

The Memory of Catastrophe

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Trauma has become a burning topic in Western cultures of late. Traumatic events and debates over how they are remembered by individuals and memorialised by cultures are important for lots of different constituencies. Survivors, grass-root communities, clinicians, psychiatrists, politicians and academics across a wide array of disciplines have rarely agreed and often loudly disputed the nature and effect of traumatic impacts on human life. This is not just the effect of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 (although this is evoked in the first sentence of Gray's and Oliver's introduction). Throughout the 1990s, lawyers and judges argued over how far to extend 'nervous shock' in negligence claims attached to fatal events like the Hillsborough Stadium disaster, psychiatrists disputed evidence that traumatic memories have a peculiar fixity or, on the contrary, a fatal malleability in relation to recovered memories of sexual abuse, and cultural commentators were forced to assess the emergence of collectivities of mourning around incidents like the death of James Bulger or Diana Spencer. A decade of genocide in Rwanda, Congo and former Yugoslavia, as well as significant anniversaries of the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust, made questions of commemoration, public remembrance and apology major political concerns. The torrent of discourse about 9/11, however unimaginable the event, had in some ways been pre-prepared by a decade of this kind of discussion. Even by 1997, the very idea of collective life for some now seemed to be imaginable only through the spectacle of trauma. As the cultural theorist Mark Seltzer put it: 'The notion of the public sphere has become inseparable from the collective gathering around sites of wounding, trauma, and pathology.'⁽¹⁾

The output of academic work in this area does not yet seem to have peaked, and shows a markedly multi-disciplinary character. In recent months, psychiatrists could read Tim McNally's sober assessment of the

violent disputes over traumatic memory in *Remembering Trauma*, sociologists might look at the book of the collaborative seminar led by Jeffrey C. Alexander in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, and literary theorists can peruse Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*. This is the merest indication of the multiple fronts on which the question of trauma and memory has advanced. But it has led one historian, Wulf Kansteiner, to consider that the idea of 'collective' trauma has become meaningless by over-extension, and worse that it has occluded the original victims of suffering by bathing us all in 'an easily adopted model of cultural trauma, one which is stripped further of any concrete suffering and which turns us all into accomplished survivors'.⁽²⁾

Gray's and Oliver's fascinating and valuable *The Memory of Catastrophe*, a collection of 14 essays from a conference at the University of Southampton in 2000, tries to steer between these two extremes. The substantial introduction acknowledges the historical importance of these ideas and the relevance of a collection that investigates how disasters have been memorialised, but is also suspicious of over-extension and the risk of diffusion. The editors present the collection as rescuing terms like memory, catastrophe and trauma from imprecise usage and what they call 'intellectual promiscuity' (p. 4), making them safe for History. This is not just a standard gesture of disciplinary appropriation, however, for Gray and Oliver observe that both concepts of memory and catastrophe issue a particular challenge to historiography. Before examining the individual essays, it is worth pausing on the editors' exploration of how 'the memory of catastrophe' creates specific disciplinary problems.

Gray and Oliver observe that memory has been theorised by some in opposition to history. History is the official discourse fatally complicit with nationalism, ruling elites, colonisers and so on, whilst memory is the fragile and fugitive resource of the oppressed. Although rarely stated in such bald terms, a Foucauldian interest in counter-discourses of memory has rendered some in the humanities suspicious of History and has prompted the development of more critically self-aware practices such as 'cultural history'. In a different way, the influential French historian Pierre Nora opposed the artificial constructions of historiography to the rapidly vanishing plenitude of the 'organic' memory intrinsic to traditional societies. The editors are rightly suspicious of this mystical evocation of memory, yet the huge success of Nora's *lieux de memoires* project in the 1980s is surely one of the main sources for the current academic interest in the field of memory. Gray and Oliver also have to negotiate the difficulties of the idea of a 'collective' memory, the worry that this simplistically scales up models for the individual psyche and transposes them onto complex social worlds, thus dressing up the old-fashioned *mentalités* approach in new garb. Psychological models indeed get a hard time from the editors, even though the study of memory is a large area of psychiatric research (to say nothing of biology, and the recent advances in medical and neurological understanding of memory). We are warned off using the dangerously 'protean' and 'anarchic' term trauma, for instance, in terms similar to Kansteiner: 'The danger of trauma theory is that it implicates us all in an undifferentiated world of hurt.' (p. 10)

