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Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research
Anbar University

مجلة جامعة الأنبار للغات والآداب

Anbar University Journal of Language and Literature

تصدر عن جامعة الأنبار

Published by Anbar University

مجلة علمية فصلية محكمة

Quarterly Scientific Referred Journal

الرقم الدولي: ٢٠٧٣-٦٦١٤

ISSN: 6614-2073

العدد ٢٩ - السنة العاشرة (٢٠١٩)

No.29-10 th year (2019)

رقم الايداع في المكتبة الوطنية العراقية
(١٣٧٩ لسنة ٢٠١٠)

Trust Number in Iraqi National Library
(1379 in 2010)



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Anbar University Journal of Languages and Literature No. 29 – 10th Year - 2019

Re- Visiting the Past: Trauma and Memory in Stanely Kunitz' Selected Poems

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Abstract

The research investigates the traumatic triggers in the poetry of Stanely Kunitz who in spite of his creativity received little attention. His father's suicide shortly before his birth left a scare in his childhood and makes his poetry fertile arena for investigation of trauma since his poetry is rich with anger, insecurity, need, depression and flashbacks. The suicide left deep impact on his soul. His attempt to face this wound failed due to his mother's attempts to deaden any memory of the bygone father and cut the link that may bridge the damage in his soul. This creates a crack in Kunitz's molding of character. As such, his return to his roots is traced in this research depending on the illumination of theory of trauma through exploring the symptoms and experiences of trauma in selected poems. Manifestations of traumatic aspects are apparent in Kunitz poetry which lie hidden in his consciousness to reappear clearly in his maturity. The uniqueness with Kunitz is his indulgence in trauma and his employment of a perfect way of recovery by re-visiting the roots of his pain.

Keywords: Stanely Kunitz, trauma, depression, memory

الملخص

يقوم البحث بدراسة علامات الصدمة النفسية في شعر ستانلي كونتز وهو من الشعراء المعاصرين. على الرغم من تفوقه في الشعر إلا أنه لم يلقي من الاهتمام الشيء الكثير. انتحار الأب قبل ودلاته بفترة بسيطة ترك أثر والم رافقه إلى نهاية حياته. والصدمة النفسية والتي أخفيت في عالم اللاوعي عادت للظهور في سن متأخر لتظهر في قصائده ملامح للصدمة النفسية تصور الشاعر أنها دفنت فظهرات بوادرها في علامات مثل الحاجة والغضب والكتابة والحنين والأهم العودة المتكررة للماضي لردم الصدع الذي تسبب في تلك الصدمة. يتبع البحث عودة كونتز إلى جذوره باستخدام نظرية الصدمة باستكشاف أعراض الصدمة في قصائد مختارة. البحث تابع علامات الصدمة في قصائده وتابع النتائج التي تحققت من العودة للماضي وتمت الدراسة بالاعتماد على نظرية الصدمة وآراء نفسية خاصة بهذا الموضوع.

Introduction

It is evident that every writer or poet is motivated by certain events and triggers that push him/her to pursue certain pieces of literature and obsess with single theme that drags him deep into assumed forgotten areas. Such productions sometimes are considered great because they belong to an authentic and profound source. Stanely Kunitz (1905-2006), an American – Jewish poet has suffered from a turbulent childhood. A troublesome past may extend a while before his birth. Kunitz' father due to some financial challenges and bankruptcy committed suicide which led the mother to hide any trace off from Kunitz after his birth. This incident has deeply affected the family and molded the character of Kunitz after he is an adult. Coming to age, Kunitz started questioning his father past and the way he died but fails to get any clue as his mother managed to remove and hide any link that may inform him. His thirst for his father's existence and past remained unsatisfied until a very late age when he discovers through some lost papers the reality of his father. Perhaps Kunitz attempts to hide his yearning for his father, but his pen betrays him to offer in detail, his pain, yearning for protection and affection. His traumatic life occupies his poetry as victorious part of his character in his poetry. He suffered because of this incident a lot and expressed this well in his many poems. Kathleen Spivak stresses that Kunitz “had undergone some hard times himself as a poet and person” (135) and suffered depression which enhanced feelings of being neglected along with fear and self-doubt (138-139).

These hardships and difficult life pushed Kunitz forward and led him in poetry to speak these fears and overcome them. In an interview with Michael Rayan Kunitz states “ I suppose my main feeling is that writing poetry, for me, has been like breathing. It has been the condition of my existence. I've never considered surviving without poetry ” (76). His unhappy past fueled him with some power to go along and remove such traumatic experiences through poetry or any other means. Commenting on his past experiences and resolving his troubles he says:

maybe age itself compels me to embrace the great simplicities, as I struggle to free myself from the knots and complications, the hangups, of my youth.

