

Branded in his Mind: Trauma, Violence and Memory in E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*¹

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Abstract

E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) is unequivocally what has been termed a "trauma novel." This paper examines the protagonist's traumatic condition, concentrating on its causes and on the determining circumstances that contribute to aggravating it. The analysis of Daniel's narrative reveals that he suffers from many of the symptoms associated to PTSD and anhedonia, a psychological condition which frequently co-occurs with PTSD as a consequence of infantile psychic trauma. The paper, then, explores the relationship between the protagonist's traumatic condition and his violent and oppressive treatment of the three main female characters of the novel. Finally, this paper concentrates on the status of Daniel's memories of his traumatic past. As a conclusion, it is contended that the novel's concern with trauma and memory points to the author's preoccupation with remembrance, which he seems to consider the best and only tool to build a better world. Doctorow seeks to highlight the importance of listening to the fragmented voices of those who suffer the effects of trauma in order to develop new social and political perspectives that will guarantee a better future.

Keywords: E.L. Doctorow; The Book of Daniel; Trauma studies; Traumatic memories; Victim-Perpetrator

Published in 1971, E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* is unequivocally what has been termed a "trauma novel." It eventually achieved an enormous critical and popular success, becoming a finalist for the National Book Award for fiction. On the surface, the novel is the fictional rendering of the conviction and execution of the Isaacsons from the viewpoint of their surviving son, Daniel. The plot is loosely based on the actual trial and execution of the Rosenbergs, the New York communists who were convicted and executed in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage leading to the development of the Soviet nuclear program. However, *The Book of Daniel* is much more than a political and

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historical fictionalization of a well-known event of North-American history; it is also the testimony of a survivor, a tale of trauma, horror, violence and guilt that depicts Daniel's struggle to find a narrative that will reconcile him with his traumatic past; it is the confession of a sadist perpetrator who seeks to counteract his helplessness through the domination and victimization of his family; and it is the account of his attempt to recover the memories of his traumatic past and assimilate the traumatic experiences that are responsible for his present condition. These terrifying memories have returned to haunt him, triggered by his sister's suicide attempt fifteen years after their parents' execution, and prompt him to write the story that we are reading.

Despite its obvious literary merits, the reception of *The Book of Daniel* was rather divided at first. On the one hand a reviewer praised it as "the political novel of our age," and Joyce Carol Oates went so far as to call the book a "nearly perfect work of art" (qtd. in Williams 1996: 21–22). However, it was virtually ignored by academia for almost ten years, until the astonishing critical and commercial success of *Ragtime* (1975) led to a reexamination of Doctorow's previous novels.² The first readings of the novel by reviewers tended to either celebrate it or condemn it on the basis of its political content, but their fixation with the novel's politics blinded them to the richness of content, theme, and style that it displays. However, with the passing of time, *The Book of Daniel* has gradually received the critical attention from academia that it undoubtedly deserves, increasingly becoming the object of scholarly analyses that have contributed to uncovering Doctorow's craft.

After a careful review of the literature, it seemed that the critical perspectives provided by trauma theory and memory studies might provide the possibility to further broaden the critical interpretation of *The Book of Daniel*. As Andreas Huyssen has noted, memory has become an obsession of Western culture; we seem to suffer from a "hypertrophy of memory" (3). This preoccupation with memory, which has emerged as a key cultural and political concern, results from factors such as the prominence of new technologies, massive migration, displacement and diaspora but, most importantly, from the need to deal with the painful

² The new decade witnessed what John Williams has referred to as the "canonization" of Doctorow's previous novels, *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960) and *The Book of Daniel* (1971) (1996: 60).

legacy of the wars and genocides that have taken place throughout the twentieth century (Whitehead 2009: 1-2). In fact, much of the contemporary memory discourse focuses on traumatic experiences. The interest in memorializing the Holocaust has resulted in a persistent engagement with the notion of traumatic memory, which has been recuperated and developed by theorists such as Dori Laub, Charlotte Delbo, Nanette C. Auerhahn, Marianne Hirsch and Anne Whitehead, among others.

