

‘MIND THE GAP’: POWERS OF HORROR AND TRAUMA IN ALI  
 SMITH’S *HOTEL WORLD*

Gemma López Sánchez  
 Universidad de Barcelona  
 gemma\_lopez@ub.edu

Ali Smith’s *Hotel World* is the story of a fatal accident and its traumatic consequences. Hotel chambermaid Sara Wilby bets a co-worker that she can stuff herself into the hotel’s dumbwaiter. She wins the bet, but the elevator cable breaks, the dumbwaiter drops, and Sara crashes inside it. The present essay will discuss the narrative consequences of Sara Wilby’s death through the critical theory of *trauma*, particularly in its repercussions upon discourse. Special emphasis will be placed on the idea that trauma is not just a crisis in the memory of the traumatized subject but a crisis in representation and narration. The main object of study of the essay will be trauma’s disturbance of discourse through gaps and its points of contact with *the abject*. Ali Smith proposes the ‘purification’ of the abject through the Logos, one of the ways in which trauma might be dealt with.

Keywords: contemporary fiction; Ali Smith; trauma theory; abjection; Julia Kristeva

---

‘CUIDADO CON EL HUECO’: LOS PODERES DEL HORROR Y EL TRAUMA EN  
 HOTEL WORLD DE ALI SMITH

*Hotel World narra un accidente y sus traumáticas consecuencias. Una camarera de hotel, Sara Wilby, apuesta con otro trabajador que puede encajarse en el montaplato. Sara gana la apuesta, pero el cable se rompe y el montacargas se precipita al vacío, aplastándola. Este artículo examina las consecuencias narrativas de la muerte de Sara a través de la teoría crítica del ‘trauma’; en especial, de sus repercusiones en el discurso. Se hace especial hincapié en la idea de que el trauma no es sólo una crisis en la memoria del sujeto traumatizado, sino una crisis en la representación y la narración. El principal objeto de estudio del artículo serán, pues, las alteraciones traumáticas del discurso a través de los vacíos y sus vínculos con lo abyecto. Ali Smith apuesta por la purificación de lo abyecto a través del Logos, una de las formas en las que puede hacerse frente al trauma.*

*Palabras clave: ficción contemporánea; Ali Smith; teoría del trauma; lo abyecto; Julia Kristeva*

“Las palabras ... poseen una vida propia y, por consiguiente, son mortales ...”  
Jean Baudrillard (2002: 9)

“... who, I ask you, would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?”  
Julia Kristeva (1982: 209)

“It all began just like that. I had said *nothing* I hadn't said a word”  
Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night* (1934: 3)

## 1. Introduction

The literary production of Ali Smith (Inverness, 1962) has been described within the field of contemporary British fiction as an exponent of “radical fiction” (Bradford 2007: 70), whereas the entry devoted to the author in the 2004 edition of *The Routledge Guide to Modern British Fiction* describes her as “a writer of otherness in every sense: fractured language, fractured fictional devices, fractured realities...” (McRae and Carter 2004: 138). Both radicalism and fracture are present in *Hotel World*, Ali Smith's second novel, published in 2001, four years after her first novel, *Like*. Before the appearance of these two novels, Smith was well-known for her collections of short stories, but it was the publication of her much-acclaimed *The Accidental* (2004, Whitbread Novel Award) which increased the popularity of the writer. In the equally radical and fractured *The Accidental*, Smith continues to explore the themes inaugurated by her two previous novels: grief, loss, love, and the narrative effects of individual trauma.

The present article will concentrate on Smith's *Hotel World*, the story of a fatal accident and its traumatic consequences. Young hotel chambermaid Sara Wilby bets a co-worker that she can stuff herself into the hotel's dumbwaiter. She wins the bet but, soon after, the elevator cable breaks, the dumbwaiter drops, and Sara crashes inside it. Sara's death has repercussions which are minutely analyzed through six compelling sections narrated by five different characters: Sara's ghost ('Past'); Else, a homeless lady ('Future Conditional'); Lise, the hotel's receptionist ('Present historic'); Penny, a journalist ('Perfect'); Clare, Sara's sister ('Future in the past'), and the narration is retaken in the last section by Sara's ghost ('Present'). These six sections compose a catalogue of decentered abject/subjects/objects, the dis coherent identities of which appear, disappear and reappear in the depersonalised (no-)context provided by the Global Hotels international chain: “*It doesn't matter where you are in the world if you're anywhere near a Global Hotel. You could be, literally, anywhere*” (Smith 2001: 180). The present essay will analyse the narrative consequences of Sara's death through the critical theory of *trauma*; particularly the repercussions trauma may have upon discourse. Special emphasis will be placed on the representation of trauma through repression and silence, whereby I will establish links with the Kristevan notion of *the abject*.

