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Studies in the Novel, Volume 40, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Summer
2008, pp. 178-188 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.0.0009>

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“YOU YOUR BEST THING, SETHE”: TRAUMA’S NARCISSISM

PETAR RAMADANOVIC

Some time ago, in reading one of the founding texts of trauma studies, Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, I proposed that her notion of entanglement offers a model for understanding how one historical trauma is implicated in another (see Ramadanovic). The Levinasian argument that Caruth made and that my essay extended was that because we are mortal, our vulnerability is entangled with another’s, though it is the other’s vulnerability and mortality that we are, as a rule, blind to even as we speak of our own.¹ The entanglement is hence unwitting, unintentional, or unconscious. In the present essay I want to try a somewhat different line of thinking about trauma narratives, concerning the self-centeredness of trauma, that begins with the premise that trauma effects a withdrawal from the world and that the traumatized subject seems, at least in one of the early phases of trauma, focused on him- or herself and closed off from anything that can be construed as different, threatening, or alien. I would also like to generalize this premise to include, in addition to trauma, also post-colonial narrative.²

My argument will be sketched in four main parts: in the first, I will claim that trauma narrative is defined through this narcissistic phase; in the second, that post-colonial narrative goes through the same phase; in the third, that both trauma and post-colonial narratives are variations on the modern Western narrative in the very basic sense that they are stories of becoming an autonomous subject (nation or person); and, in the fourth, that all three—trauma, post-colonial, and modern Western narratives—are in fact variants of Oedipus’s ur-narrative of independence (even if the Oedipal narrative is itself changing beyond the model that Freud and structuralist anthropology had in mind). The main goal of this argument is to bring us closer to understanding the implications of what, after Caruth, we might call the entanglement between

the Oedipal narrative and narratives of Western modernity, trauma, and post-coloniality.³

As Freud noted in "On Narcissism," a person "who is tormented by organic pain and discomfort gives up his interest in the things of the external world, in so far as they do not concern his suffering" (82). More significantly, the thesis makes sense theoretically since the reestablishment of psychic unity after a trauma requires, as we learn from Freud's account of the *Fort/Da*, the ego's mastery over the entirety of the psychic economy.⁴ To borrow Margaret Whitford's words from a recent essay on narcissism, this "active turning away from the object and a withdrawal to internalized objects" (207) is the mechanism that the *Fort/Da* in particular and trauma in general share with narcissism. In these cases, in narcissism and in trauma, the libido "that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego" (Freud, "On Narcissism" 75). The narcissism in question is, of course, the so-called primary narcissism (as opposed to secondary narcissism, which is a character trait), whose function Freud traces back to our most basic instinct for self-preservation. As he writes at the beginning of "On Narcissism," primary narcissism is "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature" (73-74).⁵ It is a form of self-centeredness characteristic of human beings and all other living creatures who are in some way aware of their wholeness and vulnerability. In the *Fort/Da*, where the mother's presences and absences are represented in throwing the spool away and out of sight and reeling it in, narcissism serves first to define the newly forming self and then to sustain it as a separate and different entity from the mother's self. The *Fort/Da*, then, is literally a self-defining and self-sustaining narcissistic process that alternates between an internalizing and an externalizing gesture.

As an effect of turning inward, traumatized subjects are likely not to be observant of the plight of others and might lack compassion. This is one of the reasons that Primo Levi, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, calls a certain zone in the concentration camp dominated by survival instinct "gray." The altruism of trauma survivors and their dedication to helping others do not disprove this line of reasoning since trauma victims tend to help others only once they are well into working through their trauma. Those they help also tend to be like themselves, such as victims of the same kind of trauma or members of the same national, racial, or gender group. Even selflessness and solidarity among survivors can hence be tied to a narcissistic compulsive repetition and a kind of acting out. Understood on this basis, a trauma narrative would be first and foremost a narrative of the awakening to oneself and establishing control over one's self with the necessarily narcissistic goal of self-preservation, where even empathy and self-sacrifices serve that primary objective.

