

Trauma and Literature: Derrida, 9/11 and Hart's *The Reconstructionist*

Bert Olivier

Summary

Is “trauma” a viable category in literary theory? That is, could “trauma” be articulated in such a way that, in addition to its acknowledged diagnostic and therapeutic function in psychology and psychoanalysis, it may be shown to have a distinct hermeneutic function where literary fiction is concerned – regarding the generation of the narrative thread, for example? This article investigates these questions in the light of the meaning of “trauma”, largely in relation to the event of September 11, as formulated by Jacques Derrida. The affinity of Derrida’s conceptualisation with that of Lacanian psychoanalysis is noted, and with that in mind, the narrative complications of Josephine Hart’s *The Reconstructionist* (2002) are examined with a view to demonstrating the theoretical, heuristic and hermeneutic value of “trauma” at an intratextual level.

Opsomming

Is “trauma” ’n lewensvatbare kategorie vir literêre teorie? Met ander woorde, kan aangetoon word dat “trauma” ’n duidelike hermeneutiese funksie het met betrekking tot literêre fiksie – byvoorbeeld sover dit narratiewe ontwikkeling aangaan – bo en behalwe die erkende diagnostiese en terapeutiese funksie wat dit in psigologie en psigoanalise het? Hierdie artikel ondersoek genoemde vrae in die lig van die betekenis van “trauma”, grootliks met betrekking tot die gebeurtenis van 11 September, soos deur Jacques Derrida geformuleer. Die ooreenkoms tussen Derrida se konseptualisering en die van Lacaniaanse psigoanalise word aangetoon, en die narratiewe komplikasies van Josephine Hart se *The Reconstructionist* (2002) word ondersoek ten einde die teoretiese, heuristiese en hermeneutiese waarde van “trauma” op ’n intratekstuele vlak te demonstreer.

Jack Harrington, a psychiatrist, has an uncommonly beautiful, but evidently unhappy, sister, Kate. From time to time she requires of him to help her, lest she “sink”, or “fall”. Sometimes this assistance assumes the form of a ritual, initially resisted by him when she sets it in motion, where they dance together in a quasi-formal manner, naked, with their clothes neatly folded on a chair, to music that only they can hear. And always, always, Jack has to be alert to the minutest signal that Kate is about to disintegrate. As the story unfurls its various layers, one realises that, lurking somewhere in their shared memories, but with more lethal gravity for her than for him, there is

some unspeakable thing, some trauma, which has ruptured the psychic canopy of their lives, for her perhaps in an irreparable way. Nevertheless, when the need arises, he “repairs”, or “reconstructs”, it as best he can with the means at his disposal, which are, largely, linguistic – Freud’s “talking cure” – in conjunction with other symbolic, signifying acts.

Jack is divorced, as is Kate, but marriage has been proposed to her by a very wealthy member of the London upper class and a civilised, intelligent and understanding man into the bargain, someone who just might be able, at last, to give her the symbolic protection she so desperately needs, and that Jack has always provided in her life. But then he is compelled to return to the family house (aptly named Malamore) in Ireland where he and Kate grew up together, and in retrospect the terrible circumstances of the traumatic event that interrupted their childhood re-emerge piece by piece. The question then obtrudes itself irresistibly, namely, what should be done about the house to ensure Kate’s psychic survival. When the reader of the tale that I have briefly reconstructed here, finally discovers (near the end of the narrative) what this “event” was, it is fully evident, for the first time, *why* Jack is, or has had to be, the eponymous “reconstructionist” of the narrative. It also drives home to the reader that the narrative of Josephine Hart’s novel, *The Reconstructionist* (2002), crucially revolves around, or turns on, a specific trauma. To put it differently, “trauma” turns out to be the central literary, intratextual, narratological category in terms of which the narrative thread spins itself out in this novel. However, I suspect that *The Reconstructionist* is but one of many literary works where “trauma” occupies such a central place as an intratextual generative principle regarding the dynamics of the narrative. This “suspicion” is what I want to focus on here: if it can be shown that it occupies an indispensable structural and hermeneutic position in *The Reconstructionist*, is it the case that “trauma” is an important, even constitutive, category for understanding the unfolding of at least some important literary (and cinematic) narratives – and not merely contingently, but structurally, given the very nature of trauma? What is this “nature”, and why are such narratives important for literary and psychoanalytic theory?

To most English-speaking people the word “trauma” is no stranger, especially if one happens to live in a country riddled with random, unpredictable instances of violent criminal activity.¹ It is probably safe to say that in common parlance the term is associated with something which disrupts one’s life so severely that it is difficult, if not impossible, to “pull oneself together” any time soon after the traumatic, traumatising event (or “come to terms with it”), such as a car hijacking, a robbery or mugging, an

1. See in this regard Olivier 2007b and 2007c for a psychoanalytical interpretation of the excessively brutal violence in South Africa, partly in terms of trauma.

assault, a rape, and so on. It is not only violent crime that inflicts trauma, however – a car accident or a mountain-climbing mishap that ends in severe injury or death, and even the life-disrupting insolvency of a family, may be equally “traumatic”, and it takes time for individuals concerned to recover from its devastating effects. But beyond the everyday understanding of “trauma” there is a more “technical” theoretical conception of it, encountered in psychology and psychoanalysis, among other disciplines. If I am right in surmising that what I have described above as a common understanding of such disastrous occurrences is more or less correct, it seems to me that it might be compatible with the more conceptually refined understanding of it, even if one could not directly infer, from the everyday conception, what the theoretically sophisticated version of “trauma” entails. In other words, from the perspective of the theoretically refined account of “trauma”, the common-sensical notion seems intuitively right, but the inverse is not the case; from the perspective of the latter, the complexities uncovered by the former would not be immediately, or necessarily, apparent.

I make this distinction because of the assault, of late, on all kinds of theory by the representatives of so-called “post-theory” – a current, everyday knowledge-oriented version of what was earlier referred to as “positivism” (broadly, the belief that the true objects of knowledge are “facts”, without considering that a “fact” may be described as “an agreed-upon interpretation”). Against this I want to argue that “theory” in all its variants is indispensable if one desires to come to an understanding of phenomena that not only surpasses the relative vagueness and multivocality of vernacular appropriations, but succeeds in articulating the distinctiveness of such phenomena within the conceptual context of specific disciplines – something that imparts to it a systematic coherence and a phenomenal clarity and distinctiveness it would otherwise lack, and in so doing allows it to function in a heuristic and hermeneutically fruitful and generative manner. A theory is like a metaphoric lens through which something becomes apparent that would otherwise have remained “invisible”. To be sure, it is not difficult to agree with Žižek (2001: 4-5) that post-theory serves the valuable function of pulling theorists up short, as it were, in the face of the temptation to surrender to the ostensibly useful but ultimately obfuscating role of jargon (theory’s “jargonistic imitation”), reminding them that theory has to illuminate, or flesh out, for example, the character of literature, or of communication, in the process engaging with certain social or cultural phenomena, practices or artifacts. Far from having outlived its usefulness and epistemic value, therefore, as “post-theory” would have us believe through its rather comical reduction of theoretical work to no more than a caricature (Žižek 2001: 4), “theory” is still as indispensable as ever. Žižek articulates this by means of the distinction between talking *about* something and actually *doing* it: “[I]n philosophy, it is one thing to talk about, to report on, say, the history of the notion of the subject

(accompanied by all the proper bibliographical footnotes), even to supplement it with comparative critical remarks; it is quite another thing to work in theory, to elaborate the notion of ‘subject’ itself” (Žižek 2001: 9).

