

Surviving Trauma and Chaos in Nigel Farndale's Accidental Fiction

LAURENT MELLET

University of Burgundy

lau.mellet@gmail.com

Nigel Farndale is the author of two novels so far, *A Sympathetic Hanging* (2000) and *The Blasphemer* (2010). Both striking plots rest on a number of motifs the copresence of which reads as quite contemporary. Caught between politics beyond their reach or in which they find themselves involved, and a deceiving or deceived intimacy, Farndale's lost characters endeavour to survive through complex forms of social or love Darwinism. In *The Blasphemer*, religion and terror, faith and guardian angels become to Farndale new connecting elements between the world and the self. Equally post-millennial is the acute significance of the challenge to survive: plots teem with accidents, and past as present characters do or do not manage to survive the chaos of the world and the havoc wrought in their individual lives. Farndale's most modern touch might be deciphered in his accidental —i.e., both totally fortuitous and based on accidents— narrative and writing, grounded on the unexpected and misleading random.

Keywords: contemporary fiction; Farndale ; trauma; intimacy; accident; survival

. . .

Sobrevivir al trauma y al caos en la ficción accidental de Nigel Farndale

Nigel Farndale ha publicado dos obras de ficción, *A Sympathetic Hanging* (2000) y *The Blasphemer* (2010). Sus sorprendentes tramas se estructuran en torno a un conjunto de motivos que confieren un carácter muy contemporáneo a ambas novelas. Atrapados en una política que no entienden o en la que se encuentran implicados a pesar suyo, y en una intimidad engañosa o engañada, los personajes desorientados de Farndale se esfuerzan por sobrevivir mediante formas complejas de darwinismo social o amoroso. En *The Blasphemer*, la religión y el terrorismo, la fe y los ángeles de la guarda se convierten para Farndale en nuevos elementos que permiten establecer conexiones entre el mundo y uno mismo. El sentido preciso del reto por sobrevivir es también postmilenario: se acumulan los accidentes en las tramas y los personajes pasados o presentes consiguen o no sobrevivir frente al caos del mundo y a los estragos creados en sus vidas. La dimensión más moderna de Farndale se encuentra, sin duda alguna, en su narración y su escritura accidentales —tanto fortuitas como construidas mediante accidentes— basadas en lo inesperado y en el azar.

Palabras clave: ficción contemporánea; Farndale; trauma; intimidad; accidente; supervivencia

With *A Sympathetic Hanging* (2000) and *The Blasphemer* (2010), columnist Nigel Farndale's fiction opened and marked the end of the last literary decade with ethical and aesthetic issues such as political conspiracy and intimate chaos. This article suggests that Farndale's specific and most contemporary input might be linked to the multifaceted accidental fiction he builds up in his novels, by which I mean plots and characterisation based on accidents, but also fortuitous and unplanned plots, characters and aesthetics—and eventually the more philosophical sense of the word, with its emphasis on what is added to the essentials of identity. In order to define such accidental contemporaneity, and to locate it between conspiracy, chaos and survival, I will insist on the contrary logics we find from one novel to the next, opening on other contemporary social and literary questions such as religious, supernatural and political clutter. The narrative and aesthetic echoes of Farndale's approach to the literary accidental will then be studied to underline the questions they ask of trauma theory and traumatic realism.

1. FROM ACCIDENTS TO CHOICE: AGAINST ACCIDENTAL FICTION

A Sympathetic Hanging opens on two simultaneous 'accidents': journalist Michael Yates runs over a young woman, Jennifer, just ten seconds after he has heard on his radio that the Premier has been assassinated during the State Opening of Parliament in London. Michael will run Jennifer down again a few pages later, as well as be the unfortunate witness of a bomb attack in Romania, get beaten up in the street, etc. What should be noticed is that if the first accidents seem to launch the novel, and the intimacy between the two heroes, they also allow for the main conspiracy to unfold and lock Michael in deceitful intimacy. The woman he accidentally meets is in fact the daughter of his father-in-law's enemy or accomplice, Lambert, the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff. The book's plot is, indeed, full of plotting and conspiracy: the magazine for which Michael writes belongs to his father-in-law Bruce Tenant, a media and politics tycoon busy plotting a worldwide InfoWar with computer viruses; China plots to invade Romania; a major coup by the Conservatives to set up a republic in England and appoint the King as temporary head of the government, involving both Tenant and Jennifer's father, Lambert, is revealed, as well as their role behind the Premier's murder (the latter having blocked Tenant's research into the InfoWar software). Even Michael's article is not published eventually and the affair never made public, since Tenant manages to virus the computers and the whole printing system. We move thus from accidents to conspiracy, then, the first accident triggering both the plot and the plots. Yet this first move is also based on fake accidents, or Michael's fake accidental or fortuitous impressions as, we will discover, he and Jennifer did not meet by accident and the overall pattern of the novel is rather one of delusive accidental in that the opening accident turns out to have been planned so as to disguise conspiracy and wreak intimate chaos. Michael keeps being deceived and used in the book, and accidents are a mere narrative tool to enable conspiracy to cancel out intimacy and randomness.

