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Narrative Strategies for Reclaiming the Memory of Historical Events in Theodora Dimova's Novel *The Defeated*

Abstract: This essay analyses *The Defeated* (2019), the latest novel by Bulgarian writer Theodora Dimova, as well as the ways in which literary narrative can affect collective memory. Dimova's book references events that unfolded in Bulgaria in the aftermath of the communist coup on 9 September 1944. The analysis relies on methodology developed in the field of memory studies, focusing on collective memory (A. Assmann, J. Assmann), as well as the interrelationship between literature and memory (Erll). The concept of postmemory, as described by Hirsch, is also critical to the arguments presented here, alongside trauma and affect studies (LaCapra, Caruth).

Keywords: Bulgarian literature, Theodora Dimova, collective memory, trauma, affect

Abstrakt: Artykuł zawiera analizę powieści bułgarskiej pisarki Teodory Dimowej pt. *Porażeni* (2019) oraz bada sposoby, w jakie narracja literacka może oddziaływać na pamięć zbiorową. Książka Dimowej opisuje wydarzenia, jakie nastąpiły w Bułgarii po przewrocie komunistycznym 9 września 1944 roku. Ramę metodologiczną mojej analizy stanowią badania pamięciologiczne, szczególnie zaś te dotyczące pamięci zbiorowej (A. Assmann, J. Assmann), oraz zależności między literaturą a pamięcią (Erll). Ważna z perspektywy moich badań jest również koncepcja postpamięci (Hirsch). Kluczowe w tym kontekście są odwołania do studiów nad traumą oraz afektem (LaCapra, Caruth).

Słowa kluczowe: literatura bułgarska, Teodora Dimowa, pamięć zbiorowa, trauma, afekt

The arguments presented in this article explore the possible ways in which a literary text can influence collective memory, with a focus on Theodora Dimova's novel *The Defeated*, whose plot references the events that unfolded in Bulgaria in the aftermath of the communist coup on 9 September 1944. While this is by no means the first work of literature to tackle the subject,[1] Dimova's novel seems to mark the beginning of the next stage in the process of unforgetting (Orłowski 2000), one that has the potential to reshape the social dimension of the memory of the traumatic events that occurred in the wake of World War II.

The methodological framework for the analysis draws on memory and remembrance studies, and in particular collective memory (Assmann 2009; [Assmann 2011] Assmann 2013, Szacka 2006), together with the relationship between literature and memory. In so doing, the article aims to highlight a dependance between specific narrative strategies based on affect and the social reception of Dimova's novel, since her work offers an excellent illustration of Astrid Erll's concept, founded in the conviction that:

> Literature fills in a niche in memory culture, because like arguably no other symbol system, it is characterised by its ability – and indeed tendency – to refer to the forgotten and repressed as well as the unnoticed, unconscious and unintentional aspects of our dealing with the past. It is thus on the level of mimesis$_1$, through the references that constitute the textual repertoire, that literature actualises elements which previously were not – or could not be – perceived, articulated, and remembered in the social sphere (Erll 2011, 153).

Also crucial is the concept of postmemory (Hirsch 2011), along with selected aspects of trauma studies (LaCapra 2015, Caruth 2010) and affect (Van Alphen 2012, Sendyka 2014).

Born in 1960, Theodora Dimova began her literary career as a playwright at the end of the 1980s. Her first novel *Emine* was published in 2001. Her second novel, *Maikite* [Mothers], which came out in 2004, brought her popularity and appreciation beyond her Bulgarian homeland. Based on true events – a murder committed by a group of teenagers – the novel describes the disintegration of family and social bonds. To date, Dimova has published nine plays, seven novels and three books of essays. She runs a regular column in *Kultura*, a magazine which also offers an internet platform. She is also the daughter of Dimitar Dimov, the well-known Bulgarian novelist, a fact which influenced the reception of her own works for quite some time.[2]

