Postgraduate English
www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

Issue 25 September 2012

Editors: Kaja Marczewska & Avishek Parui

"The Horror! The Horror!": Traumatic Repetition in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and Mark Z. Danielewski's "House of Leaves"

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Postgraduate English, Issue 25, September 2012

Introduction: The Plight of Tancred and Traumatic Repetition

"That wild, sad voice, still, still it haunts my mind."

– Torquato Tasso (*Gerusalemme Liberata* 13.49.4)

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud describes the seemingly endless cycle of suffering endured by those in the wake of psychological trauma. Tortured by an intrusive past that will not pass by, the painful memories of traumatic experience resurface in the guise of posttraumatic nightmares following "mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life" (597). Such horrific reverberations seem particularly pronounced in the returning members of the Lost Generation. These "dreams," notes Freud, "occurring in traumatic neurosis have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (598). On return from the battlefield, the survivors of trench warfare were initiated into a realm of terrifying repetition – the wounds of technological war scarred deep beneath the surface only to rip open once more. To illustrate this compulsion to repeat (present to some extent in all individuals, but pathological in those recovering from traumatic experience), Freud synopsizes "[t]he most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this" (605), an episode from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

> Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (605)

Tancred thus becomes lost in the *mise en abyme* of the posttraumatic state, where the pain of the past echoes throughout the present in a Dantean "*selva oscura*" (*Inferno* 1.2).[1]

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth elevates this passage in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to canonical status as the ideal illustration of the intersection between trauma theory and literature.[2] Caruth cites this synopsis in part to demonstrate "the way that the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor against his very will" (2). While this passage from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* can usefully elucidate the uncanny compulsion to repeat so central to conceptions of the posttraumatic state, Caruth's reading of traumatic memory as an exact repetition of terror needs some reconsideration.

Dominick LaCapra protests against the insistence that traumatic memories resurface without some form of mnemonic distortion. LaCapra counters such notions when he states that traumatic memory "may involve distortion, disguise, and other permutations relating to processes of imaginative transformation and narrative shaping, as well as perhaps repression, denial, dissociation, and foreclosure" (88-89). Indeed, as the authors of *Understanding Trauma* concur, while traumatic impacts may entail unique disruptions to the psyche,

[1] *Selva oscura* translates as "dark woods" (Pinsky 5).
[2] Caruth's reading of this passage of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* has justly come under some scrutiny; Forter (281), LaCapra, (182) and Novak (32) respectively critique the labelling of Tancred as a survivor or victim despite his clear status as a perpetrator of trauma. Leys offers a comprehensive critique of Caruth in general in *Trauma: A Genealogy* and critiques this "parable" in particular (292-97).

"memories [even those of a deeply traumatic nature] are changeable over time; that is to say, they are not fixed or perfect copies of experience but undergo repeated revision and transformation with each attempt at recollection" (Kirmayer et al. 8). Contrary to Caruth's claims, posttraumatic memory may involve a significant degree of alteration. Indeed, Ruth Leys expresses dismay at the "low quality" of empirical evidence upholding the "literal nature of traumatic memory" (305) in the neurobiological work of Bessel van der Kolk, which in turn informs Caruth's understanding of traumatic memory as an exact repetition of a traumatic reality.

In Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tancred's fate seems anything but an illustration of trauma repeating itself "exactly" (Caruth 2). Tancred's arboreal odyssey, as synopsized in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, outlines a descent into the *selva oscura* of the posttraumatic psyche. Robert Pogue Harrison notes that "forests haunt the mind like some mystical dream or nightmare" (183), while "[i]n literary history forests begin to appear early on as the scene for what later comes to be known as the 'unconscious'" (87). Tasso's Tancred, a perpetrator of trauma, journeys into nightmare where the past recurs as a surreal and distorted echo of experience as guilt haunts him in an uncanny composite form of the weeping wound, a symbolic blur of lost love and a slain family tree.

Having drawn attention to the imperfect nature of repetition in the trauma of Tancred, this essay attempts a double exploration of traumatic repetition in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* in order to demonstrate the potential distortions of posttraumatic memory in fiction. *Heart of Darkness* surfaces as perhaps the first psychological descent through the self of the twentieth century, appearing in serialized form in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1899 and later in book format in 1902. Rooted in his own witnessing of the horrors of King Leopold's Congo in 1890, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* offers insight into art born from personal experience which explores the contortions

of posttraumatic memory through the disturbed impressions of Charles Marlow. *House of Leaves*, Danielewski's surreal suburban nightmare, emerges over a century later as perhaps the final exploration of the underworld to take place in the twentieth century in 2000. While Danielewski has tentatively suggested in interview traces of familial trauma that impact his work (115-16), in *House of Leaves* he innovatively employs established psychoanalytical concepts in a self-conscious dissection of trauma. *House of Leaves* can therefore be said to deal with trauma from a theoretically informed position, as Danielewski articulately draws upon a century of psychoanalytic discourse; whereas Conrad intuits the nature of trauma in *Heart of Darkness* unconsciously. In both *Heart of Darkness* and *House of Leaves*, protagonists come to confront aspects of their repressed pasts through a series of uncanny repetitions. The repressed pasts of Conrad's Marlow and Danielewski's Johnny Truant are forged from series of violent events, rather than singular catastrophes. In uncovering these repressed events, *Heart of Darkness* and *House of Leaves* model the experience of trauma as a descent into Hell, or *katabasis*. Both Conrad and Danielewski subvert the typical paradigm of descent and return to light by leaving their protagonists stranded in darkness or frozen to the blues, as both texts employ colour to emphasize the repetition of trauma. Reading the canonical alongside the contemporary, this essay illustrates the potentially protean nature of posttraumatic repetition by outlining the significance of the echo in *Heart of Darkness* and the composite figure in *House of Leaves*, motifs present in Freud's synopsis of *Gerusalemme Liberata*. *Heart of Darkness* and *House of Leaves* thus present an important contrast to what Roger Luckhurst styles "the naively literal model of trauma's psychic imprint" (13) in the work of Caruth.