The fantasy England that Farndale uses as a background for his political plot is at the same time funny and politically ludicrous (for instance a Premier, a King, the euro as the English currency, a parody of Lady Diana's funeral, a Spice Girl now Dame Halliwell) and is a revisiting of a world 'à la Orwell' with home appliances and electronic devices, such as the "Multicard", reducing individuality to numbers and references and ruling out any form of intimate relationships. When Jennifer twice tries to kill Michael, for the second time at the very end of the novel, the only locus for intimacy, or what is thought to be intimate, is thus conspiracy itself, and the randomness from which Michael hopes to find intimacy is all the more rigged since accidents too are conspiratorial, and not at all a promise of honest, deep and unexpected relationships. This last twist in the novel clearly runs counter to its initial, but fake, shift from accident to intimacy: in *A Sympathetic Hanging* accidents only question the very possibility of accidental events and lives, simply because they are no accident at all.

The plot of *The Blasphemer* relies on new and more complex interactions between accidents, politics, intimate chaos and survival. Farndale's latest novel also opens on an accident, when academic Daniel Kennedy literally climbs over his wife, Nancy, to save himself after their plane has crashed deep in the sea not far from the Galápagos Islands, wherein lies the most obvious link between accidents and intimate chaos, since Nancy will find it impossible to forgive him. Meanwhile Wetherby, a colleague of Daniel's, addicted to religious sadomasochism especially with his young female students, is doing his best in London to ruin Daniel's career and promised chair. Many character connections will emerge, along with the subplot of Daniel's great-grandfather, thought to have been killed at Passchendaele in 1917; Andrew had in fact been a deserter sentenced to death, but was saved and was able to make himself a new life in France. Whether it be with the plane crash, when Daniel faints after a new vision, with the 1917 battle, or another bomb explosion Daniel witnesses in London, in *The Blasphemer* accidents always determine and create, or seem to create, something new and unexpected.

Accidents in this novel seem to have no fortuitous consequences but, on the contrary, trigger self-consciousness and choice. Wetherby, for instance, after accidentally (or not) and violently making a student pregnant, confesses his sin and repents, and instantly feels relieved and his mind to be at rest. In the next chapter, while Daniel is about to swim to shore in order to save those who have survived the crash, his heroism is played down and equated with Wetherby's penitential mood by the narrator's disclosure that "[h]ad he not been feeling ashamed about deserting Nancy, he might not have volunteered so readily" (Farndale 2010: 84). Surviving accidents or failures, as will be seen, is first a matter of shame and of self-balance, therefore having nothing to do with broadening one's identity but rather with erasing one's shame through forced decisions, words or actions: in other words, penitence but neither heroism nor self-betterment. The end of the novel is even clearer about this when, in the last accident, Daniel jumps to save his daughter who has been abducted by Nancy's counsellor, and goes into a coma. Ironically, the ending suggests that the best way to survive the intimate chaos triggered by the first accidents (and

political, or here academic, conspiracy) is to *choose* another accident and catastrophe. As Daniel's father states, "It wasn't an accident. He jumped to save my granddaughter's life" (Farndale 2010: 407). There is nothing accidental in this last accident, which indeed was motivated and unconsciously planned. The best way for Daniel to survive is to once again risk being killed, though now deliberately.

The pattern comes full circle and any notion of the accidental is cast aside in favour of choice, even choice of accidents. This is where Farndale's fiction clearly follows contemporary paths in British literature. To mention only a few very recent examples, in Zadie Smith's *NW* one of the ways for characters to narrate themselves and to exist is decision, or rather decision-making (2012: 28, 287). Similarly, the last words in Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* make the heroine Serena bear full responsibility for the existence of the novel, with a final twist perhaps more literary and metanarrative than that in *Atonement* (2012: 320). *Disputed Land*, by Tim Pears, touches upon the same issues when it confronts "spectator[s] of events" (Pears 2012: 163) with the imperative of acting (150), always along some metanarrative line. The book almost opens on the remark "The futility of art, when action was needed" (xi), to close on these bitter words: "It would have been better to have taken a chance —for the thinkers to turn into doers— to have betrayed ourselves and become men of action, flawed heroes of our own lives. Who knows what might have happened?" (209). Twice the conclusion states that nothing really happened because of inaction, and locates the essentials of fiction in this necessary explanation, much more than in a narrative of what really did take place. In Farndale's *The Blasphemer*, it is the need for self-consciousness of action that Daniel eventually understands.

