MARCO PAOLINI'S THEATRE OF TRAUMA: *VAJONT*

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"Il fine del *Racconto del Vajont* è
passare ad altri il racconto del Vajont."
(Marco Paolini, *Quaderno del Vajont*)

"The goal of *Racconto del Vajont* is
to hand over to others the tale of Vajont."
(Marco Paolini, *Quaderno del Vajont*)

Abstract: This paper analyzes the work of actor/writer Marco Paolini, and his acclaimed monologue *Il racconto del Vajont* in particular. In the wake of Dario Fo and Franca Rame's *teatro civile*, Paolini's monologues contributed to the birth of the so-called *teatro di narrazione* in the 1990s, which can also be defined as "theatre of trauma", that is, a theatre that recovers the memory of tragic events from the past. In recent times, trauma has become a central theme of Western narrative, politics, and other forms of representation in the public sphere. Following the thought of philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Slavoj Žižek, the article reads Paolini's *Il racconto del Vajont* as a significant example of what writer Kyo Maclear calls "witness art." Characterized by a crisis of the traditional models of representation in mainstream culture, witness art is conceived by Maclear in opposition to the traditional divisions between art, knowledge, and the political instances of public discourse. Among Paolini's many performances of *Vajont*, the one performed at the same time and place where the tragedy took place 34 years before, and broadcasted live on RAI 2 in 1997, stands out for its uniqueness. That night, Paolini evoked the reenactment of a traumatic experience by its witnesses, and, on a wider scale, by the audience watching television at home. An almost forgotten tragedy became a media event, and for the first time trauma witnessing as such—and not as a means for a specific political claim—became part of the public discourse in the elaboration of post-1989 Italy.

Beginning in the wake of the Second World War, with the horrors of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, and especially over the past 30 years, traumatic events have become a privileged subject of historiography, sociology, art, movies, and other forms of public discourse. This is evident in the obtrusiveness of memory in the contemporary public sphere, with the proliferation of memorials, sites of memory, remembrance days, television programs, and other forms of commemoration. At the same time, trauma theory has become one—if not the most—important subject of intellectual debate, with contributions from psychoanalysis to literary theory, from historiography to philosophy, by writers such as Giorgio Agamben, Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Michael Rothberg. In this paper, I investigate Marco Paolini's theatrical monologue *Racconto del Vajont* (*Narration of Vajont*, 1993), with a special focus on his renowned television adaptation from 1997, as a major example of trauma discourse in contemporary Italy. I define the discourse of trauma, or trauma discourse, as the way in which contemporary societies engage with the representation of tragic past events. I will demonstrate that Paolini's unexpected popularity with *Racconto del Vajont*, a forgotten story of poor mountain people, must be understood within the context of post-1989 Italy, calling into question what it means to be Italian.¹

A common explanation for the growing interest in traumatic events is that these experiences alter our image of the world and push traditional forms of aesthetic, conceptual, and political representation beyond their limits. Although this certainly holds true, I argue that the importance of “trauma” in the public sphere—through memorials, celebrations, conferences, books, etc.—must be explained in relation to how contemporary societies engage with their inner crises. In other words, the discourse on trauma is the symptom of a crisis of the legitimization of mainstream discourse as a discourse of power. Collective traumas are symbolic representations that emerge when master narratives fail, calling into question the strategies of legitimization that reinforce authority in the public sphere.

If the failure of all-encompassing modes of representation to uphold social identity “produces” (the fascination/obsession with) traumatic events, it is not difficult to understand why the latter have become central to our “postmodern”

¹ Interestingly, in 1993, the same year Paolini performed *Vajont* for the first time, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* was released and the Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington, D.C.

societies.² As LaCapra argues, as self-founded and therefore lacking a transcendent foundation, modern nations established their collective identity—bound by a common language, ethnicity, and history—through an exclusionary relationship with the Other:

[E]specially in a secular context, a commonly desired, ultimate foundation or ground is full unity, community, or consensus, which is often, if not typically, figured as lost or perhaps lacking, usually because of the intrusive presence of others seen as outsiders or polluters of the city or the body politic. (709)

This is at the core of the nationalist ideology that characterizes modernity and that also lurked behind the (apparently) formal universalism of classical liberalism.

While traditional narratives belong to a strategy of legitimization of what can be called the “horizon of consensus” (Lyotard 24), the post-WWII decline of nationalist ideology rejects this logic. As Jeffrey C. Alexander points out in *Trauma: A Social Theory*,

It is only when narratives of triumph are challenged, when individual deaths seem worthless or polluted, when those who have fallen are seen not as sacrificing for a noble cause but as wasted victims of irresponsible chicanery, that wars become traumatic indeed. [...] *Collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them.* (3–4; my italics)

It is by putting forward otherness as its central issue that trauma discourse reveals the crisis of master narratives that sustain the hegemonic discourse of power. The general commitment to understanding “what happened” in tragic events and to giving the victims a voice is a symptom of social and political distress and an attempt to elaborate new forms of citizenship in our era.

² One cannot avoid referring to Jean-François Lyotard’s seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition*, where Lyotard defined “postmodern” as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). In his foreword to the American edition of Lyotard’s book, Fredric Jameson wrote that “postmodernism, as it is generally understood, entails a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic” (vii).