My proposal here will be to establish a connection between Ali Smith's text and Julia Kristeva's suggestion of ‘purification’ of the abject through the Logos. It is my belief that the novelist proposes such a ‘purification’ as one of the ways in which trauma might be dealt with.

## 2. Powers of horror: Abject discourses of trauma

“Not me. Not that. But not nothing either”  
Julia Kristeva (1982: 2)

The centrality of Sara's ludicrous, absurd death in *Hotel World* transforms it into the traumatic event which governs the narrative evolution –or lack of– of the rest of the characters in the novel. Developed primarily in the 1990s, trauma theory is based on the work of such theorists as Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra.<sup>1</sup> In spite of their different fields of specialisation (both Felman and Caruth are literary theorists whereas LaCapra is a historian) the three would agree with Peter Buse's statement that “Trauma is a kind of brutalizing shock” (Buse 2001: 173). So brutalizing that the subject is compelled to unconsciously relive it or act it out, as originally argued by Sigmund Freud's seminal essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) where the Austrian psychoanalyst develops his theory of *repetition compulsion*. Freud's essay is considered the historical and intellectual antecedent of trauma theory, and his declaration that “through repetition a trauma from the past may eventually be recognized and mastered” (Buse 2001: 174) is considered the most compelling definition of trauma dynamics to this day. The subject's response to trauma is exposed by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), where she argues that:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (Caruth 1996: 11)

For Caruth, a classical example of trauma would be the “soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him” (Caruth 1996: 11), which is coherent with Freud's articulation of repetition compulsion shortly after World War I, where soldiers came back home suffering from what was at the time diagnosed as shell-shock: “Unable to come to terms with what they saw and experienced on the front, soldiers found its horrors returning to them later, after they had left the actual fighting” (Buse 2001: 174). It is the task of trauma theory to analyse “The vexed, and often impossible, difficulties associated with remembering and understanding [traumatic] events” (Buse 2001: 174-75). The war is a prolific field for traumatic experiences, but this may not come through as a particularly shocking revelation. Trauma's open associations with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), a condition first diagnosed in the United States in 1980 in the wake of the Vietnam War, do not divert the extension of its theoretical usage beyond the experience of war. Trauma theory, then, is also employed to cover such grounds as sexual trauma, or any other traumatic experiences which are dealt with in

---

<sup>1</sup> In Spain, work on trauma theory is carried out by the Research Group *Contemporary Narrative in English* directed by Professor Susana Onega (Universidad de Zaragoza), particularly through their project *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary Narrative in English*.

similar ways by the subject.<sup>2</sup> Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin speak of “the unspeakable or the unwitnessable” which “makes its incognisable mark on the mind as traumatic memory” (2006: 11).

This would be the approach of other theorists on the subject, such as Elaine Showalter, who, in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media Culture* (1997), focuses on hysteria as a culturally permissible language of distress used by those who are silenced; Ruth Leys, who proves that PTSD “is fundamentally a disorder of memory” in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000: 2); and Nancy K. Miller and Jason D. Togaw who suggest that the discourse produced by the Holocaust “has affected other domains of meditation on the forms the representation of extreme human suffering seems to engender and require” (2002: 4).

All these approaches prove that, provided that none of the main theorists on trauma are qualified in medical conditions, “trauma theory’ is mainly linguistic in orientation, interested for the most part in trauma as it relates to literary and historical issues such as representation, narrative and truth” (Buse 2001: 175). This aspect of trauma theory, its connections with issues of representation and narrative, will be deployed throughout the present article in an attempt to prove that this is a helpful theory for our reading of not simply this novel but also a substantial group of British works.<sup>3</sup> Like Miller and Togaw, I retain the word *trauma* in relation to the individual, beyond its original associations with the Holocaust, and despite its potential overuse because, like them, I believe it “enfolds the diverse accounts of broken boundaries” (Miller and Togaw 2002: 10) and it has come to describe a whole cultural *Zeitgeist*.