2. INTIMATELY SURVIVING ACCIDENTAL POLITICS

At the heart of this questioning of accidents we find many correlations between politics and intimacy, with many accidental links between the public and the private. *The Blasphemer* opens on quite a private plot or conspiracy, since Daniel has plotted the fateful trip with his daughter as a surprise for Nancy: "They both grinned conspiratorially" (2010: 16). This motif of characters planning against or in favour of others is central to Farndale's fiction, and both novels teem with intimate, political, military or professional conspiracies and machinations. But in *A Sympathetic Hanging* accidents also trigger intimacy, effective and immediate though deceitful. Michael kisses Jennifer after running her over (2000: 9), cannot hold back his tears when the Premier's death is made official (20), and he eventually observes that, with Jennifer, "There is an easy intimacy between us that wasn't there before. Not contrived. Not awkward" (121). Intimacy is clearly interwoven with politics and accidents in the narrative, for instance when the *Evening Mirror* sums up the events of the first chapter and insists on the links between intimacy and politics through accidents: "The story is about the daughter of the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff who has been run over by Bruce Tenant's son-in-law while cycling on a country road in Devon. 'Award-winning journalist Michael Yates, 39, knocked the cyclist down when he was

distracted by the news coming through on his car radio about the assassination of the Premier” (66). In a chiasmic structure, the passage mentions intimacy by framing the accident between two references to politics. On the next page Farndale uses an anaphora to suggest the accidental politics of intimacy: “Three months have passed since the assassination. . . . Three months have also passed since the accident” (67). The Premier’s murder and Michael’s more intimate accident with Jennifer are now narratively equated.

Yet between Jennifer and Michael, as between Wetherby and his students in *The Blasphemer*, intimacy can be violent and submitted, with sexual games based on domination and power. Violence and domination also define intimacy when in the second novel Daniel cannot help reading his wife’s diary, obsessed as he is to discover whether or not she knows that he saved himself before saving her after the crash. So that on these issues too patterns seem to be reversed from one novel to the next: in *A Sympathetic Hanging* political conspiracy leads to intimate chaos. Michael first sees his own world turned upside-down after meeting Jennifer, and this chaos is framed by plots on a larger scale. Surviving is here a matter of finding a new balance between feelings and new intimate emotions, along with the awareness of being part of machinations beyond one’s ken.

Daniel in *The Blasphemer* first survives, starts by surviving, the crash; and only then do intimate chaos with Nancy and conspiracy intermingle with Wetherby’s plot, among others. While readers are under the impression that surviving logically follows accidents, in *The Blasphemer* surviving also creates chaos and new accidents. Even going back in time, the story of Daniel’s great-grandfather is so tricky to unravel in the first place because he did survive and no one knew —hence the present chaos. Daniel’s first physical, instinctive reaction is to survive, and then his main intimate and professional tragedy is to survive until the cathartic last accident. The fact that the plane crashes in the Galápagos archipelago is relevant, since it was there that Darwin started studying species and putting together his theories. Daniel instantly feels shame after saving himself first, but also the conviction that he just had to do it, being a “life survivor”: “Daniel knew the answer. He had read about it. Given the slightest opportunity, certain people will always find a way to safety. They are known as ‘life survivors’ and they make up 8 percent of the population” (2010: 73). The ambivalent phrasing is much to the point since it definitely will be a matter of surviving not so much the crash but surviving life. The plot of the novel is clearly based on other love or social forms of Darwinism, with competition within a couple to survive, or to be the more heroic afterwards, and more traditional competition between colleagues. Farndale evokes the question of instinct in an article about survival published in *The Telegraph*:

While luck may be one explanation for survival, a ruthless instinct for self-preservation seems to be another. This, I should perhaps explain, is the central theme of *The Blasphemer*, a novel of mine being published in January, hence my interest in the subject. When a light aircraft crashes into the sea, a zoologist saves himself by climbing over the woman he loves. They both survive, but his act of betrayal causes fissures in their relationship that lead to...