Trauma, Memory, and History

In this way, trauma discourse brings forth the issue of memory and history, of remembering one's own past as fundamental to understanding how a community represents itself and projects the future: "there is an insurgent politics of memory-identity, the purpose of which is not to dethrone memory but to disrupt a unitary, all-absorbing official story of the past" (Booth 175). To put it differently, trauma challenges the modern concept of "History" and its epistemological foundation. In his seminal book *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000), Michael Rothberg argues for a new theoretical framework that might include conflicting demands of understanding traumatic events:

While the traditional combination of the extreme and the everyday [elements that characterize the Nazi genocide] blocks traditional claims to synthetic knowledge, attentiveness to its structure can also lead to new forms of knowledge beyond the realist and antirealist positions, and outside of traditional disciplines [...]. In confronting such a history, we all share the need to find an adequate form for narrating and understanding an extraordinary series of events. (6–7)

Rothberg goes beyond the opposition between "realist" and "antirealist"—the latter rejecting the former's claim of representing traumatic events within traditional epistemological schemata—and suggests the notion of "traumatic realism," composed of different narrative strategies that fill the gap between past and present.³

³ In doing so, he refers to Walter Benjamin's dialectical image of "constellation" of ideas, particularly the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where the German philosopher criticizes the linear concept of time that is characteristic of modernity. For Benjamin, the historian should engage in a dialectical juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements of the past, as well as from the *now* of the author and of his or her reader. According to Max Pensky, "Under conventional terms 'past' is a narrative construction of the conditions for the possibility of a present which supersedes and therefore comprehends it; Benjamin's sense, on the contrary, was that 'past' and 'present' are constantly locked in a complex interplay in which what is past and what is present are negotiated through material struggles, only subsequent to which the victorious parties: Benjamin's dialectical images consign all that supports their vision of the world to a harmonious past, and all that speaks against it to oblivion" (180–181).

Rothberg's "traumatic realism" exemplifies trauma theory's commitment to challenging the interpretation of post-modern narrative as the disappearance of reality.⁴ By reaffirming the singularity of the Real—in Lacanian terms—as the *other* in its scabrous, even unpleasant, bodily existence, it exposes the "traumatic" nature of history: "events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others" (Caruth 20). Accordingly, historians like Carlo Ginzburg advocate a new "microhistory," composed of the numerous, scattered narrations of individuals, one that refutes any pretension of a scientific, impartial knowledge. The result is that, as Ginzburg argues, "questions that had been considered peripheral were cropping up at the center of the discipline, and vice versa" (Ginzburg 200), and "the hypotheses, the doubts, the uncertainties became part of the narration; the search for truth became part of the exposition of the necessarily incomplete truth attained" (Ginzburg 204). In this sort of "relativistic" approach, there is no absolute point of view; there are only many "disjointed" ones: "A close-up look permits us to grasp what eludes a comprehensive viewing, and vice versa" (Ginzburg 207). Historians cannot situate themselves outside of their object in order to survey it but, instead, include the process of recollection within their representation.

Representing the Unrepresentable: Witness Art

The core of trauma theory is that, after the Holocaust, writing "History"—rather than poetry (or art in general), like in Theodor Adorno's famous statement—has become unacceptable. In fact, an art *nach Auschwitz* (*nach* meaning "after" but also "toward"), moving "toward" the (always unreachable) site of trauma, might still be possible and even necessary. While scholars such as Rothberg, LaCapra, and Caruth have been exploring new approaches to addressing and communicating the past and its memory, visual arts writer Kyo Maclear puts forward a new concept of art called "Witness Art" in her book *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness*. Since all narrations about traumatic events deal with an experience that is, by definition, entirely different from ours, Maclear's starting point is the question, "How can we bridge contact with trauma survivors without incorporating their otherness?" (83). In traditional art, any object and

⁴ Rothberg further argues: "Traumatic realist texts, moreover, challenge the narrative form of realism as well as its conventional indexical function. [...] Instead of indicating an object or phenomenon that caused it, and in that sense making the referent present, the traumatic index points to a necessary absence" (104).

action, however violent or tragic (such as the loss of a child), is subjected to the laws of aesthetic representation that make it a therapeutic rather than disruptive experience for our emotional balance. Insofar as the “beauty” of a work of art is at the core of aesthetic experience, any recollection of traumatic events seems precluded from our view.

On the contrary, by pushing the problem of interpersonal relationships to their limits, trauma discourse is engaged in acknowledging the other not as the “Other” vis-à-vis the Self, but as “an-other” self, bearer of inalienable rights because (and not in spite) of his or her irreducible otherness. In doing so, this discourse necessarily emphasizes the uniqueness and multiplicity of the subjects who, for this reason, tend to resist any attempt to make them part of a given collective totality. A major consequence of this discourse is the crisis of traditional cultural forms of expression, both conceptual and aesthetic, which become subjected to a radical change involving their specificity and difference from one another. The various forms of public discourse tend to blur and become conflated in a *liminal space* where the values of a given culture and society are subjected to a process of continual redefinition.⁵

In the case of art, trauma challenges its assumed capability of expressing inner feelings in the name of beauty and of giving a universal voice to emotional subjectivity, as opposed to rational objectivity.⁶ Blurring the boundaries between different modes of expression, Witness Art may take the form of a theatrical monologue or of street art. Thus, Witness Art forces the limits of descriptive and conceptual language based on denotation to evoke “a wordless acknowledgement of that which remains absent, or *other*, to our known worlds” (Maclear 7). In dealing with traumatic events, Witness Art does not produce the harmony of beauty, but rather the violence of an “endless imagination” (Maclear 75), akin to the aesthetic of the sublime. To put it differently, trauma is the name of the unrepresentable that forces our gaze to its limits, revealing the need to recreate the past through

⁵ This liminal space is the proper site of trauma, as a limit-experience laying bare the void that is after/prior to the collapse of narrative symbolization.

