

The Screaming Thing: A Material Ecocritical Exploration of Trauma in Aleksandrs Pelēcis's Poems

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Abstract. This article investigates the intersection of trauma studies and new materialism, offering a fresh perspective on human trauma through the prism of nonhuman forces. Drawing inspiration from material ecocriticism, a paradigm that evolved from materialist and posthumanist ideas and has not yet been brought into contact with trauma studies, the article underscores the significance of considering the embodiment of experience, thus arriving at an extended notion of trauma. This new theoretical framework is tested by examining the testimonial poetry of Latvian writer Aleksandrs Pelēcis, who was deported to Siberia by Soviet authorities in 1946. His poems employ inanimate objects and animals to create metonymical and metaphorical connections between human and nonhuman actors within the context of long exile. By illuminating a shared experiential space, Pelēcis manages to project and diffract traumatic feelings and memories, thus making them more comprehensible to his readers. This, in turn, places trauma studies on a trajectory away from the traditional conceptualisation of the inexpressible and the awkward.

Keywords: Trauma studies; New materialism; Material ecocriticism; Aleksandrs Pelēcis.

Introduction

The recent wave of interest in the complex relationship between human and nonhuman materialities (see, e.g. Coole and Frost, 2010; Grusin, 2015) has finally reached the shores of trauma studies, challenging preconceived notions of subjectivity with the idea of matter both shaping and reflecting human experience. This variation, which does not yet constitute a visible turn in the field because it needs more research, follows the previous explorations of the inexpressible in language and, lately, “the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience” (Balaev, 2014, p. 3). Deniz Gundogan Ibrism, in her groundbreaking essay from 2020, engages with the influential theories of new materialism and posthumanism

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to rethink the traditional conception of the traumatised subject as isolated in its suffering from the rest of the world:

Rather than focusing solely on the discursive and trying to understand how it exists in and is shaped by the material world, what if we center on performance, embodiment and material practices that expand, complicate and thus recalibrate the subject in its coming to terms with traumatization? In this regard, we take materiality not as firmly attached to a sealed-off conception of the mind, the body and the world, but as creative exploration of a human and more-than-human alliance (2020, p. 233).

This would mean accepting Karen Barad's famous maxim that "the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity" (2003, p. 822), which is their way of saying that matter and mind impact each other and that phenomena do not exist independently of their interaction with other phenomena. What Ibrisim takes from posthumanism to revitalise trauma studies is the conviction that human beings are "relational and hence in constant negotiation with multiple others" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 42), including organic and inorganic nonhumans. These points on intra-activity and ontological embeddedness, belonging to the broader tendency of postanthropocentric thinking, complement each other. As noted by Sonia Baelo-Allué, who has continued Ibrisim's line of thought, posthumanism and trauma studies are both preoccupied "with subjectivity, agency, embodiment, and the relationship with 'the other': trauma sees subjectivity as shattered and fragmented, whereas posthumanism explores and expands its boundaries" (2022, p. 1120). Ibrisim and Baelo-Allué suggest that scholars could actually explore how trauma behaves within the intense and diffracting network of human and nonhuman actors. The result would be a richer perspective on trauma that would be open to interdisciplinary readings and applicable to different experiences as far as they have a material dimension and lasting effects.

In this article, I demonstrate how this new approach to trauma can be used to comprehend the psychological intricacies of enduring resettlement to Siberia, a historical campaign of deportation which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, occupies a major place in Baltic memory. Following Ibrisim and Baelo-Allué (2022), we intend to further advance the material understanding of trauma by bringing in new theoretical insights and then providing an analysis of specific literary texts. My case study is the testimonial poetry of Latvian poet Aleksandrs Pelēcis, who was forced to live in the Irkutsk and Amur regions from 1946 to 1963 due to the fact that he had served in the Latvian Legion of the German army and later collaborated with Latvian national partisans, which, of course, made him socially undesirable for the Soviet regime. In his autobiography, he writes that he has a duty to speak for those who did not survive imprisonment and deportation and that the experience of exile, described as "hell", still haunts him in his dreams, without any relief in sight (Pelēcis, 1995, p. 7). The hellish feelings are also present in his poetry, which is still not very well known in Latvia because Pelēcis published very little and was not praised by critics as a great writer. During his lifetime, other authors, most notably

the late modernist poet Knuts Skujenieks (1990), were more active in giving voice to totalitarian trauma. However, a closer look at Pelēcis's poems reveals that he was perhaps more attuned to the material aspects of suffering than some of his contemporaries.