Issues of trauma started to receive prominent critical attention in the 1990s, after the American Psychiatric Association officially acknowledged the phenomenon of trauma and stressed the importance of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat fatigue, delayed stress syndrome and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes (Caruth 1995: 3). Critics such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Judith Herman produced groundbreaking studies of the effects of trauma on war survivors, victims of the Holocaust and victims of traumatic childhood experiences. The field of trauma studies would develop quickly thanks to work generated from the perspectives of neurology, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, history and literature, including that of Bessel A. van der Kolk, Robert J. Lifton, Abraham and Torok, Kai Erikson, Dominick LaCapra, and many others. Trauma and memory studies have acquired great relevance for cultural and literary studies in recent times, achieving the status of solid theoretical frameworks for the study of literary texts.

This paper focuses on the protagonist's psychological condition and on the possibility of retrieving the memories of his traumatic past in order to recover from the symptoms from which he suffers. First, I will explore the causes and characteristics of the protagonist's psychic ailment. Secondly, I will deal with the violent consequences of his condition, paying special attention to the problematization of the binary division between the categories of victim and perpetrator. Finally, I will analyze the status of the protagonist's memories, the difficulties that he experiences in recuperating and representing them, and the extent to which his condition has improved at the end of the narrative. With these aims in mind, I will rely on the works and theories of critics such as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Nanette C. Auerhahn, Bessel van der Kolk, Ronald Granofsky, Anne Whitehead and Laurie Vickroy, among others.

I

To begin with, it is worth considering that Daniel's traumatic condition does not result from a single overwhelmingly painful and terrifying event. The origin of his mental disorder does lie at the exposure to his parents' conviction and execution, which implies, after all, "learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member" (DSM IV-TR 2000: 463). However, Daniel's psychic devastation is worsened by a constellation of traumatic life experiences or cumulative micro-aggressions:³ he struggles all through his childhood as he grows up in poverty and is terrorized by his insane, cursing grandmother. Secondly, he watches his father's beating at the hands of right-wing fanatics. Later on, he witnesses his parents' arrest and the search and dismantling of his home, which cause him to wander from hand to hand—from a repulsive aunt, to a shelter for orphaned children and an unloving foster family who are only interested in his sister and him as propaganda for the Communist Party. Finally, he suffers humiliating visits to his parents in jail, until he finally finds himself an orphan after his parents' execution, which, not having witnessed, he is left only to imagine in terror.

Daniel's traumatic condition is also aggravated by further determining circumstances. On the one hand, Rochelle and Paul Isaacson are convicted and executed by the state for a crime that they may or may not have committed, which for Daniel adds to the traumatic impact of their death for three main reasons. First, the traumatic event results from human design, that is, their deaths are not due to natural causes; the perception of human agency is acknowledged to cause feelings of injury and outrage from which it is difficult to recover and to make the disorder particularly severe or long-lasting (Erikson 1995: 192; DSM IV-TR 2000: 464). In addition, Daniel is left to live alone and defenseless in the society whose legal institutions have deprived him of his family, the society that he perceives has murdered his parents. Finally, his parents' death denies Daniel any possibility of ever achieving moral closure since he cannot be certain of their guilt:

³ See Erikson and Root for analyses of trauma as resulting, not so much from exposure to an overwhelming traumatic event, but from the impact of small traumatic stressors that, when combined, can build to create an intense traumatic impact.

I have put down everything I can remember of their actions and conversations in this period prior to their arrests. Or I think I have. Sifted it through my hands. I find no clues either to their guilt or innocence. (Doctorow 2006: 159)⁴

Thus, the arrest, conviction, and execution of his parents leave Daniel helpless and disempowered; he cannot do anything to change the outcome of events, just as he cannot, later on, save his sister Susan after her attempt to commit suicide.⁵ It has been proved that a sense of helplessness plays a key role in making an experience traumatic (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 175; DSM IV 2000: 463). Finally, Daniel was very young when his mother and father were taken away from him. As Laurie Vickroy has noted, children are particularly vulnerable to trauma, because it affects the way their psyche develops, it impairs their life coping skills and determines the way they relate to other people in the future (2002: 14). Therefore, by the time Daniel and his sister are officially adopted by the loving Lewins, an irreparable harm has been inflicted on them.