⁶ Maclear observes that, when we turn horror into beauty, we endow it with a meaning according to our established cultural pattern: “Instead of being horrified by the wounds of war, one is seduced by its power of execution. The chaos, the din, the stench turns into *terrible beauty* [...] [because] our ability to turn away from horror, our ability to normalize injustice, is learned” (184).

memory and allowing others' experiences to become our own without absorbing them into our conceptual framework.

Marco Paolini and the *Teatro di Narrazione*

Maclear's Witness Art provides an insightful concept with which to investigate stage actor and playwright Marco Paolini's theatre—particularly *Vajont*—as performances where classical approaches and the dividing lines between history, art, and other modes of representation are called into question. Significantly enough, in the book *Quaderno del Vajont*, a collection of memories of how the television performance was organized and realized, Paolini acknowledges his performances as acts of witnessing:

So, telling stories like this one [*Vajont*], little by little, I became a witness. To me, the job of the actor is this: a discovery process. At first you cannot be a witness of such things, you are just a student. Then, little by little you obtain the legitimacy of witnessing. Who gives you the permission to be a witness? No one. You cannot ask for it from anyone. [...] But you are afraid of using this word, of assuming such a role: you feel inadequate, unfit. You feel your limitations. (20; my translation)

Ever since the early 1990s, Paolini has evoked traumatic moments of contemporary Italian history in monologues such as the *Racconto del Vajont* (*Narration of Vajont*, 1993–1995), broadcast live by RAI 2 on October 9, 1997; *Canto per Ustica* (*Song for Ustica*, 2000); and *Il Sergente* (*The Sergeant*, 2007). Nevertheless, he also chose to investigate tragedies from other countries, as in *Bhopal* (2003), where he narrated the December 2, 1984, disaster in India, thereby demonstrating that being a witness is removed from any national or ideological celebration.

Paolini's theatrical approach comes from a long-established tradition of Italian popular culture: *cantastorie* (balladeers). The *cantastorie* were itinerant storytellers who, especially in the south of Italy (the Sicilian balladeers were notable), performed songs in public squares in the local dialect starting in the fourteenth century. Most importantly, especially before the phenomenal 1997 television performance of *Vajont* that made him a star, Paolini performed in public and private spaces, such as schools, hospitals, factories, and clubs. Unsurprisingly, he

began his career in the late 1970s, influenced by the work of Dario Fo and Franca Rame, Fo's wife. Committed to bringing theatre back to its popular roots and audience, Fo, who received the 1997 Nobel Prize in Literature on the very night of *Vajont's* live broadcast, and Rame chose to perform their plays in disaffected factories, occupied buildings, and *Casa del Popolo* (cultural centres controlled by labour unions and the Communist Party). Since the late 1960s, they had been reviving elements of *commedia dell'arte* at a time when television shows were cannibalizing (and therefore extinguishing) Italian vaudeville and other popular forms of theatre. The renowned *Mistero Buffo* (1969), in which Fo played all the parts as a one-man show, and *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (Accidental Death of Anarchist, 1970–1973) were the first successful examples of Fo's and Rame's *teatro civile*, that is, a successful series of satires composed of songs, pantomime, improvisations, and bizarre monologues that provided a counter-history of Italy and its sociopolitical problems during the *anni di piombo* (Years of Lead, 1969–1984).⁷

In opposition to the bleak Years of Lead, the mid- to late-1980s were a period of economic prosperity in Italy, characterized by the decline of all-encompassing ideologies and political commitment—the so-called *riflusso*—and the success of commercial television networks owned by media tycoon (and future Prime Minister) Silvio Berlusconi. After 1989, with the end of the Cold War and the fall of both the Communist and Christian-Democratic parties in Italy, civil theatre saw a rebirth, and Fo and Rame's political commentary on the present was replaced with narratives of tragic past events in the so-called *teatro di narrazione*. Thanks in part to his television appearances, Paolini is probably its first and most famous exponent with *Racconto del Vajont*, but other actors and authors have engaged with this kind of theatre over the past 20 years, including Marco Baliani, Ascanio Celestini, Mario Gelardi, Renato Sarti, and Bebo Storti.⁸ Paolini

⁷ Determined to “break the fourth wall,” Fo and Rame called on the audience to participate in the show, including a final *dibattito* (debate) about the subject immediately after the representation and pranks of fake police raids before and during the performances. Along with other means of engaging the audience, a well-devised stratagem allowed them to avoid any censorship of their performances: Fo and Rame founded a non-profit cultural association with their company, *La Comune*, which included *all* of the spectators as its members (the ticket included the membership fee). As performances were a private event, they had the constitutional right—in theory, though less so in practice—to say whatever they wanted without police control.