Representation and narrative are linked to what is said and what is not said; in other words, what is repressed. One of the issues concerning trauma and the ways in which subjects deal with it is its “inherent forgetting” (Caruth 1996: 17). As Peter Buse argues, “[The forgetting] is inherent because the experience is too extreme to be assimilated by consciousness, to enter into the regular roots of memory, and it is therefore repressed,

---

<sup>2</sup> As Peter Buse states, “trauma theory can be seen as one aspect of the much larger field of Holocaust studies” (Buse 2001: 175), which arose in American Departments of English and Comparative Literature in the 1990s. He connects this interest, albeit indirectly, with the trauma caused by the 1998 revelations about Paul de Man’s wartime activities, when he wrote many articles for the collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir*. Shoshana Felman’s chapter 5 on *Testimony* busies itself exclusively with de Man’s post-war silence about his activities in his early twenties. According to Buse, “[Felman] uses de Man’s silence as an exemplary instance of the necessary silence of the witness in the face of the horror of the Holocaust” (2001: 176). Although de Man’s story is tangential to my discussion in this essay, the reference to silence is interesting to me for reasons I will disclose later.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Contemporary British Novel*, Phillip Tew devotes his sixth chapter to “The Post-millennial, 9/11 and the Traumatological” (2007: 159-90). Amongst the myriad of novels discussed in the chapter, readers may find such diverse texts as Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, Jeanette Winterson’s *Art and Lies*, and Ali Smith’s *The Accidental*.

pushed out of consciousness. Only in its circuitous returns, then, is it experienced at all" (2001: 177).<sup>4</sup>

The circumstance of Sara's death and its traumatic consequences allow Smith to reflect on the power of its inherent forgetting and its circuitous return; that is, what is not actually there, what should not be there, what is made to disappear, what is discarded, what should be gone. Smith does so through an interesting display of silences, voids, mistaken words and a multiplicity of perversions which she performs on her characters' narrative progressions, "a kind of discursive dysfunctionality", according to Raoul Eshelman (2005). For Shoshana Felman:

Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim's narrative –the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma- does indeed begin with *someone who testifies to an absence ...* (Felman and Laub 1992: 57, italics added)

The horror of what cannot be said – the absence – leaves a (blank) palimpsest on Smith's text, a physical gap which should have been filled – as the dumbwaiter is successfully filled with Sara's body – by the expected word. Words have a life of their own and are, therefore, mortal, as Baudrillard reminds us in *Mots de passe (Contraseñas)*; words, in their disappearance, leave author, character and reader dumb, just like the dumbwaiter, the alpha and omega of the story: "This is how it ended. I climbed into the, the" (Smith 2001: 6). Felman and Laub would explain it thus:

a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in the excess of our frames of reference. (Felman and Laub 1992: 5)

The word that is not there, however, may have more power than the word that is there. When the sentence contains a gap that the reader needs to fill up with meaning, it is the missing word, the gap itself, which calls our attention by becoming present in its absence, by placing all our scrutiny onto the excess in the frame of reference. The word which, just like its speaker (Sara's ghost), becomes abject, rejected; the abject word and the abject speaker, both "jettisoned object[s]" which are "radically excluded and draw... [the reader, the character, the author] toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2); that is, to the event in the excess of our frame of reference which precludes the registration of trauma.

Originally published in France in 1980, and translated two years later into English by Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* by Julia Kristeva proves an insightful debate on the issue of the abject. In the words of Kristeva, the abject is "[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (1982: 2); the abject is that which the subject does not want to recognize as its own (hence the link between abjection and repression), but also something which is not completely outside the subject nor absolutely alien to it: "A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of

---

<sup>4</sup> As Ruth Leys puts it, "The experience of trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present" (2000: 2).

meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me” (Kristeva 1982: 2). The abject weight of meaninglessness is, symbolically, that which crushes Sara into the dumbwaiter and transforms her (and her discourse) into the abject itself: “... it is death that most violently represents the strange state in which a non-subject, a stray, having lost its non-objects, imagines nothingness through the ordeal of abjection” (Kristeva 1982: 25).