Far from healing with the passing of time, Daniel's psychological condition keeps worsening as he grows up into adulthood. Some critics have pointed to his increasing sense of political dissonance as an important factor contributing to the protagonist's illness. Michelle Tokarczyk, for instance, has rightly observed that "Daniel might have had a better foundation for rebuilding [after his parents' death,] had he not also lost belief in the ideals that served as touchstones for his parents" (1987: 12). Daniel's disillusionment with radical politics manifests itself in the bitter criticism of the Communist Party that underlies his narrative; as he explains, most of the Isaacson's (communist) friends quickly turned their back to Daniel's parents, and the party did not hesitate to erase their names from the membership list right after their arrest, fearing that their conviction would be detrimental to North-American communism. Later on, however, when the Isaacson's

⁴ Further references to the novel will be to the Penguin Modern Classics edition, published in 2006.

⁵ Hence Daniel's own tendency to associate or compare himself to the Biblical Daniel, an intertext which is pointed at by the title of the novel and which has been discussed as a symbol of Daniel's inability to save his sister Susan—as opposed to the Biblical Daniel's success in saving Susannah from execution (see Dillon and DeRosa).

potential for political propaganda becomes obvious to the Party, it soon embraces their cause, turning Susan and Daniel into puppets to be exhibited rally after rally, and causing Daniel to eventually lose all faith on radical politics (358). As a result, Daniel's inability to believe in any of the principles for which his parents were executed and that have been enthusiastically endorsed by his sister clashes violently with his perceived sense of family obligation. Above all, Daniel's contempt towards radical politics conflicts with his life-long preoccupation with taking care of and supporting his little sister, who remains the most important person in his life, as will be discussed later on. Therefore, such dissonance results in intense feelings of shame and guilt, which clearly contribute to aggravate his traumatic condition.

As I will try to prove, Daniel's psychological damage takes the shape of posttraumatic stress disorder, since Daniel's narrative reveals that he suffers from many of the symptoms associated to PTSD, as described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revision (DSM IV-TR 2000: 463-68). First of all, Daniel persistently re-experiences the traumatic events in several ways throughout his life. When he was a young boy he would suffer recurrent dreams: "I was afraid to go to sleep. I had terrible nightmares which I couldn't remember except in waking from them in terror and suffocation" (134). Later in his life, the nightmares seem to have given way to a more general obsession with images— "awful visions of his head" (250)—and thoughts that recall his parents' execution. Among these, a few stand out: his constant symbolic references to electricity⁶— his Father is described as tireless and "full of electricity" (59), Grandma's hair is like "electric wire" (83), his electricity pseudo-poem has "ohm," the measure of electrical resistance, as its main image (257), etc. There is also his repeated recalling of Susan's last words before she enters a sort of self-inflicted coma: "They are still fucking us. Goodbye, Daniel. You get the picture" (10); "You get the picture. Good boy, Daniel" (82); THEY ARE STILL FUCKING US. [...] YOU GET THE

⁶ Geoffrey Harpham, who inaugurated a move away from the debate over history and politics in Doctorow's works to an emphasis on narrative technique, has argued that the master principle of the narrative is in fact electricity, and Daniel's fractured story builds to a recreation of his parents' execution. Harpham's analysis supports my contention that Daniel's mind is absolutely possessed by the not-witnessed event of his parents' execution by electrocution.

PICTURE. GOODBYE, DANIEL” (189). To the other symptoms, his frequent preoccupation with the heart and his fixation with different means of execution can be added. Furthermore, his narrative is frequently interrupted by historiographic interludes,⁷ in which he deals with issues such as Soviet politics, the Cold War, treason and tyranny, traitors and the law, astrology, failed heart transplants and forms of execution. The latter are the most recurrent ones, which together with the obsession with electricity, point to the fact that he is obsessed with the image of his parents’ execution, by the unseen image of their bodies “frying” in the chair (193). This image is not “fully owned,” because it was “not assimilated at the time, only belatedly, in its repeated possession,” to borrow Caruth’s phrasing of the phenomenon (Caruth 1995: 4-5). As Daniel puts it, “there were at least a couple of years, a couple of good years, when none of it had happened” (77).