⁸ For example, rather than merely narrating the kidnapping and killing of the Christian-Democratic leader Aldo Moro by the *Brigate Rosse* terrorist group, in 1978, Baliani's *Corpo di Stato* (1998) reflects on the *anni di piombo* and Moro's death 20 years later, including what they

and the other practitioners of the *teatro di narrazione* find inspiration in Fo and Rame's commitment to give voice to the common people outside the network of mainstream theatres. This approach challenges any "fascist" nationalist discourse by recalling that

Italian history has been marked by divided memories ever since the nation took shape in the nineteenth century. Different sets of memories have surfaced from and about events, shaping both public and private memory. One aspect of this divided memory is that certain accounts were excluded from historical discourse for long periods of time. (Foot 11)⁹

Significantly, *teatro di narrazione* adopts a minimalist approach—in part for budgetary reasons—with an actor alone onstage performing a monologue along with videos, images, music, and other recorded sound. The actor playing himself with his "bare" body and voice is part of a narrative strategy meant to convey that the many stories of men and women who lived, suffered, and died always escape the "truth" of mainstream history. Indeed, this theatre may be considered a political theatre insofar as it is committed to exploring the many forgotten events of Italian history. However, born after the post-1989 "ideological crisis," *teatro di narrazione* lacks Fo and Rame's fervent ideological framework, which allowed them to identify innocents and culprits beyond any doubt.¹⁰ Unlike Fo and Rame's plays and farces, these narrations do not claim to possess the "truth" of what really happened from a firm political perspective. Their minimalist configuration, similar to Giorgio Gaber's one-man *teatro canzone*, reveals an urge

meant to a generation of Italians. Celestini's *Radio Clandestina. Memoria delle Fosse ardeatine* (2000) is about the infamous SS mass execution in Rome during the 1944 Nazi occupation. Sarti's monologue *Mai Morti* (2002), performed by Storti, narrates the horrors of fascism before, during, and after WWII, including the massacres in Ethiopia. More recently, Gelardi's *Gomorra* (2007) is a theatrical adaptation of Roberto Saviano's successful book on criminal organizations in Campania.

⁹ For more on this subject, see Remo Bodei, *Il noi diviso* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).

¹⁰ *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (1970–1973), about the notorious Pinelli/Calabresi case, is probably the best example of *teatro civile* denouncing the continuity of methods and key figures between fascism and the Christian-Democrats.

to make the performer and his or her experience an integral part of the narrative through autobiographical digressions and commentary.¹¹

For these reasons, *teatro di narrazione* can be called a “theatre of trauma,” as in the case of its most famous practitioner, Marco Paolini. As I will show, *The Story of Vajont* is a perfect example of theatre of trauma, in which the actor, not necessarily belonging to the victimized group, performs as the victims’ mouthpiece before an audience that symbolically participates in a tragic experience.

Racconto del Vajont

Written in collaboration with stage director Gabriele Vacis, *Racconto del Vajont* is Paolini’s most successful “civil oration” (to use his own definition), recovering a tragic event from the past as a collective act of witnessing. *Vajont* recounts what happened in 1963 in the north of Italy, when a landslide into the basin of the largest double-arc dam ever designed created a massive wave that wiped out five villages and killed approximately 2,000 people. Although Paolini had already performed *Vajont* several times before October 9, 1997, this latest performance was a special occasion for two main reasons.¹² First, it was broadcast live on Italian public television (RAI 2) and captured an incredible audience for this kind of show: around 3.5 million people. Second, it was performed at the same time and in same place as the tragedy that had occurred 34 years earlier. In this particular performance, Paolini stood on a bare platform set in the basin of the

¹¹ In the 1970s, popular actor-singer Gaber abandoned his career as a pop singer and television star to perform a series of theatre recitals, such as *Il Signor G* (*Mr. G.*, 1970) and *Far finta di essere sani* (*Pretending to Be Healthy*, 1973). Gaber’s recitals, significantly called *teatro canzone*, revived the tradition of the *cantastorie* with a mix of surreal monologues and songs that were characterized by sociopolitical commentary and written in collaboration with painter Sandro Luporini. Gaber’s intimate approach, emphasized by the one-man show, was a departure from Fo and Rame’s collective farces inspired by everyday chronicles. Whereas the latter showed little doubt about the identities of the oppressed and the perpetrators, Gaber’s solo performances acted out the identity and ideological confusion of an Italian left-wing bourgeois experiencing the turmoil of the *anni di piombo*.

¹² The performance on October 9 was actually the last of three performances at the improvised “Theatre of the Dam” (the others, on the sixth and the seventh, were meant to be rehearsals for the television broadcast). *Racconto del Vajont* was not the first show on this subject: it was preceded by Maurizio Donadoni’s *Memoria di class* and Roberto Innocente’s *Vajont. Il senso della memoria*, both realized in 1993, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the tragedy.

old Vajont dam reservoir, wearing black clothes and completely surrounded by an audience composed of the survivors of the disaster and their families (see Figure 1). The huge dam, towering over the set in the background and fully illuminated by floodlights, is like a ghostly presence, the phantasmatic screen that connects but also separates Paolini and his audience from the tragic past.¹³ He uses only a blackboard and a table to explain the story in chronological order, which makes this *teatro di narrazione* particularly austere and minimalist. Even though he does not sing or play music (at least not in *Vajont*), the similarity with the Sicilian balladeers is striking.