Pelēcis's poems include inanimate objects and animals that illustrate the harsh living conditions he endured and acquire a deep symbolic meaning through their interaction with his injured self. Essentially, his destiny is presented as part of a shared experiential space in which the trauma loses its solipsistic character and becomes linked to material witnesses. Alongside the debate on materiality, this article joins the initiative to challenge "the predominant narrative focus" of trauma studies (Armstrong, 2020, p. 296) and centres on the lyrical and metaphorical thinking involved in addressing actual historical events. This switch from narrative to poetry is also significant for the study of trauma in Baltic literature. Fictional and autobiographical accounts of trauma have been researched much more extensively (see Gūtmane, 2019) than poetic engagements with history, despite the fact that poetry has its own specific instruments to work through difficult experiences and explore their material circumstances.

Next, we will revisit the classic trauma theory of the 1990s and its blend of psychoanalysis and deconstruction, which led to a dematerialised notion of trauma. This will provide the necessary contrast to appreciate better what it is that new materialist and posthumanist insights bring to the debates about traumatic historical experiences. More specifically, we shall add to existing research on trauma with material ecocritical reflections that grow out of a new materialist understanding of matter as something that has its own agency and leaves a mark on cultural representation. The joined methodological framework of trauma studies and material ecocriticism matches Pelēcis's interest in the power of things and nature to articulate his feelings, give them a tangible form and trigger empathy. Material ecocriticism counters poststructuralism, which has "exorcized nature and materiality out of representation and [...] thus closed in representation on itself" (Herzogenrath, 2009, p. 2), creating the necessary ground for classic trauma theory. Material ecocriticism, pioneered by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, posits that matter is storied, namely, that it should be viewed as "a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed" (Iovino, 2012, p. 451), as a space of inherent historicity. After this theoretical dialogue between trauma theory and material ecocriticism has been presented, we will analyse of Pelēcis's entanglement with nonhuman materiality.

Trauma and Materiality

During the 1990s, the Yale-based literary critics Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman put forth the notion of trauma as being beyond direct expression. These scholars were preoccupied with what Hartman termed "traumatic knowledge": trauma, he claimed, "cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being retrieved or communicated without distortion" (1995, p. 537), and this essentially meant that trauma could be represented only if language mimics its shattering force. Similarly, Caruth defined trauma as an experience of epistemological crisis, that is, 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” (1996, p. 4), thus undermining the possibility of its realistic representation. This kind of reasoning subscribes to Felman’s earlier argument that poetry is an exemplary instance of faithful representation of trauma because poetic language, as in the tormented works of Paul Celan, “speak[s] ahead of knowledge and awareness and break[s] through the limits of its own conscious understanding” (1992, p. 21). Trauma turns language into a site of referential instability and uncanny repetitions. According to Tom Toremans, who recently reconsidered this line of thinking, trauma intensifies the deconstructionist view of reference as shifting between becoming “purely formal” and serving as a “referential link to reality”, “language thus never reaches empirical reality, instead continually referring to its other” (2018, p. 61).

Additionally, this idea can be articulated in temporal terms because if language never reaches empirical reality, it always comes too late to capture the traumatic event. Language, in other words, is working on negative grounds, and, in a sense, it demands the literature on trauma to reflect this problem by inscribing it in its formal features. Overall, the main focus of classic trauma theory is on the discursive and temporal dimensions of trauma, which overshadow the material contexts of experience.