Daniel also re-experiences the traumatic events and suffers intense psychological distress as a response to cues that resemble his parents’ execution. And so, he is strongly disturbed and reacts with extreme violence when it is suggested that Susan’s psychiatrist is going to use shock therapy on her (251). In the same way, he somatizes his traumatic condition when exposed to an event that reminds him of the traumatic event. When that happens, he presents breathing difficulties: “I often had spells of difficult breathing. These frightened me. I found that if I ran around and waved my arms like a windmill, I could breathe better for a moment” (195).

Secondly, it is obvious from his narration that before Susan “summoned” him to write, Daniel persistently avoided stimuli associated with his trauma and preferred to bury the haunting traumatic memories in his heart. And so, he used to avoid thinking about his parents’ execution or talking about it, numbing himself and refusing to feel anything: “when the real life of his childhood, that had become a dream, became real again, he tried to make contact with Susan. [...] We should have talked, we always should have talked” (78). Similarly, Daniel shows throughout the whole narrative a feeling of detachment from others and a very

⁷ With regard to the historiographic interludes, it is also worth adding that they seem to play a role in providing emotional relief, since they frequently interrupt the narrative at times in which writing seems to become too painful for Daniel to continue. They are used as a sort of distraction tool by Daniel, who employs them to escape the pain of his own narration.

restricted range of affect: he is worried about “establish[ing] sympathy” (8) and he acknowledges that “heart rejection is a problem” (356), while at the same time his behavior proves that he is unable to feel real love for anyone other than his sister Susan, not even for his wife and baby. His attitude is one of absolute disrespect for anyone’s feelings, to such an extent that he appears to enjoy hurting his adoptive parents’ feelings and physically and psychologically torturing his wife, an issue that will be discussed presently. And yet, he constantly admits to feeling guilty and ashamed of his behavior. Throughout his narrative, Daniel also shows persistent symptoms of increased arousal. For instance, he suffers outbursts of rage and has an irritable temper: “he was GONE! A lucky think [sic] too, I would have killed him” (251); he generally experiences difficulties concentrating on things, such as his dissertation; in addition, he presents episodes of hypervigilance and paranoia, and so, as his sister lies in the hospital bed, he explains that “[t]o be objective, they are still taking care of us, one by one” (255).

To these a few other related symptoms must be added: on the one hand, Daniel’s narration has a discomfiting sense of timelessness, which is achieved through nonlinearity and chaotic, fragmented jumps in time and place. In fact, he admits that he is struggling to “work out the chronology” (193). For instance, at one time he does not even seem to know how old he is or in which year he was born: “We moved there in 1945 when I was four years old. Or maybe in 1944 when I was five years old” (118). Secondly, Daniel’s traumatic condition at times results in dissociation, which points to his fragmented psyche and is manifested in the narrative through his random shifts of voice, from autodiegetic to heterodiegetic narration and back without warning.

Finally, Daniel’s narration also suggests that he suffers from anhedonia. It has been proved that this condition frequently co-occurs with PTSD as a consequence of infantile psychic trauma (Krystal 1995, 81). Anhedonic subjects suffer from a lack of capacity for enjoyment and, as such, Daniel is unable to enjoy any of the activities that are usually found pleasurable, such as hobbies, sexual intercourse, family life, or social interaction. This can be illustrated by one of the most infamous passages of the novel, in which Daniel’s capacity to turn a beautiful family scene into an insane nightmare becomes manifest:

In the park I threw Paul in the air and caught him, and he laughed. Phyllis smiled [...]. I tossed my son higher and higher, and now he laughed no longer but cried out.

Still I did not stop and threw him higher and caught him closer to the ground. Then Phyllis was begging me to stop. The baby now shut his mouth, concentrating on his fear, his small face, my Isaacson face, locked in absolute dumb dread of the breath-taking flight into the sky and even more terrifying fall toward earth. I can't bear to think about this murderous feeling [...]. I enjoyed the fear in his mother. When I finally stopped she grabbed Paul and sat hugging him. He was white [...]. I took off. (161)

This passage shows that Daniel simply cannot enjoy any activity that a healthy person would find enjoyable, and also points to a destructive, violent nature that leads him to victimize every single person around him, especially his wife.

