

## MEMORY AS A PATHWAY TO HEALING: TRAUMA, RESILIENCE, AND MEANING-MAKING IN JOHN HART'S *THE UNWILLING*

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### Abstract

*This article investigates the intricate relationship between memory, trauma, and healing in John Hart's The Unwilling (2021) through the lens of contemporary trauma theory. Drawing primarily on Cathy Caruth's concept of belated trauma and Shoshana Felman's theory of testimony, the study argues that memory in the novel functions as a paradoxical and unstable force: it perpetuates psychological suffering while simultaneously enabling limited forms of resilience and meaning-making. Hart's narrative depicts war trauma as delayed, fragmented, and resistant to direct articulation, manifesting through flashbacks, addiction, emotional withdrawal, and sustained narrative silences. Employing qualitative textual analysis, this article demonstrates that remembrance repeatedly fails to produce complete healing yet gradually facilitates survival through partial witnessing, relational acknowledgment, and ethical endurance. By resisting redemptive closure and therapeutic resolution, The Unwilling offers a morally responsible representation of postwar trauma, emphasizing resilience as persistence rather than recovery and healing as an ongoing, incomplete process.*

**Keywords:** trauma, memory, PTSD, war fiction, testimony, resilience, healing

### Introduction

The mental consequences of war go way beyond the fighting front, and they are what makes the lives of the veterans into a nightmare of emotional pain, identity issues and memory loss. In contemporary war fiction, it is more often possible to find a challenge to the traditional heroic or redemptive narrative due to the tendency to preempt trauma, memory, and the realms of recovery. According to such literature, the traumatic force is disruptive and destabilizes the continuity of time, destabilizes the language, and disintegrates selfhood, opposing the idea that the experience of war can be fully narrated, mastered, or transcended (Caruth, 1996; Luckhurst, 2013). The attention to the long-term psychological consequences of the war makes these narratives different in that they make less emphasis on the heroic acts and more on the reality of life that was rather complex and destabilized after the war. An example of this narrative shift that occurred in postwar literature is John Hart *The Unwilling* (2021). The novel focuses on the story of Jason French, a veteran of the Vietnam War whose life after the war is illustrated with incarceration, drug addiction, alienation, and lack of feelings. Hart purposefully avoids locking up the trauma into a particular event or historical moment; he places it in the unstable zone of memory, in which the past continuously interferes with the present and continually determines conduct, relationships and self-image. The memory in the novel is not linear or stable but rather a recurrent power which at once derails and organizes experience, which is the constant effects of unresolved trauma. The article holds that *The Unwilling* envisions memory as a contentious avenue to healing - one that does not and cannot restore psychological integrity, but allows some sort of survival due to recognition, partial testimony, and ethical survival. Based on the theory of belated trauma introduced by Cathy Caruth and the idea of witnessing introduced by Shoshana Felman, the paper analyses how traumatic remembrance in the novel contributes to suffering as well as creates delicate meaning-making opportunities. Holding back on narrative resolution and redemptive closure, the work by Hart also helps to add to an ethical based comprehension of the postwar trauma, preempting endurance, relational recognition and the moral

complications of survival in opposition to the usual narrative or therapeutic models (Vickroy, 2015; Zolkos, 2018). By so doing, the novel conforms to an accumulating literature on trauma as a transformative source of literature that underlines the contradictory role of memory, both as a site of unremitting pain and disruption, and also as a tool of moral witnessing and vulnerable sorts of resilience. With memory, trauma, and survival as the central focus of the interaction, this paper places *The Unwilling* in the context of the theoretical and literary discourse of postwar trauma, and how fiction can help to clarify the processes that still occur in the aftermath of violence, which are ethically charged and controversial.