Prior to a discussion of Dimova's novel *The Defeated*, it is worth presenting a brief historical overview of the period in question, since it forms the axis of the novel and shapes the reader's memory-work. On 26 August 1944, Bulgaria, then aligned and allied with the Axis powers, declared its withdrawal from hostilities, effectively becoming a neutral state. Just ten days later, the Soviet Union declared

[1] These include, among others, А. Калоянов, *Девети,* Sofia: Trud 2003; К. Илиев, *Поразението. Хроника от краткото столетие,* Plovdiv-Sofia: Janet45 – Fakel 2003; И. Александрова, *Горещо червено,* Plovdiv: Janet45 2008; Р. Лазарова, *Мавзолей,* Sofia: Ciela 2009.

[2] Despite her own established position on the literary scene and several awards, including the most important one named after Christo G. Danov, she is still frequently introduced as Dimitar Dimov's daughter.

war on Bulgaria, forcing the Balkan state to declare war on Germany. On 9 September, the Fatherland Front seized power in Bulgaria and signed an armistice with the Soviet Union the very same day. On 30 September, its representatives issued a decree establishing the People's Court to put on trial "those guilty of dragging Bulgaria into the world war against the Allied nations and the ensuing crimes" (Bulgarian State Archives, 2022a).[3] According to the decree, the trials were to be completed by the end of that year. The panels of judges, comprising representatives of the general populace, had only a few months to administer justice, resulting in mass trials held throughout the country. The first to sit on the defendant's bench were Kiril, Prince of Preslav, former regents, government ministers who were part of the 1940–44 cabinet, former advisers to Tsar Boris III, members of the parliament in its 25th term of office, as well as high-ranking military and police officers. The Fatherland Front put on trial not only people associated with the previous government, but also those unwilling to accept the new order – mainly representatives of the intelligentsia. These cases were ruled on by the sixth panel of judges, who heard the cases of defendants accused of "disseminating Nazi propaganda in the mass media verbally or in writing (in press, radio, cinema), in literature, in schools, day care centres and libraries, as well as collaborators of nationalist organisations" (Bulgarian State Archives 2022b). Journalists, writers and artists who had any links to the previous government by way of funding, scholarships, etc., as well as to Germany or Austria – including university graduates – were also charged. A total of 135 mass trials were conducted. 11,122 people were brought before the People's Courts, of whom 9,155 were convicted. 2,730 people were sentenced to death. 1,921 were sentenced to life in prison, while the remaining convicts – a total of nearly 5,000 – were sentenced to anywhere from a few years to up to 20 years in prison. Most of the executions were carried out on the night of 1–2 February 1945. One should note that some of the sentences were conferred on people who were already dead, thus legitimising the political murders that had been carried out earlier.

The activities of the People's Court were only one element of the introduction of a totalitarian regime. The first concentration camps were established immediately following the coup; beginning in 1949, inmates were transferred to the newly-established Belene labour camp on one of the islands on the Danube River. In Sofia, the authorities established detention centres, which were used for torture and murder – including in the basement of today's State Archives. The families of those found guilty of crimes were also affected – more than 28,000 people were displaced and stripped of their property. On 26 January 1945, the new government passed a Law on the Protection of the People's Government, which became the basis for prosecuting anyone they deemed an enemy. The country was soon plunged into an atmosphere of fear and terror, one of the immediate consequences of which was the complete silencing of the victims' families.

Although Bulgaria has been a democracy since the beginning of 1989, the People's Court only became the subject of public debate in 1996, when the Su-

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author of this essay.

preme Court changed some of its judgements. Two years later, the Constitutional Court declared the People's Court illegal. In April 2000, the Bulgarian parliament passed a law on the criminal nature of the introduction of the communist regime in Bulgaria, and listed the People's Court among the greatest atrocities of that system (Act 2, item 3). A year earlier, in 1999, a monument to the victims of communism was unveiled in Sofia. It was not until 2011, on the initiative of two former presidents (Zhelyu Zhelev and Petar Stoyanov), that 1 February was officially proclaimed Memorial Day for Victims of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria. However, this type of commemoration, which was important to the repressed individuals and their loved ones for obvious reasons, was mostly illusory from the collective point of view. The establishment of a memorial site and the designation of a day for commemoration proved insufficient to bring about a change in the collective consciousness and memory of Bulgarians.