Well, the point is, while writing the book I came across examples of similar things happening.¹ (2009)

In this summary of the opening of *The Blasphemer*, Farndale clearly lays emphasis on survival and Daniel's strategy to save himself. Such might be the gist of his novel, together with the issues of luck and the accidental. Farndale thus engages, once again, with questions dealt with by other contemporary British authors. Smith in *NW* and Pears in *Landed* similarly suggest that the literary might be the only space for individuals to resist and survive. This "instinct for self-preservation" and the traumatic aftermath of survival are as pregnant with meaning in *The Blasphemer* as they are in trauma theory, the aim of which "in the arts" is to "explore the relation between psychic wounds and signification" (Hartman 2003: 257). In his article Hartman underlines how literature can voice trauma and thereby find some sort of ethical legitimacy. We know how prominent the question of survival is for trauma theorists, and particularly what is now studied as the "survivor's guilt" (Rothberg 2000: 47). Significantly, Farndale expands on the issue in his article:

Of those who do escape, many suffer from survivors' guilt. This can stem from feelings of being unworthy of survival, or from feeling pleased that they escaped when others didn't. Dr Stephen Joseph, a psychologist at the University of Warwick, has studied this phenomenon in connection with the sinking of the Herald of Free Enterprise in 1987. "In the three years after the disaster, it was found that 60 per cent of survivors suffered from guilt," he says. "There were three types: first, there was guilt about staying alive while others died; second, there was a guilt about the things they failed to do —these people often suffered post-traumatic 'intrusions' as they relived the event again and again; third, there were feelings of guilt about what they did do, such as scrambling over others to escape. These people usually wanted to avoid thinking about the catastrophe. They didn't want to be reminded of what really happened." (2009)

Joseph's emphasis on guilt, failure, repetition, and the avoidance of remembrance is a cogent snapshot on the main directions we find in trauma theory, each present in the complex plot imagined by Farndale. In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth elaborates on Freud's concept of the *Nachträglichkeit*, "l'après-coup" for Lacan, with its strategies and effects of deferral and belatedness. What is traumatic for the subject is never the event itself, which is too immediate and unaccountable, but its repetition. Trauma theorists believe that the location and the role of literature, and above all narration, are between those two extremes —the event and its traumatic repetition. Roger Luckhurst writes, "Trauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of

¹ Farndale then explains, "Studies of passenger behaviour in crash situations have found that eight per cent of people are 'life survivors' who, given the slightest opportunity, will find a way out. By contrast, 12 per cent of people won't escape under almost any circumstances; their 'behavioural inaction' is based on a feeling that in an emergency they will die, so they remain seated, paralysed by shock" (2009).

retrospective narratives that seek to explicate trauma” (2008: 79).² Hence the numerous interests of the motif of trauma for literary theorists, here summed up by Georges Letissier in his reading of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*: “Trauma . . . entails a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world. Both iteration and belatedness constitute the specificity of trauma, though, and correlatively its interest for literary studies. In a sense, trauma involves a process of deferral” (2011: 210). In *The Blasphemer*, the narrative of the initial accident is repeated many times and often by Daniel himself, who is thus living through both repeated and deferred versions of his traumatic event in order to overcome it; this narrative device fits one of the main tenets of literary trauma theory.

Surviving accidents, or accidents that help one survive, are also closely related to traumatic falling, as indicated by the etymology of *accident*, which comes from Latin *accidens*, from *accidere* (to happen), itself from *cadere* (to fall). After surviving the crash and while doing his best to help the others survive, Daniel is already confused between those two logics: “His only alternative was to remove his lifejacket and allow himself to sink. Drowning is supposed to be painless” (2010: 105). During the last accident falling and surviving are almost merged into one: “Daniel now knew he had to jump, but he also knew that *even if he survived the fall*, the broken glass would lacerate him. . . . The sensation he felt was of falling through time, of finding its inward flow” (394-95). Eventually Daniel even doubts he did survive the crash (309), while the 1917 subplot defines surviving as enduring pain and trauma: “Being shot? You don’t feel owt. Blokes I know who’ve been wounded say it feels like being punched —a dull pain. Sharp pain only comes later if you survive long enough to feel it...” (374). The point of surviving is eventually questioned in *The Blasphemer*, or at least it is located within another, more philosophical and supernatural, framework, which I will specify in the next section, before coming back to the issue of trauma.