These problems are joined by ‘catastrophe’ and its challenges to historiography. Many thinkers significant in continental philosophy and literary theory have written about catastrophe as the limit of signification and meaning: one could cite Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger and many others. Here, Gray and Oliver sum up ‘postmodernist thinkers’ by allusion to Jean-François Lyotard’s suggestion that traditional historiography meets its limit when confronted by the catastrophe of the Holocaust. This is also given relatively short shrift, but then Lyotard is not read as such, he merely stands in for a strand of unproductive relativist thinking. This is a shame: *The Differend* is a difficult book, certainly, but it is not relativist and it does not abandon the demand to think historically. The ‘signs of history’ that Lyotard invokes (‘Auschwitz’ is just one of many) are challenges to conventional genres of knowledge because their unprecedentedness demands witness in new ways. This is also the thrust of the argument of Cathy Caruth, the literary theorist whose book *Unclaimed Experience* has exerted some influence in cultural theory about catastrophe and trauma. Gray and Oliver cite her argument that because traumatic events are at the limit of meaning they remain in some ways unknowable and incompletely assimilable to historical understanding. Gray and Oliver also want to bat this assertion away as dangerous, yet Caruth, like Lyotard, is hardly out to disable the doing of history.

In many ways, these writers offer cogent reasons for the cultural and historical fascination with disasters and traumas: something happens that wrenches norms and expectations out of joint, and discourse follows in its wake, trying to turn the inconceivable into meaningful narrative form. Texts follow texts, driven by the need to understand, perhaps never able to exhaust finally the meaning of the catastrophe. Doing history might be one of these discourses – but what I sense from Gray and Oliver is an unease with other disciplinary accounts that challenge empirically based historical research. They assert: ‘It is the attribution of qualities of spiritual or cultural transcendence to “memory” which most effectively limits the capacity of the critical method to gain purchase upon its historical operations.’ (p. 5) As a materialist, there is nothing I can disagree with here – except that I think the current obsession with memory, catastrophe and trauma across a lot of disciplines is partly to do with the sense that these terms have come to stand as limit-cases or challenges to materialist explanation. They do not mark the abolition of meaning or comprehension, though, but are points of pressure that have compelled a rethinking or extension of knowledge formations. This is probably why the area is so strikingly interdisciplinary: it is the founding condition of this emergent field.

The essays in the collection are unbowed by these theoretical anxieties in the main, and set about studying the memory of catastrophe with brio in the limited space each contributor has. The book organises instances of cultural rupture in chronological sequence from the English Civil War, American slavery and the Irish famine to the political manipulation of national memory around historical traumas in Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s. There are many different styles of writing on display (detailed archival history, occasional conference paper discussion, the cultural history of representations, fieldwork and oral history), but if there is anything that unifies the contributors it is the repeated demonstration that the memory of a particular catastrophe usually has a history of changing meaning and significance. Mark Stoye tracks the changing modes of remembrance of the Civil War, for instance, seeing Cromwell re-emerge from his folkloric elision with the devil to become a latterday commemorated ideal of republican parliamentary democracy. In a fascinating essay, Peter Gray examines the changing meaning of the Irish famine, particularly against the transformed political context of contemporary Ireland in the wake of the Nationalist and Loyalist ceasefires. This essay is strong on how politicians sought to re-invent the meanings of the Famine during the 150th anniversary commemorations to make it less a source of sectarian division (nationalists have often called it a deliberate colonial genocide). The commemorations instead tied the Famine to questions of overseas aid and development in Africa. James Guimond pursues this idea of shifting significance of catastrophe on the symbolic or representational level with the sinking of the *Titanic*. He traces how narratives about class have altered in three stages – the aftermath emphasising the selfless heroism of the aristocracy, the 1950s book and film *A Night To Remember* emphasising the efficient and dutiful behaviour of the middle ranks, and the 1990s Hollywood film portraying a melodramatic victory of Irish immigrant over European aristocratic bounder. I found this a somewhat mechanical and reductive approach, which was too confident in finding singular interpretations for each phase of *Titanic* remembrance. Catastrophes and catastrophe narratives are

so absorbing because they offer multiple and often contradictory sites of identification, not uniform reflections of each successive age. His view that Cameron's blockbuster appealed to 'X-Generation' American youngsters fails to account for much of its astounding global success. How did Asian or European spectators invest in its catastrophic narrative?

