A Genealogy of Suffering

KJ Gilchrist

Abstract
Janoff-Bulman (1992) has described trauma not as resident in the traumatic event itself but resident in how the event shatters a person's collective assumptions about the world, self, and how life works. People's collective assumptions exist at the center of their being; in consequence, when a traumatic event violates or questions the validity of their assumptions, the "wound" affects their very identities. This is the loss of the assumptive world.

In facing a traumatic event, victims enter a process that leads them, ideally, to rebuild their assumptions by incorporating new understanding of the event. They may thus continue to live with awareness that such events occur, yet without being overwhelmed by their existence.

Missing from studies treating the traumatic loss of an assumptive world is the exploration of suffering within the process of trauma: to what extent is suffering a part of the trauma and the rebuilding of assumptions? Without providing understanding on this question, studies no less imply what is essentially a genealogy of suffering. Suffering occurs within the space between the traumatic event and the rebuilding of assumptions. In very fact, I contend, the loss of the assumptive world is the beginning of suffering.

Within Modernism's literature (referenced in psychology, including the DSM IV) exist not only accounts of shattered assumptive worlds but also the corresponding suffering; works like Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" (1925) and Eric Remarque's "The Road Back" (1931) in particular serve to illustrate both trauma and suffering.

Keywords: suffering, trauma, assumptive world, rebuilding, recovery

*****

1. Trauma Studies
Trauma studies in the last two decades have illustrated, albeit obliquely, how all suffering is directly related to the process victims of trauma enter into when a traumatic event occurs. These studies have further served to define both the nature and origins of suffering, but appear, ironically, without much use of or attention to the concept of (or the very word) "suffering." Nonetheless, the studies allow us to trace the genealogy of suffering as it originates in post-traumatic processes. I have come to believe that the beginning of suffering is resident in a traumatic event which brings about the loss of a victim's assumptive world, and the suffering is not alleviated until the assumptive world is rebuilt in a way allowing the victim to live life in a "normative" fashion.

First, one must define both a traumatic event and an "assumptive world." One diagnostic manual delineates trauma as "a psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of usual human experience, [evoking] significant symptoms of distress in most people."¹

Janoff-Bulman (1992) has described trauma as not being resident in the traumatic event itself—the explosion that wounds a soldier, the car crash that injures the driver, the cancer that a parent learns her child has—but rather as resident in how the traumatic event shatters a person's collective body of assumptions about the world, oneself, and how life is supposed to work. "Three fundamental assumptions" that most people hold are

- The world is benevolent
- The world is meaningful
- The self is worthy.²

Even if some individuals do not hold these exact assumptions about the world, still they hold basic assumptions of how the cosmos works: "everyone unwittingly develops a personal theory of reality that includes a self-theory and a world-theory."³ One individual, it is true, can react very differently from another victim of a shared traumatic event (one soldier reacts relatively normally at an explosion which kills a friend while another soldier might no longer function in his duties due to the requisite psychological stress); these different reactions are due to variances within their collective assumptions, yet all individuals construct these inner models.
These theories comprise what C. M. Parkes has termed the “assumptive world” and are “learned and confirmed by the experience of many years.” This “network of diverse theories and representations constitutes our assumptive world” and “reflect and guide our interactions in the world and generally enable us to function effectively.”

Despite the fact that we seldom articulate, hold up for inspection, or even notice our assumptive worlds—variously called paradigms, ideologies, beliefs, schemas, or, as I call them, collective assumptions—their importance is not merely “a cognitive matter.” As Epstein has asserted, “the essence of a person’s personality is the implicit theory of self and the world that the person constructs.” As Landsman asserts, without this essence “we do not fully exist.” Our assumptive world creates, as it were, a self-narrative (or “storying”) from which we derive our identity as well as setting a world-narrative of us as a protagonist within our life story, and our assumptions for these narratives provide the rules for how the world is supposed to work (not only in the present, but in future) and our place in those workings.

When a traumatic event occurs, the effect is to “shatter” the victim’s assumptive world, or to deliver “profound invalidation” of that world. The traumatic event is unaccounted for in the collective body of assumptions about life, self, and the world that individuals hold. As it fails to make sense in terms of prior assumptions, it creates a “crisis of meaning” in how victims are to understand a number of things. The sense of “meaning” that victims either possess or are missing as they attempt to understand an event is directly correspondent to the suffering they experience. Victims not only struggle to understand, give meaning to, the nature of the event, but also the nature of a world where such things can occur and—that world in relation to oneself; because the assumptive world is at the center of one’s being and personality, victims also tend to question their self worth, blame themselves for the event having occurred, and feel guilt for surviving the event. And because the assumptive world is at the center of a person’s being, when trauma ruptures, violates, or questions the validity of their assumptions, victims experiences a "wounding" of their very being.

Victims then enter into a very involved process which has as its aim the rebuilding of their assumptive world. And until that assumptive world is rebuilt, victims suffer a loss of meaning, no matter the nature of the traumatic event—whether it was a rape, a mugging, an explosion, a crash, a severe illness, the death of a loved one.