If post-colonial narrative is also about surviving and overcoming a condition that has both defined and traumatized the self, then it is reasonable to assume that said narrative must go through the same narcissistic, self-enclosing, self-defining phase on its way to instituting an autonomous, post-colonial subjectivity. I suggest this first because of the structural coincidences between trauma and post-colonial narratives, which are both realized through a revolutionary process akin to what Hegel termed the master/slave dialectic. The most well-known work that builds on the structural similarity between trauma and the colonial condition, and that includes an active search for self-definition as well as narcissism, is of course Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.⁶ The same thought can be found, however, in other psychological theories that draw on Hegel, including notions that do not normally come to mind in either the post-colonial or the trauma context, such as W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness (see Zwarg), and those that do, such as Jacques Lacan's understanding of the mirror stage or Paul Ricoeur's explanation of the difference between phantasm and symbol in his essay "Fatherhood." One could go so far as to say that the connection I am making, following certain psychoanalytic paths, between trauma and coloniality is both unthinkable without Hegel and already anticipated in his work. The two discourses are similar, not necessarily because the post-colonial narrative is likely to be about a trauma or because a trauma, like the colonial condition, is likely to include a relation of domination; they are similar primarily because both are discourses of self-mastery and involve processes through which the subject becomes its own, independent entity. Transcending a subjugating relation, the subject's origin and essence cease to reside outside the subject—with a parent, a master, a colonial power—and become an inner condition.

Historically, the correlative for the two conditions has been the French Revolution, understood not in a narrow sense as the beginning of the bourgeois epoch but in the wider sense as a realization of the Cartesian, rational principles of self-knowing, which acquire their political form in the self-ruling, self-constituted subject of bourgeois democracy. The French Revolution, however, also set a traumatic pattern for the path to self-realization. The cycle that eventually leads to an autonomous subject begins with a crisis of authority and is followed by violence of unprecedented proportions, which is itself followed by the emergence of a new kind of authority. In France, the crowning result of the Revolution was a secular monarch, Napoleon, who resembled the old royalty quite closely, except for one major difference: the new one-who-stands-for-the-whole was not a king but a dictator, instated not naturally, by God, but by the state.⁷

In the main revolution of the twentieth century, this traumatic, Oedipal scenario—in which the self-made son-like figure replaces and replicates the father-like figure—takes place twice, first under Lenin and then under Stalin. Today, it is in its third and, probably, final act, with ex-KGB agent Vladimir

Putin, who only sometimes appears above the constitution. Tito's Yugoslavia (the country I am from), Pol Pot's Cambodia, Mao's China, Fidel Castro's Cuba, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Mugabe's Zimbabwe, even Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy can all be seen as variations on the same modern, post-colonial, post-traumatic, narcissistic theme. A revolutionary, anti-monarchic, and/or anti-colonial terror culminates in a popularly supported, despotic, post-colonial rule, which replicates—and compulsively repeats—the worst aspects of the regime it overthrew. Meanwhile, it also essentially changes the system by grounding it not in an outside power (such as the British Empire, "nature," God, or the Mother) but in the subject itself. India, which might have been an exception because of its *satyagraha*, Gandhi's form of nonviolent resistance, followed the same violent, compulsive path to the letter. The crisis of actual and symbolic authority that the British withdrawal caused led almost immediately to bloodshed (an estimated one million people died), then to a feudal organization of power around the military and the dynasties (Gandhi and Bhutto), and finally to what looks like the permanent possibility of ultimate terror between India and Pakistan.

That American slavery, which, with the Holocaust, is the privileged example of American trauma studies, was a colonial system only strengthens the evidence that both trauma and anti-colonial revolution go through a narcissistic, self-defining phase and do it in a form whose main traits are virtually indistinguishable from the fundamental modern narrative of independence defined by the French Revolution. At any rate, as I turn to Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* and Salman Rushdie's 1980 novel *Midnight's Children*, I will find a confirmation of the Hegelian line of thinking that I have been developing thus far, which brings together, on the one hand, narcissism and Western modern narratives with, on the other hand, trauma and post-colonial conditions.