With this in mind, what I want to do here is to “elaborate” or “work” in the domain of the theory of literature, and – to borrow yet another expression from Žižek a propos of the cinematic art of Kieslowski (2001: 9) – I would like to “refer to” Hart’s novel, *The Reconstructionist* (2002), “in order to accomplish the work of theory” as far as the concept of “trauma” is concerned, specifically in an intratextual (and possibly intertextual) narratological, but in the main not in an extratextual, sense.² (I use “textual” in the narrower meaning of the word here, rather than the encompassing sense that would make of the whole of social life, as well as of nature, the “text” of the world, according to which every interpretable constellation of signifiers, from the ecology of a tidal pool to an esoteric religious book, would comprise a fragment of the “textual” totality.) Whenever one embarks on such a theoretical enterprise, which is, like a journey by ship, fraught with risk, Gadamer’s (1982: 111) account of the etymology of the word, which derives from the ancient Greek *theoros*, meaning a spectator at the performance of a drama (a comedy or a tragedy), is a salutary reminder that theory has never been (or rather, should never be) a frivolous undertaking. The *theoros* who attended the performance of a comedy or tragedy was indeed an onlooker – to this extent the word “theory” accurately captures the “distance” between the spectator and the events which unfold on the stage. But “distance” here does not mean an unbridgeable chasm. On the contrary: by beholding the dramatic action on the stage, the *theoros* participated or shared in the action which, by implication, represented a cosmic order of which he or she formed a part. The “distance” was therefore a prerequisite for understanding one’s own relation to fundamental cosmic, sometimes putatively divine, laws. Hence, “theory”, which sometimes may seem abstruse and distant from the density of the quotidian – so distant that “post-theorists” reject its legitimate epistemic and ontological function – requires precisely such distance to be able to cast

2. Regarding the matter of trauma as an intra- and possibly intertextual category, what I intend doing here is not the same as that which Miki Flockemann’s essay (2004) did on the question of what happens when “traumatic experiences” are “translated” into a cultural form such as literature. Her work in this article focuses on questions surrounding the “fictionalisation” of “actual” (or “historical”) traumatic experiences (which belong in the category of what I refer to, above, as the “extratextual”), such as those instances of violence to which people were frequently subjected during the apartheid era. My own project, by contrast, is an exploration, chiefly, of the intratextual narrative function of trauma – something that may well prove to have intertextual and extratextual implications (although this is not my main concern at present).

phenomena, experiences, events or artifacts in a new and revealing light. In this respect “theories” are like extended metaphors, or “transfer points”, where the familiarity of everyday experience is suspended by way of a defamiliarising peeling away that brings different textures and colours to the surface. These remarks about theory are by no means irrelevant, given the present theme; they go to the heart of the kind of theoretical work I engage in here. With this in mind, I turn to Derrida and Lacan’s philosophical-theoretical understanding of “trauma”.

Jacques Derrida’s (2003) perceptive deconstructive interpretation of the “event” of September 11 renders, among other things,³ a theoretical account of the phenomenon of “trauma”, as I shall attempt to show. Purist psychoanalytical scholars may disagree, but any open-minded theorist would discern the correspondence between Derrida’s conception of trauma and Lacan’s, both discussed below. (I should stress that I focus here on specific elaborations of the concept of trauma in these thinkers’ work; I do not claim to give an exhaustive overview of differently nuanced accounts in their, or any other, psychoanalytical theorists’ work.) Moreover, if anyone would object that 9/11 does not qualify as an event that could be considered from the perspective of trauma, because psychoanalysis is concerned solely with “psychic” trauma (that is, in terms of repressed materials at the level of the unconscious, which manifest themselves symptomatically), the obvious response is that 9/11 may be regarded as precisely representing psychic trauma at an individual as well as a collective level – this is borne out by Derrida’s analysis, reconstructed below.

The quasi-transcendental logic⁴ of Derrida’s thinking is immediately apparent in his analysis of the “event” of 9/11 at various levels, not least of

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3. Among the other things that Derrida does here, is his persuasive demonstration that he is no mere, solipsistic “textualist” who lacks the theoretical means to escape from the carceral confines of language or the text – something that some scholars still do not seem to understand (see Butler 2002: 16-21; Terblanche 2004), despite many available arguments to the contrary, from Derrida himself as well as from others (see Caputo 1997; Hurst 2004, 2006). Instead he shows that he is able, no less than Lacan, to account for the pivotal function of what passes by the name of the “real” in Lacan’s theory of the subject – that which cannot be assimilated into language or the symbolic register, or which, according to Copjec’s (2002: 95-96) formulation, constitutes the “internal limit” of language itself, the fact that language can only, endlessly, refer to itself, even or especially when “something” unforeseen or apparently incomprehensible – such as 9/11 – which does not readily find a place in extant language, has happened.
 4. On this, see Andrea Hurst’s (2004) exemplary exposition, including a discussion of a number of telling instantiations – such as the gift and justice – of this quasi-transcendental pattern of Derrida’s thinking.

which is that of the very notion of it being a “major event”.⁵ Furthermore, Derrida (2003: 86-94) does not hesitate to problematise this notion mercilessly. He concedes that it is “at least *felt*”, with ostensible immediacy, to be an event of an “unprecedented” kind, but questions the authenticity of such a feeling of immediacy, pointing out that “this ‘feeling’ is actually less spontaneous than it appears: it is to a large extent conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine” (Derrida 2003: 86).

The fact that one does not “yet really know how to identify” this event would perhaps explain why the “minimal deictic” of the date is resorted to as a way of naming this ineffaceable (but also ineffable – “like an intuition without concept”), “thing” that has occurred (2003: 86). Besides, describing it as an act of “international terrorism” is hardly what one might call a “rigorous concept” that would capture the utter “singularity” of what has happened. The powerlessness of language to assign this event a horizon of signification, Derrida insists (2003: 86), shows itself in the “mechanical repetition” of the date – an observation which marks his canny interpretive use of psychoanalytic theory. The conspicuous similarity of Derrida’s remark (concerning the “impotence” of language when faced with the singularity of September 11) to Jacques Lacan’s claim, that the register of the so-called “real” announces itself precisely there, where language comes up “against its own limits”, can hardly be ignored.⁶ He emphasises the

5. The concept of the “event” signals one of the Heideggerian roots of deconstruction, as Derrida acknowledges in the Borradori interview. As he points out (2003: 90), Heidegger’s notion of *Ereignis* (“event”), which bears on the “*appropriation* of the proper (*eigen*)”, is inseparable from the countervailing movement of “a certain *expropriation* that Heidegger himself names (*Enteignis*)”. He elaborates (2003: 90): “The undergoing of the event, that which in the undergoing or in the ordeal *at once opens itself up to and resists experience*, is, it seems to me, a certain *unappropriability* of what comes or happens”. This is essential for Derrida’s understanding of the “event”, as will become clearer in what follows here.

6. Joan Copjec explains Lacan’s notion of the “real” as follows – effectively precluding the temptation to equate it with the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*:

Lacan’s definition of the real is precisely this: that which, in language or the symbolic, negates the possibility of any metadimension, any metalanguage. It is this undislodgable negation, this rigid kernel in the heart of the symbolic, that forces the signifier to split off from and turn around on itself. For, in the absence of any metalanguage, the signifier can only signify by referring to another signifier ... Far from positing the existence of an elsewhere, the real as internal limit of the symbolic – that is, the very impotence of the signifier – is the obstacle that scotches the possibility of rising out of or above the symbolic.