Not that I have forgotten, or want to forget, the rages of my unhappy years? they still seethe inside me. It's true that I am astonished, in my sixties, by the depth of my affection for this life. It's equally true that I am no more reconciled than I ever was to the world's wrongs and the injustice of time.
(Ryan 79)

His poetry then witnesses a contemplation in an unknown past. This could justify why most of his poems talk about a life he does not live. In psychoanalytic terms this may refer to his wish of reliving this past and his yearning for a father that he has not ever encountered in life. As such, this troubled life is reflected in his poetry in order to work through and resolve his traumatic experiences. Accordingly, trauma reading is applied to some selected poems in order to explore Kunitz's poetry and his traumatic experiences.

Trauma

Trauma is considered a type of damage for the psyche which is caused by certain serious event. Such a traumatic event is definitely related to a certain experience, or an ongoing or recurrent event or events that destroy the person's capability to control or integrate ideas and/or emotions related to that specific experience. It may occur as a result of various events; however, there exist a few common aspects. Sometimes there is a violation of the person's common ideas about the world, rendering him weak with confusion and insecurity. This can be noticed when people or institutions, betray, violate or disappoint other people in certain unusual ways. Also, domestic violence, medical situations, sexual abuse, brutality, mechanized accidents, harassment and bullying may also directly cause trauma. Theorists employ this term to address two issues:

... first, an event which happened in the external world, together with the way it was subjectively experienced. The external and internal reality are put together through the common reference to a 'traumatic state' or 'situation' which is their nexus. The second main meaning refers to some pathological consequences

which are interpreted – through extrapolation backwards in time – as having been initiated by the trauma. (*Trauma and Life Stories* 29)

Psychological trauma may exist independently or come along with the physical one. The symptoms and feature of a certain trauma depend on the severity of the traumatic experiences that caused it. They may relatively vary from individual to another and even a traumatized person might experience such a symptom or even more than one. The kind of trauma and emotional support an individual receives from their circumstance can determine the severity of trauma as well.

After a traumatic event, re-experiencing the trauma in both mental and physical aspects in order to avoid trauma reminders, or trigger, is inevitable as in the case of Stanely Kunitz. Re-experiencing symptoms indicate that the mind and the body are striving to deal with the traumatic experience to curb or remove it but failure is a normal consequence as they don't deal with the origin of that trauma. Such reminders of trauma, cues and triggers can induce anxiety and other similar associated emotions. The individual can be totally ignorant of these triggers. In several cases, this may lead an individual to suffer from traumatic disorders to get involved in disrupting or self-destructive coping mechanisms, habitually without being completely conscious of the nature or causes of their own actions.

Thus, solid sentiments of outrage may surface habitually, once in a while in unseemly or unexpected circumstances, as peril may dependably appear to be available, as much as it is really present and experienced from past occasions. Irritating recollections, for example, pictures, considerations, or flashbacks may frequent the individual disturbing his psyche and rendering him in a state of loss where he cannot express himself because of the string effect of the traumatic event. A sleeping disorder may too happen as lurking fears and uncertainty keep the individual watchful and looking for peril constantly.

Permanent trauma symptoms make some traumatized people enduringly damaged since they do not expect that their situation will improve. This can initiate feelings of

despair, loss of self-esteem, and recurrent depression as it can clearly be witnessed in Kunitz's poems. The violation of significant aspects of a person's life and world understanding may provoke the person to question his own identity. A long-term trauma from the past situation may be buried in the unconscious. Trauma is often treated through healing; in certain cases this could be attained through recreating or revisiting the cause of the trauma under psychological secure circumstances or it can also be removed through telling and narrating the actual triggers and motivators in any means.

Re-experiencing symptoms indicates that the mind and the body are struggling to deal with the traumatic experience. As the reminders of the trauma, cues and triggers might induce anxiety and other similar associated emotions. The individual can be totally ignorant of these triggers. In numerous cases this might lead an individual's suffering from traumatic disorders to get involved in disrupting or self-destructive coping mechanisms, habitually without being completely conscious of the nature or causes of their own actions.

Shoshana Felman claims that trauma survivors do not live with "memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect" (*Testimony* 69). On the other hand, Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, explains that "[p]sychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force . . . Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (33).

Traumatic memories are demonstrated to be diverse from ordinary memories in certain perspectives. They are not encoded like typical memories of grown-ups in a verbal, direct narrative that is absorbed into a continuous life story (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 37). These normal memories change and are continuously "reassessed in view of one's ongoing experiences". While, traumatic memories, on the other hand,

retain “frozen and wordless quality” (*Trauma and Recovery* 37), like “still snapshots or a silent movie” (*Trauma and Recovery* 175).