Morrison's novel is set in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. It tells the story of a runaway slave, Sethe, attempting to start her life anew on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe, however, is too weighted by her past to be able to do it alone. The project requires the help of, first, her daughter Denver and then of one of the men from Sweet Home, the farm on which she was a slave. The turning point in the characters' working through trauma happens when a boy, Denver's school friend Nelson Lord, says to her, "Take care of yourself, Denver" (252). She hears the salute as confirmation that she has a self to take care of, which helps her gather courage for the deed her mother was not able to accomplish. As Morrison develops her myth, Denver gradually confronts her family's past and manages to leave the house at 124 Bluestone Road to join the post-Civil War world. Sethe's transformation, too, is precipitated by a man's remark, Paul D's "You your best thing, Sethe." To Paul D's encouragement, Sethe responds with a hopeful "Me? Me?" (273), which are effectively and appropriately the narrative's last words.⁸ As such, they

signal that primary narcissism, a form of independence, is the accomplishment of the first generation of former slaves.⁹

The child-like, beautiful woman who appears one day near 124 Bluestone Road and is the novel's eponymous character only emphasizes the importance of narcissism for the narrative. She commands the attention of all of the novel's primary characters just as she preoccupies the novel's interpretations, which, as a rule, try to explain the presence away as if it were not a symptom of the condition depicted by the novel but its very cause. Particularly fitting to describe the attachment that Beloved commands is Freud's understanding of why we are attracted to the narcissism of children and infantile individuals. It seems, he writes, "very evident that another person's narcissism has a great attraction for those who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are in search of object-love" ("On Narcissism" 89). The charm of Beloved, her "new skin, lineless and smooth" (Morrison 50), like that of a child, "lies to a great extent in [her] narcissism, [her] self-contentment and inaccessibility" ("On Narcissism" 89).

Both as a child-like woman and as a ghost, Beloved is categorically different from anyone else. She is on the other side of the boundary that separates adults from children, the dead from the living. This inaccessibility is the reason that Sethe finds her so enticing and attractive. What Sethe identifies with in the figure is, however, not only its self-absorption but also the wound that Beloved represents, which together testify to Sethe's inability to let go of the trauma that defines her.

In *Midnight's Children* narcissism is even more manifest. The novel's central conceit is that a person is like a state, a sovereign entity, and that a state is like a person, endowed with a specific personal character. Hence, Saleem is born on the day and in the hour of India's independence, and his life is the life of India; he becomes an independent subject as he matures as a man and a writer. In psychoanalytic terms, Rushdie depicts an equivalent to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage: a process in which Saleem and India separate from the authority they belonged to and forge a self-governing subject who, in turn, fears fragmentation.

The fundamental supposition that a nation has a personality and that a person is a sovereign subject is sufficient to illustrate the narcissistic paradigm I have suggested for this work of art, as it is also sufficient to identify Rushdie's novel as a modern narrative. The situation gets only more interesting as Rushdie builds his story around this conceit and creates a founding myth to support and justify India's and Saleem's autonomous existence. If not exactly a classical case of an "undoing narrative" in Catherine Gallagher's sense, *Midnight's Children* is a similar attempt to change the past to support a future project (15).¹⁰ Whereas Marty McFly, the hero of Robert Zemeckis's movie *Back to the Future*, which is Gallagher's main example, has a time machine, Saleem has certain literary devices at his disposal, inherited from the Persian

oral traditions (Jussawalla 52), which help Saleem achieve the same magical effect Marty McFly accomplishes with his travel through time.¹¹ The most important among the devices available to Saleem—beyond magical thinking, reading others' thoughts, foretelling the future, and moving through time at will, etc.—is his ability to manipulate and form the past. By telling the story of his birth, Saleem, like McFly, creates an alternative past reality and a different version of himself that is—or rather that seems—entirely independent of his parents. As Rushdie says in *Imaginary Homelands*, Saleem cuts up “history to suit himself” (24), which we should understand in two different senses: in the sense that Saleem fashions himself out of historical cloth and also in the sense that he revises history to fit his shape and needs.

What differentiates the two characters is that the hero of Zameckis's movie, conservative as he is, would like nothing better than to let the future take place as it actually happened. McFly even travels in time twice to undo the change in the space-time continuum he caused during his first journey, which set events on an “evil” track. Saleem, on the other hand, has in mind an autonomous India, a country whose future is different from what it would have been had the British Empire continued to exist. To this end, in a typical modern nationalistic gesture, he represents India's past as if the Indo-Mughal tradition already existed as a viable tradition within and independent from the British colony, maximizing the role of the indigenous factors in creating the new age-old subjectivity. The most conspicuous absence in *Midnight's Children* is hence not that of Gandhi's National Movement, as some critics have suggested (see Brennan 84). Rather, the most remarkable absence is of the entity that can be considered the “true” father of independent India, the East India Company, which is hardly mentioned in the book and without which the notions of independence, an authentic Indian tradition, and post-colonial revolution would not have existed.

