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Secondary Witnessing and Narrative Erasure in Inga Gaile's *The Beautiful Ones*

Antrinis liudijimas ir pasakojimo ištrynimas Ingos Gaile romane *Gražiosios*

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Abstract: This article engages with the challenges of representing traumatic historical events in a post-traumatic situation when the process of narration involves negotiating the gap between the past and the present, between the narrator and the other's suffering. Particularly, the article focuses on Latvian writer Inga Gaile's novel *The Beautiful Ones* (*Skaistās*, 2019), which deals with the aforementioned structural and ethical complexities already in its beginning, subjecting it to a series of narrative erasures and thus signaling the difficulty of embarking on a story that would do justice to the impact of trauma. The beginning of Gaile's novel deserves a close reading of its own since it provokes, in a concentrated form, broader questions about the nature of secondary witnessing, which grows out of researching history, and its potential reflection in narrative form. The article also discusses how a broken beginning might point to authorial values and frame the remaining novel as a sincere and deeply human approach to past tragedies.

Keywords: secondary witnessing, extreme narration, narrative beginnings, authorial ethos, Inga Gaile.

Santrauka: Straipsnyje nagrinėjami iššūkiai, kylantys vaizduojant trauminius istorinius įvykius potrauminėje situacijoje, kai vystant pasakojimą tenka įveikti atotrūkį tarp praeities ir dabarties, tarp pasakotojo ir kito kančios. Straipsnyje ypač daug dėmesio skiriama latvių rašytojos Ingos Gailės romanui *Skaistās* (Gražiosios, 2019). Jau kūrinio pradžioje susiduriama su minėtais struktūriniais ir etiniais iššūkiais, pasireiškiančiais kaip pasakojimo ištrynimas, taip signalizuojant apie sunkumus pradėti pasakojimą, kuris teisingai atspindėtų traumos poveikį. Gailės romano pradžia nusipelno atidžios analizės, nes joje autorė koncentruota forma užduoda platesnius klausimus apie antrinio liudijimo, kylančio iš istorijos tyrinėjimo, prigimtį ir galimą jo išraišką pasakojimo forma. Straipsnyje taip pat aptariama, kaip

laužyta pradžia gali tapti nuoroda į autorės vertybes ir paversti likusį romaną nuoširdžiu, giliai žmogišku požiūriu į praeities tragedijas.

Raktažodžiai: antrinis liudijimas, ekstremalus pasakojimas, pasakojimo pradžios, autoriaus etosas, Inga Gailė.

Introduction

Historian Dominick LaCapra in his seminal book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, first published in 2001, when thinking about how we might relate to historical suffering, cautions that "[i]t is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position" and that instead we should experience what he calls "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra 2014: 78). Essentially, empathic unsettlement means being disturbed by the trauma of the other and at the same time realizing the crucial difference between the other and oneself. This happens when we read, watch or listen to stories about traumatic experiences, and it should be distinguished from primary witnessing which belongs to the victims. "Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement," LaCapra writes, "is a desirable affective dimension of inquiry which complements and supplements empirical research and analysis" (ibid.), and this sounds more like a suggestion to historians and memory scholars. However, he also mentions a certain aspect that seems important for attentive readers of literature, pertaining both to its structural and ethical complexities. Empathic unsettlement "places in jeopardy fetishized and totalizing narratives that deny the trauma that called them into existence" by harmonizing the painful events (ibid.). LaCapra thus maintains that the shattering experience of trauma, even when it is refracted by secondary witnesses, should be embodied into formal workings. Experimental and non-redemptive narratives are privileged as they show their own limits when approaching the trauma "in a post-traumatic context" (ibid.: 179). In a later work, LaCapra specified his viewpoint by saying that the "problematic negotiations" of representing trauma "are undertaken most prominently in the structure of narration, including the modulations of narrative perspective and voice, as well as in the words and actions of characters" (LaCapra 2013: 54). However, since he is a historian by trade, LaCapra can be referenced rather like a

source of inspiration for further studies that would offer a more nuanced analysis of how narratives effectively incorporate trauma.