(Copjec 2002: 95-96)

pertinence of this psychoanalytical insight when he elaborates on the necessity of repeating the date like a mantra:

[O]n the one hand, to conjure away, as if by magic, the “thing” itself, the fear or the terror it inspires (for repetition always protects by neutralising, deadening, distancing a traumatism, and this is true for the repetition of the televised images we will speak of later), and, on the other hand, to deny, as close as possible to this act of language and this enunciation, our powerlessness to name in an appropriate fashion, to characterise, to think the thing in question, to get beyond the mere deictic of the date: something terrible took place on September 11, and in the end we don’t know what.

(Derrida 2003: 87)

What Derrida here refers to as a “traumatism” is central to the thesis I want to put forward here concerning Hart’s *The Reconstructionist*, and other narratives like it. In the face of all the conspicuous repetitions of the “event” responsible for the trauma or “traumatism”, in various guises – as image-sequences on television, in the form of discussions and analyses in the media, in academic articles and books – one has no option but to admit that the degree to which what he calls the “thing” that has happened, eludes one’s grasp, is proportional to the amount of linguistic, communicational and informational attention paid to it. After all, one should not delude oneself that reason in the guise of clear, distinct conceptual language is adequate to grasp what happened that day. In effect, Derrida is reminding latter-day rationalists like Habermas⁷ that, what is known in psychoanalysis as the “repetition compulsion” (which he explicitly names later in the interview), has precisely the function to make the unbearable bearable, *but* at the cost of falsifying the “thing” that has inflicted the trauma, which one tries repeatedly to pin down, to nail, in language and image replay. For no matter how apparently efficaciously one succeeds in inscribing it in the symbolic fabric or dominant discourses of the time – and even if one articulates it in terms of esoteric ones – or how familiar the sequence of images depicting the mesmerising implosion of the twin towers, one after the other, may have become the “event itself” will always prove to be elusive. The function of the repetition is precisely to weave a web of iconic and symbolic familiarity around the “event” constituting the trauma, within which it will be (and has to a large extent already been) archived “historically” (where one should remember that there is not only one account of historical events). But insofar as it has the status of the “real” of psychoanalysis, it escapes you the moment you think you have managed to “name” or capture it. It is important to note, however, that this does not

7. Habermas (2003) also features (via an interview) in the book where Derrida’s piece on 9/11 appears in the form of an interview with Giovanna Borradori.

mean one should avoid articulating it in language as best one can – on the contrary, as Derrida emphasises:

I believe always in the necessity of being attentive first of all to this phenomenon of language, naming, and dating, to this repetition compulsion (at once rhetorical, magical, and poetic). To what this compulsion signifies, translates, or betrays. Not in order to isolate ourselves in language, as people in too much of a rush would like us to believe, but on the contrary, in order to try to understand what is going on precisely *beyond* language and what is pushing us to repeat endlessly and without knowing what we are talking about, precisely there where language and the concept come up against their limits: “September 11, September 11, *le 11 septembre, 9/11.*”⁸

(Derrida 2003: 87-88)

As I shall attempt to show in the case of Hart’s *The Reconstructionist*, the inescapable need to inscribe a traumatic event in language (no matter how inadequately or provisionally), to “reconstruct” it time and time again,

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8. Here, again, it is clear that Derrida’s remark is perfectly consonant with Lacan’s articulation of the register of “the impossible real”. Moreover, for those scholars referred to earlier (in note 3), who still labour under the misapprehension that Derrida does not acknowledge anything “*beyond*” language – no matter how difficult it may be to invoke, suggest, hint at or allude to it – his analysis of 9/11 should remove all doubt that he does in fact affirm such a dimension. Andrea Hurst (2006, especially chapters 2 and 6) has argued persuasively that Derrida’s notion of *différance* is here the equivalent of Lacan’s notion of the “real”. One should perhaps recognise how easy it is to fall into the trap of erroneously attributing to Derrida the status of a neoidealist in “textual” terms, or to give the impression that one does this, through hasty or non-nuanced formulations – I recall a time when I gave an interlocutor, friend and fellow scholar, Marius Scholtz (who argued strenuously, and accurately, in favour of the position that Derrida’s work testifies to a recognition of something “beyond” the text), the unfortunate impression that I was making exactly that mistake through careless formulation on my part. A major reason why so many people still overlook the implications of Derrida’s complex interweaving of traditional binary motifs into an aporetic logic that surpasses it is the fact that many scholars do not read Derrida’s own texts thoroughly and patiently, easily opting for one of the abundant, but mostly misleading, commentaries on his work. Even Richard Rorty, who welcomes the “playful” side of Derrida while lamenting the supposedly persistent “metaphysical” side to his work, gets it wrong, precisely because he reduces the French thinker’s work to a binarism (see in this regard Hurst 2004 for a thorough debunking of Rorty’s well-meaning, but misguided appropriation of Derrida). It is by no means easy to say exactly *how* Derrida gets beyond binary thinking, however. In addition to Hurst’s texts mentioned above, one of the works that most successfully shows the complexity of his truly *poststructuralist* thinking, is John Caputo’s delightfully written *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (1997).

repeatedly, is at the heart of coming to terms with it – not to *reduce* it to language and iconicity, believing in the end that is all there is to it, but precisely because something that resists the symbolic weave of language, that cannot be assimilated to it, nevertheless has effects in language, and on the bodies of living human beings. Articulating it in as many symbolic frameworks and contexts as possible, elaborating on it in the precise sense of “working on and through” it, ravelling and unravelling it, is all one *has* to try and understand, and perhaps, eventually, come to terms with it. After all, as Gadamer says (1982: 432): “Being that can be understood is language”. This leaves open the question of that which surpasses language, and what its relation to language, intelligibility and reason is. As mentioned earlier, for Lacan this register that cannot be assimilated to language or iconicity is that of the “real” (in contrast to the registers of the imaginary and of the symbolic; see Olivier 2004 for an elaboration on these). The following formulation by Lacan, with which Derrida’s remark on “traumatism”, above, resonates, indicates the connection between trauma and the “real”:

The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter – the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter – first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of trauma.

Is it not remarkable that, at the origin of the analytic experience, the real should have presented itself in the form of that which is *unassimilable* to it – in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin?

(Lacan 1981: 55)

This elaboration on the “real” in relation to trauma occurs in the context of Lacan’s distinction (1981: 52-64) between two types of causality, borrowed from Aristotle, namely *tuché* and *automaton*, where the former (which Lacan describes as “the encounter with the real”) denotes that which always escapes us, but with which we will nevertheless inescapably have a meeting of sorts (the “missed encounter” of the above quotation). As Lacan puts it (1981: 53): “For what we have in the discovery of psycho-analysis is an encounter, an essential encounter – an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us”. In other words, one faces a causality here: something is set in motion by something else, which remains hidden, but nevertheless asserts its force powerfully, in absentia, by means of certain lingering traces of sorts. In contrast, the *automaton* refers to the type of causality that operates in the realm of the symbolic (language) and the imaginary or iconic, within the “network of signifiers” (Lacan 1981: 52), in other words, the sphere of “reality” (as opposed to the “real”), where the pleasure principle holds sway, where causal links between antecedents and consequents may be readily discerned, for example: water boils when heated. Not so with the *tuché*. Lacan invokes it in connection with repetition

which, he points out (1981: 54), “is always veiled in analysis”. Moreover (1981: 54): “What is repeated ... is always something that occurs ... *as if by chance*”.