Figure 1. Marco Paolini at the “Theatre of Vajont’s Dam”

Paolini is aware that his *orazione civile* is difficult to define because it does not fit into any of the traditional models of mainstream culture. At the beginning of the television broadcast, he addresses the audience at home with these words:

Here we are. Welcome to the *Theatre of Vajont’s Dam*. In some newspapers this is announced as a *documentary*, in others as a *dramatic movie*. Instead, you are in a theatre. These people are here to listen to

¹³ Paolini recalls at the beginning of *Vajont* that, despite common opinion and what many newspapers wrote after the disaster, the dam never did collapse.

theatre. Tonight we steal the scene from current events and *make a live broadcast on memory*. This is why it is so difficult to define what we are doing tonight. Maybe a live broadcast on memory does not exist... What is it? *Let's try to tell it together, let's try to make it understood*. (I, 0:01:45; my italics)¹⁴

From a superficial viewpoint, Paolini's storytelling—full of numbers, dates, and archival images—is similar to a sort of journalistic reporting, especially in the first part, which describes the long period preceding the disaster. Unlike other examples of trauma narrative, he opts for a linear reconstruction rather than a fragmented one, committed to elucidating “what” really happened and to identifying “who” should be held responsible, following a thorough investigation.

The first half of *Vajont* is in fact akin to the model of investigative documentary: Paolini introduces the story with a summary of the “facts”—an outline of what happened on the night of October 9, 1963, when the five villages were destroyed—and then narrates the whole story from the beginning, unfolding a causal chain of circumstances that led to the tragic night. This linear, chronological approach, similar to that of historical documentary, recalls how the detective story stimulates the reader's curiosity by unveiling the truth of a murder in the introduction. As Meir Sternberg explains, the detective story epitomizes this narrative strategy: “the reader's attention is impelled backward to the narrative past [...] The dominant interest is, in short, curiosity; the very *raison d'être* of the retardatory structure, consisting in the delay of exposition, is its increasing intensification, and to reach the top of the staircase is to be rewarded by its final satisfaction” (180). In other words, through an accurate recounting of past events, this kind of narrative engages the reader (or the audience) by gradually filling in the expository gaps, building toward a climax when the truth is completely exposed. By doing so, Paolini captivates the audience with the story of a tragedy that had happened more than 30 years earlier in a remote region of northern Italy,

¹⁴ “Benvenuti al *Teatro della diga del Vajont*. In alcuni giornali questo di stasera è indicato come un documentario, in altri giornali come un film drammatico. Invece siete in un teatro. La gente è qui per ascoltare teatro. Per una sera rubiamo la scena all'attualità e facciamo una diretta sulla memoria. Ecco perché è così difficile scriverlo, definire cosa facciamo stasera. Forse non esiste una diretta sulla memoria. Che cos'è?... Proviamo a raccontarlo insieme, proviamo a farlo capire” (Paolini 20?). All translations of *Racconto del Vajont* are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

forgotten perhaps by the television audience but not by the survivors and their families who attended the live performance.¹⁵

Nevertheless, despite his admiration for Pasolini's sociopolitical commitment, Paolini refuses to become the investigator or to assume the Pasolinian pose of the intellectual invested with the capacity to "know the truth" and the duty to unveil it to the public. While the detective story usually deals with a mystery that has to be solved, the "truth" of *Vajont* is quite evident from the beginning and almost trivial; therefore, its tragedy was predictable and avoidable. In this reconstruction of the facts prior to the tragedy, Paolini's point is that the *Story of Vajont* is not "unbelievable" because it is difficult for regular people to grasp, but because it happened the way it happened. Lacking oil and coal reserves, Italy had always relied on hydroelectric power plants to produce energy. After WWII, during the economic boom and in accord with the Christian-Democratic government, a private electric company planned to build a huge dam in the Dolomitic site of Vajont (a name which literally means "goes down"), where the rock was too fragile. During the many years that it took to complete the dam, nobody wanted to listen to the villagers and to the only person who opposed the project from the outset, the courageous ex-partisan Tina Merlin, a young reporter for the Communist newspaper *L'Unità*. Aside from this young "communist," the "poor and ignorant" inhabitants of the mountains had no voice and could not succeed in stopping what was supposed to become the greatest monument to Italy's recent industrialization and future prosperity. After the disaster, Merlin decided to write the whole story but received no attention; her book was finally released by a small publisher 20 years after the disaster.¹⁶ In recounting this nearly forgotten story, Paolini uses a plain narrative approach to tell the chronicle of an announced tragedy with some irony but no sentimentality.

It would be a mistake, though, to dismiss *Vajont* as an (albeit excellent) example of investigative theatre. In "Language and Ritual of a Storyteller" (2000)—the afterword to the American edition (published in 1997) of *Racconto del Vajont*—, Franco Nasi significantly quotes Walter Benjamin's famous essay on Leskov, in which the German philosopher draws a distinction between the storyteller's art

¹⁵ In the sketchbook of the performance, entitled *Quaderno del Vajont*, Paolini himself emphasizes the spectacular, cinematic effect of the stage arranged inside the dam: "We are in a movie!" (6).