Doubles and *Das Unheimliche*: Traumatic Echoes in *Heart of Darkness*

"… the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed."

– Freud ("The Uncanny" 247)

History is the nightmare from which Marlow is trying to awake. In *Heart of Darkness*, this nightmare is structured as a series of uncanny, traumatic repetitions where episodes from Marlow's past resurface in the present as distorted echoes in the "mysterious repetition of similar experiences" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 248). This sense of repetition is typical of descent narratives: Rachel Falconer notes that "distortions of time" often occur in the guise of "traumatic repetitions" (43) in the twisted soundscapes of modern Hells. In *Heart of Darkness*, these repetitions occur in threes. For example, Marlow voyages through three stations on his way to Kurtz – the outer station, the central station, and Kurtz's station, at the "very bottom" (46) of Hell. Most importantly, however, Marlow descends into Hell and lives through the horror at the heart of darkness only to repeat the horror twice in the form of distorted repetitions: Marlow survives his original descent; on his return, he must descend once again to Kurtz's Intended; and finally, Marlow relives the horror aboard the *Nellie*. As Zampanò, Danielewski's pseudo-philosopher, notes in his discussion of mythological echoes in *House of Leaves*, "Echo colours the words with faint traces of sorrow (The Narcissus myth) or accusation (The Pan myth) never present in the original" (41). Marlow returns to the sepulchral city following his descent into Hell, "resenting the sight of people," and he admits in retrospect upon the Nellie that "I dare say that I was not very well at that time" (99). Following on from an initial experience of a fracturing of his sense of self due to the witnessing of a succession of violent events, Marlow becomes dominated by both self-accusation in the form of guilt and sorrow in the form of a depressive state of self-mourning, as in Zampanò's outline of mythological echoes. This combination of repressed affect surfaces aboard the *Nellie* as horror during Marlow's narration, evincing a final distortion of Marlow's traumatic experiences.

For Caruth, "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (11), such as mechanical accidents or collisions. Marlow's traumatization is not induced by any one overwhelming episode, but, rather, occurs as a gradual loss of psychic strength and eventual collapse. Commenting on recent developments in Postcolonial theory, Michael Rothberg writes of the need to "supplement the event-based model of trauma that has become dominant over the past fifteen years with a model that can account for ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence as well" (226). As Rothberg suggests, Laura Brown's outline of the model of "insidious trauma" (107) in Caruth's edited collection of essays provides such an alternative model. This model of trauma is accumulative rather than singular. In contrast to Caruth's model, such trauma occurs as "a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event" (Brown 103). Marlow's traumatic experiences at the heart of darkness involve a combination of event-based and insidious trauma, as Marlow witnesses a *succession* of *overwhelming scenes of torture*. These scenes range from witnessing exhausted natives "dying slowly" from starvation (44) to viewing Kurtz's decorative collection of decapitated human skulls, a scene both "striking and disturbing" (85) for Marlow. In response to such dehumanization, Marlow recalls becoming "horror-struck" (45). Essentially, Marlow becomes traumatized by witnessing these scenes as a bystander, evidence that "not everyone traumatized by events is a victim" (LaCapra 79). LaCapra insists on differentiating the various potential subject positions that emerge from experiences of trauma: "victims, perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators, resisters, those in the gray zone" (175), are all potential positions arising from traumatic experience. These categories may also mutate into "complex, hybridized forms" (199) as in the case of Marlow, a bystander who comes to identify with Kurtz, a ruthless perpetrator.

Garrett Stewart's influential essay, "Lying as Dying in *Heart of Darkness*," draws attention to "Marlow's dead or dying doppelgängers" (363). For Stewart, Kurtz performs the

role of a double for Marlow. Indeed, according to one underworld inhabitant who addresses Marlow, both Kurtz and Marlow are members of "the gang of virtue. The same people who sent him specially also recommended you" (53). Aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow relates that the whole purpose of his descent through Hell becomes a journey to reach the once idealistic Kurtz. Marlow becomes "curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top" (58). This curiosity gradually becomes obsession. Upon hearing speculations regarding Kurtz's death, Marlow recalls: "I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz" (76). This obsession occurs alongside Marlow's gradual traumatization. As Marlow descends into darkness, the prospect of meeting with Kurtz provides hope of redemption; redemption eclipsed by Kurtz's moral degeneration. Marlow, after months of delay, eventually reaches Kurtz's station to discover that the once idealistic Kurtz has "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" to "preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" (77-78). The corrupted Kurtz is now gravely ill and must return with Marlow to Europe aboard Marlow's steamer.

Marlow's uncanny cathexis with Kurtz reaches its climax at the very depths of Marlow's original descent during one such midnight ritual. Conrad symbolically depicts Marlow in a state of posttraumatic self-dissolution as Marlow attempts to convince his double, Kurtz, to return from Hell to the safety of the steamer.[3] This nightmarish trance unfolds during a passage in which Marlow awakes in the middle of the night to the ominous sounds of tribal rituals emanating from the shore of the wilderness: "an abrupt burst of yells, an overwhelming outbreak of a pent-up and mysterious frenzy, woke me up in a bewildered wonder" (92). Marlow emphasizes the uncanny nature of this episode by describing the beat

[3] For Royle, the uncanny entails "a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves" (6). Similarly, Jentsch notes that the uncanny occurs when the illusion of "psychical harmony" is disrupted, a "dark knowledge dawns on the unschooled observer that mechanical processes are taking place in that which he was previously used to regarding as a unified psyche" (226).