II

This leads to the analysis of Daniel's attitude towards his family, more specifically, his mother, his sister, and his wife. One of the most conspicuous aspects of *The Book of Daniel* is certainly the brutal way in which Daniel treats his wife. To put it plainly, Phyllis is a victim of domestic violence, since Daniel frequently tortures her sexually, physically and psychologically. His mistreatment is suggested as early as page 5 of the novel, where the contemptible sadomasochistic relationship existent between Daniel and Phyllis is already established. He describes his wife as

the kind of awkward girl with heavy thighs and heavy tits and slim lovely face whose ancestral mothers must have been bred in harems. The kind of unathletic helpless breeder to appeal to caliphs. The kind of sand dune that was made to be kicked around. (5)

This highly degrading description not only establishes the power relationship existent between Daniel, who defines himself as Phyllis's "tormentor," and his wife, who is defined as a "sex martyr" (7); it also determines the bond between Daniel and his readers, since he already challenges their inclination to identify with an autodiegetic narrator who is capable of such a statement. Indeed Daniel is well aware of, and concerned about this issue: "And if the first glimpse people have of me is this, how do I establish sympathy?" (8)

In fact, any possibility of establishing sympathy with the reader is automatically destroyed by his shameless rendering of one of the most

despicable scenes of sexual violence to be found in writing, which confirms Phyllis's victimization:

Daniel instructed Phyllis to kneel on the seat facing her side of the car, and to bend over as far as she could, kneeled and curled up like a penitent, a worshipper, an abject devotionalist. [...] "Don't hurt me. Just don't hurt me, Daniel." He ran his right hand over her buttocks. The small of her back was dewy with sweat. She shivered and the flesh of her backside trembled under his hand. [...] Daniel leaned forwards and pressed the cigarette lighter. His hand remained poised. Do you believe it? Shall I continue? Do you want to know the effect of three concentric circles of heating element glowing orange in a black night of rain upon the tender white girlflesh of my wife's ass? (74)

After an episode like this one, even the most sympathetic of readers cannot but morally condemn Daniel's sadism. Nevertheless, Daniel is aware, and at times, even ashamed of this sadistic drive and, therefore, he tries to justify such behavior as a self-assigned mentoring project to educate his wife into suffering. He believes that her leftist political leanings (her hippie lifestyle and her love of peace) are "principles," "political decisions" (7). And so, he must "work on her" (207) to teach her what being a revolutionary and belonging to the American left implies in terms of suffering; after all, their leftist political stance cost his parents their life and Susan and him their mental health; as Daniel puts it, "it is a lot easier to be a revolutionary nowadays than it used to be" (314).

Such explanation of Daniel's cruelty has already been hinted at by Eric Rasmussen, who claims in his paper that the novel embodies the fantasy that "sexual violence, as a mode of extreme and dangerous affective communication, can function as an affective technology for the artful transfer of knowledge and be deployed pedagogically for political purposes" (2011: 190). However, as Avishai Margalit has put it, "it is silly, if not downright obscene, to regard torture as a mere 'communicative act,'" "torture in our culture constitutes an extreme form of humiliation," which implies "denying the victim's very human mode of existence" (2002: 119). Thus, it may make more sense to interpret Daniel's torturing of his wife as a process of what LaCapra, borrowing Freud's concept, has called "acting out" (2001: 21). On the one hand, it evokes Daniel's own strong sense of humiliation after his parents' arrest, a feeling which became particularly acute during the visits to his parents in prison (304). On the other hand, his behavior may also be seen as a

pathetic way of compensating for the impotence and helplessness that result from his status as a traumatized victim, since it allows him to maintain a sense of agency.