In this article, I take up the idea of empathic unsettlement as an experience that constitutes the way the narrator tells her story of reacting to the trauma of the other. Thereby, the article deals with an explicitly self-reflexive perspective on history, which can be properly grasped by combining insights from trauma studies and narratology. Particularly, my interest lies in the weakening of narrativity[1] as an ethically charged strategy that the secondary witness employs in order to reveal her existential position. In an attempt to make the relationship between trauma and narrative structure more tangible, I will focus precisely on the question of beginning, which, as we know, is "a foundational element of every narrative," profoundly impacting "the act of reading" (Richardson 2019: 37). Narrative beginnings are fascinating in relation to empathic unsettlement because their traditional quality—"primordial need for certainty," as Edward Said terms it (Said 1985: 47)—can be at odds with the fragmentary and obscure nature of traumatic experience. Previously, narrative beginnings as emplacements of trauma have been discussed by Mark Workman who addresses the traumatizing situation as "an originary event" that exists beyond "narratival grasp" and thus can be better expressed metonymically (Workman 2004: 249). This is in line with an earlier proposition made by Geoffrey Hartman, namely, that what he, following Freud, defines as traumatic knowledge "cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being retrieved or communicated without distortion" (Hartmann 1995: 537). Although this conception of trauma, which emphasizes the unspeakable, has been contested in more recent studies (see e.g. Pederson 2014), contemporary literature continues to provide narratives characterized by incoherence and resistance to realistic forms of narration. In some instances, this tendency can even lead to radical contradictions as a symptom of the narrator's challenges in dealing with the epistemological intricacies of trauma.

This is evident in Inga Gaile's historical novel *The Beautiful Ones* (*Skaistās,* 2019) with its interest in the women experiences of Nazi concentration camps which works as a traumatic kernel affecting the psychological and structural attributes of her text. Its beginning, illustrative of a metafictional view on

1 Gerald Prince, one of the first and most widely quoted theoreticians of narrativity, defines narrativity as a scalar function of "formal and contextual features making a narrative more or less narrative" (Prince 1987: 64).

history, stresses, to use the words of Linda Hutcheon, "the narrativity and the textuality of our knowledge of the past" (Hutcheon 1989: 22). Or, to be more exact, the beginning here accentuates the difficulties to embark on a narrative which, as the reader eventually learns, belongs to a post-traumatic context. The narrator of the opening passage is both a reader and a writer of the past and as such she has to deal with the ethical and the formal aspects of secondary witnessing which become clear when we return to the beginning after finishing the whole work. To set up the story, Gaile chooses an especially extreme form of narration that erases and reconceptualizes itself as it seeks to outline the basic parameters of its objects. According to Brian Richardson, this type of writing should be called "denarration," which he defines generally as "a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given" (Richardson 2006: 87). The best known practitioner of denarration is Samuel Beckett who used it to destabilize the storyworld and highlight the unreliability of the narrator's memory, whereas for Gaile this technique is linked with traumatic history and authorial ethos.

In what follows, I would first like to discuss more closely the relationship between trauma and narrativity, including the ethical implications of weakening narrativity. Thus I will introduce the necessary theoretical background for assessing the meaning of denarration not only for the beginning of Gaile's novel but for the entire discourse. Lastly, it should be acknowledged that her work poses broader questions about how we might today address past tragedies and what kind of ethos they demand from us.

Trauma and Narrativity

When elaborating on the function of narrativity, David Herman in *Basic Elements of Narrative* identifies four conditions of prototypical stories: situatedness in a specific context, sequences of particularized events, disruption into a storyworld created by the events, and sense of what it is like to live through that storyworld (Herman 2009: 9). Narrativity then reflects how these conditions are accomplished in a given text. Traditionally, as Herman notes elsewhere, "[m]aximal narrativity can be correlated with sequences whose presentation features a proportional blending of "canonicity and breach," expectation and

transgression of expectation," while in opposite cases narrativity decreases when the story seems either too stereotypical or too specific (Herman 2002: 91). However, some narratives purposely "weaken or diminish their own narrativity" (ibid.: 103) because of various possible reasons, haunting presence of trauma being one of them. Literary examples of trauma, most often the postmodern kind, manifest great trust in what Brian McHale has called "weak narrativity," in telling a story incoherently as if evoking narrative coherence while simultaneously "undermining confidence in it" (McHale 2001: 65). Usually, this type of narrativity is not a global feature of the narrative discourse, instead being relegated to certain episodes where it expresses the power of trauma. Weak narrativity may also prolong and perplex the process of remembering, resisting closure that might be forced upon the experience by coherent narration,[2] or even enhance narrative interest by withholding the significance of particular cryptic details.