Aleida Assmann establishes a differentiation between memorial sites and places of trauma. The former can be characterised as remnants of history that require an explanatory narrative due to the passage of time (Assmann 2013, 169). Places of trauma, on the other hand, constitute a special kind of memorial site that do not lend themselves to affirmative interpretation and the willingness to connect with the past due to its proximity in time; however, one should note that the issue does not lie in the very nature of the commemorated events, nor in the people involved in them:

> Religious and national memories are soaked with blood and sacrifice, but they are not traumatic because they have a normative quality and are incorporated into a positive self-image and endowed with collective meaning. (…)
>
> Whereas the place of memory is stabilized by the story that is told about it, with the place supporting and authenticating the story, the defining feature of the place of trauma is that its story cannot be narrated. The narrative is blocked either by psychological pressure on the individual or by social taboo – they indicate that something is not expressed but has been warded off as unspeakable, thus ensuring that it remains inaccessible (Assmann 2011, 312).[4]

Thus, pain constitutes the category generative of a traumatic place, resulting from an unhealed wound. In the case of Bulgarians, to date the lack of willingness and readiness to make an effort and work through their trauma has resulted in a selective approach to possible forms of commemoration.

The monument in Sofia, erected in a place unrelated to the events of the years 1944 and 1945, is a prime example. Although it nominally refers to the immediate aftermath of the war – as can be seen by its full name – Monument to the Victims of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria – it was in fact dedicated to "all victims of the Communists" since 1919, the year the Bulgarian Communist Party was founded. Of the 7,526 victims whose names are engraved on the stone wall that constitutes a part of the memorial (alongside a stone cross and a chapel), some of

[4] The Polish version of this article references an anthology of Assmann's writings in Polish (2013, 174). The translation references Assmann 2011, 312, which contains a passage with identical wording [transl. note].

the names refer to victims of the terror enacted by Communist militias in the interwar period. In addition, there is a place of trauma in Sofia related to the events presented here, which has never been properly commemorated. As previously mentioned, the first sentences of the People's Court were carried out on the night of 1–2 February 1945, with the mass execution taking place in Sofia's Central Cemetery. The site of the mass grave is known and marked; however, the remains of the victims have never been exhumed, examined and buried with dignity. Thus, the site remains a festering wound in the minds of the victims' families – an event that demands closure.

The absence of a proper commemoration for the victims is exactly what led Theodora Dimova to write *The Defeated*. In the Afterword, she writes about the 2016 Memorial Day for Victims of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria, which saw about two hundred people gathered at the monument; however, representatives of the state authorities were nowhere to be seen. As the author points out, the event resembled a family memorial service, rather than an official Memorial Day celebration (Dimova 2019, 249). Particularly noteworthy in the novel's commentary is the layer of discourse, enabling a specific interpretation:

> The frosty, crystal February morning left me depressed.
>
> Days passed, weeks passed, and this burning feeling would not go away; instead, it continued growing inside me, accompanied by a vague, unclear sense of guilt. Pain. Insult.
>
> I started reading about the tragic events of that period. Historians, memoir writers, journalists (…).
>
> I started thinking about my grandmother, her view of the world, her attitude toward people, how she behaved toward them, what she said, and how she raised me. In 1944, she was forty-four years old.
>
> And I remembered how back in the second grade I was given an assignment to write a poem or story about *The Party*. I think I got a good grade for it, because I was happy when I showed it to her. She seemed to move away and fell silent. Not only did she not compliment me, but she turned and walked away without as much as uttering a single word, as if I had caused her pain or offended her.
>
> And it was not until I remembered this strange event that I understood where my vague and unclear sense of guilt was coming from. It made me realise that my job as a writer was to put my finger inside the festering wound and twist it, to use my words to give a voice to the intuition of as many people as possible (Dimova 2019, 249–250).[5]

[5] Почувствах се тягостно в ледената, кристална февруарска утрин.