Contested interpretation of the same set of events is what is illuminating about the strongest contributions. Donald Bloxham's essay, 'The missing camps of *Aktion Reinhard*', is a compelling account of how the narrative and understanding of the Nazi Final Solution was skewed in the immediate post-war trials and images of the concentration camps. American and British reaction was inevitably controlled by the traumatic images from the first liberated camps, Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. These concentrated a mix of prisoners, and were not organised as extermination camps. The camps dedicated to the eradication of the Polish Jewry under the *Aktion Reinhard* plan had in fact been chillingly successful: Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka had industrially murdered 1.8 million Jews in 1942–3 before being dismantled and largely erased from record. The reconstruction of this machine took years of painstaking research, and Bloxham suggests that this is one of the reasons for the belatedness in understanding the Holocaust as focused on the elimination of the European Jew. There is excellent commentary on how the Nuremberg trials distrusted eyewitness accounts and focused on documents: 'the examination of the conspiracy and aggressive war charges considerably outweighed that on war crimes and crimes against humanity', Bloxham concludes. (p.125) Although this material repeats the arguments of Bloxham's *The Holocaust on Trial* (2001), it was important that this collection had strong work on the Holocaust, since it so often features as the ur-text of discussions about the possibilities and limits of a historiography of catastrophe.

Andrea Reiter's essay that immediately follows this, on Binjamin Wilkomirski, is less successful. Wilkomirski produced a harrowing Holocaust memoir in 1995, which won a number of awards. In 1998, he was exposed as Bruno Dösseker, an Austrian man adopted in the 1940s who had never been incarcerated in the concentration camps. Reiter sketches in a broad context of memory and trauma theory and intense debates about Holocaust memorialisation in the 1990s as the backdrop for Wilkomirski's initial reception. Ultimately, she argues that whilst Wilkomirski's *Fragments* might be ethically inauthentic it has an *aesthetic* authenticity: 'Its authenticity as a Holocaust text is rooted in its literariness and has been testified to by the reception it initially received.' (p. 140) I'm unclear how this takes the already extensive discussion of Wilkomirski any further along – it seems important to me to hang on to the assertion that the book is an exploitative fake. The interest might lie in how Wilkomirski used the framework and symbolism of the Holocaust to explore his own undoubtedly traumatic psychical life (and one does need some of the language of psychical trauma and its effects to understand how all of his fake testimony might still be 'true' to Wilkomirski), but it doesn't seem helpful to locate its importance in the authenticity of its aesthetics.

The reception of and various kinds of resistance to narratives of disastrous and traumatic events is the focus of Kendrick Oliver's essay on the massacre at My Lai, another highlight. In March 1968, American soldiers entered a village and with no evidence of Viet Cong fighters or arms set about the slaughter of 400 unarmed civilians. Oliver traces the responses to this American war crime, from initial assertions that this was graver than Kennedy's assassination, via Nixon's slow and managed disengagement from comment on the legal prosecution of the perpetrators, to what Oliver suggests is the virtual silence over the massacre in contemporary American politics. (Oliver can't be blamed for failing to anticipate how the torture conducted by American reservists in Abu Ghraib prison has resuscitated the memory of My Lai for some.) Oliver is exactly right in noting that the massacre becomes an affair of American conscience, neatly displacing the Vietnamese victims of this act. His conclusion that 'the discordant responses to the massacre precluded its easy absorption into the nation's usable past' (p. 185) is a curious one, though. It is hardly likely that any national memorial tradition would volunteer to integrate an instance of its own shamefully murderous brutality. Here again, I thought that some judicious use of the psychoanalytic concept of 'disavowal' or the mainstream psychiatric notion of 'dissociation' might have illuminated the mechanism by which America has worked – on the political and civil society levels anyway – to keep My Lai out of its memorial traditions.

The book ends with some very contemporary analysis by Rose Lindsey on how the destruction of Vukovar in 1991 has been used by nationalist and post-nationalist governments in Croatia, and with a set of

observations by Tony Kushner on how the decision of NATO commanders to launch its first military attack in its history on Serbia and Kosovo in 1999 was in part shaped by ongoing debates over Holocaust memorialisation in American and British political circles. This elegantly demonstrates the importance of the memory of catastrophe to our contemporary world.

In sum, this collection contains a series of valuable snapshots of research in this area. The contributors confirm through juxtaposition of different national contexts that the organising capacity of memory is a powerful device in contemporary cultural politics across the world, and one that deserves study. Where I wonder if the collection falls down is in the mild angst that the editorial framing displays about purifying its terminology from the taint of other disciplines. Gray and Oliver consider that this is a terrain fraught with the dangers of 'intellectual promiscuity'. I view the terrain of the memory of the catastrophe as the very product of a multi-disciplinary convergence. This means danger to disciplinary traditions in some respects, but also a potentially hugely productive cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Notes

1. Mark Seltzer, 'Wound culture: trauma in the pathological public sphere', *October*, 80 (1997), 3–26, at p. 4.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Wulf Kansteiner, 'Genealogy of a category mistake: a critical intellectual history of the cultural trauma metaphor', *Rethinking History*, 8.2 (2004), 193–221, at p. 203.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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