of the drums and chanting of the natives, which have "a strange narcotic effect upon [his] half-awake senses" (92). Marlow, in a somnambulistic trance, discovers that Kurtz has escaped from the steamer to return to his ivory throne upon the shores of Hell. Marlow has become overwhelmed by his disintegrating sense of a unified selfhood inflicted by the continual exposure to violence outlined above. Kurtz becomes a symbol for a part of Marlow's selfhood he believes he is in danger of losing. Consequently, Marlow is overcome "by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected by any distinct shape of physical danger" (92) at the prospect of Kurtz's disappearance from the steamer, but is prepared to risk descending into this carnivalesque, "almost psychopathic world" (Karl 126) to have Kurtz return with him. Melvin R. Lansky notes that while "[t]he posttraumatic state is one in which the sense of self is fractured" (164), "the possession of an intact sense of self within the scenario of a terrifying anxiety dream can be seen as a wish" (6). Thus Marlow explains: "I was anxious to deal with this shadow [Kurtz] by myself" (92) and the ensuing struggle to convince Kurtz to return to Marlow's steamer becomes a struggle for Marlow's soul: "Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man" (94). Marlow's midnight trance displays similarities to a posttraumatic nightmare enacting the attempted reunification of Marlow's uncanny divided self by guiding Kurtz back to the safety of the ship. Marlow's nightmare scenario does not recall the trauma of his experiences, but his "emerging shattered sense of self and unfolding psychosis" (Lansky 43). Marlow stumbles upon Kurtz, as a "Shadow – this wandering and tormented thing" (93) – metres away from the strange cantillation and sinister ceremonies performed by the shades of Hell.

Marlow recalls the midnight conversation ashore with Kurtz as being imbued with "the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares" (94). As in a posttraumatic nightmare, Marlow's sense of selfhood undergoes temporary reunification and he is able, after a great amount of mental and physical effort, to convince

Kurtz that if he does not return to Marlow's steamer, he will be "utterly lost" (93) for eternity. The psychological strain of this episode manifests itself as physical exhaustion for Marlow, who carries Kurtz back to the steamer: "my legs shook under me as though I had carried half a ton on my back" (94-95). The dark tides of nightmare momentarily recede when Kurtz returns to Marlow's steamer, but days later, Kurtz dies on retreat from the heart of darkness. A traumatized Marlow correlates his loss of a unified selfhood with Kurtz's death. This is symbolically emphasized by Conrad when days after Kurtz's death, Marlow comes within a "hairs-breadth" (98) of dying. Though Marlow survives, Kurtz – Marlow's double– dies. Kurtz, a man corrupted by the twin evils of power and greed is forced to face his guilt-ridden existence upon his deathbed. Marlow, overseeing Kurtz's final breath of condemnation, ponders upon the interstitial realm – "death's other Kingdom" as echoed in Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (1.14) – Kurtz crosses over into and reports in his enigmatic last words:

> Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath – "The horror! The horror!" (97)

Essentially, Marlow comments on his own fate in echoing Kurtz's final words. Marlow will relive his voyage in every detail of sorrow, accusation, and terror in two distorted echoes of his original experience – "The horror! The horror!" (97) emphasizing this twin trip through the underworld of posttraumatic memories.

For Zampanò, echoes entail "imperfect" (41), "fragmented repetition" (46) which "possess a quality not present in the original" (42) – guilt and sorrow. Marlow returns to the sepulchral city following his descent into Hell disturbed by his recent experiences. Impelled

by guilt to remain "loyal to the nightmare of [his] choice" (92), loyal to Kurtz's memory, Marlow seeks out Kurtz's Intended, another one of his doubles, a year after Kurtz's death. Marlow's fractured posttraumatic psyche becomes dominated by both self-accusation in the form of guilt and sorrow in the form of a depressive state of self-mourning. As in Zampanò's analysis of echoes in Classical mythology, his initial experience of anxiety regarding his split sense of self returns as a distortion, in contrast to Caruth's conception of the literal repetition of trauma. Marlow's disturbed affect also corresponds to Lansky's outline of the posttraumatic psyche: "Guilt plays an important role in the posttraumatic picture in all trauma sufferers" (168), while "the shame filled posttraumatic patient may [also] experience … depression" (166). Marlow is both disturbed by guilt and laments the loss of his pre-lapsarian self, his displaced anguish expressed in the figure of the Intended; his shattered sense of self in Kurtz, as outlined above.[4] For Falconer, "recalling" can constitute "a descent into Hell in itself" (50). Marlow recalls his excursion to Hell during his meeting with Kurtz's Intended, but is unable to articulate the horror and represses it by lying. Stalked by the guilt of complicity in the sordid conquest of that nameless foreign inferno, mourning his shattered sense of self, Marlow still cannot share the hellish experiences at the heart of darkness. In the concluding passages of Conrad's chiaroscuro nightscape, Marlow's sorrow and guilt cry out at him, but undergo repression: "The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! The horror!'" (105).

Marlow's repressed sorrow and guilt return years later in a final distortion as existential dread when he recalls his descent aboard the *Nellie*. Unlike his earlier descent to Kurtz's Intended, "the tale he narrates on the *Nellie* is one he is unable to suppress" (Karl

[4] In the posttraumatic state, as understood by Lansky, "unacceptable aspects of the self" can be "projected onto other persons" (160).