The abject has the power of horror, the horror which leads the subject to reject it because it does not want to recognize it as part of itself. In the words of Georges Bataille: “Abjection ... is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things” (in Kristeva 1982: 56). Abjection, both for Bataille and Kristeva, is the result of being unable to perform the exclusion on the abject, since “[t]he logic of prohibition ... founds the abject” (Kristeva 1982: 64). The abject has the power of horror because it constantly shows the subject what it permanently should be thrusting aside. The abject has the power of horror because it “disturbs identity, system, order”, because it does not “respect borders, positions, rules”; it is an “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982: 4). Both *of* the subject and *not of* the subject. Both a version of the subject and, importantly, a (per)version of the subject which “neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; [it] turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (Kristeva 1982: 15). The abject returns to remind the subject that it belongs to it, turning aside (grammatical) rules and laws, corrupting them, taking advantage of them. Ironically, in *catch 22*, “[t]he abject lies ... in the way one speaks; it is verbal communication, it is the word that discloses the abject. But at the same time, the Word alone purifies from the abject ...” (Kristeva 1982: 23). I will return to this issue in the next section of the present essay.

“Remember you must die”, Muriel Spark reminds us from one of the epigraphs opening *Hotel World*. The whole first section of the book is a constant reminder of the fall inside the dumbwaiter, the subsequent death of Sara, and the traumatic consequences of such an abject death:

Wooooooooo-  
 Hooooooooo what a fall what a soar what a plummet what a dash into dark into light what  
 a plunge what a glide thud crash what a drop what a rush what a swoop what a fright  
 what a mad hushed skirl what a smash mush mash-up broke and gashed what a heart in  
 my mouth what an end.  
 What a life.  
 What a time.  
 What I felt. Then. Gone. (Smith 2001: 3)

Sara’s outcry (“Wooooooooo-hooooooooo”) rightly opens and closes the novel, thus producing a framework which contains the other sections and reminds the readers that they are somehow related to this traumatic incident. Sara’s discourse, with its lack of punctuation, its language games, its voids and gaps establishes the dynamics which will

punctuate the discourse of all the other characters.<sup>5</sup> Attention is always directed to what is *not* on the page: punctuation marks, words, Sara's body, ... all have crushed, disappeared, been made abject and, in the process, been made strange and reappeared: "Seeing birds. Their wings. Their beady . . . The things they see with. The things we see with, two of them, stuck in a face above a nose. The word's gone. . . . There is a word for heated-up bread. I know it. I knew it. No, it's gone" (Smith 2001: 8-9). Attention is always directed to the horror of what cannot be named and needs, therefore, to be made abject: the dumbwaiter, the eyes, the toast, Sara's body, death. "Trauma", Buse reminds us, "is not just a crisis in the memory of the traumatized subject but *a crisis in representation and narration*" in so far as "It is in the very nature of trauma to resist being accounted for in a completely coherent or easily comprehensible way" (2001: 182, 181, italics added). For Felman, the processes of witnessing and testimony prove the tortuous but useful way in which trauma can be successfully represented and/or narrated.

### 3. Powers of purification: A (traumatic) burst of beauty

"Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes"  
Catherine Clément (1996:ix)

"Purification is something only the Logos is capable of"  
Julia Kristeva (1982: 27)

The Global Hotel chain is a panopticon, "a spatial trap ... in which the employees are strictly monitored and punished according to need" (Eshelman 2005). There are escapes to surveillance, of course, and these "arise ... by accident –as when the omnipresent surveillance cameras fail to work shortly after Sara's accident"(2005). These escapes, the loopholes to panoptive control, create an alternative space for what is discarded, an imaginary zone where rejected material can effectively reside, the excess of our frames of reference, to use Felman's terminology above. The 'blind zone' created by the faulty operation of the cameras after Sara's accident symbolically inaugurates another blind/blank zone: one that promotes the appearance of Sara's ghost and its abject discourse ("the intrusive phenomena" Caruth referred to above) throughout the first section; in other words, the "imaginary zone" that "every culture" has "for what it excludes", as Catherine Clément would put it.

---

<sup>5</sup> In *Discourse*, Sara Mills refers to Michel Foucault's 'The Order of Discourse', where he: discusses the way that discourse is regulated by institutions in order to ward off some of its dangers. [Foucault] describes the processes of exclusion which operate on discourse to limit what can be said and what can be counted as knowledge. The first of the procedures of exclusion he calls 'prohibition' or taboo: there are certain subjects which it is difficult to discuss within Western societies, such as death and sex. [...] Once a subject is tabooed, that status begins to feel self-evident. (1997: 64-65)

Tabooing the subject of death has the power of making it abject, thus creating the void of meaning which punctuates the characters' discourse throughout the first five sections of *Hotel World*.