For Cathy Caruth, whose writings, built on Freudian psychoanalysis and de Manian deconstruction, have greatly influenced literary trauma theory, trauma causes epistemological crisis since the truth of trauma "in its delayed appearance and its belated address cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language," thus the encounter with trauma leads to "the possibility of history that is no longer straightforwardly referential" (Caruth 2016: 4, 12). Deconstructionists assert that, while there is a link between reference and reality, reference is not fully masterable, "language thus never reaches empirical reality, instead continually referring to its other" (Toremans 2018: 61), and trauma surely amplifies this condition. Consequently, much of the research of trauma in literature has focused on works that are experimental and introduce trauma as something present in narrative omissions. Instead of healing, which presupposes the activation of memory and the ability to tell a coherent story of the past, many modern, postmodern and contemporary artistic representations of trauma exercise weak narrativity to signal the presence of trauma by metonymically connecting to its destructive force. This kind of connection is not straightforwardly referential,

2 The shattering experience of trauma makes it difficult to tell a story "according to conventions of linearity, continuity, closure, and omniscience, conventions that have become canonical with 19th century realist writing" and that are still favored within different social, cultural and medical contexts (Brockmeier 2008: 28).

rather it transmits the experience of traumatic disruption directly to the reader who is immersed in the poetic and fragmentary text (see e.g. Forter 2007). For example, Latvian writer Gundega Repše in her experimental novel *Conjuring Iron* (*Dzelzs apvārdošana*, 2011) uses multiple confusing narrative strategies, such as unnarration, indeterminacy and metaphorical reduction of historical time, to retain, even to the point of melancholia, the presence of the trauma of Soviet occupation. The painful events behind the discourse are unnarrated, that is, the passages referring to the past "explicitly do no tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator's refusal to narrate," to quote Robyn Warhol (2005: 221) on this peculiar strategy. This refusal is also endowed with an ethical value when juxtaposed with forgetting, which, as the narrator of Repše's novel claims, is promoted in contemporary Latvia.[3]

The main objection against Caruth's conception of trauma and narrative has to do with her emphasis on the impossibility to adequately represent the nature of trauma. She maintains that the narrativization of trauma weakens its precision and force (Caruth 1995: 153), and this would entail that the rejection of coherent storytelling is an ethical choice. Simply put, incoherence is said to resist normative regulations of narration that convert difficult experiences into already existing and harmonizing forms of thinking. Stef Craps offers an alternative to the Caruthian model by reminding us that there are many postcolonial novels that speak of traumatic experiences while simultaneously relying on realist forms of narration to "get the message across and to mobilize" (Craps 2013: 42). However, others, like Robert Eaglestone, have defended the deconstructionist take on trauma, pointing out that it still "allows us to better understand trauma," to display how fragmented language reflects the structure of experience in a faithful manner (Eaglestone 2014: 14, 18). My own position regarding this debate is that we should look closely at the way different narratives are constructed and that the necessary theoretical framework should be chosen depending on the level of narrativity the particular work manifests. Thus, if the work demonstrates high trust in weak narrativity, it could be read in the light of Caruth's ideas, and, conversely, if the work uses coherent storytelling to speak about trauma, then it should be considered in terms of its narrative possibilities.

3 For more on the relationship between trauma, narrative and ethics in Repše's novel see Ostups 2020.

Contemporary narrative theory is well equipped to work fruitfully in both directions. Gaile's novel, applying weak narrativity in such a constitutive narrative position as the beginning, which belongs to a post-traumatic context, is more open to an elaboration on the complex relationships between the past reality and the present narration than, say, on social and cultural aspects of trauma, often accentuated in realist accounts. Accordingly, the empathic unsettlement as an ethical approach to the trauma of the other should be viewed, as already suggested by LaCapra, in connection with those stylistic effects that resonate structurally with the disorganizing experience of trauma.

After Reading History

The overarching consciousness of Gaile's novel is a woman named Duks who narrates her own story and also brings in other troubled voices related to historical trauma. Duks is the granddaughter of Magdalēna, an emotionally complex character who was the central figure in Gaile's previous novel, *The Glass Shards* (*Stikli*, 2016), set in Latvia of the 1930s when the country was ruled by the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis. In that text, Magdalēna is a psychiatric patient, misdiagnosed with schizophrenia and expecting a child from her doctor, Kārlis, who then helps her to escape the possible sterilization at the time when eugenics is slowly introduced into national biopolitics. Later, in *The Beautiful Ones*, we find Kārlis continuing his work as a doctor in another environment that subjugates life to power, that is, in Ravensbrück concentration camp for women where he meets inmate Violeta who is slaving away at the camp's brothel. Whereas, the story of Magdalēna begins (or resumes) at the year 1953 after the most tragic events of the novel, some of them mentioned only briefly, have taken place. The Ravensbrück experience, including perpetrator, collaborator and victim points of view, however, is represented in detail and functions as the novel's traumatic kernel. Gaile's novels include many restless voices who are all affiliated through the effects of either the First World War, as in *The Glass Shards*, which features narratives also by a former soldier and a widow, or the Second World War, especially the camp life, as in *The Beautiful Ones* that stretches over the second part of the 20th century until the year 2006 when Duks is trying to finish her book on women in German camp brothels. The metalepsis