125). Like other descent narratives, for Marlow "narrating the journey constitutes a descent into Hell in itself" (Falconer 50). Marlow's repressed past returns as a distorted repetition after years of silence. This process is comparable to the mutation of affect undergone in following traumatic experience. Affect, in the posttraumatic state, becomes remarkably protean, as Lansky notes: "shameful aspects of the self-representation are transformed into fearful ones" (81). Marlow's unacceptable sorrow and self-accusation undergo a third distortion typical of the posttraumatic state. This surfaces as a "fear of attack" (83) in posttraumatic nightmares and is particularly evident in two passages of Marlow's twisted dreamscape. Approaching Kurtz, Marlow's steamer is enveloped in "a white fog … more blinding than the night" (67). Transported into another liminal world, a state not of sleep, but a mood "unnatural, like a state of trance" (67), Marlow's sorrow is clouded by a manifest fear of attack. A sudden, violent acoustic irruption unnerves Marlow, for "it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed" (67). Marlow's steamer is surrounded not only by fog, but by Kurtz's demonic legion. Articulating Marlow's own concerns, one crew member wonders: "Will they attack?" (67), while another bleakly predicts: "We will be butchered in this fog" (67). Upon reflection Marlow suggests that the episode that he narrates as fearful masks sorrow: "Unexpected, wild and violent as [the screams from the shore] had been, they had given me an irresistible impression of sorrow" (71). During Marlow's nightmare confrontation with Kurtz, this pattern is repeated. His sense of "pure abstract terror" (92) rooted in the angst-inducing prospect of his shattered sense of self, is quickly screened by "the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre" (92).

During Marlow's netherworld journey, he undergoes a fracturing of self-identity due to witnessing a stream of violent events. This results in a loss of self that is reflected in the death of his double, Kurtz – a perpetrator of such crimes. Marlow relives these disturbing

experiences in the form of imperfect echoes, as in Zampanò's summary of Echo in Classical mythology, recalling Tasso's Tancred in Freud's synopsis of *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Haunted by the sorrow for the loss of self and guilt regarding his complicity with Kurtz, Marlow represses his story in the presence of Kurtz's Intended, a further figment of his traumatized identity, an aspect of his psyche locked in compulsive mourning for his own shattered selfhood buried in a "sarcophagal unreality" (Stewart 373). Years later, Marlow relives the horror aboard the *Nellie*. The posttraumatic psyche, "fragmentation prone" (Lansky 18), flooded with conflicting affects such as sorrow, guilt, and shame, enables "a trade-off of states of mind – shame is transformed into fear" (81). These alterations provide a contrast to Caruth's paradigm of the posttraumatic state as entailing untainted repetitions of the original event.

Uncanny Composites in Danielewski's House of Darkness

"In the unconscious nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten."

– Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 733)

House of Leaves provides another instance of the fictional rendering of traumatic repetition that contests the Caruthian model of trauma. Imbedded within *House of Leaves* there are three entangled primary narratives which bleed into each other to uncanny effect. *The Navidson Record*, a found footage documentary horror film attributed to Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist Will Navidson, documents the Navidson family's arrival at a haunted house on Ash Tree Lane attached to a mysterious labyrinth built atop a spiral staircase of protean depth inhabited by an intangible, threatening presence. *The Navidson Record* is narrated to us by an obscure blind poet named Zampanò in an unfinished monograph which describes the series of strange events which take place within this house. The history of Zampanò's composition comprises a second narrative which surreptitiously hints at a past

shrouded in darkness. Johnny Truant's footnotes from underground – which, far from forming a series of insignificant subclauses, often spill over and compete with Zampanò's intricately narrated reconstruction and analysis of *The Navidson Record* – relate a third narrative. Johnny, a young Los Angeles resident, by chance inherits the unfinished manuscript, assembling scraps of narrative into a (somewhat) coherent document. The act of editing the manuscript leads Johnny into a delusionary underworld of paranoia and panic attacks. At the height of these delusions, Johnny, deeply enthralled by the darkness, feels as if he is being stalked by the creature said to haunt *The Navidson Record*, despite knowing that the film does not exist.

Several literary critics have explored the uncanny elements of Danielewski's house of darkness; for example, both Nele Bemong and Alan Gibbs draw attention to the fusion of the Freudian uncanny with that of the Jentschian in relation to the evocation of trauma.[5] Indeed, Will Slocombe notes that "[p]sychoanalysis plays an important part within *House of Leaves*, from continued reference to the unconscious and to family relations, such as those between Zampanò and his son and between Johnny Truant and his mother, and provides another, equally valid, means of interpreting the text" (108 n.10). As in *Heart of Darkness*, the various characters scattered across the divergent diegetic levels voyage through emanations of their disturbed pasts. This is most obvious in *The Navidson Record* as the subterranean psyche-scape of the labyrinth mutates in order to inspire fear in the subjective explorers. On Johnny's plane of (un)reality, Danielewski's twisted contemporary surrealism explores a severely traumatized individual's fallen psyche. Those suffering posttraumatic reverberations may endure "lapses into altered states of consciousness" (Lansky 18). In *House of Leaves* this

[5] For Bemong, "[t]he uncanny effect in *House of Leaves* can be understood as a combination Jentsch's intellectual insecurity , and of Freud's characterization of the uncanny as everything that should have remained secret and concealed, and has nonetheless come to light." Gibbs partially concurs with Bemong, outlining the presence of "both Jentsch's definition of the uncanny as intellectual uncertainty and Freud's notion of repression" (39) though ultimately attributes the evocation of trauma to an "ontological crisis" (43) in which the various diegetic levels of *House of Leaves* come to haunt each other.

oneiric unreality leads to the return of the repressed in the form of uncanny composite figures for Johnny, emphasizing the imperfect nature of traumatic repetition. In his masterpiece of painstaking empiricism, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud notes the existence of composite figures in dreams: "the dream-image contains features which are peculiar to one or other of the persons concerned but not common to them; so that the combination of these features leads to the appearance of a new unity, a composite figure" (432). By following the knotted threads of Truant's often aporetic narrative, we can examine these uncanny composite figures and relate them to Danielewski's extended meditation on trauma. Johnny's traumas – from various stages of his childhood and adolescence – blur into composite figures surfacing as imperfect repetitions of trauma.