The echoes, here, with Derrida’s analysis of 9/11, above, should be clearly audible. September 11 belongs to the causal realm of the *tuché*, of the traumatic missed encounter with the “real”, that which happens “as if by chance”, as opposed to the domain of the *automaton*, that is, of language, visibility, predictability and anticipatability – the domain of the empirical and social sciences in the broadly positivist sense of “science”, where so-called “facts” are located or understood within the framework of testable hypotheses and explanatory theories. If it is objected that 9/11 could have been anticipated (and, as Derrida reminds one, an attack of that nature was indeed foreseen as early as in 1994 by certain architects; see Derrida 2003: 186-187, note 6), it should be pointed out that this is not what is at stake. For a “terrorist attack” to be “predictable”, is one thing; for an “event” like 9/11 to be anticipatable insofar as it is “more” than just a terrorist attack, and belongs properly to the order of the “missed encounter”, is another. It is therefore necessary to pursue Derrida’s analysis a little further to be able to understand the event and advent of a trauma, to the point where he problematises the very question, whether September 11 “really” constitutes an “event” in this sense of something, some traumatic “thing”, which tantalises our resourcefulness in naming, in inventing conceptually appropriate appellations to inscribe it, finally, in the archive of a putatively shared social and political history. Accordingly, he proceeds to unravel the paradoxical logic of “eventspeak”, agreeing (2003: 88) with Borradori that one could speak of the “impression” of a “*major event*” here, reminding her, however, that the “menacing injunction” to repeat the name, September 11, issues from a constellation of dominant powers, themselves dominated in turn by “the Anglo-American idiom”, from which this impression cannot be separated in its rhetorical, interpretive, globalised guise. However, one should distinguish rigorously between the “impression” as a supposedly “brute fact”, and the interpretation pertaining to it. “We could say”, he observes,

that the impression is “informed”, in both senses of the word: a predominant system gave it form, and this form then gets run through an organised information machine (language, communication, rhetoric, image, media, and so on). This informational apparatus is from the very outset political, technical, economic.

(Derrida 2003: 89)

In the case of 9/11 there is therefore a “resemblance” between the “impression” as a global effect and the “thing” that produced it by means of a web of mutually reinforcing agencies (the media, technoscience, as well as

military, economic and diplomatic institutions), although neither the “thing” nor the event is *reducible* to this impression (Derrida 2003: 88-89).

This becomes more comprehensible when he explains (2003: 89) that the “event” comprises the “thing” itself as that which “happens” (“event” is also “advent” or “arrival”), together with the “impression” (simultaneously “spontaneous” and “controlled”) created by it. From this it seems that one is not permitted to say that the ineffable “thing” *is* in any meaningful sense separable from the agencies which produce the “impression”, but one might say it is “refracted” through these agencies as through a prism, so that it first becomes “visible” as event in its constituent “colours” when it has “passed through” the prism of language, dominant discourses, images, media and communication channels. Here one is confronted by the limits of language – an unmistakable sign that one has encountered the Lacanian “real” – for the prism metaphor only partly captures the relation between the “thing” and the “impression”. It is important to note, however, that whatever it is that becomes “visible” (and therefore intelligible) must unavoidably do so in terms of the spectrum of humanly visible “colours”, which here represents language and iconicity in their most encompassing sense. This is significant for comprehending the indispensable function of the “reconstructive” language, especially on the part of Jack, in the narrative of *The Reconstructionist*, because one learns from the above that language and iconic representation function ambivalently, paradoxically even, in the face of a traumatically experienced event – it knits an intelligible, protective fabric around one even as it alienates one from the “thing” which wields inscrutable power over one’s life; obscurely, as if from a distance.

Nowhere does this become clearer than where Derrida’s deconstructive thinking delineates the “other side” of the “constructedness” of the “event” of 9/11. Every successive linguistic or iconic appropriation of the “event” evinces the functioning of a cumulative process: with each appropriation (iteration, description, discussion, analysis, framing) something is added to it, complexifying it, enhancing it, constituting it *as* “event”. But concomitantly it increasingly assumes the character of something “sublime” in the aesthetic sense of being, strictly speaking, “unpresentable”.⁹ In this way it highlights the paradox, that the more the event is “put in perspective” by what is said or written about it, the more it recedes from humans’ attempts to incarcerate it, as it were, in the “prison-house” of language in the widest sense, and the more it asserts its irreducibility. At the same time as the symbolic network progressively appears to assimilate or appropriate the event (*Ereignis*), therefore, the countervailing process of “expropriation” (*Enteignis*) or withdrawal occurs in a corresponding manner, intimating that

9. For an extended discussion of the sometimes countervailing aspects of the sublime as “unpresentable”, specifically in the context of postmodern culture, see Olivier 1998.

“something” escapes it. And it is this traumatically experienced “something” – the “thing” that inflicted the traumatic event of 9/11, and similarly that unspeakable event, which traumatised Kate in *The Reconstructionist* – which continually, *repeatedly*, returns, challenging and exhorting one to appropriate it interpretively in an attempt to exorcise its effects. This is why

there is no event worthy of its name except insofar as this appropriation *falters* at some border or frontier. A frontier, however, with neither front nor confrontation, one that incomprehension does not run into head on since it does not take the form of a solid front: it escapes, remains evasive, open, undecided, indeterminable. Whence the unappropriability, the unforeseeability, absolute surprise, incomprehension, the risk of misunderstanding, unanticipatable novelty, pure singularity, the absence of horizon.

(Derrida 2003: 90-91)

Even the most therapeutically efficacious linguistic exchange or communication enacted between people to ward off the debilitating *Nachträglichkeit* (its enigmatic “causal” working long after the occurrence) of a trauma, seldom, if ever, succeeds in exorcising it exhaustively. The compulsion to repeat – manifestation of what Freud (1968: esp. 38, 47, 53) named the “death drive” (initially translated as “death instinct”) – calls for repeated, “interminable” reconstructive interventions, because they tend to “falter” to a greater or lesser extent before the elusive (non-)frontier of the thing that conceals itself even as its impact exacts its price.

In *The Reconstructionist* Kate Harrington’s brother, Jack, is the one who bears the responsibility for these therapeutic interventions, made more significant than is usually the case by the fact that they are siblings – unusually close siblings; a fact not lost on some of their acquaintances (Hart 2002: 94).¹⁰ As intimated earlier, unless he stays on the alert for these occasions, she might disintegrate. From the outset, Hart judiciously imparts just enough information to the reader to create a varying and expanding, as well as deepening sense of anticipation, blended with dread. The narrative opens with a section cleverly titled “Afterwards” – a reference to the aftermath of the traumatic event, which simultaneously signals that the entire, subsequently unravelling, narrative thread will be enigmatically determined by what happened there – which depicts Jack and Kate as children, sitting opposite each other in the hallway of their childhood home, tellingly named (as the reader gradually realises in the course of the unfolding narrative) Malamore.¹¹ Here already, in the opening sentence, Hart (p. 1) introduces

10. Subsequent references to *The Reconstructionist* will be indicated by page numbers only.

11. “Malamore” may be divided into “mal” and “amore”, which would mean something like “evil” (or “bad”) “love”.

the psychoanalytic theme of verbal “reconstruction” which is inescapable in the aftermath of a traumatic event: “We were asked to reconstruct the event”. One gathers that their father had instructed them to sit there, waiting for people who would inevitably arrive. Significantly, the narrator, Jack, describes the instant when these people broke the window and entered the house, in retrospect as “the first moment of dispossession” – a description whose symbolic implications could not be lost on anyone familiar with psychoanalytic theory either. This marks the retrospective activation of the trauma, as it were, something that explains why even the best efforts on the part of those into whose custody their father entrusted Kate and Jack could not entirely wipe out the memory of the event which, decades later, still exercises its grave spell on them, but more gravely on Kate.