The material in Caruth’s writings resembles an unactualised kernel of thought. Its marginal status within her work is a result of specific theoretical inclinations. However, it still should be assessed to understand that trauma is not completely detached from the material dimension of reality and that it thus invites a new materialist recasting of historical suffering. Caruth begins her book *Unclaimed Experience* by returning to Freud’s brief discussion of Torquato Tasso’s 1581 epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which illustrates the recurrence of repressed harmful experiences as part of the present instead of the past. In the poem, the hero, Tancred, kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel where she has been disguised as an enemy knight. Thus, the event is characterised by Tancred being unaware of the actual situation. Later, Tancred travels with his army through a strange magic forest where, in a moment of confusion, “[h]e slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again” (Freud, 2001, p. 22). Caruth, therefore, views trauma as “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” (1996, p. 4), implicitly privileging literary expression as a means for reaching more deeply into the nature of trauma. However, what Caruth learns from this episode is the power of poetic language to reveal the mechanism of repetition, which cannot be subjugated to controlled knowledge while quickly forgetting the material dimension of the address, that is, the tree itself. (Previously, Hubert Zapf, offering an ecocritical view, recognised this gap in existing interpretations of Tasso’s story when he wrote that “[t]he tree becomes a metaphoric other of the female heroine, and the wound of the human body merges with the wound of the tree in giving voice to otherwise silent suffering” (2016, p. 214).) Although we appreciate the importance of Tasso’s story for

illuminating trauma, we slightly diverge away from Caruth's approach by dwelling more on the material bearers of the past, without which trauma becomes an abstract concept oblivious to ontological relations. Indeed, we could still imagine trauma being just a voice, but that would neglect that nonhuman materialities in the literary imagination assist in explicating painful histories, making viable "witnessing after the human" (Richardson and Zolkos, 2022). Pelēcis's poems, as we will show in the second part of this article, allow precisely this kind of thinking where painful human experiences, contrary to Caruth's overall argument, are always entangled with the environment, creating broad networks of embodiment and projection.

Over the last decade, trauma studies have radically challenged Caruth's model. Stef Craps, for instance, references Roger Luckhurst (2008) to remind us that "the crisis of representation caused by trauma generates narrative *possibility* just as much as narrative *impossibility*," and this is evident in many postcolonial novels which rely mostly on realist forms to "get the message across and to mobilize" (2013, p. 41, 42). Similarly, Joshua Pederson, following the evidence of traumatic memories often being more detailed than normal ones, advocates that "a new generation of trauma theorists should emphasise both the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims may construct reliable narrative accounts of it" (2014, p. 338). This shift from the unsayable to the sayable is also present in explorations of poetry, showing that trauma can be relatively direct, even in an essentially indirect medium. In his book *Poetry as Testimony*, Antony Rowland engages with forms that "are not, for the most part, composed with the self-conscious and self-castigatory strategies of awkward poetics" (2014, p. 8), thus allowing a more straightforward expression. (Celan's work would qualify as awkward since, for him, "words are not names but traces, shattered and scattered remnants of an expropriated, destroyed meaning" (Franke, 2013, p. 142); however, his style is more of an exception than the norm.) Pelēcis's testimonial poetry, with its attempts to emphatically address its readers by using poignant speech and material imagery, works counter to the modernist complexity favoured by Caruth, Felman, and Hartman, thereby creating a theoretical blind spot. Pelēcis's poems invite an analysis that would acknowledge the importance of accessing repressive history and combine it with specific attention towards matter. Matter as "a site of vibrantly 'vital' processes where meanings coalesce with material dynamics" (Iovino, 2015, p. 70) can, I propose, reveal the realness of the traumatic experience.

In their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism*, an edited volume that brought together material and cognitive phenomena, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann claim that all matter is "storied matter", meaning that matter is a complex mixture "of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (2014, pp. 1–2). This insight, as these theorists demonstrate, is based on Karen Barad's integral thesis that matter and meaning are "inextricably fused and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder" (2007, p. 3), and this fusion remains intact also in the case of trauma, where overwhelming experiences do not necessarily lead to a subjectivity completely estranged from the material aspects of suffering. Such inward movement is perhaps more likely

in melancholia, but even then, we could discover a certain materiality when a grieving subject, for example, creates a particularly strong attachment to some tangible object that represents the lost other. (After the death of his friend Allon White, literary theorist Peter Stallybrass became attached to his friend's jacket: "He was there in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles which in the technical jargon of sewing are called 'memory'; he was there in the stains at the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits" (1993, p. 36)). Trauma studies, for the most part, have overlooked literary examples which include the enmeshment of the human and the nonhuman in their subject matter, leaving scholars with an intriguing question of how traumatic emotionality performs in broader networks of signification.