Nicoline Timmer correctly observes that *House of Leaves* is "overflowing with theories, not simply reproduced, but wittingly *used*, practiced" (24). I would suggest that it is in the form of composites – such as the aforementioned merging of the uncanny with dream theory, or to use an example from Timmer's proposed characteristics of the post-postmodern novel: the "combination of 'high' and 'low' discourses on subjectivity" (360) – that we can most clearly see Danielewski's "intellectual work" (23). Indeed, the figure of the composite provides an interesting gateway into Danielewski's *House of Leaves*; from Danielewski's innovative blurring of psychoanalytical concepts, to Johnny's pictorial collages, the figure of the composite is omnipresent throughout Danielewski's house of darkness.

Johnny Truant's Traumatic Trip

"I'm falling down the stairs, tripping over myself …"

– Danielewski (*House of Leaves* 72)

In order to appreciate the appearance and complexity of these composite figures, it is necessary to reconstruct Johnny's turbulently traumatic childhood and note the various motifs that will recur to constitute these uncanny composite figures. At the very depths of his inferno, Johnny feels possessed by "[s]ome wicked family tree" (496) as he undergoes a nightmarish loss of self-control and aggressive regression, thus recalling the fate of Tancred. Like Tancred's, this wicked family tree is rooted in past trauma. Lansky's study of the posttraumatic state observes that sufferers, rather than being exposed to a single trauma, often have endured "a continuum of familial stress points" (48). Building on this observation, Lansky states: "At each of these stress points, the dysfunction constitute[s] a separate and enduring trauma with devastating sequelae" (48). Thus Johnny's experience of trauma approximates Marlow's in its combination of ongoing and event-based trauma. Johnny's scarred life history can be mapped onto a series of familial stress points which can be divided into three stages: early physical and emotional scarring by his mother, Pelafina, initiates Johnny into the painful realm of trauma; his father's death, and, almost nine years later, Pelafina's suicide, leave Johnny devoid of the emotional support requisite to recover from his initial trauma; and an intervening encounter with a violent foster father, Raymond, coupled with the concurrent emergence of a violent self during his early adolescence, entrap Johnny within a posttraumatic mandala of self-destruction. Johnny relives these experiences in three corresponding tiers of Hell as imperfect and uncanny repetitions. These traumas form the distinct but intertwined branches of Johnny's traumatic family tree.

Before her Leviathan-like descent into The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute, a psychiatric hospital, Pelafina scars Johnny on two different occasions: when Johnny was four she dropped a pan of oil on him, leaving "Oceanus whirls" of scar tissue (505) engraved on his forearms, as Johnny instinctually attempted to "catch the sun" (504), the scalding oil. When Johnny was seven, Pelafina, in a suicidal and homicidal delirium, may have attempted

to strangle him, leaving "jagged half-moon reminders on [his] shoulders and shins" (129) from her "ridiculous purple nails" (630). Johnny later denies the veracity of this recollection, but both episodes are associated with "a nearly inhuman shout" (506), variously attributed to Pelafina and Donnie, Johnny's father.[6] Following these initial scars, both of Johnny's parents die: "when I was ten my father died and almost nine years later my crazy Shakespearean mother followed him" (21). Donnie, a former pilot, dies "when the Mack truck he was in swerved into a ditch and caught fire" (585), while Pelafina eventually commits suicide by "self-inflicted asphyxiation achieved with bed linen from a closet hook" (643) in the Whalestoe Institute. After unsuccessful attempts to lay down new roots with a succession of foster families, Johnny's nightmare begins. He is sent to live with Raymond, a former marine, "a man with a beard rougher than horse hide and hands harder than horn, who called me beast" (78). As in a posttraumatic nightmare, Johnny's disturbed (un)reality is infected by "the emergence of a vengeful or destructive tendency" (Lansky 111). This destructive tendency manifests itself in Johnny's compulsion for schoolyard fights: "This one kid … hit me twice and figured I was down for good. I clawed up his face pretty bad then, enough for blood to get into his eyes" (93); on another occasion Johnny relates: "I got my thumb in one of the kid's eyes. I heard he had blood in it for weeks" (93). Following these fights Raymond assaults Johnny on two occasions, hospitalizing him on the first. Johnny recalls being brought to a secluded wasteland, "where I lost half my tooth" (93). During the second assault, Johnny recalls being cornered "like some beast" (324) by Raymond: "I stopped seeing, something black and painful hissing into my head" (325). Already the motifs of deformity (oceanic swirls, broken teeth, beasts); aural paroxysms of pain (screams, hissing); unnatural death or suicide (flames, asphyxiation); absorbed aggression (oil, long nails); and projected aggression (bloodied eyes) are manifest. These motifs serve as the interchangeable ingredients of the

[6] That Johnny ultimately denies this episode does not necessarily detract from its significance, for as Johnny states in his Introduction: "what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (xx). Indeed, Johnny's trauma consists of episodes where nightmarish fantasies fuse with his waking existence.

nightmarish composite figures that will return to stalk Johnny throughout *House of Leaves* as imperfect traumatic repetitions.

Falconer notes that "Western culture is saturated with the idea of a self being forged out of an infernal journey" (1). Typically this journey "consists of three movements: a descent, an inversion or turning upside down at a zero point and a return to the surface of some kind" (43). Johnny's narrative illustrates an interesting descent into Hell with important implications for trauma studies. Initially Johnny descends, or trips, through nebulous hallucinatory figures perceived as monstrously other and terrifying. For Johnny, the next tier of Hell manifests itself as other people as he encounters three characters throughout his infernal downward spiral at different points that reflect his own disturbed sense of self: a girl with the pseudonym Johnnie, Lude, his close friend, and the recollection of a drowning Haitian teenager, all serve as distorted mirror images of Johnny's deteriorating psychic state. Johnny then encounters a violent self and ultimately fails to resurface or achieve a redemptive *anabasis*, thus subverting the classical katabatic narrative paradigm, akin to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Bemong notes that "[t]he notion of derealization, of living in a dream, regularly returns in *House of Leaves.*" Nicoline Timmer concurs with Bemong, terming these uncanny episodes which plague Johnny throughout *House of Leaves* "experiential hick-ups" (257). These experiential hick-ups are essentially posttraumatic flashbacks, "a perceptual reexperience of a specific traumatic event with an intensity approaching hallucinatory vividness" (Lansky 55). Though in *House of Leaves*, these uncanny recurrences fuse with elements of dreams, in particular with the form of the composite figure. In this upper vestibule of Hell, a kind of Cimmerian borderland, Johnny encounters an obscure and threatening presence stalking him from the very margins of his perception as "a vast and traumatic darkness" (Timmer 258). This presence is variously described as a "beast" (27),