¹⁶ Entitled *Sulla pelle viva. Come si costruisce una catastrofe. Il caso del Vajont* (Milan: La Pietra, 1983). Paolini wrote a brief "Presentazione" for the 1997 edition (published by Cierre Edizioni).

of narration and information, opposing the sphere of life and subjectivity of the former with that of the objectivity and plausibility of the latter:

The storytelling [...] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience. (Benjamin 91–92)

The storyteller is the officiant of a ritual that evokes the memory of the past and those who lived it. In the same spirit, Paolini's performance creates a particular space for witness by weaving a precise historical reconstruction, beginning with his personal memory of the events and ending with an evocation of the memories of the victims and their families—the audience around him.

Figure 2. Paolini sets the time.

In his opening speech for the television performance, quoted above, Paolini welcomes the audience to a “theatre.” Because it involves active participation that cannot be merely voyeuristic, with direct empathy between the performer and the spectators, theatre is particularly suited to the practice of witnessing. By saying “we” and “together,” Paolini also emphasizes that the audience must be an active element of his *orazione civile*, more so than usual in a live performance. Interestingly, whereas documentaries such as *Shoah* establish a relationship between the author (the director and interviewer), the victims, and the audience by rejecting a linear narration, Paolini uses the chronological unfolding of the events in the *Story of Vajont* to create a connection between the performer and the audience that opens a space around trauma. *Vajont* is not merely a lecture on “what happened”: the extensive use of data is necessary to transform the narration from a purely artistic performance into what Maclear calls Witness Art.

Paolini's use of time in *Vajont* is, in fact, only apparently objective and chronological: it should be defined as evocative. That is, he does not let the past unfold before us like an object that can be observed and comprehended, but rather like a presence/absence that slowly overlaps onto the flow of the present. This narrative strategy becomes clear at the beginning of the second half of the performance, when he puts an old clock on the table (Figure 2) and says,

Here. I have set an alarm clock. I am taking off my watch. Can you see it? What time do you see? It's a quarter to 10. Now please do not look at your watches anymore—the people at home, too. Let's change the time zone... I'm going to ask you the time; I won't look at [the clock]. Every so often I'll ask, and you tell me. (II, 0:9:30)¹⁷

From this point on, the narration becomes increasingly emotional as Paolini approaches the events of that shocking night of October 9. The clock on the table marks this path to a crucial moment in which the present (the performance) and the past (the memory) finally become one and the same. This moment takes place when his narration reaches that crucial instant at 10:45 p.m., when the landslide fell into the basin and when, suddenly, “an entire

¹⁷ “Ho preparato una sveglia. Mi tolgo l'orologio. La vedete? Che ora fa? Le 10 meno un quarto. Allora per favore i vostri orologi non guardateli più. Anche a casa. Cambiamo fuso orario ... Io l'ora la chiedo a voi, non guardo l'orologio, ogni tanto ve lo chiedo e mi rispondete” (Paolini 1999).

world (trees, animals, people, land, rocks) reaches the speed of 100 km/h NOW!” (II, 1:04:11). As he switches from the past to the present tense (maintained until the end), Paolini’s narration makes the present (us) and the past (them) collapse into one another. Interestingly, in the written version of *Racconto del Vajont*, the word “now,” so effective in the live performance, is not present. In this way, not only does the gap between the time of the narration and that of the narrated events blur in a Benjaminian way, but the distances between the performance and the audience, and the stage and the space around it, are erased also. The evocative—rather than merely chronological—nature of time and space makes Paolini’s performance the catalyst for a collective re-enactment of a traumatic experience in which the individual and subjective elements relegate objective facts to the background.

Figure 3. Vajont’s final “song”

By constantly alluding to the presence of the witnesses surrounding him, particularly in that special 1997 performance, Paolini calls attention to the victims and the survivors as the real protagonists of his own act of witnessing. This narrative strategy also accounts for the many often quite humorous digressions that, together with his use of dialect, create the feeling of everyday life. His storytelling

does not linger on the smallest and apparently secondary details like in a detective story, which carefully delays the moment in which the mystery completely unfolds. Rather, Paolini's micro-narratives recall that the real subject of this story is that which has always been optional and expendable to official historiography: the life of ordinary human beings and their memory. It is this representation of ordinary everyday life, including its most trivial aspects, that evokes the unique *experience* called "Vajont." Likewise, the presence of the survivors—the real and only witnesses—and their families makes this performance particularly compelling because, in Rothberg's words, "the trauma's conditions of possibility lie in surviving the accident of the extreme. [...] The narrator is traumatized insofar as she lives on beyond extremity into a new world of everydayness" (138).