### **Trauma, Memory, and the Postwar Condition**

The psychological trauma essentially interferes with the capacity of the mind to assimilate experience to form coherent memory. Traumatic experiences flood consciousness and are not always fully processed at the time of their happening and reappear later as intrusive recollections, flashbacks, emotional numbing and dissociation and somatic symptoms (Van der Kolk, 2014). These symptoms are common among war veterans as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, depression, relational dysfunction and identity disruption (Murthy and Lakshminarayana, 2006; Herman, 1992). The research on trauma points out that trauma memory is non-linear, fragmentary and involuntary. As opposed to the normal memory, which can be consciously remembered and architected into a story, the traumatic memory comes into view, unconsciously and destroys boundaries between the past and the present (Caruth, 1996; Whitehead, 2008). Consequently, the issue of trauma becomes experienced less as a past that is remembered and more as something that is re-experienced, as an intrusive and intrusive present where the temporal and self boundaries are constantly shaken. The theory of literary trauma also emphasizes the way fiction can be an official reflection of these psychological disturbances. Fragments, delayed revelation, repetition, narrative silence is used to simulate the instability of memory and effects of violence on consciousness (Luckhurst, 2013; Balaev, 2008). Memory in this situation is not a fixed repository but is a dynamic character that dictates identity, experience, and relationship interaction. The trauma that Jason French experienced in *The Unwilling* is present in the regular life beyond the recollection of warfare to affect the way Jason behaves, how he socializes, and even to the way he views himself. Hart describes trauma as a permanent state, which is integrated into the memory, and according to which, postwar life is led in the shadow of unpunished violence. It is this image of trauma that highlights its duality, on the one hand, it is destructive, disruptive of identity and the perpetuation of suffering, on the other, it is generative, creating provisional space of recognition, resilience and ethical relationship to the past.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Trauma and Belatedness**

The pioneering work about trauma by Cathy Caruth is a reconstruction of the understanding of the traumatic experience as something which is not entirely noticed at the time when the events take place. Trauma, according to Caruth (1996) is a delayed phenomenon that mostly comes in the form of intrusive repetitions, nightmares, flashbacks or somatic symptoms. This late appearance is an indication of an innate inability to consciously understand, and points out the temporal and epistemic upheaval of traumatic experience. This tardiness is the reason behind the usual resistance of trauma to direct narration, in literature and finds an outlet through indirect narrative discontinuities, by means of narrative fragmentation, of ellipses, of stylistic discontinuities. Wartime fiction especially has been reviewed through the prism of Caruth to depict how history of trauma can be conveyed by narratives. Delayed revelation, disrupted chronology and narrative gaps are among the common techniques used by the

author to reflect the intrusiveness and inability to assimilate traumatic memory (Balaev, 2008; Tal, 1996). Memory in these writings is not a storage of the past or a chronological experience of remembering, but it is a force that constantly encroaches on the present, disrupting the sense of identity and making it harder to recuperate. This conceptualization of trauma emphasizes its continuation, randomness and incapacity to ascertain the conventional narrative resolution. Also, the idea of belated trauma introduced by Caruth focuses on the moral aspect of trauma observation in literature. The belated coming back of the past (as portrayed by the authors) leaves the readers with the room in which they can acknowledge the psychological and moral implications of violence that continue to exist, without reducing trauma to a sensible or digestible narrative. This method is close to modern literary trauma theory emphasizing the representational difficulties of invoking the psychological trauma onto the page (Luckhurst, 2013; Vickroy, 2015).

### **Testimony, Silence, and Witnessing**

According to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), the core to the argument is that the issue of testimony is quite problematic in terms of its excessiveness in the expressive power of language and conscious knowledge. The result of this is that the testimony is fragmented, partial or mediated by silence due to the impossibility of any complete expression of extreme suffering. Felman also does not perceive silence as a lack of presence or failure, but as an important part of the narrative of traumas, in which the unknown said can have an ethical and affective significance. In this sense, witnessing becomes an ethical act, allowing recognition and relational engagement without requiring factual completeness. Later scholarship has elaborated on the ethical implications of incomplete testimony. Vickroy (2015) and Zolkos (2018) emphasize that narrative gaps, interruptions, and silences are not deficiencies but deliberate strategies that communicate the limits of understanding and the moral responsibility of the listener or reader. Silence functions as both a form of resistance against narrative closure and a mode of ethical witnessing, preserving the irreducibility of trauma while facilitating relational acknowledgment. This framework is particularly relevant to war narratives, where survivors' experiences often defy conventional linguistic and temporal structures, requiring readers to navigate ambiguity and partial disclosure as ethical engagement.