Abject discourse, however, is not the prerogative of Sara's spectre. Outside the hotel, Else, a homeless lady, begs on the streets: "She is (Spr sm chn?) sitting near a grating through which some warmth rises" (Smith 2001: 35). Else's gnomic discourse focuses obsessively on voids and gaps, on what can be spared: change (the small coins we might discard) and vowels (albeit discarded, sentences can still be decoded). Change and vowels, like Else herself, might be spared, might be made abject: "(Cn y spr sm chn? Think y.) ... People go past. They don't see Else, or decide not to" (Smith 2001: 36, 39).

Else's rejection of the vowels calls our attention on their absence, a similar effect to that of the passers-by's rejection of Else's presence. Still, can the abject be purified? Can the rejected object be transformed into useful material? Julia Kristeva believes this may be the case when she proposes that although "it is the word that discloses the abject, ... *the Word alone purifies from the abject ...*" (Kristeva 1984: 23, italics added). Truly, Else may have no use for vowels, just as the (Global) world may have no use for homeless begging Else, but the Logos, the 'Word alone', has the power of purifying and recovering what had initially been discarded as abject material:

She doesn't need vowels either ... She imagines the pavement littered with the letters that fall out of the half-words she uses (she doesn't need the whole words). ... It's just letters. Anyway they're biodegradable. They rot like leaves do. They make good compost. Birds use them for lining nests, for keeping their eggs warm. (Smith 2001: 47)

The purification of the abject speaks of its transformation into poetic material. Else 'imagines' letters filling the pavement, like leaves out of trees, biodegradable letters which make good compost and a home for birds. Vowels, in Else's discourse, are like change, like leaves, they are made abject, they disappear and reappear in poetic, emotional shapes. The process of obliterating a word from discourse has the effect of creating another space for it (a space somewhere 'Else', the blind/blank/imaginary zone), an alternative space where it is made useful and organic for "[t]he poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture" (Kristeva 1986: 36).<sup>6</sup>

Like Else, Lise has no use for words. Lise, the receptionist of the hotel, has had an emotional breakdown and finds herself unable to fill in a form about her condition. In her discursive dysfunctionality, Lise is incapable of naming the unnameable, the "jettisoned object" which "draws [her] toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2):

---

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva establishes links between what she calls *the poetic word* and the theory of carnivalesque discourse as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin when she states that "[o]n the omnified stage of carnival, language parodies and relativizes itself, repudiating its role in representation; in so doing, it provokes laughter but remains incapable of detaching itself from representation" (Kristeva 1986: 50). Carnavalesque discourse has many points of contact with Menippean discourse, where "Elements of the fantastic ... crop forth ... Pathological states of the soul, such as madness, split personalities, daydreams, dreams and death, become part of the narrative ... Menippean discourse tends towards the scandalous and eccentric in language" (Kristeva 1986: 53). All of these can be found throughout the six sections of *Hotel World*.



About you –continued.

If you need help filling in this form, or any part of it, phone 0800 88 22 00.

Tell us about yourself.

Well. I am a nice person.

...

After this she would cross out the word nice, and write above it the word sick.

I am a sick person.

...

I am a ( ) person. (Smith 2001: 81, 85)

By helplessly trying to fill in the form, Lise confronts the “weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes [her]” (Kristeva 1982: 2). Ironically, by writing first *nice*, then *sick*, and finally allowing the object to come to the surface by leaving the space blank, the reader is allowed to see the obvious: Lise is a person. And persons may transform tedious medical forms into poetic stanzas:

*I do not have a problem with sitting  
I cannot sit comfortably at all  
I cannot sit comfortably for more than 10 minutes,  
Without having to move from the chair  
I cannot sit comfortably for more than 30 minutes,  
Without having to move from the chair  
I cannot sit comfortably for more than one hour,  
Without having to move from the chair  
I cannot sit comfortably for more than two hours,  
Without having to move from the chair  
This form reads like a kind of poetry, she thought.*

(Smith 2001: 99)

Fully aware of the poetic potential of the form, Lise ruminates on Sara's death, the probable but unnamed traumatic cause of her present depression. She is shocked to discover that the photographs in the papers and on TV effectively wipe out the memory of the real Sara: “It's for this reason, for exactly this blank in the memory where there's almost no face, almost no body, nothing but the near-empty outline of a person not known ...” (Smith 2001: 110). Sara, like words, has become a near-empty outline, almost gone but not quite. Lise's is “a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition” (Felman and Laub 1992: 5); hence its outcome of leaving it nearly blank.