3. ANOTHER ACCIDENT: PHILOSOPHICAL AND SUPERNATURAL EVOLUTION

Accidents with Farndale may also be enriched with philosophical undertones. We know that to Aristotle accidents were not radically opposed to essence in the definition and reality of man, but might, when emerging, reshape, specify, and qualify essence without altering it (Aristotle 2004: 150). In both novels accidents likewise may not so much open on the accidental as fortuitous, but rather throw light on *change*. In the way accidents lead to change and new characters, new inclinations, expectations, decisions or actions, they steer clear of the fortuitous and, conversely, allow protagonists to self-consciously change and make choices. Here again, accidents limit the accidental by opening onto change, and favour evolution and progress rather than randomness. In *A Sympathetic Hanging* Michael initially acknowledges: “Although I’ve been a political correspondent and written two

² See also his development on Jean-François Lyotard’s assertion that “trauma freezes time, and therefore any possibility of narrative” (80-81).

political biographies, I think I was born without the political gene, the one that makes politicians embarrassing yet unembarrassable” (2000: 30). Yet after the accident and the meeting with Jennifer he surprises himself by becoming more interested—and involved in spite of himself—in politics, as well as more able to be sentimentally committed (through another colliding of intimacy and politics). The narrative teems with self-awareness of such evolution. The same is true of Jennifer, whose father sarcastically remarks, “Yes, yes, her personality did change after she came out of the coma. She became more stable and rational” (149). The novel also mentions the difficulty of setting up a sexual politics: “I’ve never been good at sexual politics”, Michael states, to which Jennifer replies, “Oh, give it a rest. *Please*. . . . You always have to, like, analyse things. All this politics bollocks. You always make things more complicated than they are. There doesn’t need to be a motive behind everything, you know” (156). This passage links intimacy and sex to politics and explanation, and echoes a similar intimate exchange on the nature of politics in Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve up!*:

“You think you can reduce everything to politics, don’t you, Michael? It makes life so simple for you.” “I don’t see what’s simple about it.” “Well of course politics can be complicated, I realize that. But I always think there’s something treacherous about that sort of approach. The way it tempts us to believe there’s an explanation for everything, somewhere or other, if only we’re prepared to look hard enough. That’s what you’re really interested in, isn’t it? Explaining things away.” “What’s the alternative?” (2008: 354)

Equally applied to intimate relationships in Coe’s novel, this definition of politics as a way to explain and understand things is in both texts another way to defuse the accidental and rationalise both narration and intimacy.

As a zoologist (a nematologist to be precise), Daniel Kennedy is a rational researcher who will embark on a journey to the discovery of doubt, faith, religion and guardian angels. “Flying was an act of faith in the people who build, inspect and fly planes: as a scientist, Daniel knew he of all people should appreciate that. But he was not a great believer in faith. ‘I keep telling him it’s irrational,’ Nancy said. ‘He hates that. Thinks he’s the most rational man on the planet’” (Farndale 2010: 55). The accidental was just what was missing in his life and convictions, as he almost admits here: “Death is part of life. It is programmed into our DNA. I can even tell you, more or less, how long you will live, barring accidents” (236). There may be nothing new in the motif of the rational scientist who learns to take into account more supernatural features of life, but here it appears as the first consequence of accidents and being forced to survive. And it is above all the visions that Daniel so often has that push him to question his own rationality. On their way to the airport (21), once there (31), in Quito (49), or when he is just about to give up getting to the shore to find some help (105), Daniel has the precise vision of the same young man, whom he will be dumbfounded to recognise in the face of his daughter’s teacher, Hamdi. His great-grandfather Andrew happens to have been saved after the

massacre, as well as driven to desert, by some similar vision and a man looking exactly like Daniel's visions and like Hamdi (148). When Daniel catches a glimpse of Hamdi at a demonstration in London, he stops his car and thus avoids death in a bomb explosion a few minutes later and a hundred yards further, and therefore he confusingly thinks Hamdi might be his guardian angel (162). The only picture the family has of Andrew, posing next to his own future guardian angel with Hamdi's features, might finally be the only way to save Daniel out of the coma at the end of the book, when his father brings it to him and Daniel recognises Hamdi next to Andrew. Things will not be explained, yet ironically this supernatural side with its recurrent enigma could be construed as the ultimate form of conspiracy and machination in *The Blasphemer* —Daniel, in spite of his rational doubts and blasphemes, despite being a life survivor, is at the heart of yet another conspiracy this time aimed at saving him.

This is the most conspicuous example of the supernatural in Farndale. In his first novel allusions to religion are to be found when at the beginning Michael is on his way to interview a faith healer, when he writes a paper entitled "The Premier as Saint" (2000: 30), or when after the absence of political genes he defines himself through another absence: "[A]lthough I'd say I have a religious temperament, I have no belief whatsoever" (13). Faith and religion are given much more weight in *The Blasphemer*, where faith, guardian angels and Islam often intermingle, with Hamdi of course but also, for instance, with the legend of the Angel of Mons during WWI. This is a further example of the contemporary background to Farndale's fiction, not only in its political questioning of faith and religion but also in the way accidents shake the foundations of belief. This might be one significant aspect of Farndale's contemporaneity: this accidental and unexpected shift from fragile certitude to new doubts and confusions. The ways in which the public and the private inevitably collide, as well as politics and religion, Islam and suspicion of terrorism, science and guardian angels, sex and politics, etc. —all based around the issue of survival— endow the novels with a sometimes muddled yet inventive contemporary colour.