Testimonial literature from Soviet deportees offers a rich source of material for examining this question, given the fact that these people found themselves in an environment that was both sublime and hostile, thus powerfully impacting their poetic language (nature plays a crucial role in Gulag testimonies as well, either allowing individuals to rise above suffering or mirroring trauma in its materiality (see von Zitzewitz, 2022)). This article, taking a subtle turn, focuses not so much on how nonhuman actors express "their stories through material imagination of their human counterparts" (Iovino and Oppermann, 2012, p. 82) but on how the human and the nonhuman, in extreme conditions, share the same space and base their narratives in kinship. Precisely, the story of this relationship is what we want to find inscribed in the matter. Keeping in mind that literary works "emerge from the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter" (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, p. 8), I will now turn to inanimate objects and animals in Pelēcis's Siberia poetry to consider how they embody traumatic experience by capturing it in specific tropes questioning narrative grasp.

The Relational Thing

In Pelēcis's poems, inanimate objects or things belong to the ordinary world of labour, defined by their onerousness and incessant presence, and the bleak environment clearly permeates their texture. This embodiment of life in things is familiar to us through an excerpt of Martin Heidegger's writing on a pair of peasant shoes from Van Gogh's painting: "In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind" (1971, p. 33). Pelēcis indulges in similar poeticising depicting a thing as more than just a mute object, that is, "as what is excessive in objects" (Brown, 2001, p. 5), bringing it closer to humans, but also still respecting its thingness. This balancing procedure resonates with the new materialist understanding of matter and its further adaptation by material ecocritics in their focus on nonhuman stories. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, introducing the edited volume on new materialisms, claim that matter "is both self-constituting and invested with – and reconfigured by – intersubjective interventions that have their own quotient materiality" (2010, p. 7). Serenella Iovino and

Serpil Oppermann borrow this idea and suggest that careful anthropomorphising can reveal our strong ties with nonhuman actors (2014, p. 8). Careful anthropomorphising would work in favour of revealing nonhuman agency, endowing the matter, for example, with emotions, memories, and intentions that simultaneously correspond to or at least are not opposed to what remains inexpressible. Pelēcis's experience in Siberia is an excellent example of human-nonhuman kinship, given the fact that there was always a shortage of things, and one had to create a relationship with them, as the poet movingly displays when writing about old clothes:

Mans sūro dienu aizstāvi un biedri,
Tu biji bruņas man pret svešas zemes vēju.
Šais skrandās atmiņas ir sajauktas ar sviedriem.
Un slepens prieks par izmisumu spēju.

Es tevi pirmais neuzvilku plecos.
Tu tiki piešķirts man par mantojumu.
Daudz posta jau tavs auduns iepriekš sedza,
Un, iespējams, ka dažs šai nastā guma.

Par to tev krūtīs godazīme brūna,
Ko nenoslēpj pat steigā uzlikts ielāps.
Tu redzēji no stobra nāvi glūnam,
Bet caursauts neiekliedzies vienaldzībā lielā.

Un tomēr, tomēr, manu vamzi veco:
Tu kļiedzi klusējot par citiem diktāk.
Un kļiedziens tavs man bija jānes plecos,
Lai pāri naidam cilvēcībā tiktu. (1991, p. 82)¹

¹ In days of hardship, you were my friend,
Protective armor against harsh foreign winds.
Memories are mixed with sweat in these tatters
And secret joys lurk there along with despair.
I was not the first to put you on.
You were the legacy of someone else.
Your fabric encased much misery before,
Some may have crumpled while still bearing you.
A brown sign of honor testifies to this,
A hastily stitched patch fails to conceal it.
You saw death lurk from the barrel,
Yet did not scream when they shot you through.
And yet, and yet, my old and tattered jacket:
Your mute scream rang out the loudest.
That scream I then wore on my body,
To reach humanity above all hatred.

