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Recovering Memory

John Frow

To speak of memory as *tekhne*, to deny that it has an unmediated relation to experience, is to say that the logic of textuality by which memory is structured has technological and institutional conditions of existence. Let me illustrate the enabling conditions of the 'textual' logic of memory by reference to the controversy over recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse.¹

In the course of the 1980s, in the United States and one or two other countries, but not elsewhere in the world, there occurred a well-documented explosion of memories, recalled in therapy often after many years of oblivion, of childhood sexual assault. These memories were validated by other sources of information about the prevalence of sexual abuse of children, and by a feminist politics of consciousness-raising about incest. Within this context, memories of abuse were largely accepted -- by therapists, by courts, and by most of the people affected - as historical fact. Many American states amended their statutes of limitation to refer to the time of remembrance of abuse rather than the time of the event. The typical pattern is that of a woman entering therapy to try to come to terms with either a diffuse unhappiness or more specific disorders or addictions, and then recovering a buried memory of her childhood which contradicts her 'normal' memory and reveals it to have been a screen. Recovery restores a sense of meaning to a life without order:

*The more I worked on the abuse, the more I remembered. First I remembered my brother, and then my grandfather. About six months after that I remembered my father. And then about a year later, I remembered my mother. I remembered the 'easiest' first and the 'hardest' last. Even though it was traumatic for me to realize that everyone in my family abused me, there was something reassuring about it. For a long time I'd felt worse than the initial memories should have made me feel, so remembering the rest of the abuse was actually one of the most grounding things to happen. My life suddenly made sense.*²

Increasingly, however, the status of these recovered memories became problematic: in part because of a challenge by psychologists to the working methods of many therapists, committed to believing their clients rather than to scepticism about the literal truth of recovered memories; but in part too because of a pattern in which recovered memories more and more often came to refer to abuse within Satanic cults, to the ritual mutilation and murder of children, to cannibalism and the breeding of babies for sacrifice, to abduction by aliens, and to past-life abuse. These memories look like fantasies, and they seem often to have been fostered in an atmosphere of group or community hysteria.

Take, almost at random, the case of James Rud, who was charged in 1983, in Jordan, Minnesota, with sexually abusing two children in his care. Rud in turn implicated eighteen other members of the community, and the circle widened until some sixty children in the town made accusations 'against their parents, neighbours, a long-deceased resident of the town, and certain mysterious strangers'; the accusations included participation in 'two interconnected sex rings also engaging in Satanic rites and the ritual mutilation and murder of children'. The children typically made these accusations only after extended questioning by police and counsellors over several months; and the charges that were laid (of unnoticed multiple murders in a town with a population of 2,700, for example) were inherently incredible.³

The case perhaps most often cited in the literature is that of Paul Ingram, who between November 1988 and April 1989 produced an astonishing series of self-incriminating 'memories' in what seems to have been a prolonged process of self-hypnosis, sustained by his own eagerness to respond appropriately to his interrogators and by a bidding war in which his two daughters made ever more bizarre accusations which Ingram then came to 'recognise' as true.⁴

The importance of the Ingram case lies in the fact that his memories were the confirmatory memories of a supposed abuser rather than the originating memories of a victim; and they led police to expect hard evidence (hitherto entirely lacking) of the operations of a Satanic cult, this one (in Olympia, Washington) allegedly having sacrificed something in the order of two hundred and fifty babies. What is so striking about the case, however, is the 'breathhtaking readiness on the part of its major players to form lasting "memories" on very slight provocation':⁵ not only Ingram and his daughters but a son, his wife, and two of his colleagues implicated in the supposed Satanic cult and in ongoing abuse of the daughters either at some time remembered major and almost certainly non-existent crimes, or at least suspected their own complicity even if not remembering it; and Ingram 'remembered', and came firmly to believe in, a pseudomemory suggested to him by a sociologist working as a consultant for the prosecution.

The repressed memory of satanic abuse may stand here as a figure of the wider linkage of psychic disturbance to a directly causative and repressed trauma. Despite the efforts of Frederick Crews and others to link the recovered-memory movement to a discredited Freud, that movement's storage-and-retrieval model of memory corresponds rather to Freud's earliest accounts of memory, predating the fundamental break that grounds psychic reality in fantasy and desire rather than in an immediate correspondence to extra-psychic reality.⁶

To say that memory is of the order of representation rather than a reflex of real events, and that its temporality is that of the reworking of earlier material rather than that of a causality working as a line of force from the past to the present, is not to deny the reality of traumatic experience, including childhood sexual assault, and its working through in present suffering; but it is to say that this experience is always reconstructed rather than recalled; that reconstruction takes place within the specific and formative circumstances of the present; and that causes are always attributed rather than known. Our attention should thus turn to those practices and structures within which recovered memories are produced.