This direction recalls the ambiguities of 'traumatic realism', defined by Michael Rothberg as the main narrative and stylistic option in trauma fiction. Rothberg points at the rejuvenation of realism and its traditional functions thanks to traumatic realism: "Traumatic realist texts, moreover, challenge the narrative form of realism as well as its conventional indexical function" (2000: 104). Anne Whitehead identifies the double nature of traumatic realism: "[T]rauma fiction relies on the intensification of conventional narrative modes and methods. There are, however, a number of key stylistic features which tend to recur in these narratives. These include intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice" (2004: 84). Traumatic writing would then follow the traditions of literary realism but also be based on less realistic and more 'hyperbolic' strategies, as studied by Jean-Michel Ganteau, who defines traumatic realism as being: "dominated by poetic modalities such as hyperbole, intensification, saturation, anachronism and fragmentation —devices that are supposed to be mimetic

of traumatic effects and that problematise the conventions of transparent mimesis in a hyperbolic fashion” (2011: 111). Which narrative and stylistic features in Farndale’s writing, then, drive towards a symbolical and supernatural dimension in traumatic realism?

4. FROM A ‘MEANING VACUUM’ TO NARRATIVE AND STYLISTIC ACCIDENTS

José M. Yebra recalls how the stylistic tools of trauma fiction can bridge the gaps between trauma and representation: “There seems to be an apparently unbridgeable gap between traumatic events and their narrative representation . . . Nevertheless, a breaking down of language does not imply complete silence. Trauma fiction has elaborated complex strategies to represent its inarticulacy: disruptions, temporal and logical gaps, silences, unreliable narration, grammatical dislocations are some of the formulae to (mis)represent the vacuum left by a traumatic event after a period of latency” (2011: 185). Farndale’s writing does not usually go as far as “breaking down” language, although at certain points Daniel’s traumatic narrative evokes such “temporal and logical gaps”, for instance when telling Susie of his present confusion:

“We both survived, you and me.” . . . “Sort of,” he said distractedly. “I still don’t feel like I did before the crash. I feel off-centre. Sometimes I wake myself up with my own shouting. Sometimes I’m afraid to sleep. I’ll get all shivery like I have a fever but at the same time I’ll be feeling clear-headed. It’s hard to describe. It’s like everything is more vivid. Wet seems wetter. Blue seems bluer. I feel more energised and restless. People tell me I keep smiling. I sometimes feel that, since the crash, I have found my true self—that a glass wall that separated me from the rest of the world has come down. It was like, before it happened, I was underwater and everything was muffled. I was hearing sounds coming from a distance. Now I hear everything clearly. Does that make sense?” (2010: 309)

However off-centre Daniel might feel, his traumatic recollection and narrative is the point to which the novel keeps returning. Here and elsewhere, the text follows misleading strategies of excess and fluidity to stress how slowly trauma may be overcome through narration: short sentences, noun sentences and confused perceptions which indeed might not make sense.

Elsewhere Farndale’s narrative seems to rely on a specific pattern involving chaos and the trivial to represent the vacuum of trauma. This narrative device becomes another case of accidental fiction, the aim of which is to order meaning from the trivial and the fortuitous. In a similar way to what happens after the traumatic event, the text will reorganise the vacuum after too many facts or too much narrative. What is at stake here echoes Mary Shelley’s definition (and practice) of creation out of chaos in *Frankenstein*: “Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances,

but cannot bring into being the substance itself" (1992: 8).³ Creation may only emerge from chaos, while to Farndale such chaos is also to be understood as a correlative of the vacuum engendered by trauma.

What I want to insist on is the aesthetic link between chaos and the void —aesthetic inasmuch as it tackles the logic of creation, embedded in the plot of *The Blasphemer* through another complex thread related to the score for an alternative opening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Wetherby has been looking for it for years, and it turns out that conductor Major Morris, who had been bequeathed the score, was the person who shot himself enabling Andrew to be saved in 1918. However excluded arts and creation seem to be in the plot, they also constitute the main MacGuffin and even help Daniel's father save his son's career and reveal Wetherby's machinations. Creation and writing, with narrative and stylistic accidents, might become the only remaining space for the accidental and the fortuitous to take shape with Farndale.