Following this logic—that what is most important must be repressed because it cannot be fully erased (the logic which is also active in *Beloved*)—Saleem's father is neither the rich Indian Ahmed Sinai nor the poor Indian Wee Willie Winkie but, as only a very careful reader discovers, a British man, William Methwold. Methwold is a descendant of the first William Methwold, who deserves to be called the “truest” father of British India. Not only was he among the founders of the East India Company, he was also the first to have a vision of British Bombay, which, Rushdie writes, had divine-like force that “set time in motion” (*Midnight's* 106; see also 111). It inspired the creation of British India and it defined a model that Indian India would follow some three centuries later.

Saleem's family buys the Methwold estate just prior to the British withdrawal from India and moves to the family seat on the day of India's independence (August 15th), continuing the double lineage, the apparent Indian one and the hidden British one. Following the bizarre conditions of the

sale set by William Methwold, the Sinai family is forbidden to throw away anything that was in the estate prior to their ownership (109). As a result, soon after moving in, the Sinai family begin to ape the Methwolds:

Every evening at six they are out in their gardens, celebrating the cocktail hour, and when William Methwold comes to call they slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford drawls; and they are learning about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars, and Methwold, supervising their transformation, is mumbling under his breath. Listen carefully: what's he saying? Yes, that's it. "Sabkuch ticktock hai," mumbles William Methwold. All is well. (113)

The Methwold identity and bloodline, however, endure for only one more generation until Saleem's sterilization during Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule. This wound that the new India inflicts on itself finalizes Saleem's creation of himself and of his independent race. The castration-like event, as Saleem says, severs his relation with the past. He is "[d]eprived of the last object connecting me to my more tangible, historically-verifiable past" (515). In loosening the past's grip on him, the sterilization, on the other hand, allows for a new, bastardized sense of heritage and identity formation, described on the novel's last page as it only can be, in the negative formula: "my son...is not my son, and his son...will not be his, and his...will not be his" (552). Indeed, Saleem's son Adam has blue-eyes like his British ancestors and Ganesh-like elephant ears of his Indian forefathers. He is at the same time, as Saleem says, "not-my-son and also more my heir than any child of my flesh could have been" (534).

Needless to say, in *Beloved* the main father figure (the slave-owner) is also white and absent in the same sense as William Methwold. The ultimate goal of self-invention is to replace, falsify, and hide—or transform and revolutionize, depending on how you look at it—the role of the father. As we shall promptly see, this is what makes both of our revolutionary, traumatic narratives Oedipal.

Saleem is a self-made man and the creator of his race. He is a "swallower of lives" and an Indian version of Leviathan: "Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me" (4). In what is perhaps the most openly Oedipal moment of the novel, Saleem boasts that "my inheritance includes this gift, the gift of inventing new parents for myself whenever necessary. The power of giving birth to fathers and mothers: which Ahmed [his father] wanted and never had" (125; see also 291).

Saleem is thus his own father in two different senses. Not only has he created himself in his writing, but through his writing he has also created his parents. This comes as close as one can to the absolute fantasy, similar to the undoing narratives that Gallagher identifies in the sci-fi genre, of the son creating the cause of his own existence.¹² Saleem engenders not only himself but also the past and the source that came before he came into being. He is,

as a result, the “sum total of everything” (475). In this mystical universe, the bygone is not finished and done; it is still current and open to emendation even if the correction is, in one of the postmodern twists of this novel, only imaginary and recognized as imaginary, as when Saleem identifies the India of his writing as a “new myth” and a “collective fiction” (130).

As the Sinais’ behavior begins to resemble the Methwolds’, Saleem distances himself from his parents, especially from his father, Ahmed. Not unlike Sophocles’s Oedipus, Saleem thinks of himself as a spurious child who, in his case, was taken by a maid from a poor mother and exchanged for the baby that his rich mother gave birth to. Saleem is thus entirely alien to the two people who are closest to him and who seem to be his biological parents. He is not their blood, nor their caste, nor their race.