Amongst the major supports of the recovered-memory movement is a large non-professional literature

of self-help manuals, of which the most influential has been *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis.⁷ The primary addressee of many of the manuals is a reader who has no memories of childhood sexual abuse;⁸ for this reader, the work performed by the manuals is that of producing a recognition through the conduct of spiritual exercises directed to the problem of disbelief.

Two major epistemological tools underly this process. The first is the principle that to disbelieve is to be in a state of 'denial', and so complicit with the systematic concealment that characterizes abusive families.⁹ The second, inverse principle is a 'positive' conversion of disbelief into proof of its opposite: 'The existence of profound disbelief is an indication that memories are real', and the absence of memories of abuse doesn't mean none took place:¹⁰

Belief itself is a matter of exercise, of practice, of imagining oneself into the truth. Thus Fredrickson recommends that the reader should 'Let yourself know what the most hopeless or shameful problem in your life is. Try saying to yourself three or four times a day for one week, "I believe this problem is about my repressed memories of abuse". After a week, write down or talk over with a friend how you see the problem now. Speculate on how it may relate to how you were abused'. Various exercises follow. One is the use of a checklist of symptoms which will 'highlight common warning signals of repressed memories' and may provide 'clues to your abuse'.¹¹ Typically, the symptoms are of the greatest generality, and, as Carol Tavris writes of the checklists scattered throughout *The Courage to Heal*, 'The same list could be used to identify oneself as someone who loves too much, someone who suffers from self-defeating personality disorder, or a mere human being in the late twentieth century.... Nobody doesn't fit it.'¹²

The next layer of exercises specifically addresses the generation of memories and it encompasses a range of techniques: guided visualization; hypnosis, specifically age regression; the interpretation of memories apparently stored in the body and recovered through massage or other forms of bodily manipulation; the analysis of dreams; the invocation of an 'inner child' to reveal in dreams or meditation the secrets of abuse; art therapy, usually employing an 'automatic' technique for producing images; free-associative writing; the keeping of a journal imagining or describing childhood abuse; rage and grief therapy in which repressed emotions are acted out; and group therapy.¹³

Paul Ingram, a self-taught master, developed an elaborate meditation technique which he called 'praying on' and which involved four stages: first, he would pray in seclusion; then he would relax his body and reduce external stimuli; next, he would empty his mind of all thoughts, producing a sensation that he described as a 'white fog'; and finally he would dwell upon the images suggested to him by his interrogators, elaborating them into detailed and vivid narratives.¹⁴

This state of self-induced trance has the cumulative effect, not just of generating memories but of reinforcing belief in them.¹⁵ The culmination of the spiritual exercises is the elaboration of a counter-hermeneutic in which the revealed past is played off against the previously accepted framework of memory. It is here that the role of survivor groups, the importance of which is emphasized in all the manuals, becomes clear: they are anti-communities to the family of origin, and - similar in this to many small religious communities - their task is to sustain a counter-reality.

Recovered memory is a counter-memory, elaborated within a powerful therapeutic apparatus formed by the transference relation to the therapist, the reality created and sustained by support groups, the

framework of expectations that memory of childhood sexual assault is a goal to be achieved, and the systematic deployment of a set of spiritual exercises designed to produce such memories and to inculcate belief in them.

Beyond this, however, this counter-reality is built upon and absorbs a broad folk-cultural reality which includes such familiar entities as satanic cults, past lives, and contact with alien civilizations. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of such books as *Satan's Underground* and *Michelle Remembers*,¹⁶ or of such celebrity 'survivors' as Roseanne Barr Arnold.

Satanism, past lives, and recovered memory are the daily stuff of tabloid journalism and of television talk shows. The day before Paul Ingram's daughter Julie wrote a letter accusing him and the circle of friends with whom he played poker of sexually abusing her - a charge which culminated in elaborate accounts of Satanic worship and ritual murder - he and his family sat down and watched together a prime-time Geraldo Rivera special entitled *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground*, 'one of the most widely watched documentaries in television history'.¹⁷

Recovered memories are recalled as much from the culture as from the archives of individual memory.