His wife and baby are certainly the most evident victims of Daniel's dominating drive, but they are not the only ones. His mother and sister are also submitted to his desperate need for power and control. Therefore, even though he does not actually abuse them physically, it is possible to argue that he seeks to counteract his helplessness and his low self-esteem by dominating their subjectivity. In the case of Daniel's sister, Susan, he loves her dearly, but he feels threatened by her independence and strong will. The bond between Daniel and Susan is too complex, too contradictory and yet too strong to be understood outside the context of their mutual traumatic condition. He took care of her as a little girl (23) and tends to her lovingly when she is at the hospital (10), and yet fights her roughly on every occasion, always trying to exert his power over her; he admits that his life is strongly influenced by hers (214), and yet he is glad to be the one who survives (254); he despises her for her ideas about politics, drugs, and sex (11), and yet he admires her deeply for her strength and determination (97). Furthermore, their relationship is complicated by a sort of mutual incestuous attraction, and Daniel seems to be obsessed with his sister's sexuality. And so he explains that when Susan was thirteen, she "used to work her tentative saucy sex on [him]" (265), and she gave him "glimpses of herself in her underwear" (78). Likewise, Daniel showed her the hair that he was growing around his penis (358), and he admits that "more than once [he has] asked [him]self if [he'd] like to screw [his] sister" (253). Although his own answer is 'no', such fixation with each other's sexuality reveals that the traumatic events of their childhood have impaired their way of relating to each other and to other people. In any case, he feels compelled to eradicate her voice by banning her from expressing her own views and feelings in the narration of a story of trauma that is as much hers as it is his. It is Daniel's tale that the reader gets, in which Susan is relegated to a secondary role—at best—in spite of the fact that she is as much a protagonist as Daniel.

In the case of his mother, Daniel also loves and admires her deeply. Rochelle is described as a very strong, realistic, and intelligent woman. She is an active member of the Communist Party. She faces her trial, conviction and execution with a "composed ironic smile" on her face

(363), and she is executed last because “they had rightly conceived that [his] mother was the stronger” (359). However, it soon becomes obvious through Daniel’s narration that he was already starting to begrudge his mother’s power and control over the whole family. In fact, she is at times presented as a castrating woman whose authority Daniel cannot but resent⁸: “[m]y mother directs us all like a military commander” (53) and “nothing is really official without my mother’s endorsement” (57). Meanwhile Daniel’s father, arguably the most important figure for a little boy, is reduced to the role of an “irresponsible child”, a man too self-obsessed to take care of practical family matters who “couldn’t be trusted to make a living” (45) and who has no authority to speak of (57). Rochelle’s premature death leaves Daniel unable to challenge her overwhelming authority. He is caught between mixed feelings of love and rejection that he has been prevented from confronting and resolving by her death and his subsequent guilt. As a result, he reacts by turning her into a mere character of his narrative, by creating for her an invented internal monologue of feelings and thoughts during the last months of her life. In that way, by controlling his mother’s and sister’s subjectivity, Daniel manages to maintain a sense of agency and counteract his disempowerment.

This effort actually mirrors his sadistic and violent treatment of his wife, Phyllis, a passive woman whose voice is also completely silenced and whose weak character offers Daniel the possibility of being, for once, the one in control, the tormentor and not the victim. Thus, the victim has become a perpetrator, proving that the limits between both categories are not as stable in the context of trauma as one might think. This interpretation points to Daniel’s traumatic condition as a likely source for his sadistic behavior. As a result, Daniel’s violent, abusive attitude is problematized—though most certainly not justified—by his trauma, to the extent that the reader is frequently torn between feelings of pity and contempt, sympathy and repulsion, as Daniel himself

⁸ Robert Forrey has gone so far as to argue that Daniel shows unconscious, incestuous, sadistic impulses towards his mother, but his shame causes him to displace them onto his wife (1982: 169). Similarly, Naomi Morgenstern, in her psychoanalytic reading of the novel, has argued that “Daniel’s sadism may be an attempt to overcome, by force, his own liminal status as the subject of (and subject to) the primal scene”, by which she refers to Daniel’s obsession as a young child with spying on his parents’ sexual activities (2003: 77).

understands when he broods over his difficulties in establishing sympathy (8).

III

Another aspect of Daniel's traumatic condition that deserves special attention is the status of his memories. After all, being a trauma narrative, *The Book of Daniel* concerns itself with the narration of the memories of a traumatic past. To begin with, it is worth pointing out that Daniel's narration has a discomfiting sense of timelessness, since it is non-linear, fragmented and chaotic, with constant jumps in time and place. This suggests the confused status of the protagonist's mind, who struggles to produce a more or less logical narrative out of the decontextualized memory fragments that he is able to retrieve as he progresses. In addition, Dori Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn have noted that victims' knowledge can emerge in several other ways, namely, as transference episodes, in which present experiences are distorted or in some way influenced by the earlier traumatic event, and as overpowering narratives, where the traumatized subject can describe past events but continues to feel buried in the traumatic experience (1993, 295). Both forms of retrieving traumatic memories appear in Daniel's narration: on the one hand, the whole text becomes an overpowering narrative, since Daniel is most certainly still absorbed by the original trauma and yet he manages to describe past events, although in a fragmented way. On the other hand, there are frequent episodes of transference, the best example probably being Daniel's rendering of his parents' funeral, which abruptly turns into his sister's funeral without further notice:

We stand at the side of the graves. An enormous crowd presses behind us. The prayers are incanted. Everyone is in black. I glance at Susan. She is perfectly composed [...] I feel her warm hand in my hand and see her lovely eye cast down at the open earth at our feet and an inexpressible love fills my throat and weakens my knees. I think if I can only love my little sister for the rest of our lives that's all I will need. The Lewins ride in the rear seat, Phyllis and I in jump seats at their knees. My mother wears a black hat with a veil over her eyes [...] (365)

It is obvious, then, that Daniel's determination to write about his traumatic past after his sister's "summons" is not an easy task, since as Cathy Caruth has put it, the images of traumatic representation, although accurate and precise, are largely inaccessible to conscious control (1995:

151). In fact, as Daniel progressively recovers his memories, they are presented with astonishing accuracy and in minute detail, to an extent that he even wonders at times: “how do I know this?” (63). He constantly calls himself “a little criminal of perception” (37, 41), and remembers with unnatural precision aspects which are far beyond a child’s capacity. For instance, when the FBI has started to harass his parents, he proves to have had a general comprehension of everything that was happening:

Meanwhile, the newspapers have been reporting a chain action of arrests around the world. An English scientist. An American engineer. A half-dozen immigrants in Canada. Secrets have been stolen. The FBI has been finding these people, and convicting them in the same press release. A chain reaction. (133)

This phenomenon has been described by psychiatrist Dori Laub when analyzing his own status as a witness and his awareness as a child survivor (1995: 61). He explains that “it is as though this process of witnessing was of an event that happened on another level, and was not part of the mainstream of conscious life of a little boy” (1995: 62).

Yet, Daniel admits in his narration that there are still many things that he has not managed to recover: “I remember nothing of our trip to the Shelter” (197); or “just two or three images left from this period of our life” (183). In addition, Daniel’s memories are not always reliable and he repeats several times that what he just explained has most likely been invented: “Also, a heavy, old diamond shaped microphone from a real radio station. It broadcasts on a secret frequency directly to my father in his jail cell” (149). His problems remembering or knowing lead him to construct an unreliable narrative of the past made of scraps: his own fragmented, but precise memories, the trial transcript, his parent’s letters, accounts by the people involved, and his own invented passages. This fact links Daniel’s narrative to Sandra Gilbert’s notion of “writing wrong” (qtd. in Uytterschout 2008: 64–65). According to Gilbert, who writes about her own personal experiences, “survivors of trauma are left behind with so many questions that all they can (try to) do is filling the gaps of a story [...]. Survivors writing about their experiences are in fact *imagining* what happened” (2008: 65). This is precisely what happens towards the end of the novel, where Daniel invents an account of his parents’ trial and execution.

Similarly, in some sections of the novel there is a sense of simultaneous knowledge and denial as a result of resistance and

repression: there are certain events that Daniel is only able to partially narrate and which evoke a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory. This is the case with his account of the first weeks that he spends at the Shelter, where he explains that there has been an attempted sodomizing crime and that a kid has been caught with a knife he should not have had. Given Daniel's unreliability as a narrator and the information about his childhood that he has otherwise provided, it is possible to assume that he is trying to narrate his own experience, but he is caught "between the urge to know and the need to deny" (Herrero and Baelo-Allué 2011).