At the very beginning of this text, the poet speaks of the importance of human and nonhuman companionship in the everyday life of exile, and he suggests that the shared experiential space closes the gap between the psyche and the things around it. The old padded jacket bears a memory, but it is mingled with sweat, a characteristic that vividly brings to the fore the material dimension of how the past invades the present. The piece of clothing, to use the previously presented terminology, becomes storied: it co-witnesses the traumatic experience and, in a sense, performs it for others who will certainly recognise its deep historicity, which can be later translated into a narrative. We refer to the process of translation to challenge the confident and yet fuzzy use of “narrative” by material ecocritics when they talk about discovering the “material and discursive interplays” (Iovino and Opperman, 2012, p. 79) among real phenomena. Perhaps in addition to the concept of “storied matter” we should also consider the notion of “poeticized matter” as something that occurs prior to narrative knowledge. After all, in some cases, the meaning embedded in the matter will more likely disclose itself through associative thinking governed by metonymies, metaphors, and allegories, instead of being limited to the sequencing that the term “narrative” seems to imply. This happens, for example, when a subject is overwhelmed by the presence of things, an aspect that Jane Bennett acknowledges in her ontology, where both a human being and the things around her express affinity and longing for connection (2014, p. 241). These kinds of situations are primarily affective and not yet ordered in a clear fashion. Literary trauma theory goes even so far as to argue that coherent narratives lessen “both the precision and the force” (Caruth, 1995, p. 153) of intense experiences. Narrativisation takes place when the human imagination tries to fill in the gaps, as is also possible when reading Pelēcis’s poem since it briefly mentions the history of the old jacket, and we can fit the story of its wear in the narrative arc of Pelēcis’s life. Poeticised matter emerges toward the end of Pelēcis’s poem when he introduces the paradoxical and powerful image of the mute and yet loud scream of the old jacket. This image can be read as a metaphor for trauma, anthropomorphising the nonhuman object and allowing the unutterable to speak beyond the confines of coherence, where the painful experience is much more concentrated than carefully explained and spread out.

In another of his Siberia poems, Pelēcis writes about parting with an old shirt. Similarly, to the old padded jacket, the life of the shirt is described as hard and simple. As it turns into a rag, the shirt gains relief from the trauma of its owner: “You can’t be called ‘possession’ any longer: / So sadness will no longer stick to you” (1991, p. 70). This tendency to stick to human emotions transforms the object into a metonymy; the nonhuman can now represent the human because they share the same context. Previously, the role of metonymy as a transfer of traumatic experience has been addressed by analysing examples from postmemorial prose (see Ostups, 2023); however, in Pelēcis’s case, metonymy assumes an even more pronounced function, as he dedicates entire poems to developing the nonhuman into a substitute for his past. A similar poetic process can be found in some poems about the Holocaust. Recently, Leora Bilsky and Vered Lev Kenaan have discussed poetic testimonies that speak of objects as witnesses “in an imagined future

trial” (2022, p. 379). Their examples, taken from Polish poetry, differ from Pelēcis’s text in that they do not emphasise the kinship between the human and the nonhuman and downplay the metonymical potential of matter. The only crucial similarity is that in both cases, objects have the agency to bear witness. In Pelēcis’s poem, the shredded pieces of clothing as metonymies are relatively easy to comprehend, and they counter the classic understanding of metonymy in literary trauma theory, which suggests that only complex modernist forms can effectively represent trauma. Pelēcis introduces metonymy on the level of content as an object of reflection that encapsulates years of suffering and gives a clear message to his readers back in Latvia. This message is related to the ideal of a free humankind in which people are not just rags.

Nonhuman Suffering

Alongside metonymical connections, Pelēcis explores the potential of allegory, where the representation of animal suffering sheds light on human suffering and portrays Siberia as a shared experiential space for both human and nonhuman actors. In literary imagination, animals are often simultaneously both familiar and unfamiliar, and their uncanniness allows them to alternate between metonymy and metaphor (Garrard, 2012, p. 153), which also makes the transfer of traumatic feelings possible. This process involves not only the seemingly unavoidable anthropomorphisation of animals, as far as the human is striving for an empathetic relation to its other, but also might enable zoomorphisation of human beings in order to reveal their vulnerability. As Timothy C. Baker points out in his recent monograph on animal suffering in fiction, “in both contemporary philosophy and critical animal studies, suffering is positioned as the central shared experience of human and nonhuman animals” (2019, p. 14). Trauma studies, as they embrace the material turn, should recognise the value in this kinship and affirm its symbolic potential to illuminate the extension of traumatic experience beyond a solipsistic mind and into a broader field sensitive to projections. In one of his Siberia poems, Pelēcis writes about a trapped fox, and, viewed together with his other writings, this text can be interpreted as an allegory for his own destiny:

Lamatas ar baltu sarmu apsalst.
Velti saltu dzelzi zobi skar.
Naktī slazdā krita taigas lapsa.
Ausmā ķērciens apkārt – kraukļu bars.