Another critic and psychoanalyst Dominick La Capra reveals how a *narrative* can absolve the traumatized of his/her wounds to evoke experience, “which comes through nonlinear movements that records trauma in language and its delays, indirections, pauses, and silences. And, particularly by bearing witness and giving testimony, narrative may help per formatively to create openings in existence that did not exist before” (*History in Transit* 122).

Cathy Caruth a well-known theorist in trauma studies also notes that trauma is evident “in and through its inherent forgetting” (*Unclaimed* 17). So, through this forgetting that the victim suffers because the mind strives to comprehend and process the event which is not consciously experienced, on the other hand, the event returns disguising in form of literal reenactments, nightmares, sleeplessness, irritability and emotional outbursts. Line of Time and language breaks down setting the victim in turmoil as the past refuses to be forgotten in the past; finally causing the victim to re-experience the pain over and over again as the event is not fully grasped by the survivor.

Analysis

Kunitz`s poetic creativity witnesses a shift to divide his career into two areas. In his earlier period, kunitz has an interest in love, human limited power and self-searching to be his recurrent themes in his collections, this is clear in his collection of *Passport of War* (1944) and his *Intellectual Things* (1930). The hidden trauma in the unconsciousness re-appears. The traumatic triggers are flashbacks and memories of the theater of pain. The last stage witnesses new focus since kunitz is occupied with his memory of the past to indulge in his father`s dilemma of suicide that under his mother threat keeps deep in his heart (Crick 136). He seems to look for the lost self in the past to re-establish it in the present.

In "The Portrait", Kunitz presents forthright depiction of his life wound that seems to bleed even after his sixty-four. The principal symptom of trauma in this poem is the memory that takes the poet to a crucial event related to his trauma, the reaction of injured wife, who is betrayed by sudden departure and the pain of the early departure of the father who selects his death in ill-timing. Another trigger of trauma which is the feeling of despair and loss appear in this poem. The birth of the narrator and the beauty of spring fail to hinder his suicide. The outset of the poem shows a uncontrolled longing to reveal the imprisoned pain, thus Kunitz ignores the traditional rules of poetry to focus on telling his aching pain. He states:

“My mother never forgave my father
for killing himself,
another
and in a public park,
when I was waiting to be born”.

All his mother's attempts to deaden his existence in the home and heart go in vain. The domestic violence fails to stop his symptom of trauma of revisiting the past. So trauma manifests itself in the re-emergence of this pain either directly or in disguise taking the form of silence, loneliness and depression which reveals that Kunitz' undergone hard times as a poet and a person" (Spivack 135). The tracing of Kunitz's poetry, can reveal that he attempts to forget the suicide of his father by adopting optimistic themes then the depression begins to conquer his will, his final poems are characterized by pessimism:

“My mother never forgave my father
for killing himself,
especially at such an awkward time

and in a public park,

when I was waiting to be born”.

Kunitz shows that though he was unborn and does not live the entire pain but he is killed with his father since sorrow has travelled from father to son. The grudge accompanies his entire life and recreates his personality. He proves that he is caught by certain event in his life that is repeated more than once in his poetry. The event is his finding his father`s portrait among the attic. Out of anger, he is slapped and the portrait is torn by the hopeless mother. Mere repetition of this event more than once proves its traumatic effect on the poet. Kunitz reveals that though he is old now, the pain of the suicide stills aches in his soul. He states that the sin of suicide is conveyed to him taking the form of everlasting sorrow. Thus, it is not the hurt of his mother`s slap, it is the pain of the loss that cripples his soul:

“When I came down from the attic

with the pastel portrait in my hand

.....

she ripped it into shreds

without a single word

and slapped me hard.

In my sixty-fourth year

I can feel my cheek still burning”.

His mother suppressed and imprisoned anger for her husband`s suicide and her decision to lock this topic for ever has a psychological effect on the son. Kunitz hints that the depressed anger of the mother is conveyed to him just like the sin of his father

that he still tastes its bitterness. Anger and depression which are the main triggers of trauma are imported to him by his parents appears in this poem. She does not only want to deaden his suicide but also she wants to end his existence from the poet's memory:

“She locked his name
in her deepest cabinet
and would not let him out,
though I could hear him thumping”.