The dilemma faced by a victim is thus:

Either an event must be interpreted and explained in such a way as to fit our schemas, which is a difficult and painful task, or our schemas must be altered, an even more daunting task.

What lies between the traumatic event and such rebuilding or revision of one’s inner world is “so painful that it brings to a halt, temporarily, the processing of traumatic material.” The victim is like the proverbial bird that sits, stunned, after hitting a window. What lies before the victim is the “arduous task of reconstructing an assumptive world, a task that requires a delicate balance between confronting and avoiding trauma-related thoughts, feelings, and images”; and in successful rebuilding are those who “can move on with their lives, which no longer seem to be wholly defined by their victimization. Victims have become survivors.” There may also be the case (as with the murder of a family member) that an event remains “unresolved” and “does not allow for a full engagement with life and one’s future.” In such a case, suffering continues unabated. It is “an experience,” as Cathy Caruth has expressed it, “not yet fully owned.”

At the moment of trauma, then, is the beginning of suffering, for suffering, in this view, is the loss of all or part of our assumptive world; it is not merely a loss of a view of the world but of our central sense of self. I contend that Modernism had at its center tendencies that produce trauma for both individuals and society collectively. These tendencies may be clearly observed in the literature emerging from Modernism and the suffering of characters depicted within Modernist works. And since the Modernist model emerged, I believe we have not recovered (either within memory or by establishing a new assumptive world) from the suffering that began with Modernism.

Central to Modernism is a rejection of what had become the traditional body of assumptions that the western world in the late 19th Century had come to accept; these included—beyond rigid structures for class, race, and gender—optimistic, even blindly melioristic assumptions that the world was certain, knowable, and that progress (due to increasing knowledge and technology) was inevitable. Paul Fussell has remarked it is “a paring down of
everything to minimal size, including language and ideas of grandeur, and ideas of a possibility of the state making everybody happy [...] You cut out everything that has deceived you and throw it away."

The Modernists rejected previous world models to establish new assumptions describing the world and the individual’s part in it, including assumptions for music, art, politics, morality, technology, and—not least—our own psychology as Freud, Jung, and others emerged. All traditional ways of relating to the world had been questioned, undermined, and deemed insufficient. And the First World War itself shattered not only soldiers’ assumptive worlds, but the western world’s assumptions collectively. The result is a collective, societal suffering which, to alleviate, modernists sought new assumptions. As Hemingway’s character, Brett, explains the importance of their new belief system, in contrast to the earlier societal assumptions they rejected, “it’s sort of what we have instead of God.”

2. Mrs. Dalloway (1925)

The phenomena of suffering in Mrs. Dalloway are divided between two people, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith; Septimus represents the suffering of veterans of WWI while Clarissa represents her society’s suffering after the war.

Septimus’ collective assumptions before the war are symbolized by Shakespeare and a young woman he loved, Miss Isabel Pole, two features that symbolize the certain, idyllic, and reliable world he believed in. The war, however, shattered that world when his close friend, an officer named Evans, is blown up as the final shells of the war fell. After seeing Evans die, Septimus developed a continuing and increasing numbness toward life, and retreated into a state of mind that allowed him to defer facing both the past reality of Evans’ death and any present realities that might seek to further shatter his existence. He experiences a hyper-reality—delusions of messages being sent him by Evans, hearing music of the trees, and other such modes of reality-evasive denial that allow him to defer observing further realities like those that brought on his trauma and suffering. But foremost, when “the last shells missed him [...] he watched them explode with indifference [...] he could not feel.” Yet Septimus’ overriding reaction to Evans’ death corresponds to Caruth’s observation that “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it.”

Septimus is diagnosed by the doctors Holmes and Bradshaw who believe, apropos of the time, that he has “nothing the matter with him”; Septimus is eventually labeled as a “coward” despite summoning the courage to again face what might be terrible realities, such as those he faced in war:

He began, very cautiously, to open his eyes, to see [...] But real things—real things were too exciting. He must be cautious. He would not go mad [...] And so, gathering courage, he looked [...]"

He looks around at everyday items, none of which he finds terrible, as he feared. But then he risks all and looks at his wife, Rezia; it takes immense courage because the last person he looked at intently was Evans, who, being blown up, was a horrific sight which left Septimus in his state of suffering:

He shaded his eyes so that he might see only a little of her face at a time, first the chin, then the nose, then the forehead, in case it were deformed, or had some terrible mark on it. But no, there she was, perfectly natural, sewing [...]"

We see further that he comes to not only face present realities, but the past of Evans’ death: “Why then rage and prophesy [...]? For he had a sense.” He has faced the past and present negative realities and has done so courageously, establishing no less an identity that Woolf indicates he has set forth in defiance of the dangers of the world he inhabits.