### **Trauma, Addiction, and Postwar Narratives**

The issue of addiction is a common postwar phenomenon in literature where the characters use it as a form of maladaptive coping mechanism to avoid the intrusive nature of memories of the traumatic event. According to Herman (1992), substance abuse is another typical experience of avoidance as a result of traumas, which not only deadens the mind to the psychological pain but also unconsciously repeats the dynamics of emotional and relationship dysfunctions. Addiction in works like *The Unwilling* is a self-contradictory survival: it provides a moment of survival when faced with a flood of memories and at the same time feeds isolation, guilt, and self-destruction (Perry and Daniels, 2023). Besides that, the theme of addiction overlaps ethical and narrative aspects of trauma. The use of substances both obscures and unveils agony: the use of substances burying immediate trauma does show its presence, but it also indicates that the trauma is unresolved and incurable. This duality underscores the fact that postwar experience is complex, and strategies of avoidance may, at the same time, prevent recovery and enable endurance, or memory and coping mechanisms can reciprocate to create identity across time. Although the literature on the topic of trauma, memory, and postwar narratives is large, less research has been conducted on how remembrance can both hinder and facilitate recovery. The research that has already been done is usually dedicated to either the debilitating or the restorative roles of memory, not usually depicting the coexistence of such processes. The article fills this gap by examining *The*

*Unwilling*, which discusses how the divided recollection, behavioral subjects, and relationship interactions that Jason French displays cause both the disruptive and the ethically transformational possibilities of traumatic memory.

### Research Questions

1. How does *The Unwilling* represent traumatic memory through flashbacks, silence, and narrative delay?
2. In what ways does remembrance both hinder and facilitate healing, resilience, and meaning-making in the novel?

### Theoretical Framework

The paper is based on the modern theory of trauma and combines the concept of belated trauma of Cathy Caruth and the theory of testimony introduced by Shoshana Felman to analyze how the process of memory, suffering and silence of healing are depicted in *The Unwilling* by John Hart. Combined, these frameworks can be used to categorize a subtle interpretation of trauma as a psychological issue and as an ethical dilemma, especially within the framework of postwar stories.

The theory introduced by Cathy Caruth is a conceptualization of trauma as a phenomenon which has not been entirely assimilated during the time when it occurred, but which comes back later in time in the form of intrusive memories, flashbacks, and repetitions (Caruth, 1996). In this perspective, trauma is not determined by the event but by its effect on consciousness in its deferral state. Since the traumatic experience supersedes the ability of the subject to process it, it is unintegratable into the linear memory but manifests itself in the form of the lack of the continuity of time. This theoretical point of view is particularly pertinent to *The Unwilling* where the war experience of Jason French has not been fully expressed but still contributes to his postwar identity by involuntary memory, affective desensitization and disintegration of behavior. The framework by Caruth therefore explains the reliance and obsessive recurrence of the traumatic memory in the novel focusing on the resistance of the trauma to narrative mastery and psychological closure.

And to add to the theme of belatedness, the theory of testimony by Shoshana Felman concerns the ethical and linguistic aspects of the trauma representation. Felman, together with Dori Laub, makes the argument that the issue of trauma challenges the viability of testimony essentially because it goes beyond the boundaries of language and conscious knowledge (Felman and Laub, 1992). Testimony is, then, very frequently broken, oblique or characterized by silence. Instead of being a comprehensive description of experience, traumatic testimony manifests itself in spaces, verbal failures, and interpersonal experiences with the audience. This viewpoint is vital in the analysis of *The Unwilling* whereby the silence and emotional withdrawal of Jason is an indicator of the absence of trauma but rather the continuation of the trauma.

The moral importance of witnessing in Felman is also predetermined by the structure. Instead, trauma, she claims, requires recognition and not narrative closure. Seeing is a relational process where meaning is created through mutual recognition and not disclosure of facts. Periodic revelations and emotive realization (especially in family bonds) exemplify how recovery is always dependent on recognition rather than on expression in the novel by Hart.

In a combination, the theories by Caruth and Felman theorize the idea of memory as a contested and a shaky place. Memory, at once, sustains suffering in that it gives the subject a repetition of an unresolved past and allows some sort of transformation in that it allows recognition and witnessing. These two polarizations enable the research to transcend reductive theories of trauma that confuse healing and recovery or narrative closure. Rather,



trauma is perceived as a persistent state where survival, endurance and ethical recognition are paramount to resolution.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach grounded in literary trauma studies to examine how memory, trauma, and healing are narratively constructed in John Hart's *The Unwilling*. Qualitative textual analysis is particularly suited to trauma-focused literary inquiry because it allows for close engagement with narrative form, thematic patterns, and representational strategies that reflect the psychological effects of traumatic experience (Balaev, 2014).