In *Beloved*, because female protagonists predominate (Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, and Beloved) and there is no family romance, indeed, no nuclear family, it may appear hard to locate the triangle. But, similarly to *Midnight’s Children*, the Oedipal story occurs in the attempt to break with old rules and to establish new ones that define patrimony and kinship. Its most characteristic Oedipal moment is nothing less than the central event of the novel, the murder of the baby Beloved, which takes place when a slave-owner reaches Sethe in Ohio and the “four horsemen” (149) attempt to reclaim the master’s property. The master, as their owner, is the father of Sethe’s children, as he is also Sethe’s father and lord, in the sense that he has complete authority over her. Unable physically to overpower the posse or to protect her children and herself, Sethe decides to kill them all. In the process of this desperate act, she entirely changes the nature of the relation that defined her, thus altering also the terms that informed her master’s possessions, that is, her children. What makes the event Oedipal is the fact that she appears as the patriarch’s rival who names her own kind against his notion of family, which treats her and her children as if they were not human beings in their own right.

Building on this essential opposition, definitive of American slavery, between male slave-owner and female slave, the novel creates its sense of a free African American family almost entirely based on the relations between and among women (with the sole exception of Stamp Paid, who is an old man), which is itself a form of Oedipal acting out insofar as the women appropriate the father function. They are not merely matriarchs but matriarchs who replace wrongly-functioning or non-functioning patriarchs and effect the emancipation of their kin. *Beloved*’s young male characters are dead or are running away from either slave-owners or, like Sethe’s male children Howard and Buglar, their families, and are, like Paul D, roaming around the US in search of the proper way to function as men (not only as human beings). They figure in the community and in the novel only through their relation to the one, namely Sethe, whose primary role seems self-evident.

The crucial reason that *Beloved* and *Midnight's Children* are Oedipal is that both are invested in defining kinship, in replacing a patriarchal model with what seems a more enlightened and more inclusive formation. As such, both are part of the general historical process of the decline of the complex, which, according to Jacques Lacan, is defined by a history of the sublimation of the rivalry with the father, as the difference between Sophocles's Oedipus and Shakespeare's Hamlet already demonstrates. According to Lacan, Hamlet presents the *Untergang* (decline or dissolution) in which open animosity toward the father of the kind represented in Sophocles's tragedy gives way to respect for the father and almost unquestioned obedience. The child—or, in our case, the literary character—internalizes, as Freud says in “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,” the authority of the father into the ego, where it forms “the nucleus of the super-ego” (176). So in *Hamlet*, “libidinal trends belonging to the Oedipus complex [and to Sophocles's play] are in part desexualized and sublimated...and in part inhibited in their aim and changed into impulses of affection” (177). This is the reason Hamlet, on the one hand, obeys the ghost's bidding without any questions and, on the other, cannot raise his hand against the father figure, which Oedipus does unthinkingly and impulsively. Lacan explains: “The very source that makes Hamlet's arm waver at every moment, is the narcissistic connection that Freud tells us about in his text on the decline of the Oedipus complex: one cannot strike at the phallus, because the phallus, even the real phallus, is a *ghost*” (50).¹³ That is, the history of the Oedipus complex is a history of internalization in which an outside condition, an objective authority whose power resides in his might, becomes an inner function (a ghost), that is serving the son to identify with the father and to form not only a super-ego but also his own, independent personality. Hence, Hamlet is torn between his duty to kill Claudius and his inability to strike against a father-figure, between his desire to kill the father and his impulse to worship him, as he is also confused by the dawning knowledge that the Father is not a person and that he cannot be killed. As one of the results of sublimation and inhibition, Hamlet, as testified by the famous monologue which begins with “To be or not to be,” comes close to hurting himself.