Clarissa Dalloway, the protagonist of the novel, is civilian society’s parallel to the veteran Septimus. While the onset of Septimus’ suffering was immediate and sudden, Clarissa’s suffering has been cumulative through her years of traumatic realizations about people and her world. Her world is not certain, stable, and carries a sense of impending doom lurking round each corner, and beyond slighting and narrow opinions of people that question her assumptive worlds and identities. Yet, as Woolf explores Clarissa’s inner world throughout the day which the novel covers, she illustrates that the unremarkable events of daily life, both past and present, carry trauma—and requisite
suffering. Clarissa has built and attempts to hold on to an assumptive world set as an act of defiance against life’s negative realities. Through both Septimus and Clarissa we learn that the world is not certain, stable, idyllic, and our assumptions are easily shattered by both catastrophic events like war and the cumulative negative realities of daily, domestic life.

3. The Road Back (1931)

Eric Remarque is better known for his novel All Quiet on the Western Front (1928) than he is for the sequel to that novel, The Road Back. The collective assumptions instilled in the young men—prescribed by their families and teachers before the war—and the shattering of those assumptions are illustrated in many points of All Quiet, a novel used in the DSM III to illustrate tendencies in trauma victims suffering PTSD. Paul, the protagonist of All Quiet, explains that

We were still crammed full of vague ideas which gave to life and to the war also an ideal and almost a romantic character.29

Having believed that the “glory” of war would serve their fatherland, even in the event of their deaths, the young men encounter the stunning realities of the front and find that “the war has swept us away [.....] We know only that in some strange and melancholy way we have become a waste land.”30 In another place, one character observes,

[...] for weeks together a man might feel nothing. Then suddenly there would come some new, unforeseen thing and it would break him down.”31

During his leave, Paul is repelled by those at home who blithely retain their idyllic assumptions and certainties; he remarks, “now I see that I have been crushed without knowing it. I find I do not belong here any more, it is a foreign world.”32 Should these young men survive the war, how shall they return home and re-enter domestic life?

That is what Remarque’s sequel, The Road Back, traces through Ernst, the protagonist: after war ceases, the return of those who suffered years of traumatization in the trenches. Upon returning home, they cannot re-enter the old dispensation with its collective assumptions. Ernst suffers further isolation as those at home ask about his “experiences” at the front, but he “cannot talk about the things out there with civilians.”33 The novel is, in total, an exploration of how the soldiers attempt to fit into the old ways of life, yet without the assumptive worlds they once shared with those at home. They must build new assumptions that will allow them to co-exist with civilians who were never traumatized by the horrors of the front, but most of all, they “want to be men again, not war machines!”34

As Remarque shows, they all suffer the marks of trauma: intrusive memories and flashbacks of traumatic events;35 they are restless and fidget,36 cannot concentrate,37 feel guilt for surviving,38 resist authority figures,39 and, among other things, suffer a continual sense that “Damn it, but the world is clean upside down.”40 All together, and in various degrees, the persistent effects of trauma beggar their understanding, and until they can rebuilt an assumptive world that allows them to function at least nominally in life again, they suffer through their days.

One character, Tjaden, borrows Ernst’s old books in an effort to rebuild his assumptive world:

I’d like to know, for instance, what mankind is up to that such a thing could happen and how it all came about [.....] We had a very different notion of what manner of thing life was before, if you remember.”41

Yet, as happens with any who suffer trauma, various comrades with whom Ernst served fail to re-establish assumptions that allow them to function effectively in home-life: the wound, in effect, will not heal. One soldier, Rahe, cannot find a way to live; he travels from Germany back to France, finds his old trench line where his comrades fought, died, and are buried, and in a night filled with delusions Rahe succumbs to his suffering:

At one shrill burst he recognizes the empty jaws where the truth, the valour and the life of a generation disappeared. The thought chokes him, it destroys him.42

Standing before the crosses of his comrades’ graves in the old trench line, he shoots himself. In contrast to Rahe,
Ernst asserts “I work to dig out again what was buried during the years of shells and machine guns,” and “no doubt I shall always be a little inattentive and nowhere quite at home — but I shall probably never be wholly unhappy either—for something will always be there to sustain me [....]”

The wound of trauma, as it violates our inner world, is the beginning of suffering; this has long been seen in both psychological and modern (if not earlier) literature. That suffering continues, as with a physical wound to a limb, until there is healing. Even after healing, a scar may remain, but the limb becomes useful once again.

Notes


5 Janoff-Bulman, Shattered, 5.


12 Ibid., 20.

13 Ibid., 18.

14 Ibid., 18.


16 Landsman, “Crises,” 19.

17 Cathy Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995), 151.


22 Woolf, *Dalloway*, 96.


25 Ibid., 168.

26 Ibid., 159.

27 Ibid., 160.

28 Ibid., 160.


30 Ibid., 20.


32 Remarque, *All Quiet*, 168.

33 Remarque, *Road*, 69.

34 Ibid., 65.

35 Ibid., 71.

36 Ibid., 70-71.

37 Ibid., 110

38 Ibid., 76.

39 Ibid., 69, 82-83.

40 Ibid., 101.

41 Ibid., 110.

42 Ibid., 331.

43 Ibid., 342.

44 Ibid., 343.
Bibliography