Минаха дни, седмици, горестното чувство не само не отминаваше, а се засилваше. Към него се прибави и смътно, неясно чувство за вина. За болка. За обида.

Започнах да чета за трагичните събития от този период. Историци, мемоаристи, журналисти (…) Започнах да си припомням моята баба, нейния мироглед, отношението ѝ с хората, как се държеше с тях, какво говореше, как ме възпиташе. През 1944 година е била на 44 години.

И си припомних как във втори клас ни бяха накарали да пишем стихотворение или разказ за „Партията". Сигурно съм била получила добра оценка, защото радостно го показах. А тя някак се отдръпна, сви се в себе си, замълча, не само не ме похвали, а се обърна, отдалечи се и нищо не ми каза, като че ли я бях наранила физически, като че ли бях нагрубила.

What is noticeable here is the process of activating individual memory by querying archives. The creation of the work seems to be inscribed in a coherent order of cause and effect – an impulse leads to the analysis of historical materials, which leads to exploring one's own memory, and results in the writing process. What seems more important, however, is the affective aspect of Dimova's statement. According to contemporary theories, affect should be treated as a pre-thought process occurring in the body, distinct from emotions and feelings which can be structured (Deleuze, Guattari 2000, Massumi 2002). In one of the texts she studied, Roma Sendyka recognised the affective nature of experiencing such a state, as expressed by a British geographer visiting the site of the former concentration camp in Kraków-Płaszów: "Something is wrong" (Sendyka 2014, 84). In Dimova's text, elements of affect are discernible in the above-quoted paragraph, which can be interpreted as a record of the search for a language to describe what was happening to her: "A vague, unclear sense of guilt. Pain. Insult," and in what the author later refers to as "the intuition of as many people as possible." On the other hand, giving a voice to this form of intuition, which is the task of the writer, is a clear declaration concerning the understanding of literature's involvement in the work on collective memory.

In the humanities, affect emerged as an additional element with which to enhance trauma theory (Van Alphen 2012). An important motif linking the Bulgarian writer's statement regarding the categories of trauma and affect is her sense of guilt. Most often linked to the role of a silent witness to history (Najder 2012), alongside trauma, it is most commonly mentioned in the context of shifting responsibility for historical events to subsequent generations (cf. Arendt 1985). In addition to the concept of guilt, affect theory also brings in the concept of entanglement in the past (Van Alphen 2012, 214). Indeed, entanglement is a particularly appropriate concept with which to refer to the affect expressed by Dimova as *a vague sense of guilt*, which compels her to *stick her finger inside the festering wound* and face up to the traumatic events. The impact of such events on subsequent generations (now removed from the collective consciousness) is captured by the author in her poignant title *The Defeated*; however, the Bulgarian gerund *поразен* has slightly broader connotations than its Polish counterpart *porażeni* (which I propose using as an equivalent), or the English counterpart *defeated*. According to the Bulgarian Language Dictionary, it refers to "one who is dead or wounded usually in an armed collision or accident; one who is damaged, impaired by disease, adverse conditions, etc.; one who is greatly astonished, confounded, unable to react to the sight or tidings of something very bad or very good; stricken" (Rechnik na balgarski ezik). In an excerpt printed on the novel's cover, Dimova states:

> Ние всички, родените преди '89-та и след нея, всички ние, които имаме нещо общо с България, сме поразени от тези събития така, както сме поразени от Чернобилската авария. Мащабът на пораженията тепърва започва да излиза наяве.