Although Penny, the journalist who is trying to write a piece in one of the hotel rooms, never knew Sara, she also participates in the (discursive) traumatic abjection which her death has inaugurated in the text:

Fawless, Penny typed. She deleted the F and replaced it with an l. Then she put the F back on the front again.

...

FF  
 FFF  
 FFF

FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFlawless, the computer screen said.

(Smith 2001: 125-26)

Penny, apparently “the only figure in the novel who is able to write, speak, and act in a conventional way” (Eshelman 2005), is also extremely passionate about the purification of the abject through the Logos: she thinks of “all the people who have ever died, still here ... all of them soundlessly shouting ..., *We’re* not dead! Don’t call *us* dead!” (Smith 2001: 127-28). Without knowing it, Penny is actively recovering the near-empty outline of Sara, but also her discursive dynamics: “That was an adventure. That - . That was -. That could have been -” (2001: 134). In her enthusiastic contribution to unscrew the wall screen that covers the space where the dreaded dumbwaiter used to be, Penny actively participates in the general feeling of purification from the abject through the Word, since “[t]he nothing that ran the length of this hotel like a spine had appalled her” (2001: 145).

In the section before last, readers are able to read Sara’s sister’s convoluted thoughts. Clare Willby’s remembrance of her dead sister lacks punctuation and is interspersed with a multiplicity of gaps which, paradoxically, allow the reader to learn more about Sara, to make her less of a ‘near-empty outline of a person’. Clare focuses on those parts of Sara which are gone but have left their remnant, the abject that returns through speech, through a dent in the carpet: “there are the dents left in the carpet they prove [Sara’s bed] was there if you put your hand down & feel you can feel the dips where the feet of the bed were” (2001: 191), through a mark left by Blu-tack: “all the pictures too he took off the wall & they repapered it because the Blu-tack had left the marks” (2001: 192), through the “buried treasure” (2001: 195), the relics that Clare keeps of Sara now that she is gone, all abject objects: a handkerchief, a solidified piece of syrup, some swimming medals, ...: “since now you are nothing but air you are not even air any more I don’t know what you are” (2001: 218).

Else, Penny, and Clare offer discourses which perform in Smith’s text as *testimonies of trauma*, to follow Shoshana Felman’s terminology. Theirs are texts which testify to Sara’s tragic disappearance, not by “simply *report[ing] facts* but, in different ways, encounter[ing] –and mak[ing]us encounter- *strangeness*” (Felman and Laub 1992: 7). Else, Penny, and Clare do not merely tell (as witnesses), they do not simply report the accident but, to the contrary, they constitute “the witness’s readiness to become himself [sic] a *medium of testimony* –and a *medium of the accident*” (Felman and Laub 1992: 24). As Peter Buse states, literature and the art (the Logos), in proceeding indirectly, by narrative, metaphor and other figures of speech, prove appropriate mediums to approach trauma “with enough subtlety” (Buse 2001: 183) by being “sufficiently self-conscious about their own impossible status as witnesses to do justice to extreme trauma” (Buse 2001: 183).

#### 4. Mind the gap: AbjectSubjectObject

"I have spelled out abjection ... all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted ... on the fragile border ... where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject"  
Julia Kristeva (1982: 207)

"Remember you must live"  
Ali Smith (2001: 30)

"it is only in the remembering of a traumatic occurrence that it takes on reality"  
Peter Buse (2001: 180)

A ridiculous, abject death unfurls the "discursive dysfunctionality" (2005) of a number of characters who confront trauma and the horror of what cannot be named by allowing physical gaps to spread through their discourse. Words appear, disappear and reappear in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*, absent words calling attention on themselves, words which ask the reader to mind the gap, to fill it with meaning, to recover the "radically excluded", the "weight of meaninglessness about which there is nothing insignificant" (Kristeva 1986: 2), the "act... that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, [the] event... in the excess of our frames of reference" (Felman and Laub 1992: 5), and purify it through "the Word alone", the Logos (Kristeva 1982: 23).