"creature darkness" (48), a "Walker in Darkness" (150), and an angel of death (327) composed of the various traumatic motifs mentioned above. During his first flashback, Johnny re-experiences a sensation of asphyxiation, as he imagines "some tremendous beast crouched off in the shadows" (27). This figure reappears later in Johnny's narrative when he is sent to retrieve some ink from the storeroom in the tattoo shop where he works. The beast reappears with "[e]xtremely long fingers," "eyes full of blood" and suddenly vanishes, though "[a] scream, a howl, a roar" (71) reverberate long after its retreat. In a derealized panic Johnny begins "tripping over [him]self" (72); as ink showers down on him "[s]omething hisses and slashes out at the back of [his] neck" (72), leaving him wounded. The verbal ambiguity of Johnny tripping over himself is telling – the psychic distortions of a drug-induced trip, an involuntary downward spiral, and the tentative beginnings of a metaphysical quest are each implied. This lurid and aggressive presence eventually disturbs not only Johnny but those close to him. On hearing Hailey, a girl Johnny recently slept with, complain of how unnerving Johnny's posttraumatic night terrors were, he is overwhelmed by a melancholic angst: "Screaming things was bad enough, but the thought that I'd also frightened someone I felt only tenderness for made it far worse" (149). Slipping from the security of self-control, Johnny aggressively reacts to Lude's suggestion that he abandon Zampanò's unfinished *magnum opus*. Johnny, in a typical posttraumatic reaction, then endures "suicidal wishes after confrontations with his own aggressiveness" (Lansky 47). The beast signifies a looming suicidal angst, as Johnny imagines the creature heralding "[t]hat long anticipated disintegration, when the darkest angel of all, the horror beyond all horrors, sits at last upon my chest" (327), the horror of suicide.

Beneath this layer of Hell, Johnny becomes entrapped in a posttraumatic state of "intense, fearful self-absorption" (Lansky 48). In this state of solipsism, Hell becomes other people as memories of and encounters with others become a reflection of Johnny's own

psychic deformation. Essentially, Johnny trips through a kaleidoscope of composite figures, imperfect repetitions of previous traumatic incidents. On his third attempt to tell the story of a mutilated Pekinese dog, Johnny relates his encounter with Johnnie, a girl whose prosthetic physique distresses Johnny and serves to underline her status as an unreal figure of a disturbed imagination (her unnatural silicone- and peroxide-enhanced appearance emphasizes her fake status). Johnny describes her using a now familiar litany of traumatic motifs as a composite figure reflecting various past traumas: Johnnie wields "nails as long as kitchen knives" (266), blinks "bloodshot eyes" which are perhaps "permanently red" (266), and smiles through a "deformed mouth" (267), motifs corresponding to Pelafina's domestic violence, Johnny's own aggression, and injuries inflicted by Raymond respectively. Ultimately Johnnie leaves Johnny disturbed by her propensity for ruthless violence – she slaughters an abandoned Pekinese dog after pronouncing herself, "the moma to all strays" (267). Thus Johnny not only "experiences a degree of transmissibility or identification with the animal" (15) as Gibbs notes, but becomes unnerved by Johnn(ie)(y)'s potential for violence. The optic injury of the Pekinese reflects Johnny's violent adolescent urges: the episode concludes with Johnny standing over the dead dog, "an eye broken and oozing vitreous jelly" (267). Following an assault by Gdansk Man, one of Johnny's romantic rivals, Lude becomes another shattered reflection of Johnny's traumatized state. Johnny visits Lude in the hospital and reacts with disbelief on beholding his friend's facial disfigurement: "I couldn't believe how terrible he looked" (411). Lude, equally unnerved by Johnny's physical state, exclaims: "you look like you ju[s]t got out of a concentration camp" (412). Lude emerges from the hospital with a painkiller addiction and begins his own traumatic trip: "By summer, Lude was tumbling straight down into oblivion" (491) and dies intoxicated during a motorcycle accident, eerily echoing Donnie's death.

The most important of these three figures Johnny encounters in this mid-level of Hell surfaces in the form of a memory. Johnny relives the sinking of a ship he worked on when he was thirteen following his escape from Raymond. Johnny, posing as a sixteen year old, departs for Alaska where he works for a fishing company. Johnny tells of how their ship went under during a storm and how one sixteen-year-old Haitian was drowned, swallowed by icy oceanic swirls: "Some line had gotten tangled around his ankle and he was dragged down with the wreck. Even though his head went under, we could all hear him scream. Even though I know we couldn't" (104). Johnny later relives this disaster as a stream of consciousness composite story, blurring his own experience with stories he has heard from Tex, "an eccentric gay millionaire from Norway" (297). *The Atrocity*, the re-baptized ship, becomes a floating inferno: "sparks from a blown fuse suddenly found a puddle of oil" transforming the spillage into "a living Hand of angry yellow" (298). The sole survivor of the doomed excursion lives long enough to sink with the ship, "his great coffin plummeted downward" (299) and Johnny imagines his "burst conjunctiva – letting go of streaks of red tears" (300). The substantially altered retelling holds significant metaphoric impact. The episode now encapsulates the katabatic essence of these various encounters: a character who survives an initial violent encounter lives only to become stained by bloody tears while suffering a loss of self-control.