Едва когато си припомних тази странна случка, разбрах откъде идва смътното ми и неясно чувство за вина. Защото като писател работата ми е да слагам пръст в раната, да изговарям интуицията на колкото може повече хора (Dimova 2019, 249–250).

that should be translated as follows:

> All of us, born before 1989 and later; all of us who have any links to Bulgaria – we were all irradiated by these events to the same extent as we were irradiated by the Chernobyl accident. The scale of this irradiation is only now starting to unfold.

Thus, the book's title alludes both to the physical phenomenon – the immediate reaction to the external stimulus – as well as the intangible dimension, which stems from a lack of awareness, misinformation and, above all, silence.[6]

Dimova also emphasises another aspect of critical importance within the context of memory – namely that her generation is the last to have direct contact with people who personally experienced the traumatic events of the upheaval of 1944. Thus, she commits to working with cultural memory, which – according to Astrid Erll – spans both the individual (*collected memory*) as well as the collective level (*collective memory*), which affect each other (Erll 2011, 105). In analysing literature as a medium of cultural memory, Erll points to three similarities between memory and literature:

> … first, 'condensation', which is important for the creation and transmission of ideas about the past; secondly, 'narration' as a ubiquitous structure for establishing meaning; and thirdly, the use of 'genres' as culturally available formats with which to represent past events and experience (Erll 2011, 145).

In my interpretation of Dimova's novel, I focus on the second point, i.e., 'narrative'; however, such an analysis requires mentioning the linguistic and symbolic compression required, as well as the specificity of the genre.

The novel is not divided into chapters; instead, it comprises four stories. It lacks a table of contents, thereby encouraging continuous reading. Three of the stories are untitled – instead they are preceded by women's names: *Rayna*, *Ekaterina*, *Victoria and Magdalena*, while the stories themselves directly relate to the events of 1944 and 1945. The elements which link all four stories are comprised of the single prison cell where the protagonists' husbands and fathers are held, as well as the time and place of their subsequent execution. Before the fourth story, in addition to the name, the author adds a note of sorts: *Aleksandra, twenty years later*. This part most overtly refers to the impact of historical events on subsequent generations, as alluded to in the novel's title.

The traumatic events are presented from the perspective of the women, even though the prose is not limited to a first-person narrative. On the contrary, it constantly fluctuates and switches perspectives. Dialogues are fused with narration, not as free indirect speech, but, untypically for Bulgarian literary discourse, as quotes embedded within the main text. The readers get to know the first protago-

[6] In Bulgaria, the first news bulletins concerning the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident only appeared several days after the event (on 2nd, 4th and 6th May 1987) and were hardly exhaustive. No steps were taken to try and safeguard Bulgarian citizens, even though the extent of the radioactive cloud encompassed the entire country. As a result of covering up the scientific data in the year following the accident, the Bulgarian population was shown to have received the second-highest dose of radiation in Europe, trailing closely behind the Soviet Union. The detailed study can be found on the website documenting the atrocities committed by the communist authorities in Bulgaria: www.pametbg.com.

nist – Rayna – by means of a traditional third-person narrative, which is broken up by elements such as the protagonist's direct address to her husband, her first--person introspections and flashbacks presented as unconventional dialogic retrospections. In this story, Rayna recalls the pre-war life of an intelligentsia family, including minute quotidian details, which at times verges on sentimentality and which devotes a good deal of space to describing objects and places. Working with such commonplace historical detail (cf. the German concept of *Alltagsgeschichte*, Saryusz-Wolska 2009, 11) brings into sharp relief the old reality that had been negated and ridiculed for decades (in Communist newspeak reduced to the derisory notion of *bourgeois*), which, to a certain extent, makes it embarrassing and shameful. This is a critically important part of working with collective memory.