here indicates that Duks can provide for the reader something like a prism for developing meaningful intersections between historically split experiences. The operation of metalepsis—"contamination of levels in a hierarchical structure" (Pier 2005: 303)—has often been associated with a metatextual function likely estranging the reader from the narrative, and yet recent research identifies cases of metalepsis that are "a condition of our emotional investment rather than something to be overcome" (Punday 2020: 110). Gaile's novel *The Beautiful Ones* uses metalepsis to connect the beginning and the ending of the work as signifying the same emotional experience of the narrator Duks.

As a reader of testimonies of Ravensbrück survivors, Duks is a secondary witness. There is one particular story, mentioned in the last chapter of the novel, that she finds "completely insane" and "unbelievable" (Gaile 2019: 177), and her unsettlement is extended into the beginning of the novel, which, in terms of story, follows her experience of reading. We can retrospectively recognize that the beginning is narrated by Duks because a later section, named after her, repeats the opening passage closely, using denarration to once again express the complexity of addressing the past that seems traumatic (ibid.: 139). However, it is rather the ending of the novel which makes her experience clear to us. This going back and forth between the beginning and the ending is a welcomed approach since "nothing comes before" the beginning and it needs some consulting (Mortimer 2008: 214). The last chapter of the novel is dated 2006, while the opening passage of the novel is without a date, inviting us to revisit the beginning of the work after reading the entire text, to realize its place within the story and to illuminate its existential meaning.

Examining the beginning after reading the ending is a natural strategy because we are accustomed to comprehend an ending "as a summing up of the work's meaning" (Rabinowitz 2002: 304), which thereby might contain a valuable information for (re)interpreting the beginning. Here, I quote the entire beginning in order to showcase its post-traumatic properties (the process of denarration is represented by highlighting the elements involved in it):

> I want to tell a story. I want to tell my story. But how can I do it?
>
> I can try.
>
> *The event is simple... In fact, it's not event at all.* [Herein and after emphasis is mine – *AO*] It's rather the protagonist's need to understand what actually happened. To

explain what happened, slipped through her fingers, formed a hole in her chest, placed her face to face with this force which is not, cannot be, and never has been hers. It's not mine, I don't deserve this pain. You're so inept. You just can't get a grip and be normal. Who will ever love you? Just look at yourself. *A young woman. Why young?*

A woman.

And why a woman? True, we don't yet know whether it's a woman or a man.

A human being?

A human being. Unknown to anyone—age, sex, name—nothing.

On a cold winter day a human being walks into a church and drops to their knees in front of the altar.

It's not a winter day.

True, it's already the beginning of spring. But there's still a lot of snow.

The human being doesn't find it embarrassing to drop to their knees in the shaft of winter light making its way in through the stained glass of Mary's humbly bent head and halo, about which she has no idea at the moment of bending her head because... *Here we should note that it's not day after all. It's morning. A working day morning.* And in the morning of a working day when others are working, when others are waking their beautiful, gentle children and lovers, the human being is drunk. On a cold, snowy morning in the first month of spring, the human being is inebriated, no, drunk, and they walk into a church and drop to their knees. The human being is not embarrassed because first of all, as we already pointed out, the person is inebriated and the drunkenness stifles their sense of shame, otherwise always present and snuffing out any other emotion. *And second of all, the church is empty. Well, almost empty.* There is another human being in the church, and they are mopping the floor. This human has a white headscarf and a bucket from which they take out a rag, wring it, wrap around the broom, and go on mopping the floor without as much as looking at the other human being. Without as much as looking at that human being who, on a cold and snowy winter morning, walks into a church, and theatrically drops down on the red-plush-covered altar rail.

"Let's try not to fall," the human being thinks and folds their hands, bends their head, and prays.