As Paolini approaches the terrible, inevitable night in the second half of *Vajont*, his narration becomes more and more fraught with gaps and long moments of silence, during which the television director cuts to close-ups of the audience. However accurate Paolini's chronicle of the events may be, it is his emotional performance that evokes the past, unveiling the inevitable distance that separates *us* from *them*. He does not pretend to give the victims back their lost voice; quite the opposite, he recalls that there cannot be a unique mouthpiece that ties together every single narration but only a sort of "central silence" from which their voices may come to light. At the very end, Paolini asks the spectators to stand (see Figure 3) and says, "A song for this story does not exist. Your silence is that song. Thank you; let's not forget" (II, 1:19:00). Hence, it is silence that ultimately configures this narration and makes it possible, because, as Claude Lanzmann observed, "Here silence is the most authentic mode of speech, to maintain, as in the eye of the cyclone, a protected, preserved region in which nothing must ever enter" (qtd. in Stoekl 73). By doing so, the story of *Vajont* opens up a "listening *from the site of trauma*" (Caruth 58) that circles around a core of absent voices.¹⁸

The Discourse of Trauma as Discourse of the Other

Paolini's constant pointing at *what cannot be grasped* recalls Rothberg's above-mentioned concept of "traumatic realism" in opposition to the indexical

¹⁸ Caruth concludes her new "afterword" (written for the 2016 edition of the book *Unclaimed Experience*) with these compelling words: "Sometimes a traumatic address comes from our past. Sometimes it comes from pasts we do not know. [...] And sometimes our language must find its way through the language of others we will never understand" (139).

constitution of traditional realist narrative.¹⁹ But it also exemplifies Maclear's concept of Witness Art, challenging the traditional divisions between art, historiography, and other conventional modes of representation. *Vajont's* linear storyline is unable to represent the real event, in keeping with Maclear's statement that "facts may define the broad parameters of the news, not the singular experiences of the traumatized," while only "art has the power to respect claims of difference and otherness inherent to trauma commemoration" (76). Only by stretching the discourse of trauma to its limits, by putting forth the dehumanizing experience of victims as absolute otherness, does art become Witness Art. To use the words of Lyotard, "let us bear witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (82). From a political perspective, the issue of "representing the unrepresentable" that is at stake in trauma discourse is a commitment to alternative narratives in the public sphere, counter-narratives in which other voices can speak without being absorbed into a predetermined cultural framework. In a similar vein, Paolini's *teatro civile* as a theatre of trauma puts forth a discourse that is inclusive of otherness, of the irreducible diversity of human beings and their points of view.

The discourse of trauma as *discourse of the other* is therefore political only insofar as it is a non-ideological one. It is not "about" history; instead, it claims to "make history," showing that the public body and national identity are not monolithic but are a polycentric and equivocal "horizon of relative and contingent truths" (Williams 14).²⁰ The desire to narrate traumatic experiences beyond the frame of our experience—this frame being the alcove of the objectifying power of knowledge—aims at establishing a dialogical relationship with other subjects who are excluded from public discourse, with the consequent possibility of reworking social identity. Accordingly, in her book *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich explores

¹⁹ As Rothberg argues, "Instead of indicating an object or phenomenon that caused it, and in that sense making the referent present, the traumatic index points to a necessary absence" (104).

²⁰ In his book *The Transparent Society*, Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo writes, "with the demise of the idea of a central rationality of history, the world of generalized communication explodes like a multiplicity of 'local' rationalities—ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic minorities—that finally speak up for themselves. They are no longer repressed and cowed into silence by the idea of a single true form of humanity that must be realized irrespective of particularity and individual finitude, transience and contingency" (9). In a series of public lectures entitled *From Weak Thought to the Thought of the Weak*, he called for a public space that is finally open to the voices of outcasts.

the mechanisms by which public life operates not just in the political arena but in the production of cultural forms such as films, memorials, and oral histories. The turn to memory is also a turn to the affective or felt experience of history as central to the construction of public cultures, to give a range of people the authority to represent historical experience, and often implicitly to suggest a plurality of points of view. Yet *questions remain about what counts as a trauma history and whose feelings matter in the national public sphere.* (37; my italics)

By narrating what appears “too personal or ephemeral to leave records” (Cvetkovitch 244), trauma discourse declares that everyone’s story is worth being told and, therefore, preserved.

In other words, trauma discourse stresses that individuals are all different from each other and that victims of traumatic experiences are an outlying case of this irreducible otherness. The very fact that a discourse is *of* trauma—trauma being both its subject matter and the subject being allowed to speak—rejects the idea of a unique, master discourse that requires consensus through the elimination of different voices. The crisis of traditional forms of art and historiography are connected to the crisis of nationalist ideologies, and of the idea that a public space exists in which anyone is allowed to speak. Today the concept of the nation and of society as a unified totality is called into question, to be replaced by one that “does not form an integrated whole, but remains haunted by a principle of opposition” (Lyotard 13). In this context, the role of the discourse of trauma is evocative as well as *provocative*, pushing the limits of any discourse that takes place in the legitimate, symbolic domain. As such, it opens up a plurality of social spaces made of “counter-publics,” opposing homogenizing and exclusionary norms and their capacity to integrate any anomaly into the social system. The goal is to re-imagine our collective identity as the dialectical product of a network of social spheres that continually (try to) define their relationships to one another and to strike a balance between them. Consequently, art, historiography, and other public discourses become conflated in a sort of *liminal* space that is open to those who are not traditionally allowed to be subjects of discourse, in which everyone has a right to speak *for* him—or herself and not to be spoken *about*.