The Blasphemer plays with genres and expectations, with definitions, to reshuffle standards and deliver contemporary fiction. *A Sympathetic Hanging* soon drifts towards intricate scenes and conversations, in the middle of which Michael Yates seems to be lost. What he is witnessing or given to hear does not make more sense than do, to us, some of his own rambling actions in the novel. Unplanned and incoherent twists could thus be seen as first textual traces of accidental and random aesthetics. In the incipit of *A Sympathetic Hanging* Farndale comes up with this aphorism on order and accidental creation: "The urge to impose order, to think clearly, must begin with the trivial" (2000: 3). And indeed both novels, perhaps so as to impose narrative order on chaotic references, begin with the trivial and the accidental —*A Sympathetic Hanging* with two accidents, public and private, and with one character trapped somewhere in his car, surely one character and one place among potential others. *The Blasphemer* similarly opens on the figure of the hero confined in a closed space, the bathroom this time, in a short first scene with Nancy using the weighing scales, to install intimacy and desultory forms of the trivial or the accidental; by so doing more importance is lent to their growing apart when having to survive. Accidental and desultory beginnings are embedded in *The Blasphemer* with this introduction of Nancy: "Nancy was his dentist, the mother of his child, the woman he loved" (11). How could the introduction of a heroine be more trivial, at the same time funny and pompous, unexpected and accidental? Yet the reader will move from the accidental and the trivial to order and understanding, following the paths of Farndale's heroes.

In the end, Farndale's relation to time might be both accidental and chaotic. The fantasy he creates in *A Sympathetic Hanging* is a first sign of his tendency to play with history and political reality, reshuffling actual references to approach some allegory of our times. It is also in this debut novel that we find a first definition of accidental time: "Even though time warps and slows down during an accident —something to do with a delay

³ On chaos in *Frankenstein*, see Mellet 2011.

in the electrical impulses that transmit information from the retina to the brain— it isn't slow enough for me to prevent the car from slewing from one side of the road to the other" (2000: 8). Then this slowing down of perception is followed by a repetition of the scene in the narrative, since another accident happens after Jennifer has temporarily regained consciousness and cycled on a few metres. Time distortion leads to repetition and, once again, anything but accidental and fortuitous events, as if the two were doomed by the first accident literally to bump into each other forever. The trivial might therefore not always be leading to any imposed narrative order, and be repeated just to bring to the fore its own traumatic qualities. More than any dubious form of order, the representation of trauma imposes the logic of repetition and its primary emphasis on traumatic structures.

The links between narration and the void associated to trauma are discussed in Farndale's essay 'The Children who Survive Plane Crashes,' where he evokes the experience of surviving: "Psychologists also talk of 'survivor syndrome,' a pattern of reactions including chronic anxiety, recurring dreams of the event, a general numbness and withdrawal from the pleasures of life. Survivors find themselves in a 'meaning vacuum' where they question the point of life" (2009). The motif of the vacuum here becomes the metaphor of depression and the ground for a fresh questioning of one's identity and meanings. Farndale continues: "But in other cases, surviving can have positive benefits. People re-evaluate their lives and find new meaning and depth. This is what is known as 'adversarial growth.' The survivors become, if you like, better people: more compassionate, less materialistic. They determine to live their lives to the full and in the moment. Significantly, many no longer worry about death" (2009). This alternative path, from the traumatic void to new meaning and a fresh approach to life, becomes the gist of the 'meaning vacuum,' insofar as the former exists only to be filled with meaning. At the crossroads of this pattern at the heart of trauma theory can be found the essentials of what Anthony Giddens has called "self-identity" as based on the narrative:

Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. . . . Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*. (1991: 52-53, emphasis in original)

Personal identity will emerge and be asserted through the self-narrative in which the individuals will recognise themselves: "A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor —important though it is— in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (54, emphasis in original). The weight laid by Jacques Rancière on the democratic chaos and disorganization at work in what he calls, with Derek Attridge (2010), the process of 'literariness,' appears as another theoretical opening suggested by Farndale's traumatic aesthetics: "[Writing] disrupts the legitimate order of speech in the way the latter is distributed and at the same time distributes bodies in a well-ordered

community. . . . I propose to call this disruption 'literariness'" (Rancière 1998: 125-26; my translation). To Rancière, such democratic use of writing will lead individuals to "political subjectivation", defining or redefining their identities.

This would finally explain why the traumatic narrative cancels the need to impose order and begin with the trivial: "The urge to impose order, to think clearly, must begin with the trivial" (Farndale 2000: 3). For the survivor whose meaning vacuum Farndale relates in his article,⁴ "trivial things don't worry [one] any more" (2009). The trivial itself no longer is the source for order, even narrative order. Surviving becomes a matter of accepting chaos and the accidental, as Daniel does in the last pages of *The Blasphemer*, when choosing and creating new accidents for himself. Farndale's accidental fiction might then assert itself as the best narrative mode to encompass trauma and its aftermath, as well as to endow his characters with the ethical possibility of facing and accepting chaos as the enduring token of their new inclusion into life.