At the peak of her process of trauma and abjection throughout Section 1 ('Past'), Sara's ghost appeals directly to the reader:

Here's the story.  
Remember you must live.  
Remember you most love.  
Remainder you mist leaf.  
(I will miss mist. I will miss leaf. I will miss the, the. What's the word? Lost, I've, the word.  
The word for. You know. I don't mean a house. I don't mean a room. I mean the way of  
the . Dead to the . Out of this . Word.  
I am hanging falling breaking between this world and the next.  
Time me, would you?  
You. Yes, you. It's you I'm talking to.)

(Smith 2001: 30-31).

For Sara not to become the ultimately abjectsubjectobject, the reader ("You. Yes, you") must "remember" the "remainder". Sara's discourse, her identity, is an "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1986: 4) "between this world and the next", "intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 1996: 11), which does not "respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982: 4), a something which turns aside rules and laws, "elud[ing]

speech”, “outside-of-meaning” (Kristeva 1986: 23), but ceaselessly claiming to be remembered, to be purified through the Logos.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the next five sections of the novel, the characters and the reader set out on the process of remembrance of the remainder, transforming the rejected abject and its powers of horror and trauma into the loving memory of a nineteen-year-old girl. “Literature”, Kristeva claims, “[is] the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us” (1986: 210). The burst of beauty which takes the shape of the overwhelming poetic act that carries its full power into effect: “Words rushed out of Penny. She explained everything. Telling them both the story had made her forget to panic” (Smith 2001: 146). The burst of beauty which takes the shape of reconciliation through the confrontation of the horror –the panic- that the abject exerts on us all.

“[I]n these times of dreary crisis”, Julia Kristeva asks, “what is the point of emphasizing the horror of being?” (1986: 208). The horror of being is, perhaps paradoxically, the horror of death which creates the abject material now purified by Sara’s sister through an apt literary metaphor; that is the point of emphasizing the horror of being:

it is like reading a book yeah like say you were reading a book any book & you were halfway through it really into the story knowing all about the characters & all the stuff that’s happening to them then you turn the page over & halfway down the page it just goes blank it stops there just aren’t any more words on it & you now for sure that when you picked this book up it wasn’t like that it was like a normal book & had an end a last chapter a last page all that but now you flick through it right to the end & it’s all just blank nothing to tell you yes that is a bit like what it is like. (Smith 2001: 190)

Untimely death is like reading a book, one which suddenly “just goes blank”.

“Time me, would you?”, Sara demands. A direct appeal to be ‘timed’, to be placed somewhere she can have meaning, somewhere she can make sense instead of horror or panic, somewhere she may not exceed our frames of reference. In the last section of the novel Sara achieves her ‘timing’ through a secondary character: the girl who works in the watch shop where Sara took her watch to be mended. Although her untimely death prevented her from ever collecting the watch, the watch is not forgotten and neither is Sara’s memory with it. The watch-shop girl, for whom Sara had developed an unrequited crush, takes a mysterious fancy to the watch and wears it as if it were her own. Every morning, the watch-shop girl waits for Sara to come to the shop and collect her unreclaimed watch:

Every morning she thinks it as she fastens the watch on. It is today. She will put her bare wrists on the counter and say, I’ve come to pick up a watch, for Wilby. The girl in the watch shop will show her the watch on her own arm. I hope you don’t mind, she will say. I kind of took a fancy to it. (Smith 2001: 235).

In this simple, symbolic act of emotion, Sara is remembered and recovered. “Remember you must live. Remember you must love” (Smith 2001: 237), Sara’s ghost obsessively reminds us. In her wearing of the wrist watch, the unnamed girl enacts an act of

---

<sup>7</sup> Following this idea of the purification through the Logos, E. Ann Kaplan talks about “the need to share and ‘translate’ [the] traumatic impact” (2005: 1, italics added).

remembrance, love, life. Every morning, every day, the unnamed girl proves that Sara just happened. The abject is purified, reconciliation is achieved, trauma has been represented, narrated. Interestingly, throughout the last section, Sara's discourse is completely devoid of gaps: it/she has become (ful)filled (with meaning), it/she does not exceed our frame of reference anymore.