His cry for need and support comes from the heart of his "The Testing Tree" which shows new triggers of trauma which is insecurity and need for the dead father. Kunitz revisits his past via a journey into his childhood and nature searching for his selfhood. His seeking for "unexhausted oak" to practice his old game of three throws, turns into a wound, as if his lonely childhood is connected with this loss. He goes over his past 66 years and takes us to his previous years looking for his sacred forest. He searches for his life pain. His father's suicide remains the painful stamp on his spirit. He asks for his father's bless and seems to complain from the depressed mother. He prophesizes his need to the father:

“Father wherever you are
I have only three throws
bless my good right arm.
In the haze of afternoon,
while the air flowed saffron,
I played my game for keeps--

for love, for poetry,
and for eternal life--
after the trials of summer”.

Again Krunitz visits his childhood's memory in "Comet Haley". He shows his roaming in nature from school to home. He reflects the movement of time and the cycle of life. He offers his loss of childhood innocence due to the depression of his father's death that forces him to proceed his years. In the middle of his memory, his father is present. He remembers his climbing to the roof; proudly he tells his father his achievement then he shows his living in destruction waiting the end saying:

“ for me, Father, on the roof
of the red brick building
at the foot of Green Street –
that's where we live ‘
you know, on the top floor.
I'm the boy in the white flannel
.....
I bed searching the starry sky ‘
waiting for the world to end.
In spite of his pain,
his soul still pure
no malice and hatred stain though:
the heart breaks and breaks
and lives by breaking.

It is necessary to go
through dark and deeper dark
and not to turn”.

"Father and Son" is the most popular poem among Kunitz poetry. It is written before the eruption of the World War II. Kunitz states that it emerges in a dream. The poem is not a common poem about father-son connection since the latter has nothing to remember from his father save a worn photo that is also torn by the mother. Kunitz starts a journey to his childhood searching for his lost childhood. His journey starts from his location to the forest pond where his father grave lies. The sense of need overcomes his feeling in this poem. He is out of need for psychological calmness and love in the distress time of war. He decides to follow his father`s steps through time. The poet depicts the fatherless sons who will forever be in need for their bygone father. The speaker sympathies with all orphans since father`s absence will be worsened in the maturity of the sons:

“Now in the suburbs and the falling light
I followed him, and now down sandy road
.....

After the secret master of my blood,
Him, steeped in the odor of ponds, whose indomitable love
Kept me in chains. Strode years; stretched into bird;”

The son imagines the lovely role of father who is the source of calmness and the enjoyment for sons. The father here means security. He raises naïve questions that are said by the suppressed child inside Kunitz and shows the deep need for his unlived father whom by his loss everything is gone.:

“How should I tell him my fable and the fears,
 How bridge the chasm in a casual tone,
 Saying, "The house, the stucco one you built,
 We lost.

Light we could make, but not enough of warmth,

 I am alone and never shed a tear”.

The vain cries of the son in the poem continue to reveal the extent of the need that Kunitz has for his father that turns him to be father to all fatherless sons "For I would be a child to those who mourn\ And brother to the foundlings of the field \ And friend of innocence and all bright eyes." Premature deprivation creates a crack in his spirit. This does not prevent him from crying hopelessly:

“...Return! You know
 The way. I'll wipe the mudstains from your clothes;
 No trace, I promise, will remain”.

In spite of being mature, the voice of the poet is quoted from the imprisoned childhood. The speaker is the little Kunitz who lets his chained emotions to be released. It is worthy to tell that more than once Kunitz states the hurt of this deep wound fortunately does not cripple his spirit but it alleviates him to be a son or brother to all the mourners. He admits that in spite of the breaking of his heart, still he is pure and malice finds no way to his heart. Some certain positive changes in his last collection shows relaxation and his works are " towards of relaxation from and an intimacy of tone though he tackles painful themes " (Ramazani 758). This is so crucial for the recovery from trauma. Kunitz re-visiting his past in many of his poems and his bravery to present his trauma help in resolving his trauma since; he returns to the roots of his

pain. The poet seems relieved from heavy weighted pain after pessimistic poems. The world war knocks the door and the poet senses over and over the need of emotion:

“ ... Instruct

You son, whirling between two wars,
 In the Gemara of your gentleness,
 For I would be a child to those who mourn
 And brother to the foundlings of the field
 And friend of innocence and all bright eyes.
 O teach me how to work and keep me kind”.

Conclusion

Trauma appears in Kunitz poetry clearly through various traumatic triggers like depression, need, anger, re-visiting the past and memories. Though the symptoms of trauma are rooted in his character as his poems revealed, he can recover from it by healing the seeds of his pain and re-visiting his childhood to heal the opened wound and confront his loss to gain recovery. His final poems which show spiritual calmness proves that this trigger can damage the character, but the state is different in Kunitz since he uses his poetry which seems his lonely vent of confrontation in recovery. The new relaxed tone in Kunitz `s final collection is a sign of resolving this trauma.

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