WORKS CITED

- ARISTOTLE 2004: *The Metaphysics*. Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin.
- ATTRIDGE, Derek 2010 (2004): *The Singularity of Literature*. London and New York: Routledge.
- CARUTH, Cathy 1996: *Unclaimed Experience-Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP.
- COE, Jonathan 2008 (1994): *What a Carve up!* London: Penguin.
- FARNDALE, Nigel 2000: *A Sympathetic Hanging*. London: Quartet.
- 2009: 'The Children who Survive Plane Crashes'. *The Telegraph* 5 July <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/comorosandmayotte/5743227/The-children-who-survive-plane-crashes.html>> (Accessed 4 January 2012)
- 2010: *The Blasphemer*. London: Doubleday.
- GANTEAU, Jean-Michel 2011: 'Trauma as the Negation of Autonomy: Michael Moorcock's *Mother London*'. Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, eds. *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. 107-25.

⁴ "Juliane Köpcke is one of these. She is a professor of biology now, based in Germany. In 1971 she was a 17-year-old schoolgirl flying with her mother to Lima. Lightning struck the plane. There was an explosion and the next thing she knew she was in the air, strapped to her seat at 10,000 feet. Her final thought before she passed out was that the rainforest below her looked like broccoli. When she came round it was morning and she was on her own in the Peruvian jungle, still strapped into her seat. Her arms and legs were gashed and she had broken her collarbone, but otherwise, miraculously, she was unharmed. She was the only survivor out of 92 on board. 'I was too shocked to feel frightened,' she says. 'I realised there was no way a search party would find the plane—it was too deeply hidden—so my only chance was to reach help. When I heard the sounds of running water I knew I had to follow it, because a river would lead to a human settlement.' Her survival instinct took over. She scooped maggots from her wounds, drank muddy water and walked for 10 days in the jungle before being found by tribesmen. 'The accident changed me completely,' she says. 'I have learnt that life is precious—that it can be taken from you at any moment. I came so close to death then that everyday stress no longer affects me. Trivial things don't worry me any more'" (Farndale 2009).

- GIDDENS, Anthony 1991: *Modernity and Self-Identity-Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- HARTMAN, Geoffrey 2003: 'Trauma within the Limits of Literature'. Ortwin De Graef and Vivian Liska, eds. *The Instance of Trauma, European Journal of English Studies* 7:3: 257-74.
- LETISSIER, Georges 2011: "'The Eternal Loop of Self-Torture': Ethics and Trauma in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*". Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, eds. *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. 209-26.
- LUCKHURST, Roger 2008: *The Trauma Question*. London and New York: Routledge.
- MCEWAN, Ian 2007 (2001): *Atonement*. London: Vintage.
- 2012: *Sweet Tooth*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- MELLET, Laurent 2011. 'Ré-adaptation et création dans le mythe de *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, James Whale, Kenneth Branagh)'. Ariane Hudelet and Shannon Wells-Lassagne, eds. *De la page blanche aux salles obscures-Adaptation et réadaptation dans le monde Anglophone*. Rennes: PU de Rennes. 139-49.
- PEARS, Tim 2011 (2010): *Landed*. London: Windmill.
- 2012 (2011): *Disputed Land*. London: Windmill.
- RANCIÈRE, Jacques 1998: *La Chair des mots-Politiques de l'écriture*. Paris: Galilée.
- ROTHBERG, Michael 2000: *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P.
- SHELLEY, Mary 1992 (1818): *Frankenstein*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- SMITH, Zadie 2012: *NW*. London: Penguin.
- WHITEHEAD, Anne 2004: *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- YEBRA, José M. 2011: 'A Terrible Beauty: Ethics, Aesthetics and the Trauma of Gayness in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*'. Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, eds. *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. 175-208.

Received 21 April 2012

Revised version accepted 19 March 2013

Dr Laurent Mellet is Senior Lecturer in British literature and cinema at the Université de Bourgogne in Dijon (France). He is the co-author of *Étudier l'adaptation filmique-Cinéma anglais, cinéma américain* (PUR, 2010), and the author of *L'Œil et la voix dans les romans de E. M. Forster et leur adaptation cinématographique* (PULM, 2012). He is the editor of the 2012 issue of academic e-journal *Textes et contextes*, entitled *Early Literary Centuries*. He has written a monograph on Jonathan Coe, to be published in 2014 by the PUPS.

Address: Université de Bourgogne. UFR Langues et communication. Département d'Anglais. 2 bd Gabriel, 21000, Dijon, France.