Conclusion: The Discourse of the Other as Open Text

As an act of witnessing, *Vajont* is not simply a way of collectively working through or reliving a traumatic past; rather, it is an act of sharing memory that calls for audience participation, making the viewer an active protagonist in the shaping of public discourse.²¹ In this view, Paolini's *theatre of trauma* demonstrates that what constitutes Witness Art is not the work itself, but how it engages with the audience/viewer/reader. Despite the uniqueness of that particular night at the *Theatre of Vajont's Dam*, Paolini's performances are a form of secular ritual requiring an endless re-enactment that is always new. Therefore, calling for the voice of others to fill in its gaps, this re-enactment is constitutionally *open* to exceeding prescribed dimensions. As in the case of Maclear's Witness Art, such a discourse leaves the work unfinished in order to make victims and viewers participate, either with their voices or their silence. This is evident in Paolini's performances and in other examples of *teatro di narrazione*, where the audience is never passive but is called to participate in order to fill in the narrative gaps.

This radical openness is crucial because, although the subject of trauma discourse is always "obscene" (i.e., what lurks from outside the scene), it constantly risks objectivizing its subject and allowing it to be swallowed again within the legitimate framework of mainstream narrative. A genuine trauma discourse, as we have seen, finds its place in the niches of experimentation, of alternative cultural spaces and subcultures. And yet, one cannot overlook the risk of its being a discourse that exists inevitably and simultaneously inside and outside the horizon of the legitimized public sphere—for example, to endorse the extravagances of independent art and alternative culture, in view either of their commodification (e.g. the quotations of Banksy's murals) or of a "politically correct" approach to minorities and other victimized groups. Even the most challenging examples of

²¹ In this respect, Avishai Margalit observes: "The most promising projects of shared memory are those that go through natural communities of memory, so to speak, and the issue is how to engage painful traumatic memories from the past" (82). Similarly, LaCapra distinguishes between *absence* and *loss*. Whereas *absence* points to a metaphysical foundation and is trans-historical, *loss* deals with particular events of the past and involves not the hope for the restoration of an original full presence but the possibility of a social transformation (adding pages from LaCapra).

Witness Art are destined to fail once displayed within the “artistic” frame of a gallery or a museum, perhaps suggesting that only few might appreciate its message.²²

Conversely, monuments such as the many *Tombs of the Unknown Soldier* and the proliferation of modern memorials are salient examples of the institutionalized mourning that characterize our “democratic” era. Erected after the horrors of WWI, the *Unknown Soldier* monuments did not honour kings or other state heroes but nonetheless reinforced the rhetoric of nationalism by celebrating the ideal citizen as the everyman who sacrificed his life for the sake of his country—while also compensating for the impossibility of identifying the bodies of many soldiers.²³ As collective acts of remembering that enhance social cohesion, “national memorials” (such as those located near the Mall in Washington, D.C., or at “Ground Zero” in Manhattan) do not escape the ambiguities of an institutionalized commemoration of a tragic past in the form of a fixed truth that is closed to further discussion. At the same time, as has been pointed out (Todorov 1995), alternative acts of mourning often reaffirm exclusivist, if not blatantly xenophobic, identities that challenge pluralism.

The “scabrous” presence, even in the form of memory, of the traumatized victim exposes the fact that every subject must be recognized in his or her individuality, to a point beyond any easy reconciliation. In fact, we should ask whether a genuine trauma discourse might always bring about some kind of sociopolitical break akin to what Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls “pure act”: “there is something inherently ‘terroristic’ in every authentic act, in its gesture thoroughly redefining the ‘rules of the game,’ inclusive of the very basic self-identity of its perpetrator—a proper political act unleashes the force of negativity that shatters

²² Picasso’s *Guernica* was perhaps the first artwork to be explicitly acknowledged by critics as a representation of traumatic experience beyond any temptation of beauty. However, as it became an iconic symbol of the horrors of *any* war, reproduced in countless posters and postcards, *Guernica* regained the universality of “Great Art” at the expense of the power to point at *that* unique event.

²³ With the significant exception of the Italian *Milite Ignoto* located within the *Vittoriano*. The huge neoclassical monument dedicated to King Victor Emmanuel II was built in 1911 in the very centre of Rome to celebrate the country’s fiftieth birthday. Parallel to the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, local commemorative monuments were erected in every town with the names of the fallen soldiers who came from there, so that in the *Vittoriano*, the people would mourn a body without a name, while in the local monuments, names without a body. Later on, in line with its triumphalist use of memory, the Fascist government built the massive *Sacrario di Redipuglia*, containing more than 100,000 bodies of soldiers who died in the Great War, most of them unknown.

the very foundations of our being” (377).²⁴ Although the Italian public sphere has always been the battleground of divided memories, it would be naïve to say that Italian history saw any significant historical break in the last 20 years (perhaps we should say the opposite). Even so, with his performance on October 9, 1997, Paolini staged a unique event: the re-enactment of a traumatic experience with the participation of its actual witnesses and, on a wider scale, of the audience watching on television at home. With this monologue, a considerable part of the Italian population participated in a massive, collective moment of witnessing. Through the commemoration of an almost-forgotten tragedy, a local and marginalized memory became a national event and, for the first time, witnessing trauma became part of the public discourse redefining post-1989 Italy.

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²⁴ Accordingly, this discourse takes place only within what Žižek also calls the Badiouian “Truth-Event,” which is “the intrusion of the traumatic Real that shatters the predominant symbolic texture” (141). Badiou’s concept of the Truth-Event, in fact, “consists in the elementary ideological gesture of interpellating individuals (parts of a ‘situation’ of Being) into subjects (bearers/followers of truth)” (141).

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