Another one of the protagonists – Ekaterina, the wife of an Orthodox priest – writes down the story of her life for her sons, mixing first and second-person narratives. She is terminally ill, and her letter constitutes an attempt to convey as many memories as possible on the one hand, in particular those concerning the tragic fate of the father; and on the other, she attempts to present a world of values that is currently being destroyed as she commits her memories to paper. The protagonist is locked in a dual fight against time – she is attempting to complete this task before she dies, whilst at the same time trying to anticipate the changes that will occur naturally as her sons grow up. She often refers to her own memory, constantly using phases such as "I remember how…," "One day…" and "Another time…," but she does not shy away from addressing the future memories of her children: "You still remember it now, but when you grow up…" (Dimova 2019, 84), "I am telling you things you know now, but I am afraid you are going to forget them one day…" (Dimova 2019, 86). Part of the narrative is written in the future tense – presenting a mother's vision of her own children as adults.

In the story of Victoria and Magdalena, Dimova uses yet another narrative device – interweaving third-person narration with thoughts written in italics, at times resembling a stream of consciousness; the identities of the characters are revealed as the narrative progresses. Such thoughts emanate from the adult Magdalena, since she was still a child when the People's Court issued its judgements. It is in this story in particular that the impact of such events on subsequent generations is first revealed. Although the narrative in all three parts is very personal, poignant and intimate, it is the voice of Magdalena which stands out. This voice is characterised by a certain affect found in virtually every statement she makes, and similar to the language used in the novel's Afterword.

> I think that the world consists of words and scraps, without any sense or meaning. I feel like I am going to fall every time I take a step. It is obvious to me that I am walking across quicksand, and that any given house, person, or place may suddenly disappear. (…)
>
> I do not think that time is linear – it is filled with holes, scraps and craters, like when the bombings were going on. First, you could hear them coming, then the whistling noise of the bombs falling, growing louder and louder. The bombs can fall at any moment and explode, but you never know where exactly – in just ten seconds, you will know if it will fall on you or somewhere nearby. Then you hear the explosion and understand that you are still alive

> and fine. For now. Ten seconds. The time between you and your death. Then you return to your daily life, and time returns to its usual course. That is what I believe to be that hole, that scrap or crater (Dimova 2019, 142–143).[7]

These sentences begin the story of Victoria and Magdalena, and such a narrative choice will directly impact the reader. However, its purpose is not just to immediately plunge the reader into someone's thoughts. Due to the narrative being presented from the first-person perspective, the feelings of a person are juxtaposed with a certain level of ambiguity since the reader does not know who is talking, and in addition, the person talking is living in a state of constant uncertainty. As a result, the words trying to convey this state have a strong impact on the reader. Emotions are replaced by images and physical sensations. The subsequent statements by Magdalena are equally as impactful, since at that point, the reader knows who she is. Using a third-person narrative, it is revealed how she and her relatives experienced the communist takeover and discovered its consequences. The protagonist's second internal monologue also focuses on trying to describe her reality:

> I remember so many things that do not seem like my memories – as if they belonged to someone else, as if I watched them in a film. It was as if some magician cut out the time from the moment he [father – Author's note] was taken away and he held me in his arms, until the moment when I returned to Sofia – and replaced it with someone else's time. It was as if someone removed those fifty years, and I aged instantly, becoming a sixty-year-old woman in the process (Dimova 2019, 185–186).[8]

The protagonist's attempt to describe her post-traumatic experience once again uses the metaphor of a gap or hole; however, this time it results in a sense of alienation from her own body, a loss of her identity – a phenomenon known in psychology as depersonalisation and derealisation (Siuta 2009, 57–58).

The affect is even more apparent in the final part, which describes events that took place twenty years later and which are not directly related to the traumatic events of 1944 and 1945. Alexandra's narrative begins with a memory:

> My name is Alexandra, I am five and a half years old, the house is full of people, my relatives are wearing black clothes, I can barely see my mum, she is crying, surrounded by other

---

[7] "За мен светът е на думите, на кръпки, без вътрешност. За мен е обичайно усещането, че с всяка следваща крачка мога да се сгромолясам. За мен е самоочевидно, че стъпвам върху подвижни пясъци, че всеки дом, човек, място може внезапно да пропадне. (…)