Falconer states that "a serious mental illness may well be regarded by many Westerners as the worst form of Hell because it deprives the sufferer of his or her psychic autonomy" (116). A complete loss of self-control constitutes the final circle of Johnny's inferno. According to Lansky's study of the posttraumatic state, "the victim may also react with tendencies to identify with the aggressor … project[ing] aggression on a victim who receives traumatic injury in the same way the sufferer did" (164-65). In *Heart of Darkness*, as outlined above, Marlow's posttraumatic guilt seems rooted in his identification with the

demonic Kurtz. In *House of Leaves*, Johnny, at the very depths of his abyss, assaults Gdansk Man in a way that recalls his own past. Danielewski infuses Johnny's degeneration with Zampanò's revisionist interpretation of the Minotaur myth: "According to Zampanò, the mythical account of a man with a bull's head represents the reality of a youth horribly marred by birth defect and his father's ensuing shame, pity and sorrow" (Shiloh 137). Zampanò maintains that his astute revision of the myth inspired a play, *The Minotaur*. Johnny assumes the role of the deformed beast in both a dream and violent fantasy, struggling definitively to place the latter on a plane of reality. After realizing a "particularly disturbing coincidence" (336) – that "within the phrase 'The Minotaur' is the anagram 'O Im he Truant'" (Hayles 798) – Johnny relives elements of *The Minotaur.* Within a dream, Johnny awakes "deep within the hull of some enormous vessel" (403) as a disfigured, beastly Minotaur figure. Submerged within the sunken *Atrocity*, Johnny continues the katabatic descent of the episode he relates regarding the drowned Haitian within a nightmare. Johnny encounters a protean and aggressive force as Theseus appears in the guise of a "drunken frat boy" (403) who later morphs into a mother figure. These "[n]ightmares fuse into waking minutes" (497) as Johnny relives the surreal atrocity as the aggressor, instinctually and uncontrollably assaulting Gdansk Man, "like some beast accustomed to shattering bones and tearing away pounds of flesh" (496) and threatening to rape Kyrie, Gdansk Man's girlfriend. Though Johnny later denies killing Gdansk Man, "what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (xx), as Johnny informs us in his Introduction, composed two days after the assault. The traumatic trajectory is complete and Johnny has tripped beyond the bounds of self-control into an inferno of ruthless violence, killing a frat boy, Theseus figure and suggesting the dark demise of Gdansk Man's girlfriend, the maternal Kyrie.

Throughout *House of Leaves*, Johnny's repressed past returns in the form of uncanny composite figures rather than as a series of unaltered repetitions of the original traumatic

reality. The composite figures of his scarred history return until Johnny identifies with the various perpetrators that form the roots of his twisted genealogical tree – the scars engraved by Pelafina, Raymond, and the beast, a dark corridor within himself, blur together as traumatic and uncanny composites. This can be related to Danielewski's overall comments on memory from an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory: "We believe that our memories keep us in direct touch with what has happened. But memory never puts us in touch with anything directly; it's always interpretative, reductive, a complicated compression of information" (121). *House of Leaves* thus challenges the prevailing view of trauma, as various traumatic memories are compressed in the form of composite figures, contra Caruth's paradigm of traumatic memory as a literal repetition.

Dark Blue: Trauma and Colour in *Heart of Darkness* and *House of Leaves*

"The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest and greatest town on earth."

– Conrad (*Heart of Darkness* 31)

"Welcome to the Ice House."

– Danielewski (*House of Leaves* 504)

In *Heart of Darkness* and *House of Leaves* trauma comes to haunt place. In *Heart of Darkness*, trauma pollutes Marlow's various surroundings and haunts him in the sepulchral city and aboard the *Nellie* during his relivings of his original traumatic experience. Similarly, in *House of Leaves*, trauma's shadows forever stain domestic spaces. Both texts use the repetition of colour to further emphasize the repetitive nature of traumatic experience: images of darkness and gloom prevail in *Heart of Darkness*, while blue comes to signify traumatic experience in *House of Leaves*.

The darkness of Marlow's original descent haunts him during his repetition in the sepulchral city and aboard the *Nellie*. Upon descending to Kurtz's Intended, "the gloom of the forests" (101) seem to resurface for Marlow and the shadows return throughout his meeting with the Intended: "The darkness deepened … [as] the girl talked, easing her pain in the certitude of [Marlow's] sympathy" (103). This atmosphere infects the beginning of Marlow's final descent aboard the *Nellie*, as "a mournful gloom" (31) hangs over the Thames, according to the anonymous framing narrator. While F.R. Leavis famously complained of the "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery" in *Heart of Darkness* (177), as Frederick R. Karl notes, these repetitious phrases "beat upon us, creating drumlike rhythms entirely appropriate to the texture of the poem" (134). Conrad patterns the "words that are compulsively repeated" (LaCapra 143) in trauma into imperfect echoes of horror. The repetition of darkness and gloom throughout Marlow's tale come to signify the trauma he has endured, recalling the atmosphere of his descent through the landscape of Hell, "the hidden evil … the profound darkness of its heart" (61).

Danielewski also uses colour associations to emphasize the repetitions of trauma. In *House of Leaves* the psychic nadirs of trauma are places of infernal frost rather than flames. Consequently, the Navidsons' house is "similar to the Khumba Icefall at the base of Mount Everest where blue seracs and chasms change unexpectedly throughout the day and night" (69). Navidson, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner – to whom he is often compared – must venture through an infernal realm of cold, "The land of ice, and of fearful sounds, where no living thing was to be seen" (Coleridge 59). *House of Leaves* innovatively makes use of colour to deepen this symbolism. In full colour versions of *House of Leaves*, every time the word house is printed it appears in blue print. Critics have been quick to draw analogies between this typographical anomaly and the hyperlink structure of the internet and other

digital technologies.[7] Considering the paucity of references to the internet within *House of Leaves* and the fact that Danielewski wrote the novel using pencil and paper ("Haunted House" 117), looking beyond these technological analogies may prove fruitful. William G. Little notes that "[t]he blue also suggests that the house's ruptures and shocks are architectural re-creations of traumatic experience … the house is a house of sorrow, a house of blues" (195 n.2). Gibbs similarly relates the repetition of this house of blues to trauma:

> the blue 'house' strikes the reader again and again, therefore underlining the trope, important to the representation of trauma, of repetition. The blue rendering of 'house' becomes not only mantra-like, evoking the repetitive dimension of trauma, but also in a sense codifies it (16).