The analysis concerns the identified narrative instances that prefigure memory, flashbacks, addiction, silence, and withdrawal of emotion and considers the aspects not as plot elements only, but as a formal expression of trauma. Special focus is put on the passages that describe the postwar life of Jason French, which displays the manifestations of trauma in an indirect form, in the form of behavioral patterns, gaps in the narration, and the principle of interrupted past and present. This approach recognizes the trauma theory which insists that traumatic experience is usually difficult to represent directly but manifests itself through repetition, fragmentation, and absence (Caruth, 1996; Luckhurst, 2013).

The interpretive framework is based on the theory of belated trauma developed by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman with her theory of testimony, which is used to analyze the functioning of traumatic memory on the psychological and ethical levels within the narrative. Instead of empirical validation or even psychological diagnosis, the paper focuses on the meaning-making and narrative ethics and the limits of representation, and puts *The Unwilling* in the context of larger arguments in trauma fiction and war literature.

The given methodological choice is consistent with the practice in the area of literary trauma studies that emphasize close reading, theoretical contextualization, and the need to be ethical in discussing the suffering (Balaev, 2014; Vickroy, 2015).

### **Discussion and Analysis**

#### **Flashbacks and the Persistence of Belated Trauma**

The recollections that Jason French has of the Vietnam War are spontaneous and involuntary and also commonly follow incidences of violence, emotional anxiety or mental weakness. Examples of such intrusive recollections are the way Cathy Caruth defines belated trauma wherein the traumatic experience is never completely experienced when it happens but comes back later as fragmented and disruptive (Caruth, 1996). The past is not held in the memory but it continues to burst out in the present, breaking the lines of time, and disrupting the self of Jason.

Hart has also been careful not to provide graphic portrayals of the battles, and he does not want the narrative to be complete. This lack supports the resistance of trauma to explicit description and points to the lack of conscious memory. The war is not described as a logical chain of events but it is a specter that haunts the psychological reality of Jason. The same narrative sparseness reflects the theory of trauma, which holds that the trauma memory is usually enacted through repetition and silence as opposed to direct telling (Whitehead, 2008). The narrative delay of the war experience of Jason reiterates the fact that the trauma is in its repeat rather than in a particular episode in history. Memory is a place of disorder, not healing, which makes much more emphasis on the continuity of trauma and the inability of trauma to be placed in the past.

#### **Addiction as a Failed Strategy of Healing**

Jason abuses drugs as an effort to respond maladaptively to traumatic memory and excessive affect. Alcohol and drugs are used to offer a short-term solution to mental suffering, blurring

the intrusive memories and emotional suffering. Nevertheless, the move eventually leads to the further isolation, guilt and self-destruction of Jason instead of fixing trauma.

Addiction is a paradoxical survival mechanism as perceived through the trauma-theoretical approach. According to Herman (1992) and Van der Kolk (2014), avoidance techniques can bring about temporary reprieve but will not allow incorporation of traumatic experience, thus will not allow the suffering to end. In *The Unwilling*, addiction allows one to endure without being cured, therefore, enabling Jason to survive without being stuck in the rut of emotional deadness and self-blame.

The imagery provided by Hart rejects the moralizing aspect of addiction or the idea of recovery as a possible destination. Rather, substance abuse is presented as an expansion of trauma itself - a symptom of memory that is not resolved, and not a distinct pathology. This depiction is consistent with the modern trauma literature that locates the addiction within the context of emotional survival and mental disintegration.

### **Silence, Testimony, and Fragmented Witnessing**

The deep inability of Jason to articulate his trauma serves as a perfect example to the argument by Shoshana Felman that the testimony is incomplete, indirect, and fractured (Felman and Laub, 1992). His silence is not that of forgetfulness or suppression but an expression of the inaccessibility of language to the problems that are beyond understanding. Trauma is retained at the very place of speech failure.

Hart recurrently enacts scenes in which language fails, and the focus on the gaps in the narrative and the disengagement of emotions is transferred. Such silences serve a purpose of meaningful absence indicating the presence of traumas that does not translate into a coherent narrative. According to the trauma scholars, this narrative opaceness is opposed to the process of taking on the suffering as a matter of interpretive mastery (Zolkos, 2018).

But the novel too points in the direction of tentative ways of witnessing. Instances of semi-disclosure - especially in family relations - point to the idea that healing does not entail total confession or a transparency in narration. Rather, the discursive witnesses are replaced by recognition, co-presence, and emotional perceptiveness. Healing does not come about through the articulation of testifying but the relational acknowledgment of testimony.