И времето за мене не е линейно, а на дупки, на кръпки, на кратери. Нещо като времето когато траеха бомбардировките. Чува се първо приближаването, свистенето на бомбата, то се усилва все повече, всеки момент бомбата ще падне и ще избухне, но не знаеш точно къде – и това са около десетина секунди само – дали ще падне върху теб или встрани. После се чува взривът и разбираш, че си все още цял и този път си останал невредим. Десетина секунди, които те делят от смъртта. После пак се потопяваш в живота и времето си възвръща обичайната продължителност. Ето това имах предвид под дупка, кръпка, кратер."

[8] Толкова много неща си спомням, които не са мои спомени, а като че ли на някой друг. Като че ли съм ги гледала на филм. Като че ли от онзи миг, когато го отведоха и той ме държеше на ръце до времето, в което се завърнах в София, някой фокусник е изрязал годините и на тяхно място е поставил други години, не мои. Като че ли някой е отмахнал тези петдесет години. И аз от дете се превърнах направо в шестдесет и няколко годишна жена.

> women, who are sniffling and holding tissues in their hands. When I get close to her, she starts crying even harder, so they make sure I stay away. (…)
>
> They did not take me to his funeral. Twenty years later, I saw photos of his remains in the building of Central Military Club (Dimova 2019, 189–190).[9]

The reader is confronted with the same narrative device the author used to present Magdalena's narrative – using a different font to distinguish the text recording her internal monologue, which opens with: "It was a dream… and it was not a dream. It was the real world… and at the same time it was not the real world." The protagonist recalls a dream that continues to haunt her twenty years after her father's death, where Alexandra is a child again. The passage is an attempt to find closure and say goodbye to a loved one – something she was originally denied. The narrator first revisits the memory of her father's death, focusing on her own feelings ("I have no idea where to go. I keep walking from one room to another, just walking around, unable to find a place for myself – because I keep disturbing and bothering other people all the time"). The reader is then witness to the accompanying emotions of grief and anger ("Adults are simply afraid of me – that is the reality, they are afraid that I will look them in the eye and ask 'Why won't you tell me that my dad died? Why are you keeping secrets from me? Why are you hiding this from me? I understand it!'" [Dimova 2019, 190]). However, it is only in revisiting the dream, remembered over many years (making it seem increasingly like a real event), that she is finally able to discuss her sense of loss and experience the grief she has been denied due to her age. Alexandra describes the (un)real nature of meeting with her father as an event in some other dimension (Dimova 2019, 194), the meaning of which is later deciphered by a third-person narrator: "This innate, eternal inexpressibility of the world, the loneliness and suffering was the very dimension in which – many years later – Alexandra could meet and dream of her father" (Dimova 2019, 213).

The image of an emotionally abandoned child is a theme running throughout this story. Alexandra is Rayna's granddaughter – the daughter of her daughter, Siya. After the death of her husband, Siya goes into mourning and decides to live in his painting studio, while the girl has to live with her grandmother, who in turn struggles to cope with her own loss. This loss is never discussed – instead it remains a dark cloud hovering above her. One of the more poignant images of how trauma shifts to the next generation is seen in the girl's visit to the amusement park. Dazzled by the many colours and sounds, the girl feels that she needs to go home, but at the same time she is paralysed by fear: "Her knees were weak at the mere thought that she could have replaced any of the children" (Dimova 2019, 216). Here, a world filled with childish emotions expressed by laughter, squeals

[9] Александра е името ми, на пет години и половина съм, у нас е пълно с хора, близките ми са в траурни дрехи, почти не виждам майка си, тя плаче, обградена от други жени, те също подсмърчат и стискат в ръка носни кърпички. Когато съм до нея, тя се разплаква по-силно, затова гледат да ме държат далеч. (…)

Не ме взеха на погребението му. Двадесет години по-късно видях снимки от поклонение пред тленните му останки във Военен клуб.

