

**EXORCISING TRAUMATIC APORIA:
RECOVERED MEMORIES AND THE TRAUMA THAT NEVER WAS
IN NICCI FRENCH'S *THE MEMORY GAME***

María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro
Universidad de Zaragoza
jmartine@unizar.es

In *The Trauma Question* (2008), Roger Luckhurst suggests regarding trauma fiction not as a narrow canon of works but as a mass of narratives that have exploded across high, middle and low-brow fiction in the last two decades or so. He also suggests moving the focus away from narrative rupture as the proper mark of a trauma aesthetic in order to consider instead the alternative of narrative possibility. In what follows, I approach *The Memory Game* (1997) in the light of these two moves proposed by Luckhurst. Nicci French's novel is above all a good yarn, an investigative story which incorporates into its plot some of the contemporary concern with trauma and the complexities of remembering and forgetting. Despite this concern with trauma, the pleasures of narrative concordance defeat the threat of permanent traumatic discordance in the novel. I thus finish my analysis by reflecting on whether it is to more mainstream trauma fiction that the reader may turn in search of an alternative to the impossible healing and traumatic aporias that saturate many contemporary exemplars of trauma literature.

Keywords: Trauma fiction, traumatic aporia, Nicci French, *The Memory Game*, narrative possibility

Trauma literature and trauma criticism have developed in the last decades to the point that there is already a recognisable canon of works, as well as a recognisable aesthetic, for the trauma novel. This canon includes well-known novels by authors like Toni Morrison, W.G. Sebald, Pat Barker, Tim O'Brien, Anne Michaels, Benjamin Wilkomirski, Jonathan Safran Foer, Ian McEwan, and Don DeLillo, among others. These works also share a consistent attempt to reflect formally the disruptions inherent in traumatic experiences: the narrative voice is usually fragmented or dispersed, the narrative often departs from the conventional linear sequence and it incorporates into its structure the silences, rhythms, and uncertainties of trauma. When the reader/critic of trauma literature reflects on this, s/he cannot but face a paradox. As Roger Luckhurst (2008: 89) points out, aesthetic experimentation and defamiliarising techniques have often been used as a vehicle not only for expressing the effects of traumatic experience but also for defying habituation and the domestication of trauma. And yet, as a specific aesthetic has emerged from works dealing with a wide variety of traumas, formal disturbance can precisely be regarded as habitual and conventional, defamiliarisation having become familiar, so to put it. Luckhurst proposes to make two shifts in order to avoid this contradiction (89-90). The first one has to do with moving the focus away from narrative rupture as the proper mark of a trauma aesthetic: trauma may bring narrative to a halt, but texts can also be analysed from the perspective of how trauma's stalling actively provokes the production of narrative. The second move suggested by Luckhurst has to do with regarding trauma fiction not as a narrow canon of works but as

a mass of narratives that have exploded across high, middle and low-brow fiction in the last two decades or so. Thus, texts with different ambitions frequently share similar features, and so, the trauma fictions of Toni Morrison and W. G. Sebald, for instance, may be considered alongside Stephen King's trauma Gothic and other mainstream trauma narratives that have crammed bookshops since the 1990s.

It is in the light of these two moves proposed by Luckhurst that I will analyse Nicci French's *The Memory Game* (1997) –the first joint novel by British writers Sean French and his wife Nicci Gerrard. *The Memory Game* begins with the accidental digging out of Natalie Martello's skeleton. Natalie had gone missing twenty five years earlier, when Jane (the novel's protagonist) and Natalie were only sixteen. Jane's and Natalie's families had always been very close, and so, they spent their holidays together in the Stead –a estate in Shropshire bought by Alan Martello from the profits of a best-selling novel that made him famous. Natalie became Jane's best friend and, as a young girl, Jane had an affair with one of Natalie's brothers, Theo, although she eventually married the eldest, Claud. The event that casts a shadow on what she remembers as an idyllic past is the disappearance of Natalie during a party held in the Stead to celebrate the twentieth wedding anniversary of the girl's parents, Alan and Martha.

By the time the story begins, Jane's marriage with Claud has broken up but she is still very close to the Martellos. An architect by profession, Jane has designed a new house to be built in the Stead as an overflow space but when the building work begins the workers find a bundle of bones that turn out to be Natalie's. Forensic tests also reveal that the girl was strangled and that she was pregnant when she died.

Typically enough, *The Memory Game* begins with the discovery of a corpse which makes for the ensuing investigation. As David Lehman points out, in detective fiction "death comes not only *at* but *as* a beginning" and the corpse is "not a person but an indispensable pretext" (2003: 3, original emphasis). The detective narrative is paradigmatic of a narrative structure that seeks its authority in a return to past events and the tracing of a coherent story forwards from its origin to the present. Thus, the corpse at the beginning actually marks the ending of the story of the crime which the investigation will try to uncover. This belated revelation which regressively rewrites the import and meaning of events is also at the core of a significant number of trauma narratives, where narrative anachrony is a symptom of buried traumatic experiences. The belatedness that defines trauma often points to an event whose meaning is initially delayed or deferred but that resurfaces later on, possibly triggered by a second event with which it has certain similarities. The psychoanalyst works from the second to the first event, the psychoanalytic case history being in sum an attempt to reconstruct an originating cause. No wonder that the psychoanalyst should have often been compared with the detective, who also works from end to beginning, from the corpse to the murderer's motives and the perpetration of the crime. Thus, the afterwardness of trauma and of the detective story can result in a considerable degree of structural similarity between trauma and detective narratives. This similarity opens interesting possibilities of analysis, especially when it comes to works where the two kinds of narrative blend, as is the case with *The Memory Game*.