### **Memory, Meaning-Making, and Limited Resilience**

Although memory blows away the identity of Jason, it also allows making meaning in limited ways. In a disjointed memory and emotional conflict, Jason comes to understand how he suffered, although he might not be in a position to recount and fix them completely. This is in line with the theory of trauma that focuses on recognition and not integration as the survival condition (Caruth, 2002).

In *The Unwilling*, healing is still sketchy and tentative. Jason fails to find the psychological completeness or narrative resolution; he learns to live with trauma and not surrendering to the devastating power of the trauma. Hart reformulates resilience therefore not as recovery or transformation but as survival in the face of vulnerability.

The novel defies cultural norms which equate healing to closure by opposing therapeutic accounts of closure. Resilience turns into a moral position and not a psychological result, a constant bargaining of memory, suffering and endurance.

### **Ethical Dimensions of Incomplete Healing**

*The Unwilling* refusal to give either narrative closure or therapeutic resolution is one of the most ethically important interventions in it. In contrast to portraying trauma as a state that is complete, fully processed, told, or healed, Hart portrays healing as something incomplete, unstable and temporary. Such a narrative decision is an ethical service to the experienced reality of trauma survivors, who tend to make no headway via linear or redemptive patterns.

The novel does not provide the readers with the restorative effects of closure and is also reluctant to aestheticize suffering and turn it into an easily digestible narrative product.

According to trauma theorists who are current, narratives purporting to bring closure or catharsis are critiqued because they take the risk of devaluing the long-term effects of violence (Vickroy, 2015). Here, the endurance instead of recovery is predicted by the way in which Hart presents Jason French as continuing to struggle with his psychology. When it does occur healing is partial and weak, and characterized by episodes of recognition and relation recognition instead of psychic assimilation or narrative competence. This is in line with ethical trauma stories, where devotion to suffering is prioritized above satisfaction as a reader.

Besides, this moral position is supported by the focus of the novel on silence and narrative holes. The trauma of Jason is not entirely revealed and transferred into a clear testimony, which highlights the restrictions of words and presentation. Trauma narratives that maintain a sense of irreducible excess of traumatic experience and do not take the suffering and interpret it to resolution, as argued by Zolkos (2018), are permissible. Hart declining to make trauma completely intelligible therefore serves as an ethical denial of owning pain in ways that are beyond the understanding.

The novel also critiques the mainstream cultural resilience discourses which equate healing with productivity, reintegration, or emotional resolution. In its turn, *The Unwilling* offers resilience in the form of a survival in the state of continuous vulnerability. The fact that Jason is tough, rather than being cured of his trauma, complicates the concept of neoliberal narratives in that healing is a personal obligation or a moral accomplishment. By doing so, Hart places trauma in the context of more general ethical and social structures, which stress the joint duty of witnessing suffering that never concludes.

### Conclusion

This paper has established that *The Unwilling* is an expression of memory as a contradictory power that perpetrates trauma as well as facilitating the use of limited forms of healing. Based on theories of belated trauma proposed by Cathy Caruth and the theory of testimony proposed by Shoshana Felman, the study has demonstrated how memory in the novel does not play a role of pathway to psychic healing but rather plays a role of repetition, disruption and partial recognition. Traumatic memory incessantly does not heal wholeness, but it creates permeable places in terms of resilience, meaning, and moral survival.

The story that Hart narrates does not necessarily concur with prevailing models of recovery since it highlights persistence rather than resolution and recognition rather than mastery. *The Unwilling* unveils trauma as a perpetual state of being imprinted in the memory and identity through flashbacks, silence, addiction, and fragmented witnessing. When healing does come, it is incomplete and relation-based, coming out in instances of recognition and not narrative closure.

Coming out of refusal of redemptive endings and therapeutic certainty, *The Unwilling* can be viewed as part of an ethical tradition in trauma fiction that is more concerned with responsibility to suffering than aesthetics. The novel asks the reader to deal with the enduring effects of war without the promise of closure, which supports the idea of trauma theory that some injuries are not readily assimilable but can still be survived.

By doing so, this work by Hart provides a great contribution to modern war fiction and the study of literary trauma. It redefines memory as not a mechanism used to overcome trauma but a complicated and delicate area in which pain coexists with resilience. *The Unwilling* finally concludes that although the impact of trauma can not be completely recovered, it can be observed, experienced and morally recognized.

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