After “Afterwards”, the narrative abruptly switches, like a cinematic flashforward, to the narrative present, where Jack is a practising psychiatrist, and the troubled Kate is worrying about the advisability of marrying for a second time. Again, inserted smoothly into the sequence of narrated occurrences, there is (like on so many occasions throughout the novel) a “symptomatically” pertinent moment when Kate’s erstwhile mother-in-law says to Jack (p. 48): “Giving birth is nothing. What is required of parents is dedication to the art of helping their children save their own lives”. And a few paragraphs further, resonating with what one already knows about the siblings’ past, including their father’s role in entrusting them to the care of a family member in the wake of the “event”, apparently “abandoning” them forever, Kate confides in Jack (p. 49): “You see, Jack, I feel that he [Harold, the man who has proposed marriage to her] could build a wall around me and that I could hide behind it”. When Jack does not reply, she says softly (p. 49): “I’m sinking again. I’m sinking. Please Jack. Please”. And, knowing when it is inescapably his duty to rescue her, here through the still mysterious enactment of a strange, almost – but not quite – incestuous ritual, the dance (macabre, the reader realises in due course), Jack concedes. Having folded their clothes neatly and placed them on facing chairs, they dance, at shoulder’s length, in the nude, to silent music. As the story progresses (or perhaps “retrogresses”), one discovers that this is an imitation, or re-enactment, of a ritual enacted by their parents, and secretly observed by the children on more than one occasion, including immediately prior to the shattering event. Moreover, the ritualistic re-enactment of the dance by Jack and Kate whenever the (repressed) memory of the traumatic event threatens to overpower Kate in the shape of some obscurely anticipated lapse, is itself metonymically interwoven with the function of the “talking cure” mediated by the therapist-reconstructionist (here, Jack).

The fact that Jack is burdened with the responsibility of keeping Kate from falling apart by “reconstructing” her – their – past when called upon to do so, is framed by narrative information concerning Jack’s regular patients,

his psychiatric-therapeutic practice and his relationship with various other people, in conversation with whom he reveals valuable glimpses into the past that he shares with his sister, Kate. It is clear from his relationship with each one of them that he has an uncommon gift – the capacity to listen, discern and observe even the minutest clue (verbal and physical) on their part, which would signal something significant, negative or positive, to him. As the narrative peels away each layer that still separates the reader from the pathology-inaugurating, traumatic event, one gains a better understanding, not only of Kate's repetition compulsion, but also of the provenance of Jack's uncanny ability to home in on any important sign or symptom on the part of either his patients or his damaged sister. It is as if the catastrophe of their youth predisposed him to being a psychiatrist, given the fact that he was entrusted by his father with the responsibility of "looking after" Kate subsequent to the catastrophic event in question. But more than this, and hand in hand with it, all the stages of the narrative are connected to, and impelled by, this event which, in its turn, is inextricably intertwined with the passionate love relationship between Jack and Kate's parents, Michael and Catherine Trainor, the frequent dramatic-erotic expression of which the children sometimes witnessed. In fact, this awareness on the part of brother and sister, of the passionate nature of their parents' relationship – determined, on the one hand, by their mother's almost desperate adoration of her husband, and on the other hand by his strength, wisdom and ability to "handle" his wife's excruciatingly fiery desire for him (up to a point) – is crucial to, and conditions the impact of what eventually happens.

Hart even provides, interwoven with the narrative, a hermeneutic key to the theoretical understanding of trauma – one which is conceptually compatible with that derived from Derrida and Lacan for the purposes of the present analysis (not surprisingly; see p. 50). Not only does she explicitly connect "trauma counselling" to Jack (p. 56), but also provides, in the guise of a speech written by him, reflections on the limitations of such counselling. Significantly, in his intended speech Jack situates himself in the contemporary field of psychoanalytic theory:

MY POST-FREUDIAN QUESTIONS THEREFORE ARE, HOW DEEP SHOULD WE GO IN EXAMINATION OF OUR SELVES AND OUR PAST? DO WE UNDERSTAND ITS DANGERS? INDEED THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO FALL AND VANISH INTO ONE'S PAST? ARE WE SPENDING LARGE SWATHES OF TIME BANGING ON THE DOOR OF TIME PAST, WHICH IN TRUTH IS ALWAYS LOCKED AGAINST US?

(p. 57)

Isn't this statement a clear indication of the novelist's appropriation of what Lacan calls the "missed encounter" (with the "real") in the traumatic event? That it is in principle impossible to confront the "thing" (as Derrida

describes it) head-on, face to face, because it remains faceless? This impression is reinforced when Jack's written text continues, referring to the speech of the patient:

THE LANGUAGE WE CHOOSE AND THE VOCAL EMPHASIS WE GIVE TO OUR CHOICE ILLUMINATE NOT WHAT HAPPENED, BUT OUR OWN COMPLEX REACTION TO THE MEMORY OF THAT EVENT. A MEMORY WHICH OVER THE YEARS IS REINTERPRETED IN THE LIGHT OF NEW EVENTS. AUTHENTICITY IS THEREFORE MOST OFTEN A CHIMERA.

(pp. 59-60)

Here, again, one witnesses a confirmation of the Lacanian/Derridean version (discussed above) of the quasi-efficacy of therapy: what matters, is not whether the traumatic event has been captured, "*wie es gewesen ist*", but the quasi-efficacy of the subsequent interpretations and reinterpretations – the question to what extent the event has been bearably inscribed in experience through language or discourse (Lacan 1977: 48; Derrida 2003: 87-88). In his speech Jack acknowledges his awareness of these inadequacies, but simultaneously commits himself to the "endeavour" of limited, but indispensable efficacy, one which no doubt also bears on his reconstructive interventions regarding his sister:

THAT OF AIDING THE PATIENTS WHO COME TO ME – WHEN THE VERSION OF REALITY THAT WORKED PREVIOUSLY FOR THEM IS BREAKING DOWN – TO BE "EQUAL TO CIRCUMSTANCE"....
WHAT IS NEEDED, OVER TIME, IS A METHOD OF DISTANCING THEMSELVES SO THAT SOME FORM OF PERSPECTIVE MAY BE ACHIEVED. ONE WHICH WILL AT LEAST ALLOW LIFE IN A REASONABLE FORM TO CONTINUE.