References

¹ I have drawn in particular on: Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory* (New York: St Martins Press, 1994); Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watter, *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria* (New York: Scribners, 1994); Mark Pendergrast, *Victims of Memory: Incest Accusations and Shattered Lives* (Hinesburg, Vermont: Upper Access, Inc., 1995); Hollida Wakefield and Ralph Underwager, *Return of the Furies: An Investigation into Recovered Memory Therapy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994); Michael Yapko, *Suggestions of Abuse: True and False Memories of Childhood Sexual Trauma* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

² Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

³ Denis J. Brion, 'The Hidden Persistence of Witchcraft', *Law and Critique* 4:2 (1993), pp. 228-9.

⁴ Extended accounts of the Ingram case can be found in Lawrence Wright, 'Remembering Satan - Parts I and II', *The New Yorker*, May 17 and May 24, 1993, pp. 60-81 and 54-76 (substantially reprinted in Wright, *Remembering Satan* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994)); Richard Ofshe, 'Inadvertent Hypnosis During Interrogation: False Confession Due to Dissociative State; Mis-Identified Multiple Personality and the Satanic Cult Hypothesis', *The International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* XL:3 (1992), pp. 125-56; Ofshe and Watter, *Making Monsters*; Loftus and Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory*; Lenore Terr, *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories, Lost and Found* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁵ Frederick Crews, 'The Revenge of the Repressed', *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 17, 1994, p. 59.

⁶ Ned Lukacher's *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), contains a particularly astute reading of the implications of this break for the Freudian theory of memory, which continued to oscillate ambivalently between a notion of the 'primal scene' as an ontologically undecidable event and as recollection.

⁷ Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, 2nd ed. (1988; rpt. New York: HarperCollins, 1992) Others include: Carol Poston and Karen Lison, *Reclaiming Our Lives: Hope for Adult Survivors of Incest* (New York: Bantam, 1990); Steven Farmer, *Adult Children of Abusive Parents* (New York: Ballantine, 1989); E. Sue Blume, *Secret Survivors:*

Uncovering Incest and its After effects in Women (New York: Ballantine, 1990); Renee Fredrickson, *Repressed Memories: A Journey to Recovery from Sexual Abuse* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); John Bradshaw, *Homecoming* (New York: Bantam, 1990).

⁸ Ofshe and Watters set up somewhat more forcefully the opposition between the two kinds of address: 'Unlike treatments intended to aid patients suffering from the shock of rape or grappling with lifelong memories of childhood sexual abuse, the axiom of recovered memory therapy is that the patient will have no knowledge of the sexual trauma before treatment. Patients can begin the therapy with no memories of abuse and finish with the belief that they suffered endless horrible molestations or rapes - often by their parents. Recovered memory therapists expect that patients will not only be amnesiac for the trauma in their past but that they will also disbelieve the therapist's initial suggestion that they suffered sexual assaults as children'. Ofshe and Watters, *Making Monsters*, p.1.

⁹ Fredrickson, *Repressed Memories*, p. 224: 'If you have a strong denial system, you can work on dismantling it with a skilled therapist ... Once you recognize you are in denial, talk it out in therapy and with friends who are supportive of your recovery. Avoid talking to people who are in their own denial and therefore enable yours'.

¹⁰ Bass and Davis, *The Courage to Heal*, p. 26. 'It is rare that someone thinks she was sexually abused and then later discovers she wasn't. The progression usually goes the other way, from suspicion to confirmation. If you genuinely think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, there's a strong likelihood that you were. If you're not sure, keep an open mind. Be patient with yourself. Over time, you'll become more clear.' The third edition also includes a postscript, 'Honoring the Truth: A Response to the Backlash', which describes all criticism of recovered-memory therapy as a 'backlash against survivors of child sexual abuse' (p. 477). (The concept of a 'backlash' is further elaborated in the special issue, 'Backlash Against Psychotherapy', of *The Journal of Psychohistory* 22:3, Winter 1995.)

¹¹ Fredrickson, *Repressed Memories*, p. 32.

¹² Carol Tavris, 'Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine', p. 1.

¹³ Fredrickson, *Repressed Memories*, p. 97ff; Loftus and Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, p.141; Bass and Davis, *The Courage to Heal* passim;

¹⁴ Ofshe, 'Inadvertent Hypnosis During Interrogation', p.145; Wright, 'Remembering Satan - Part II', p. 65.

¹⁵ Pendergrast, *Victims of Memory* p. 90: 'With repeated visualization, or the verbal repetition of the stories, they become more real. Memory, then, is largely a product of rehearsal'.

¹⁶ Lauren Stratford, *Satan's Underground* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1988); M. Smith and L. Pazder, *Michelle Remembers* (New York: Congdon and Lattes, 1980).

¹⁷ Wright, 'Remembering Satan - Part I', p. 80. On Satanic cults, cf. Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993).