In its decline, the Oedipus complex ceases to be a matter of a physical confrontation with a given authority figure and is transformed into a self-confrontation that includes self-negation in the form of a readiness to hurt oneself. Following the same trajectory of sublimation (from phantasm to symbol as Paul Ricoeur might put it), Sethe not only opposes the slave-owner, but she also raises her hand against her child; Saleem not only revises history to fit his image, but he also undergoes a vasectomy; and Denver becomes a protector of the troubling version of her family history—the one who, in Baby Suggs's words, can both know the past and go on (244). In doing so, our heroes make possible a new sense of patrimony and tradition, based on a vision of a more inclusive world governed by a kinship that is a matter of identifications and

symbolic operations, not of biology or brute force. The new, modern system is more open than the old one at least in the sense that it includes those who do not look like the former patriarchs: a white man's Indian bastard and the daughter of an ex-slave whose mother prides herself on having no white blood. The process of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex culminates in the institution of a new myth and of what are called improper, invented, or imagined relations that are meant to replace blood or proper relations but that can, if one judges based on our three examples (*Beloved*, *Midnight's Children*, and *Hamlet*), only take a negative form. Hence, in the epigraph at the beginning of *Beloved*, "my people" are defined in the very same sense that children appear in *Midnight's Children*, through a negation, as not being my people.

Given that self-negation—as self-wounding, as a negation of my people as my people or my son as my son—is part and parcel of the narcissism and the affirmation of the new subjectivity, it is perhaps no wonder that neither the trauma nor the post-colonial novel ends on a triumphant note. Rushdie's closes with a chaotic state resembling psychosis: few rules (not even those of the free market) hold, and one is exposed to what seems like random violence as if the great hope for the new order and self-rule with which this post-colonial project started had been derailed by the inability of the new subject to establish itself on its own terms. The fragmentation is there not because Rushdie is a pessimist, as critics have suggested, but because the project of self-realization itself leads him to the realization that the subject—the postcolonial subject—be it a state or a person, is fragmented, and that the condition for the possibility of its independence also makes it impossible for this subject to be whole or self-same. The facts on the ground and the history of the Indian subcontinent readily fit this conclusion. Today's India is a volatile admixture of feudalism, socialism, and post-cold war global capitalism, whose further development can go in any of these directions; and Pakistan is simply a mess, on the verge of civil and sectarian war.

Beloved also ends on a melancholy note, as if a whole and unified identity could only be an object of nostalgic longing and as if the mourning that Lacan identified in *Hamlet* had become a permanent condition. In Morrison's work, as *Beloved*'s last chapter testifies, we are not even sure if we are remembering or forgetting, nor do we know exactly who it is that we are remembering or forgetting. The only thing we know now, as Barbara Christian puts it, is that we hurt. The depth of the resulting problem is perhaps more readily apparent in the third part of the trilogy which starts with *Beloved*. The novel *Paradise*, which might yet prove to be Morrison's most enduring and impressive creation, is, colloquially speaking, among the most depressing contemporary American works. The novel describes the new reality of the autonomous African American subject in the starkest of terms. In short, *Paradise* represents an unrelenting internal violence, a self-destruction, that tears the African American collective

subject apart beyond possibility of reunification, expiation, or redemption. *Paradise* also presents, more or less explicitly, the breakdown of metaphors that equate a psychic economy with a political economy and imagine a community in terms of an organic unity and, literally, in terms of a person's body.

I do not think that this ending makes Morrison a pessimist who believes that the African American ethos has been so destroyed by the history of slavery and discrimination that it cannot survive survival and recover its vitality. Possibly, like Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, she is a chronicler of a new wound, a kind of masochism, which is a product of the very process of forming a post-traumatic or post-colonial identity. If my line of thinking is correct and the new wound cannot be reduced to a past trauma, this means that paradoxically working through trauma (and the Oedipus complex) is at least partially working and that a new condition, some form of emancipation, and independence have been achieved. At the same time, the newness of the wound should signal the limitations of this modern form of overcoming, which takes place in terms of self-realization. Among these limitations would be a delusional belief present in both novels that the new subject's political autonomy is also psychological autonomy from the former master.

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NOTES

This article is a result of many conversations with Catherine Peebles. I would also like to thank the Center for the Humanities, University of New Hampshire, for the fellowship without which this article could not have been written.

¹ Caruth's reading follows along the lines of Emmanuel Levinas's reproach to Heidegger that his notion of Dasein privileges one's own death, because it rests on the assumption of a proper death that no one can die for me but myself. Caruth, however, explicitly situates her work on trauma only in relation to Freud and to what she identifies as the central insight in *Moses and Monotheism*, "that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24).