Drīzi atnāks laupījuma pakaļ
Tas, kas dzelžus slēpa sniegā šeit.
Zvēro taigas lapsa spītā trakā,
Netīk viņai kauna nāves veids.

Nograuž lapsa pati savu ķepu,
 Aizlec brīvībā uz kājām trim.
 To, ka dzīva pieveikta vis nebūs,
 Raksta sniegā zvēra asinīm. (1991, p. 83)²

Notice how Pelēcis attributes the human sentiment of disgrace to the trapped fox and the desire for freedom, written in the snow with the beast's blood. This careful anthropomorphisation, we claim, is used to project the psychological suffering of a deportee onto the surrounding nonhuman materiality, from which it reverberates back to the human agent, emphasising his proximity to a state of bare existence. Animality, in short, constitutes a conceptual sphere in which to rethink traumatisation. Samuel O'Donoghue has written about the role of such projections in concentration camp testimonies, where emotional anguish becomes embodied in the surrounding landscape to create an alternative reality for the inexpressible trauma (2021, p. 832). In the case of Pelēcis's poem, the courageous fox might represent his own wish to remain strong in the face of hardship and eventually transcend the reality of exile. However, the stubbornness of hope is here introduced together with the implied notion that some part of the subject will always remain in the location where traumatisation took place and that life after entrapment or deportation will bear witness to past suffering. For the fox, it is the gnawed-off leg; for the poet, it might be his psychological stability.

Among those oppressed by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, Pelēcis is not the only poet who turned to inanimate objects and nature to express his experiences. In fact, he is one of several poets interested in the metonymical and metaphorical abilities of nonhuman matter to make trauma palpable and open to new frameworks. In Latvian literature, the poet Knuts Skujenieks, who was imprisoned in the Gulag from 1962 to 1969, similarly writes about animals to project his own feelings or about the broader landscape as embodying both hostility and hope. For example, in one poem, Skujenieks addresses a starving sparrow, claiming that they both share the same tragic fate (1990, p. 12). Pelēcis and Skujenieks are interested in the surrounding nature and its potential for human and nonhuman kinship. This kinship is meant to help come to terms with the trauma of deportation and exile and make it available to readers. Pelēcis might be a minor poet in terms of artistic complexity, but his works, due to their clarity and emotionality,

² The trap is frozen white.
 His teeth are no match for the steel.
 A taiga fox fell in at night.
 Flocks of ravens now caw at dawn.
 The one who hid the steel in snow
 Will soon come looking for the prey.
 The taiga fox is raging wildly,
 He hates to die in such disgrace.
 The fox gnaws off the leg that's caught
 And hobbles toward freedom on just three.
 The wild beast's blood spells it plainly out:
 Alive, he will never be unfree.

provide the necessary ground for testing the promising direction trauma studies could take after the material turn has offered new concepts.

Conclusion

Deniz Gundogan Ibrism argues that “[r]esearch on posthumanist and new materialist thinking constitutes a rich potential for trauma theory in its multiplicity and diversity, and it provides illuminating insights and new outlets to recalibrate universalist and anthropocentric conceptions of Western trauma” (2020, p. 238). Material ecocriticism, as we proposed in this article, allows us to perceive the embodiment of trauma in nonhuman actors, thus rendering human experience more comprehensible. Indeed, this theoretical framework, based on the new materialist idea of intra-action, can be applied to better understand testimonial objects and corporeal encounters with place that, as Marianne Hirsch suggests in her writings on postmemory, “can embody memory and thus trigger affect shared across generations” (2012, p. 206). Materialist thinking emphasises the co-constitutive aspect of such encounters, identifying those processes that leave neither humans nor nonhumans unchanged. The analysis of Pelēcis’s poems is a clear example of this, as the matter of Siberian exile, either through metonymy or allegory, became saturated with his experience. Simultaneously, the poet created a conceptual sphere to think about the impact of matter on self-understanding, which oscillates between despair and hope. I believe that Pelēcis’s turn to things and animals is not an accidental feature but naturally grows out of his experience living in poor conditions. Pelēcis is unique among other Latvian writers who voiced totalitarian trauma in that he explored the metonymical aspects of everyday objects and endowed them with agency and even expression. This makes Pelēcis’s works suitable for working towards new theoretical insights that balance out the previous conception of trauma as being focused on unreadable minds and situates pain in a broader network of signification.

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