and shouts is juxtaposed with the image of a dark, quiet house on her return, and where her grandmother now refuses to go back to the amusement park. As a result, Alexandra steals her grandmother's money and runs away from school. She is alone, with no one to talk to about her doubts and fears, and is compared to a soldier on the battlefield. She buys several tickets to all the rides and loses herself in the fun:

> She could not get enough, even though at times she felt dizzy and sick. She lost herself, her eyes and body trembled in ecstasy. She no longer had anything to do with the old Alexandra. She will never be that Alexandra again. She will never be defeated again, she will never be a victim, she will not be dead and broken (Dimova 2019, 220).[10]

The final part is perhaps of the greatest interest, not only because it is where the postmemory mechanism of transferring traumatic experiences to subsequent generations is first presented – but also because it is where the autobiographical elements are presented in the narrative. Dimova's father, the famous Dimitar Dimov, died when she was five years old; just like Alexandra's father, he had been summoned before a court of his peers because of one of his works. As a result, he abandoned writing, just as Mikhail abandoned painting, which led him to despair and a slow death.

At a glance, the writer tries to differentiate the protagonists and narrators through language. Each story is presented via a separate, individual voice. The reader can thus see how the different narrative strategies are an attempt to discover a language with which to discuss mediated experiences. Yet, as it turns out, *The Defeated* is largely an attempt to understand the author's own pain. The personal dimension of the story is therefore an element that determines the work's reception. As is pointed out in the Preface, Dimova's novel is hardly the first attempt at a literary confrontation with this painful period; however, she is the first author to abandon the attempt to recount, to describe facts, to present the broader narrative in favour of showcasing individual, personal and poignant stories. The intimate dimension of Dimova's narrative is established by the language the writer uses to describe the difficult past; this language focuses on feelings and gives voice to associations that elude reason. Indeed, the importance of literary and figurative language as a means with which to articulate experiences is noted by one of the founders of the discipline of trauma studies – Cathy Caruth:

> These figures are not mere tropes that replace one meaning with another. They act more like catachresis, allowing assigning names to things that are unnamed. By definition, trauma refers to the loss of experience or consciousness and – at the same time – can be linked with the loss of language that emerges from a certain set of meanings (Caruth 2010, 128).

Such reflections are also applicable when analysing attempts to find meaningful words with which to discuss events experienced through silence. The recurring metaphors in Dimova's narrative serve as an attempt to name (and thus under-

[10] Не можеше да се насити, въпреки че на моменти й се завиваше свят, ставаше й лошо от превъзбуда. Беше забравила себе си. Очите и тялото й трептяха в екстаз. Вече нямаше нищо общо с предишната Александра. Вече никога не може да бъде предишната Александра. Вече никога няма да бъде победена, да бъде жертва, да бъде мъртва, да бъде сломена.

stand) the sense of being out-of-place experienced by successive generations, living a life that they felt was not theirs to live. This largely boils down to the image of a void – *a hole, crater, gash, chasm* – which is the essence of trauma (LaCapra 2015).

Nevertheless, the most common words repeated by reviewers of Dimova's novel are *shock*, *paralysis* and *joint suffering*, engendering numerous people publicly sharing their own family stories. During various meetings organised to promote engagement with the novel, the hosts – prominent literary scholars and historians – could not cope with their own emotions and often cried. In this sense, the Bulgarian writer's novel perfectly illustrates Astrid Erll's model of constructing cultural memory, in which cultural patterns are updated on a personal level. Through affective narrative strategies, Theodora Dimova manages to construct a story about a specific historical event, the course of which influenced (and continues to influence) not only the history of individuals and families, but also the state of present-day Bulgaria. It is difficult to make a definitive judgement concerning the impact of *The Defeated* on Bulgarians' collective memory of the traumatic events that transpired in late 1944 and 1945; however, it seems very telling that – since the publication of the novel and the debate it sparked – government officials now visit the monument to the victims of communism every 1 February.

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