² In this essay, the "post" of post-colonial has the same status as the "post" in post-traumatic stress disorder, and I will write both terms with a hyphen.

³ The argument is by no means a new one. On the side of narcissism, it is made, for instance, by Julia Kristeva in her *Tales of Love*. On the post-colonial side, it is made, for instance, by Pheng Cheah in his article "Spectral Nationality." To the best of my knowledge, we have not yet seen all five figures—trauma, narcissism, the Oedipus complex, post-coloniality, and modernity considered together.

⁴ As Freud noted in "On Narcissism" and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the general goal of our mental apparatus is a form of mastery. It is "a device designed for mastering excitations which would otherwise be felt as distressing or would have pathogenic effects" ("On Narcissism" 85). The same narrow preoccupation that guides these two works is present in the 1924 essay "The Economic Problem of Masochism."

⁵ Freud's most basic understanding of narcissism is that it is a state between autoeroticism and object love. Relying on Béla Grundberger's *Narcissism: Psychoanalytic Essays*, Margaret Whitford offers this definition of narcissism: "the wish for an ideal sense of well-being in which,

like a fetus, one knows nothing of need but, being ignorant of one's real dependence, feels autonomous and omnipotent, and in which one would feel loved because one *is*, rather than for any qualities, abilities, or deeds" (209).

⁶ Noteworthy is Lane's attempt to deontologize the difference between the colonizer and the colonized and thereby demonstrate that the racism of the colonial relation is not only a social construct, but also a form of psychic reality that psychoanalysis can unravel perhaps better than any other discourse. He thus makes his contribution to a lively debate concerning Fanon's use of the master/slave dialectic and its appropriateness for the colonial context.

⁷ Napoleon also gave the best theoretical definition for the new form of authority when he turned Louis XIV's "L'État, c'est moi" on its head by saying that the state and the law make authority, not the other way round. (He only forgot to add that it takes a Napoleon to make the modern state.)

⁸ To be precise, Morrison offers one more, three-page chapter that looks back at Sethe's family and *Beloved* and asks about the possibility of remembering a traumatic event.

⁹ This is in contrast to someone like Audre Lorde, who, distinguishes between self-love and narcissism by saying that self-love of the kind Morrison defines in *Beloved* is the opposite of self-hatred, and narcissism, which is a negative personality trait, is not (see 62). To the contrary, as we learn in *Beloved*, narcissism and self-love are the same, but narcissism is not a negative character trait, and it is not separable from self-hatred, which is one of its forms.

¹⁰ While *Back to the Future* is Gallagher's leading example, her true targets are "national [American] undoing ambitions" that aim to "erase the consequences of past discrimination" by restoring, in the words of the Supreme Court decision in *Milliken v. Bradley*, "the victims of discriminatory conduct to the position they would have occupied in the absence of discrimination" (22). We will see Rushdie's narrative as attempting to define India's postcolonial identity as equivalent to what India would have been had it not been for the East India Company.

¹¹ His dependence on the Indo-Mughal tradition is not only Jussawalla's observation but also Rushdie's belief. He says, for instance:

When the book is discussed in the West, it seems to get discussed almost entirely in terms of a certain string of writers who always get hung around its neck like a kind of garland, which is, you know, Garcia Marquez, Gunther Grass, Rabelais, Laurence Sterne, Cervantes, Gogol, etc. So I thought that instead of talking about all that I'd dry to talk about its Eastern literary ancestors and the sense in which it derives out of an Indian Tradition which, to my mind, is much more important than this aforesaid list. And I suppose the main thing to talk about is the use of techniques derived from the oral narrative. It is really impossible to overstress the fact that the oral narrative is the most important literary form in India (qtd. in Jussawalla 52).

¹² The stock motif of time travel and undoing narratives is "the grandmother paradox." It refers to one's own undoing, which represents the limit of time travel. The condition for one's undoing of oneself is the opposite of the condition necessary to carry out that action: a man "could only carry off the murder [or one's own undoing] if he hadn't carried out the murder" (13). From a Freudian standpoint, the paradox boils down to a male fantasy of replacing one's father and having sex with one's mother.

¹³ Polonius, whom Hamlet murders as he is hiding behind a curtain, is, as Lacan explains, only a sacrificial calf offered to "the spirit of the father" (51).

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