Technologically innovative as Danielewski's colour-based repetition is, it marks a fundamental similarity with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as the repetition of colour comes to be associated with traumatic experience. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* thus anticipates Danielewski's visually striking treatment of traumatic repetition through the use of colour.

The blue dimensions of Danielewski's *House of Leaves* also serve to emphasize the nature of Hell for Johnny. Johnny's descent leaves him stranded in an "Ice House" (504), a composite structure of the various places of his traumas.[8] It is worth examining the composite blueprints of Johnny's ice house in order to explore the implications of Danielewski's investigation of traumatic trips into Hell. James Hillman notes that "[b]elow the water, the hell fires, and the mud, there is the ninth circle of the Inferno that is all ice" (168), Lake Cocytus. Following her scarring of Johnny, Pelafina is "swallowed by the Whale" (517), the Whalestoe Institute. Exactly nine years after Pelafina's death, Johnny revisits the Whalestoe

[7] Mark B. N. Hansen draws attention to the hyperlink analogy, thus the house opens "a portal to information located elsewhere, both within and beyond the novel's frame "(598), while Hayles compares the use of blue to "the blue screen of a movie backdrop onto which anything can be projected" (792).

[8] In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud notes the existence of the composite structure: "Dreams are, of course, a mass of these composite structures" (437).

Institute, the site of Pelafina's suicide, one source of the wailing that has haunted his waking and sleeping minutes since inheriting Zampanò's study of *The Navidson Record*. The now abandoned Whalestoe Institute serves as a composite nodal point of the places of all of Johnny's traumas, a frozen reservoir of horror, sorrow, and psychic pain. Graffiti reading "Welcome to the Ice House" (504) greets Johnny, an infernal echo of the Dantean advice to "Abandon All Hope You Who Enter Here" (3.7). Johnny wanders through empty hallways that recall the hallway where Pelafina either tried to asphyxiate Johnny or left him to live out a traumatic nightmare devoid of maternal support. The Ice House also recalls the *selva oscura* of physical assault, the "ice covered place, surrounded by barbed wire and willows" (93) where Raymond further disfigured Johnny. On reaching Pelafina's room, Johnny notes that "the springs [of her bed] now resembled the rusted remains of a shipwreck half-buried in the sands of some half-forgotten shore" (504) recalling the icy Alaskan waters that swallowed *The Atrocity*, the corridors of which form the labyrinth of Johnny's Minotaur nightmare. The various atmospheres of Johnny's traumas are thus blurred together in this uncanny composite structure, a frozen inferno of imperfect repetition. The knotted threads of Johnny's traumatic family tree are finally symbolized by the "vine entwined tree" (504) visible from Pelafina's room, a tree trapped by the thorns of traumas.

Johnny stays the night, awaiting the apparition of Pelafina's ghost, though the episode subverts our expectations and denies any lasting catharsis as Pelafina's spectre does not materialize for an enlightening *nekyia*.[9] Johnny emerges from the Whale in May only to become haunted by "a wind over seventy below" (493) following Lude's death in October. Falconer observes that in contemporary katabatic narratives, "once the trapdoor to that other, deeper reality is thrown open, it can never be closed" (4). Johnny, like Marlow, encounters

[9] Typically, the ghost figure haunts the trauma narrative. Luckhurst's astute and comprehensive interdisciplinary dissection of trauma notes the centrality of the ghost figure to contemporary fictional narratives of trauma. Elevating Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to paradigmatic status as a trauma genre text, Luckhurst attributes "its figuration of trauma in the ghost" (91) as one aspect that make *Beloved* central as a trauma narrative.

"[a] killer that lives in the ice," part of the soul that is "psychopathic, paranoiac, catatonic" (Hillman 169) in his assault of Gdansk Man and rape-fantasy of Kyrie. Infected by this wind-chill, Johnny uncovers the "creature we all are" (xxiii), a beast scarred by the thorns of a traumatic family tree. Johnny must roam the corridors of Hell alone waiting for a psychic thaw and an opportunity to resurface from a realm of imperfect repetition. Similarly, Marlow's tale closes anticipating further traumatic repetitions, as according to the original framing narrator only darkness lies ahead: "the tranquil waterway … seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (105).

Conclusion: Trauma as Uncanny Repetition

Leys's genealogy of trauma laments a problematic tendency in the contemporary theorization of trauma: "the entire force of recent work on trauma is to propose that traumatic relivings are exact and automatic repetitions of traumatic reality" (228). Both Marlow's and Johnny's descent into the Hell of posttraumatic memory entail reliving the past, though with considerable mnemonic distortion. Caruth's understanding of traumatic repetition as resulting from the trauma's "unassimilated nature" which then "returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4), "exactly and unremittingly" (2), seems to miss the complexity of the posttraumatic alterations of affect and memory in both *Heart of Darkness* and *House of Leaves*. In these texts, the repressed past returns either as a series of traumatic echoes or as composite nightmare figures. Thus, in *Heart of Darkness* and *House of Leaves*, traumatic reverberations entail the kind of repetition suggested in Freud's "The Uncanny," repetition as strangely familiar, though far from exact or literal: the "mysterious repetition of similar experiences" (248) seem lend to "certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character" (238) in the posttraumatic state.

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