(pp. 60-61)

Within the unfolding story, these self-reflective words on Jack's part explain his own therapeutic work regarding his patients' perceived needs, but crucially also his sister's. Structurally, Hart's narrative (which has to be adequately, albeit succinctly reconstructed here for my interpretation to be intelligible) resembles the temporality peculiar to psychoanalysis: just as the therapist systematically works back (see Freud 1957) through different stages of the analysand's history or personal anamnesis towards the final knot to be "disentangled" – if this can conceivably be done at all – or, alternatively, reconstructively reinscribed in a safety zone persuasively experienced as such by the analysand, so, too, the narrative inexorably works through present and a series of receding, past layers, until one finally comes "face to (veiled) face" (recall the earlier discussion of Lacan on trauma as the "missed encounter") with what might have been inferred or guessed correctly by then. Even so, the horror of it is almost as unbearable,

when the reader relives it (“impossibly”) in her or his imagination, as it conceivably was for Kate (and to a lesser extent, Jack) at the time. By the time one gets here, one knows that Jack believes Kate’s prospective husband (number two), Harold, to be, in all probability, a good prospect as far as Kate’s well-being goes. Not only is he a wealthy member of London’s upper classes, but for various reasons he sees Kate as his last opportunity to “make good” in marriage, and welcomes it when Jack intimates that he would have to “take responsibility” for Kate (as “reconstructionist” in Jack’s place) once they are married.

One has also been told that Kate and Jack’s father, Michael Trainor, has spent time in prison after being convicted of “manslaughter”, and that he has moved to America, where Jack is able to contact him, on strict instructions, *only* in the event of emergencies. The incongruity of different surnames has been explained, too – after the watershed event they were entrusted to the enduring care of an English uncle, Edmund, whose surname, Harrington, they eventually assumed. In fact, Jack’s house, which is home as well as clinical premises to him, in Harley Street, London, used to be Uncle Edmund’s home. And although Jack has therapeutically protected Kate by repeatedly spinning and respinning a protective web around her, painstakingly, ritualistically reconstructing her life whenever cracks appeared in the edifice – usually signalled by her saying something like “Please Jack”, or “I’m falling again”, or simply “What happened?” – it is when he discovers that Harold Abst intends buying Malamore as a well-intended wedding gift for Kate when it is put on the market, that Jack has to intervene. He decides to purchase their childhood home himself, first, to have it demolished, lest Kate be propelled headlong into disaster by unwittingly revisiting the scene of primordial disaster. This act holds the promise of an eventual liberation of sorts for both of them: “Soon the Malamore of my childhood, the internal landscape of the house, will be destroyed and with it the catalyst to devastating memory. A memory which could pull down around me the construction within which Kate has for so long been protected” (p. 194).

In the process of returning to the estate in Ireland, Jack himself enters, at last, upon a reliving, a personal working-through, of the fateful happenings of their youth at Malamore. This is where the psychoanalytic structure of the narrative is most conspicuous – once in the house, crucial, mind-shaping episodes from his and Kate’s youth are resurrected in Jack’s memory (pp. 143-177, 212-216): memories of witnessing, from a hiding place, some of the passionate (and often puzzling) encounters between their parents, as well as angry confrontations between their father and their grandfather concerning Catherine, his daughter and their mother – furious exchanges not fully comprehensible to a child because they involved accusations of infidelity, references to passion and to erotic devotion. There are memories, too, of Michael Trainor bearing the brunt of a vicious dog’s attack to protect

Kate and Jack, and pacifying their mother when she berates Kate for provoking the attack. Throughout these memories a red thread runs, as it were: Jack and Kate's incomprehension and bewilderment in the face of the strange, ambiguous passion that binds Michael and Catherine together – sometimes ecstatic, sometimes ostensibly painful (judging by the erotic sounds their unwittingly observed parents make, and the expressions on their faces) but always palpably fraught with the possibility of imminent disaster. For example, they witness their mother banging her fists against their father's chest, making dire threats against a woman who works as a nurse for Michael's mother. This anamnestic journey on Jack's part culminates, here, in a lengthy recall of the sequence of events that converges with, and expands on, the "afterwards" scene with which the narrative opens – Jack and Kate sitting opposite each other, waiting, on their father's instructions, for the people who would, and do, inevitably come to Malamore; a sequence of bewildering happenings, including being questioned by the police, that lead, finally, to their Uncle Edmund coming to their grandfather's house and taking them back to London with him the next morning.

What is achieved through the narrative reconstruction of these events is not merely imparting to the reader crucial information on the context which frames the traumatic event in Kate and Jack's lives, but simultaneously a performance of "working through", on Jack's part, of these events. As he acknowledges near the end of the tale (p. 216) concerning his own part in rescuing Kate via "the talking cure" and its ancillaries (apart from his father's decisive part): "And my reward? I helped. He knew that would save me too. I had a job to do and, honestly, fourteen is not all that young to start". This negotiation of that treacherous terrain in memory is what "finally" delivers Jack, too, from its clutches.

The reader has to wait almost until the end of the narrative to arrive at the remembered, and simultaneously covered up, traumatic moment from which Jack has been protecting Kate all along. Before this is narrated, Jack returns to London from Ireland, and has to face the important, indispensable task of passing the baton, as it were, to Harold Abst by providing him with an acceptable "version" of that "something" which has cast a shadow over his future bride's life (surmised by Harold to have occurred, of course, given his knowledge of Kate's personality by this time). This account of events (pp. 196-197) casts their father, Michael, in the role of one who accidentally committed manslaughter by wounding their mother, Catherine, fatally with a gun when Jack was fourteen and Kate eight and a half. Jack knows that, armed with this account of events, Harold would be in a position to catch Kate if she should ever fall again. It requires a fine calculation on Jack's part – how much to tell Harold, how to let him feel that he is assuming responsibility, without allowing him too much, lest he should feel justified to improvise his own recipe for "handling traumatic history" (p. 197). Jack

also allows Harold the satisfaction of a partial truth, when the latter surmises that the “secret” Jack has shared with him has been “the bond” between brother and sister (p. 200).

Having returned from his meeting with Harold, Jack receives a phone call from Kate, who has sensed that she may have reached a point where she will be relatively free from the persistent, insistent echo of the past, sheltered by the embrace of the man she is about to marry:

“Why do I feel it’s all ending”?

I know what she’s talking about. I sense in her voice that she is now caught in the loop of hope, which is as contagious as despair. I, too, have taken a careful bet on the future. Fundamental to which was the historical perspective I had, this evening, painted for Harold. The story, which will guide him to certain strengths from his own repertoire, which will make him more beloved by her.

(p. 202)

Harold, in other words, has become Kate’s “reconstructionist” in Jack’s place, with the responsibility of shielding her from the long-term effects of trauma. Hart’s keen insight into the exigencies of psychotherapy – that it is the degree to which the patient believes an account of the pathologising events to be true that matters, and not the question whether it corresponds to “what actually happened” – is striking here (see Lacan 1977: 47-48).

This is where the culminating sequence of events – which brings the originary traumatic moment (inaccessible as it is in its pure “originality”), and the “end” of the narrative, together – starts unfolding. Jack knows that a certain rite of passage faces him too: a newspaper article and photograph of his father, referring to the day the latter was released from prison, trigger a series of reminiscences on his part – how he met his father at the station, the older man’s reluctance to see and talk to him (believing, as he did, that the best thing for his children was minimal or no contact with him, in order to bury the past under a blanket of silence), his father’s stated intention to go to America with a woman lawyer whom he had met in prison (a sure sign that Michael Trainor’s enigmatic charm still worked), and the abrupt way he ended the conversation and left. Too agitated by the memory of that day of parting to settle down, Jack rings his father’s “emergency number” in America for what he believes will be the last conversation between them. He needs to share with the older man the belief that Kate may henceforth be “safe”, that the re-enactment of his own intermittent, ritualistic, dance macabre with his sister has been obviated at last. In a very significant passage (with tragic echoes of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*), Michael Trainor provides insight into the grounds of the passion that constituted a kind of *hamartia* on Catherine’s part, and conditioned their tempestuous relationship, so incomprehensible to their children at the time:

“She lived high up on some other plain, in a kind of passionate dream of me. The smallest thing threatened the giddy high-wire act of Catherine and Michael. She wanted it seamless. As though we’d been knitted into one another.¹² Even a single loose thread was a prophecy of unravelment to her. I let her fall. I wasn’t careful enough. The rest is a technicality. It’s a heavy burden, a woman’s adoration. Anyway, it’s to be feared. With good cause, in my case. You’ve carried this a long time, Jack. I’m grateful. Well ... goodbye now.”

