vulnerability, in contrast to male-focused spatial and power themes in the originals; Asma Aijaz argues that Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* depicts Hurricane

Katrina as a site of cumulative racialized trauma, showing how structural racism destabilizes Black families and redefines the disaster narrative; Manas M S explores how climate-induced displacement disrupt the embodied self, fracturing identity and subjectivity, as displaced bodies exist in a liminal state between bare life and political recognition, highlighting both ontological and political crises; Vineetha Anitha Vineshkumar examines exile as a psychological and ontological condition, showing how transgender selfhood in A. Revathi's memoir emerges through narrating trauma, linking exile, identity, and self-awareness; likewise, Yiannis Mitrou proposes a phenomenology of mediation, showing how embodied perception and media forms co-create meaning and arguing that media are open, fragmentary processes that express the inherent incompleteness of human experience; and Panos Eliopoulos suggests that in contexts of exile and cultural displacement, bioethics alone may deepen trauma, requiring doctors and patients to renegotiate identities and suspend assumptions to enable meaningful ethical communication.

While reflecting on cases of war and displacement, I came across a disturbing testimony from the Cambodian genocide: 'Once I stole some rice from the fields for my pregnant sister, who was starving. The Khmer Rouge guards caught me and beat me with an axe. Then they put me in jail, where I endured further cruel punishments. A man who had grown up in my mother's village and was imprisoned with me went to the prison chief, telling him that I was still very young and begging him to have me released. About two weeks later, I was let out of prison. I subsequently learnt that the man who had helped me was accused of having relatives in enemy areas and has not been seen again'.[7] The violence and cruelty described by the author, the horrors of the human condition, the suffering and dehumanisation caused by might and lust for domination, cause intense dismay towards the consequences of human formidableness. We may also bring to mind the trauma caused by the Yezidi genocide and the mass killing of Kurds in Halabja,[8] where entire communities were shattered by might.

In both cases, we witness collective trauma inflicted not only due to physical devastation; the rupture of the basic assumptions that deny safety, dignity, and the expectation of a minimally just

[7] Chhang Y. 2007: 157.

[8] Cf. Schmidinger 2022.

world, is at the heart of our concern. More severely, we see persons being converted into 'things'; ethical relationality is violently replaced by *hubris*, the most frantic human desire for exaggeration in the pursuit of rapacious ends.[9] In the wake of ongoing hardships, reality ruthlessly and violently grounds us to the cruelty of suffering, oppression, genocide, and extreme affliction; in Homeric terms, we live 'far from hot baths'

To preserve a message of hope, it might be worth remembering the words of Hannah Arendt: 'even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth-this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn'.[10] Perhaps the most meaningful way to follow hope against the peril of pessimism by practicing forgiveness, 'the freedom from vengeance',[11] from what keeps us imprisoned in the self-perpetuating spiral of violence.[12] Forgiveness breaks the chain of revenge; it is 'the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven'.[13] Forgiveness cultivates humility by humbling individual egos. The Greek definition of forgiveness is *synchōresis* (*συγχώρεσις*). Derived from *syn* (together) and *choros* (space), *synchōresis* advocates the creation of shared spaces, where persons can embrace each other as equals. As Martin Luther King Jr believed, forgiveness transforms 'bitterness, humiliation, and anger … into sentiments' that seek transformation, repentance, and reconciliation.[14]

[9] Theodosiadis M. 2021: 7-8, 202; Castoriadis 2007: 14
[10] Arendt H. 1968: ix.
[11] Arendt H. 1998: 241.
[12] Doering J. 2010: 67.
[13] Arendt H. 1998: 241.
[14] Theodosiadis M. 2023; King M., L., 1986: 40.

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