And the prayer is answered. It's answered in full. (Gaile 2019: 7–8)[4]

4 The passage was translated by Ieva Lešinska.

The third paragraph of this passage allows the reader to assume the presence of trauma, which, as the ending of the novel indicates, belongs to a secondary witness. The words "a hole in her chest" conjures the traditional metaphor of trauma as a wound, which is present already in Freud's works and was later used by Caruth to suggest that trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available," meaning that in order to understand trauma we must pay attention to the unrepresentable (Caruth 2016: 4). Gaile's subject is unable to fully explain what has happened and finds herself totally disoriented in the face of a destructive force coming from somewhere outside of her. To employ a phrase from Jill Bennett's writing on trauma and affect, Gaile's narrator is speaking "from a body sustaining sensation, a body inhabited by different aspects of a self, different facets of memory" (Bennett 2005: 34), which here are gained from reading others. Further on, this troubling and poetically conveyed feeling is mirrored in form, that is, in a series of erasures pertaining to subjective, temporal and spatial aspects of the story, thus the shock of a secondary witness, acknowledged at the end of the novel, transforms into the narrator's difficulties to narrate the past after researching history.

Duks erases and reconceptualizes the basic elements of her story highlighting the tension between the past, which seems to be worth telling about, and the very narrative that is supposed to capture, although in a distorted form, the past reality. (The gap between the event and the narrative comes up also later in the novel, for example, when Kārlis, who is working as a doctor in the Ravensbrück camp, begins his diary by saying that it is "impossible" to write down what is happening there (Gaile 2019: 66).) Denarration has been previously associated with the problem or reliability in Beckett, but its theoretical origins suggest that it could also designate a symptom of trauma. This connection could be supported by the influential Freudian idea that traumatic memory, as claimed by Caruth, "totters between remembrance and erasure" (Caruth 2013: 78). Richardson modeled the denarrated "on Gerald Prince's concept of the "disnarrated," his term for possible events that, though referred to, remain unactualized in a text" (Richardson 2006: 88). Prince notes that the disnarrated can, among other things, express narrator's "limitations resulting from insanity, delirium, an obsession, a psychological trauma" (Prince 1988: 4). Richardson contemplates denarration similarly to disnarration claiming that in

the most prevalent cases, in first person narratives, denarration "invites more possible interpretive positions concerning the subjectivity of the narrator, as the reader wonders whether the narrator is incompetent, disoriented, devious, or insane" (Richardson 2006: 93). Illustrative of this aspect is the episode in Sasha Sokolov's *A School for Fools* (1976) where we find a narrative of a schizophrenic mind, oscillating between first person singular ("I") and second person singular ("you) to correct its own memory "errors."[5] According to Richardson's model, this unreliable episode should be categorized as an example of local denarration because, in contrast to global denarration which "undermines the world it purports to depict," the indeterminacies seen here "are temporary, and the stability of the represented world is not seriously challenged" (Richardson 2006: 91). The traumatic denarration, as used in Gaile's novel, resembles Sokolov's schizophrenic denarration only as far as it too is local and disrupts coherent subjectivity and memory. The difference is that in traumatic denarration the language is more intense, more on the search for truth, thus also more self-reflexive and more open to ethical reflection.

Authorial Ethos

As noted, the reader of Gaile's novel assumes that the beginning is narrated by Duks because of the corresponding uses of narrative erasure later in the novel and the possibility of placing the beginning right after the ending in the timeline of events. However, when we first read *The Beautiful Ones* in a linear fashion, starting from the first page and moving forward, we have a feeling that perhaps it is the author herself who is speaking to us about her struggles with the basic task of introducing a story. This feeling can be better understood by paying attention to those features of the beginning that might effectively point to what narratologists call "authorial

5 "Allow me to correct you; as far as I remember, the white girl really stood in the school yard but it was a girl with a dog, not a doe, a chalk girl with a simple dog; when we rode our bicycle from point A to point B, this girl in a short dress and with a dandelion in her hair was going for a swim; you are telling me the chalk girl in front of our school is standing (stood) and looking (looked) at the wastes, where we are running (ran) fortifying cross-country races, and I'm telling you she's looking at the pond, where she will start bathing soon. You're telling me she's petting her doe and I'm telling you the girl is petting her simple dog." (Sokolov 2015: 99)