And yet, in spite of his awareness that his narration is fragmented, incomplete, and at times invented, Daniel feels the need to write the story of his trauma. On the one hand, he seeks to relieve his guilt, since he is convinced that "some of the force that propelled [Susan's] razor was supplied by [him]" (36); in other words, he feels responsible for his sister's attempt to commit suicide and assumes that it was his betrayal that led her to try and end her life; he feels that he has failed to support Susan in her own desperate attempt to find peace through the cleansing of the family name, which acts as a sense of summons. Thus, as Walker Bergström has rightly argued, "it is his sense of moral obligation to Susan that sets the plot in motion" (2010: 14). On the other hand, he is ashamed because he has always rejected his past, presumably because it was too painful and maybe also frustrating for him to try and remember what happened to his parents:

[A]ll my life I have been trying to escape from my relatives and I have been intricate in my run, but one way or another they are what you come upon around the corner, and the Lord God who is so frantic for recognition says you have to ask how they are and would they like something cool to drink, and what is it you can do for them this time. (37)

Thus, Daniel seeks to get rid of the burden that troubles his heart and find some peace. As characteristically happens to trauma victims, he has been silent for years about the traumatic event, troubled by visions that he cannot fully own. Therefore, by attempting to narrate the past he seeks to reach a catharsis and cure his heart of what has been ailing it for a long time:

“IS IT SO TERRIBLE NOT TO KEEP THE MATTER IN MY HEART, TO GET THE MATTER OUT OF MY HEART, TO EMPTY MY HEART OF THIS MATTER? WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH MY HEART?” (20)

...

“I, Daniel, was grieved, and the visions of my heart troubled me and I do not want to keep the matter in my heart.” (21)

Writers on trauma and memory such as Judith Herman, Suzette Henke and Dori Laub stress the importance of creating a narrative of the traumatic event as a strategy to work through the trauma and attenuate the painful memories or at least provide some peace to the traumatized subject. Herman highlights the necessity for the victim to reorganize “fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation” into “an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical contents” (1992: 177). Similarly, Laub argues that a victim must “re-externalize” the traumatic event by articulating and transmitting the story to an “empathic listener” and then “take it back again, inside” (Felman and Laub 1991: 68–69). Further, Suzette Henke points to autobiography as a form of “scriptotherapy,” which offers the possibility of “reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject ideologically” and “encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past” (1998, xv). This is precisely what Daniel seeks to achieve, and his dependency on the empathic reader becomes evident in his frequent notes and addresses to him or her throughout the narrative: “I know there is a you. There has always been a you. YOU: I will show you that I can do the electrocution” (359).

The question that arises, then, is whether Daniel’s relative success in retrieving the traumatic memories of the past and in narrating them to a more or less empathic reader has eased his condition and healed his ailment. His ability towards the end of the novel to narrate his parents’ death by electrocution, the single event that has been eluded throughout the narrative and yet has constantly hovered around it—and also the ability to do it in the past tense—indicates that he has managed, to a certain extent, to “assimilate” the traumatic experience into his model of the world, to borrow Granofsky’s phrasing of this phenomenon (1995: 8). However, as Daniel himself puts it, the imprint of Susan’s small warm hand in his hand is permanent (214). After all, as B. van der Kolk and O. van der Hart have found,

in the case of complete recovery [...] the story can be told, it has been given a place in the person’s life history. However, the traumatic experience/memory is, in a

sense, timeless. It cannot be transformed into a story placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end. If it can be told at all, it is still a (re)experience.
(1995: 177)

And so, the excessiveness of his behavior at his sister's funeral in the last pages of his account suggests that although he has managed to assimilate the past and achieved some closure, he will never overcome his guilt and will continue suffering the aftereffects of trauma.

IV

In conclusion, when seen in the light of the novel's political and historical content, its concern with trauma, violence and memory points to Doctorow's preoccupation with remembrance, which he defends as the best tool to build a better future. It is possible to conclude that the novelist intends to stress the fact that letting the unsettling and overwhelming remnants of the traumatic past fall into oblivion, or even silencing them, may eventually result in their repetition. It is widely acknowledged that "history tends to repeat itself" and, therefore, it is our duty to avoid the reenactment of situations of historical victimization, such as the one depicted in the novel. As a result, it can be concluded that *The Book of Daniel* seeks to denounce the way a number of social, economic and political structures have traditionally created, and may continue perpetuating situations of traumatic victimization in which the victim may even become, in turn, a perpetrator. Doctorow seeks to highlight the importance of listening to the fragmented voices of those who suffer the effects of trauma in order to develop new social and political perspectives that will guarantee a better future and avoid the repetition of society's darkest mistakes.

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