The discovery of Natalie's skeleton further destabilises Jane's already unstable life and she decides to seek the professional help of a therapist, Alex Dermot-Brown. As Jane explains to him: "I've been preoccupied with an image. It must be all to do with Natalie being found. But I've been thinking about my golden, golden childhood and a black hole in the middle of it, and I can't get a grip on it and I don't know what it is".¹ Dermot-Brown is intrigued by that image of the black hole, which is significantly built on metaphors equally apposite to the domains of detective fiction and of trauma theory.

Murder in the classic whodunit takes place more often than not in an idyllic setting: the more harmony seems to be inherent in it, the more murder appears to be out of place, a kind of black spot that calls for action so that the ideal stability which preceded the crime can be restored. The setting of Natalie's murder is the Stead, which is part of a real idyllic countryside and also part of the idyllic landscape of Jane's childhood memories. Natalie's murder and pregnancy opens a black hole in Jane's remembered golden past.

This metaphor of the black hole is also recurrent in the description of trauma and its effects, trauma having often been described as a black hole phenomenon. Thus, the feelings of absence, of rupture, and the loss of representation that go with trauma are experienced by the trauma victim as a yawning emptiness which Nadine Fresco compares with a "vertiginous black hole" (1984: 418). To Elana Gomel, the "black hole has become the master trope at the intersection of history, memory and trauma" (2003: 163).

The black hole in Jane's memoryscape comes to be interpreted by her therapist as a "submerged trauma" (*TMG* 183), a traumatic memory of something she witnessed on the day when Natalie disappeared and that she cannot recall, but that could help to solve the enigma of Natalie's murder once Jane manages, in Dermot-Brown's words, "to dig up your own past, to disinter your own secret" (*TMG* 88). The discovery of Natalie's remains works as a second event that triggers an earlier traumatic experience, forgotten by Jane. Memory becomes then a *space* of trauma, a landscape with a black hole indicative of a submerged trauma which becomes the structural equivalent of the corpse. Thus, although trauma may halt narrative progress, it becomes here, like the corpse in classical detective fiction, a generator of narrative possibility. Unveiling Jane's traumatic memories becomes one with clearing out the mystery of Natalie's murder. Dermot-Brown will become the archaeologist of Jane's memory, a landscape to which he will make her return in order to find what has long been buried there, and in order to construct, little by little, a narrative of the past.

The spatialisation of memory is a trope already resorted to by Freud. The archaeological analogy appears in his writings of the 1890s and although he modified it during the course of his work, he never abandoned it entirely. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud described his first full-length analysis of hysteria, noting that he had arrived at a "procedure which I later developed into a regular method and employed deliberately. This procedure was one of clearing away the pathogenic psychological material layer by layer, and we liked to compare it with the technique of excavating a buried city" (Freud and Breuer 1955: 139). It was not until the following year, in his 1896 essay "Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neuroses", that he explicitly connected hysteria and the memory of childhood sexual abuse. To his idea of the archaeological excavation, Freud added the view that the repression of memories entailed their preservation. The analyst searches for a past that Freud conceived as essentially static and unchanging. Once the analyst removes the patient's resistance to remember, the past is unveiled in its original form, like the city of Pompeii recovered from the ashes.

The view of repressed memories as existing "somewhere", waiting to be uncovered by the remembering subject, took hold in particular among the practitioners of recovered memory therapy. Their approach to memory and repression, which resurrects much of the early Freud, was thoroughly challenged in the debates surrounding False Memory Syndrome in the 1990s.² Published in 1997, *The Memory Game* incorporates these debates into its plot and takes sides with the scepticism about the validity of recovered memories. The authors even added a brief explanation at the

end of the novel about False Memory Syndrome and the memory wars of the 1990s, stating there that:

We came across the controversy in 1994 and we ... were shocked by the suffering involved and also saw it as compelling material for a thriller.... As it turned out, the part of the subject that most engaged us was not the subject of sexual abuse but the possible manipulation of the relationship between patient and therapist. (*TMG* 398)

The manipulation of Jane's memories by her therapist is, after all, what *The Memory Game* is about.

One of the things about Natalie's murder that most torments Jane is that the girl was last seen in the place where Jane was, and barely at the same time, on the day of the anniversary party. That day, Theo –Natalie's brother and Jane's first love– had broken the protagonist's heart. As she was not in the mood for celebrations she decided to leave the anniversary party and walk away to Cree's Top. Natalie was last seen on the other side of the hill, so if Jane had walked over Cree's Top maybe nothing had happened. But what if she actually walked over the hill? Dermot-Brown suspects that she did and that she saw Natalie being murdered. This is the traumatic memory that she has buried and that her therapist will help her to remember. He starts practising relaxation techniques and hypnosis, which allow Jane to "go back" to that place twenty five years earlier until she finally "sees" Alan, Natalie's father, kill his daughter. Jane tells about this recovered memory to the police and, in no time, the whole story becomes public. Alan is therefore believed to have sexually abused Natalie and to have murdered his daughter on discovering that she was pregnant.