(p. 210)

This is not yet the culminating moment of returning to the scene of the “crime” as it were. Being a psychiatrist – and a Lacanian one, as Hart (p. 50) intimates – Jack knows that, having taken care, as best he could, of Kate’s future well-being, he has to shuffle off his own burden of suffering, in the rich sense of passion, too. After all, for someone as sensitive, and as much of an observer, as himself, his decades-long vigilance has not been neutral, innocuous. In true Lacanian fashion (see Lacan 1977: 40-49), he knows that he has to introduce a new, changed perspective into the narration of his own story. Hence:

It’s time, as my father said, to finish it.

I will now lose Kate. I must now lose her. I must let her go – which is just another way of saying it. She is the love of my life. She is my great love affair.

Though not in the sense the words usually mean

The great thing is over.

Kate and I will no longer dance. She will not ask me. She too has sensed her own survival. How strange that I never felt a single spark of desire for her, not even when we danced naked together.

No, that was a communion. A ritual to celebrate the moving tableau that was our last vision of them, our utterly beautiful parents, naked, dancing, not in their bedroom but in the attic where new guns, and old treasures, were carefully locked away. The forbidden place, to which we had followed them, ambivalently, excitedly, secretly. Looking for the answer to the mystery of

12. Catherine’s passion, on this account, corresponds largely with Aristophanes’s version, in Plato’s *Symposium*, of love (or, more appropriately, the sexual drive for union with the other) – unlike Socrates’s own version of love, which stresses “lack” on the part of the lover (implying that one never “really” reaches the object of one’s love, which is actually aimed at the cultivation of an autonomous self, see Plato 1965: 82-83; 92-94). There is evidently also a measure of desire, the passion accompanied by the dread of human groundlessness, on Catherine’s part, though. In his Seminar XX (1999), Lacan elaborates on the differences among these “passions”. I am indebted to Andrea Hurst for my very provisional understanding of this very difficult aspect of Lacan’s work.

parental love. A fatal quest, as I learned young and relearn weekly in my consulting rooms. Not all of us are lost parents but most of us are, at some time, lost children.

(pp. 211-212)

This is not the place to elaborate on Hart's wisdom, commensurate with Lacan's (and across the millennia, with Plato's), that – contrary to what most people naively believe, there is not only one kind or form of love, or passion. Clearly, Jack's "love" for Kate, his sister, has not been of the erotic, sexual kind, but it has been a kind of passion nevertheless – perhaps most accurately described as *the desire to free her* from the cold clutches of the past, of that thing which perpetually threatened to pull her down. In short, she has been his *desire* in psychoanalytic terms (explained below). His means to protect her has been, of course, the version of events that he has had to "reconstruct" as the need arose – that version according to which her father was convicted of manslaughter for the death of her mother but which she intermittently doubted. Is there another version? Here the reader, finally, has to look the terrible, traumatic "truth" in the eye, when Jack recalls, near the end of the narrative – which here comes full circle – that day, long ago, when he and Kate hid behind a chest of drawers in the attic and watched, mesmerised, as their parents danced, naked, ecstatically, until Catherine suddenly stopped and started beating her husband on his chest with her fists, threatening:

"Oh, Michael, I will kill you, I will truly kill you if you ever, ever, touch"

And then, our world exploded and burned out. What is noted in the moment of conflagration remains indelible. Though not everything is noted. A sensation of emotional vertigo does not allow for precision as layers of presumed reality collapse, the way trembling buildings do in an earthquake. But of this I'm certain. Her face as she fell dead to the floor, did not look frightened.

(p. 213)

The anamnestic narrative retrogression having worked through layer after layer metonymically bearing, but also covering over, the unsayable traumatic kernel, has finally stripped away the "last" one, revealing – what? Something tangible, or an abyss? A traceable implosion of horizons of meaning? These are difficult questions to answer, but Hart's is as accurate an evocation of the anatomy of trauma as any, if one compares it to Derrida's and Lacan's characterisations, outlined earlier. What she describes is the counterpart of the "event" or of the "thing" that happens, like a bolt from the blue, the "real" rupturing the canopy of "reality" fatally.

But how did Catherine die? Who shot her? That it should have been Michael, her husband and lover who, seconds before, had been dancing the dance of Eros with her, is surely incongruous. Hart gently peels away this last layer of memory covering up the elusive moment of traumatic impact:

There is not a day I do not hope that in her last seconds she saw it all and sensed how sublime he would be. Yes, that's the word. He was sublime. In a split second he lifted from Kate the burden of her guilt, a primitive guilt which is, and always has been, unendurable.¹³ He wrenched it from her and carried it away. It requires supernatural strength

He did not cry out as his wife slipped from his arms but as though a primitive impulsion drove him, turned and threw himself headlong across Kate, who stood there, paralysed. He took the gun, seeming to wipe it from her hand, as though it were a stain.¹⁴ Then, as his huge body blocked Kate's vision, with studied precision he fired over the body of his dead wife.

In that strange state, which follows trauma and which destroys or suspends human responsiveness, we remained silent and becalmed And as though in a dream I listened to him as he whispered to her over and over that poor Daddy had done a terrible thing, that there had been the most dreadful accident and that maybe Daddy would have to go away ...

Afterwards, he sat us opposite each other in the stone hallway and rehearsed us in the reconstruction of the event.

(pp. 214-215)

The last sentence in the above passage connects the narrative, near the end of its unravelment (appropriately, in psychoanalytic terms), with the word that commences, instigates the narrative: "Afterwards". Not only does Hart demonstrate, in these lines, her keen grasp of the conditions of possibility (and of comprehensibility) of trauma and its consequences, as well as of its possibly effectual treatment (Michael initiates the work of "reconstruction" of Kate's world, something that Jack afterwards has to take over from him), but she simultaneously shows her insight into something, going back to the ethics of Immanuel Kant, and strikingly thematised in the work of Jacques Lacan, namely, what it means to act ethically.¹⁵ This is properly framed in