ethos," which describes authorial attitudes towards some proposed reality, as well as to the act of narration itself and the possibilities of narrative as a form of comprehension. Such ethos signaling situations are closely linked to a specific use of narrative voice. Susan Sniader Lanser in her book *Fictions of Authority* writes about "authorial voice" to signify public and self-reflexive instances of narration, adding that this term does not entail an ontological equivalence between the narrator and the author, instead "such a voice (re)produces the structural and functional situation of authorship" in 'extrarepresentational' acts," namely, in "reflections, judgements, generalizations about the world 'beyond' the fiction, direct addresses to the narratee, comments on the narrative process, allusions to other writers and texts" (Lanser 1992: 16–17). Furthermore, as recent research demonstrates, the presence of authorial voice can be evoked by the use of present tense and gnomic statements linked to author's values (Mäkelä 2017: 122, 130). The ethos attribution can be fostered also by "genre and reading strategies, as both operate as a framing, in which authorial ethos may or may not be foregrounded" (Altes 2014: 161). The most obvious example of foregrounding authorial ethos in narrative would be autobiographical literature which we read assuming that the narrator is the author, but one can also mention depictions of extreme violence, which, as Liesbeth Korthals Altes writes, will usually entail a "respect for the victims or show restraint in trying to represent the unrepresentable" (ibid.). This aspect is visible in the *The Beautiful Ones*.

The beginning of Gaile's novel makes a self-reflexive gesture already with the first sentence ("I want to tell a story") that is then questioned ("But how can I do it?"), expressing the difficulty to find the right words about some deeply disturbing past reality, which "has slipped through her fingers" and "formed a hole in her chest." According to Lanser, these sentences count as comments on narrative process and their obscure content is further intensified through a series of narrative erasures. Tellingly, the activity of denarration, which here has the task of defining the basic elements of the story, builds a relation between the narrator and the reader, triggered by the first person plural "we," immersing the reader deep into the experience of uncertainty and perhaps, in a way, seeking their help for establishing a beginning.

In terms of framing reading strategies, the beginning of Gaile's novel might provoke ethos attribution because, in contrast to other parts of the novel, it has no narrator's name attached to it, thus it reads like an anonymous passage,

and anonymity, as Lanser suggests in one of her essays, can function as a sign of an authorial position (Lanser 2005: 212). Although the narrator here does not offer straightforward judgements about the world either inside or outside the text, the substitution of "a young woman" with "a human being" implies a certain perspective on the post-traumatic reality that can be acknowledged as ethically valuable because of its universal humanistic implications. But, again, the reader comes to this interpretation not by assessing the beginning on its own terms but by connecting it to the metaleptic ending of the work where the same narrator returns to describe her experience of reading Ravensbrück testimonies. These stories place "her face to face with this force which is not, cannot be, and never has been hers," which, in other words, cannot be appropriated but only recognized. More generally, Gaile's beginning, to quote Robert Eaglestone on broken narratives, "makes us think about the precariousness of life, mourning, wounding, grieving" (Eaglestone 2018: 65), about the need, and possibly even an obligation, to mirror this in the narrative form. Thus incoherence could be seen as an ethical resource introduced by authorial voice.

Conclusion

In his book *Remnants of Auschwitz*, published in 1998, philosopher Giorgio Agamben maintains that the witness, when attempting to address unique and traumatic events, "must in some way submit his every word to the test of an impossibility of speaking" (Agamben 1999: 157). This idea constitutes the ethics of witnessing, regarding both primary and secondary accounts of suffering and resisting the pressure of harmonizing narrative forms. Dominick LaCapra, in a similar vein, insists "on the need for empathic unsettlement, and the discursive inscription of that unsettlement, in the response to traumatic events or conditions" (LaCapra 2014: xxxi), and, as he eventually comes to suggest, experimental literature is a "relatively safe haven in which to explore post-traumatic effects" (ibid.: 180). However, I would like to add that the discursive inscription of empathic unsettlement, felt by the readers and the narrators of traumatic past, can be better understood by providing a narratological analysis of concrete complicated strategies and tropes that can be connected, following thematic and metaphorical cues, to the force of trauma.

In this article, I have offered a close reading of the opening passage of Inga Gaile's novel *The Beautiful Ones* to demonstrate how the need for certainty and stability, typically associated with narrative beginnings, can be disturbed by the presence of traumatic past, which the reader of this work grasps after comprehending its ending. Furthermore, the use of denarration in the beginning is linked with authorial values, making this extreme strategy, as it were, conscious of ethical complexities involved in the relationship between the traumatic past, the secondary witness and the narrative. More precisely, the beginning of Gaile's novel frames the following chapters as inevitably incomplete representations of the women experiences in the Nazi camps since the contemporary narrator—the secondary witness—of those experiences have emphasized her difficulties of finding the language for addressing the other's trauma. The best she can do after reading history is to remain unsettled, that is, remain human.

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