As the authors of *The Memory Game* point out in the passage quoted above, they were less interested in sexual abuse as their novel's topic than in the possible manipulation of the relationship between patient and therapist. Thus, the idea of sexual abuse is present indirectly in the story, as it is Natalie and not Jane who seems to have been abused by her father. However, the descriptions of Jane's sessions with Dermot-Brown powerfully illustrate the functioning of recovered memory therapy. These descriptions also make the reader reflect on an issue brought to the fore by the debates on recovered memory, namely, that traumatic memory may be iatrogenic, that is, the product of the very therapy used to deal with the patient's troubled condition. This is precisely what happens in *The Memory Game*

There is always a twist at the end of a good detective story and the twist here comes with the discovery that it was Claud –Jane's ex-husband– who killed Natalie and that they had had an incestuous relationship for some time. Jane comes to this conclusion after going to the very place which she had been "visiting" under hypnosis during the sessions with her therapist, namely, Cree's Top. She understands there that what she had seen with her mind's eye was just an imaginary construct. Her first shock is the discovery that her memories are a physical impossibility since the real landscape does not fit the one she had remembered. Disoriented, she goes to the place where Natalie was found only to realise that she had been buried underneath the barbecue, built in time for the anniversary celebration under Claud's supervision. Accordingly, the murder must have taken place before the barbecue was finished. This exculpates Natalie's father, who arrived just on time for the party. Jane realises then that the man who claimed to have seen Natalie at Cree's Top must have seen her, not Natalie. She could not have been at Cree's Top at the same time as Jane because by then Natalie had already confronted Claud with the news that she was pregnant and that she was going to

tell the family. Claud killed her and buried the corpse in the place where he knew the barbecue was going to be built. Obviously, Jane did not see anything of this.

The supposed trauma, the black hole of Jane's memory, turns out to be inexistent. Perhaps the most traumatic revelation is that there was no trauma at all. The novel's ending comes a relief for the reader, especially for a reader particularly aware of how trauma has invaded all kinds of spheres in the last decades and has even become the template of our relationship with history.

In parallel with trauma studies' insistence on the ubiquity of trauma, there also seems to be a blending, as Dominick LaCapra puts it, between (the nature of) trauma and some of the most powerful manifestations of our culture. Thus, just as trauma is unspeakable, recurrent, etc., so much art, writing and criticism seem to exhibit "a compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning and a resistance to working through" (2001: 23). I agree with LaCapra and others that, like him, try to put some limit to this excess and/or direct our attention to the world beyond post-structuralist trauma theory and its trauma canon. For this reason, and as pointed out at the beginning, I welcome Luckhurst's invitation to focus on a wide diversity of cultural forms that have provided a repertoire of compelling ways to deal with the trauma narrative. In works like *The Memory Game*, the pleasures of narrative concordance defeat the threat of permanent traumatic discordance. Thus, mainstream trauma fiction emerges as a possible place to turn to, and a field worth exploring, for readers in search of an alternative to the impossible healing and traumatic aporias that saturate many exemplars of contemporary trauma literature.³

Notes

1. *The Memory Game*, 69. Hereafter the abbreviation TMG will be used in parenthetical references.
2. It is true that Freud later repudiated the seduction theory on concluding that the accounts of abuse by his patients could not be true, and were therefore fantasies. Supporters of recovered memory therapy have focused on Freud's early theories of hysteria as groundbreaking work that he had to change in order to make his discoveries more palatable to society (see, for instance, Bass and Davis 1988: 347 and Herman 1992: 13). Ofshe and Watters claim that the recovered memory movement would not be possible without Freud (1995: 289). And yet, one should also bear in mind that Freud's theories are used partially and his name is often inaccurately invoked in these debates.
3. The research carried out for the writing of this paper is part of a research project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the European Regional Development Fund (code HUM2007-61035). The author is also thankful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (code H05).

Works Cited

- Bass, Ellen and Laura Davis 1988: *The Courage to Heal*. New York: Harper & Row.
- French, Nicci 1998 [1997]: *The Memory Game*. London: Penguin.
- Fresco, Nadine 1984: "Remembering the Unknown". *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 11: 417-27.
- Freud, Sigmund and Joseph Breuer 1995: *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895). Ed. and trans. James Strachey. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2. London: Hogarth. 1-319.
- Gomel, Elana 2003: *Bloodscripts. Writing the Violent Subject*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Herman, Judith L. 1992: *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic.

LaCapra, Dominick 2001: *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lehman, David 2003 (2000): *The Perfect Murder. A Study in Detection*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Luckhurst, Roger 2008: *The Trauma Question*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ofshe, Richard and Ethan Watters 1995: *Making Monsters. False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria*. London: André Deutsch.



THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org