"The overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" that trauma constitutes promotes a response through "the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 1996: 11) in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*. The appearance of Sara's ghost and its disruptive and disrupted discourse of abjection embodies the "victim's narrative" which "begin[s] with someone who testifies to an absence ... (Felman and Laub 1992: 57), to a human mind whose "observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction" (Felman and Laub 1992: 57). The traumatized memory is one that "has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in the excess of our frames of reference" (Felman and Laub 1992: 5) and which give way to "a crisis in representation and narration" (Buse 2001: 182) which "resists being accounted for in a completely coherent or easily comprehensible way" (Buse 2001: 181). The obvious discursive consequence of trauma, then, is abjection.

"... [W]ho ... would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?", Julia Kristeva asks (1986: 209). The answer is, obviously, no one. No one would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection. No one would agree to accept the power of horror, panic, disgust, and rejection, to recognize horror as its own, to accept the logic of prohibition and thrust aside what we need to reject in order to live.

## 5. Conclusion

Our identity is disturbed by the abject, by its relentless denial of borders, positions, rules, laws, its corruption, its traumatic implications. Still, there are ways in which the abject can be purified. By establishing connections with the work of Julia Kristeva and trauma theory, I have aimed to reveal how Ali Smith's *Hotel World* shows that the way of purification, disclosure, and reconciliation of trauma is remembrance, love, and life through literature and art, the Logos, the Word. The expression of love through the simple act of remembrance and recovery achieves the purification of abject material and the exorcism of the powers of horror it performs upon the subject. Reconciliation and acceptance bring about the representation of trauma, its successful narration. Silences are filled up with meaning, love and life, our frame of reference is not exceeded anymore and the gap is finally not to be minded.

### Works Cited

- Baudrillard, Jean 2002: *Contraseñas*. Barcelona: Anagrama, Colección Argumentos.  
Bradford, Richard 2007: *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.  
Buse, Peter 2001: *Drama + Theory: Critical approaches to modern British Drama*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP.

- Caruth, Cathy 1996: *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Clément, Catherine 1996 (1975): 'The Guilty One'. Helene Cixous and Catherine Clément, eds. *The Newly Born Woman*. London: I. B. Tauris Publishers & Co Ltd: 3-59.
- Destouches, Louis-Ferdinand Auguste (Céline) 1934: *Journey to the End of the Night*. Trans. John H.P. Marks. Boston: Little Brown.
- Eshelman, Raoul 2005: 'Checking out of the Epoch: Performatism in Olga Tokarczuk's *The Hotel Capital* vs. Late Postmodernism in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*'. *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* X.2. <<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1002/transhotel.htm>> (Accessed 20 July, 2009)
- Felman, Shoshana and Dory Laub 1992: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund 1984 (1920): *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Vol. 11 of the Penguin Freud Library. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 269-338.
- Kaplan, E. Ann 2005: *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP.
- Kristeva, Julia 1982: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP.
- Kristeva, Julia 1986: *The Kristeva Reader*. Toril Moi, ed. New York: Columbia UP.
- Kristeva, Julia. 2004: *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Leys, Ruth 2000: *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P.
- McRae, John and Ronald Carter 2004: *The Routledge Guide to Modern English Writing: Britain and Ireland*. London: Routledge.
- Mills, Sara 1997: *Discourse*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Miller, Nancy K. and Jason Daniel Togaw, eds. 2002: *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*. Illinois: U of Illinois Board of Trustees.
- Radstone, Susannah and Katharine Hodgkin, eds. 2006: *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers
- Showalter, Elaine 1997: *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media Culture*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Smith, Ali 2001: *Hotel World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Tew, Philip 2007 (2004): *The Contemporary British Novel*. London and New York: Continuum.

Received 18 September 2009

Revised version accepted 24 June 2010

Gemma López teaches English Narrative at the Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya (Universitat de Barcelona), where she also gained her PhD. Her research interests include contemporary narratives in English, cinema studies, and literary theory. She is the author of the volume *Seductions in Narrative: Subjectivity and Desire in the Works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson*, published by Cambria Press in 2007. She has also published articles on contemporary narrative in a number of journals, and has co-edited the volumes *Wuthering Heights: A Novel by Emily Brontë* (2005) and *Pride and Prejudice: A Novel by Jane Austen* (re-ed. 2009).

Address: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya, Facultat de Filologia, Universitat de Barcelona, Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 585, 08007 Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 934039102. Fax: +34 933171249.