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13. What Hart is invoking here is the well-known feminine counterpart of the Oedipus complex, namely the so-called Electra complex, according to which the daughter loves the father to the extent that she would, like the eponymous Electra in ancient Greek drama, murder the mother in his defence, or to avenge him.
 14. "Stain" is another telling word that connects the narrative to Lacanian theory here. Metaphorically speaking, the "stain" marks what Lacan calls the *objet petit a* (or *objet a*, "little other object"). Very succinctly stated, it represents the "stain", fragment or "knot" that "frames" one's desire, or from the perspective of which one's desire may be deciphered. In this case, it is ambiguous – it could either denote Kate's desire for her father's endless affection, or Michael's desire for Catherine, in which case it would mark his sense of guilt about not anticipating the possibility of the catastrophe. See in this regard Žižek 1993: 206-207.
 15. See in this regard Olivier 2005 for an investigation into the question of the ethical (in relation to various agents and contexts) in Lacan's work. For

the language of *desire* – a truly ethical act does not necessarily coincide with what conventional morality dictates; on the contrary, it is, more often than not, transgressive in respect of convention, because it presupposes that the acting person has “taken up” his or her desire (which is, paradoxically, what is unique or singular about the person but also a differentiating characteristic that she or he has in common with all other people). However, the further test of whether someone who has assumed his or her desire is capable of acting ethically, consists in his or her ability to sacrifice this very irreducible desire. And this is what Michael does, fully accepting the consequences of giving up his desire – living, in a fundamental sense, to fulfil the reciprocal desire of Catherine – when, faced with the dreadful fact of Catherine’s demise at the hands of his daughter, who heard in her mother’s threat the possibility of losing her beloved father, he immediately stepped into the breach and assumed culpability in Kate’s place. In sacrificing his desire like this, creating for his daughter at least a *chance* to live a “normal” life one day, he paradoxically confirms it, for he simultaneously honours what would arguably – as Hart intimates through Jack’s thoughts – have been Catherine’s own wish, too. He takes the rap. And this is what makes him, as Jack tells the reader, sublime; which means “unrepresentable” in philosophical terms – that is, his is an act that cannot be articulated in ordinary, conventional terms.

The narrative ends where the virtuoso “reconstructionist”, Jack, having just listened to a message from Cora – who has him “in her sights” – decides that he has reached a point where he can allow himself the luxury of being “willing”. He, too, has in a sense been saved: “But tonight, before I sleep, I’ll play that reel of memory just one more time before I finally erase it. Just once more Then I’m swimming to the surface and this time I’m going to stay there” (p. 218).

One cannot overestimate the importance of Hart’s insight into the nature of psychotherapeutic work in the shape of “reconstruction” – it should be emphasised that, in effect, this amounts to the reconstruction, *time and time again*, of what Lacan understands as the *symbolic* sphere of a person’s life (as distinguished from the *imaginary* and the “real” registers of human existence). This has already been discussed in the theoretical section, above, but what has not been adequately emphasised (although it is implicit in what was said earlier), is the inescapable need for *repeated* (primarily linguistic) “reconstruction” of the symbolic fabric of a person’s life – in the first place, of a person like Kate, who has experienced an unbearably traumatic thing; so much so that it had to be repressed out of sight, but the intermittent symptomatic manifestation of which continually impinges upon her disruptively, necessitating the reconstructive interventions on Jack’s part. But

further elaboration see also Lacan 1997: 243-287; Zupancic 2000; and Žižek 2000.

there is a second psychoanalytic lesson here from Hart, detectable in her treatment of some of her minor characters – including Harold Abst, Rose (Jack’s erstwhile mother-in-law) and Cora (Jack’s current girlfriend) in the novel: a “healthy” person, no less than a “damaged” one, requires intermittent “reconstructions” of her or his personal symbolic horizon (either by the person her- or himself, or with the help of a friend or a therapist), lest one become victim to the (usually ideological) illusion that there is some permanent, time-resistant conceptual framework that remains intact throughout the vicissitudes of life and history. The need for *reconstruction* is interminable, and implicitly requires as its counterpart, one might say, interminable “*deconstruction*” of one’s own life (either by oneself, or by someone else) in the Derridean sense of uncovering the groundlessness of a belief in inviolable wholeness, atemporal hierarchies, foundations and origins – in ordinary language, broadly, a resolute acceptance of one’s own finitude, mortality and fallibility. This is something which is probably undertaken *explicitly* by very few people, although the regular or intermittent linguistic appropriation of one’s own life in conversations with friends and family members presupposes the potential of such a questioning (even if it is not acknowledged), as shown in Rose’s, conversation with Jack in the novel.¹⁶

Here a Derridean and a Lacanian approach are in agreement, their terminological differences notwithstanding: one cannot do without the relative, albeit “mobile”, stability of something like language, while simultaneously learning to live with the “certainty” that such “stability” is itself subject to *uncertainty*. After all, what Derrida (in Caputo 1997: 23) calls the “messianic” structure of experience – the fact that, strictly speaking, the future is not predictable in its temporal and historical specificity, that something could (and does) arrive or happen unexpectedly, that one should always “expect the unexpected” – is consonant with Lacan’s “real” as that which cannot be symbolised, which constitutes the internal limit of language against which our very best efforts, literary as well as scientific, to name the “cause” of events, shatter, thus evoking the ineffable. The religious and ideological dream of a final, conclusive, totalising, overarching framework, metanarrative or metalanguage has been debunked, incontrovertibly, as an illusion by poststructuralist thinkers such as Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Kristeva, and Deleuze. The alternative is not acceptance of an anything-goes relativism in epistemological and ethical

16. In a conversation with Jack, early in the narrative, for example (p. 31), Rose (Jack’s former mother-in-law) uses the opportunity of having a conversation with Jack to do some minor “reconstruction” of her own life – from offering gratuitous judgements of Jack’s home decorations (a way of reaffirming Jack’s knowledge of her personality), through speculating about the reason why Ellie (Jack’s former wife) left him, to informing him about her own past life, which she regards as “a minor masterpiece” (p. 34).

terms (see Olivier 2005) but a willingness to live with, and learn to negotiate the difficult, complex structures and textures of existence, which means negotiating the tensional relations among the imaginary, the symbolic and the “real”. To this end, poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida and Lacan, and novelists like Josephine Hart, have contributed indispensable insights.

What this investigation has brought to light, it seems to me, is that “trauma” is a crucial motif in the narrative of Hart’s *The Reconstructionist*. It is not difficult to think of other literary works where this is the case – Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Love* spring to mind, as do Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Richard Adams’s *The Girl in a Swing*, Fowles’s *The Magus* and Rushdie’s *Fury*. Cinema, too, yields promising candidates – thinking of films from Nicolas Roeg’s oeuvre alone, for example: *Bad Timing*, *Don’t Look Now* and *Track 29* are all susceptible to a reading in terms of a narrative dynamic impelled by a trauma of sorts. Interestingly, in *Bad Timing* it seems at first glance to work in a retrospective manner, where the narrative events culminate in a trauma which, when retrospectively reconstructed, is perceived as being virtually ineluctable. In all of these narratives there is some traumatic “thing” that impels the narrative unfolding of events, some knot that the symbolic weaves circles around even when it seems to be moving forward, and which, ultimately, does not really allow “closure” – even when the narrative “ends” – but rather a temporary suspension of the process of symbolic ravelling. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, such novels and films enact, metonymically, the inescapable human symbolic activity predicated on the primordial trauma of being born, namely, to spin a web of words, a “talking cure” of sorts, repairing or restoring it over and over – because webs get torn, ruptured, and blown to pieces – in an effort to catch some bits of sense, of meaning, in its threads. As the creative symbolic activity par excellence, literature may be understood, like Penelope’s ravelling and unravelling in the face of Odysseus’ “traumatic” absence, as that which continually stitches up the intermittently (or perhaps perpetually) torn fabric of human existence. And sometimes – as in the case of Hart’s *The Reconstructionist* – the symbolic stitching is done so as to mark, even accentuate, the tear in life’s cloth, but with such mastery that its textile beauty is enhanced, not spoiled.

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