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# Corporeality of Trauma and Loss in Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*

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#### **Abstract**

Published in 1989, Janice Galloway's first novel *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* has drawn both critical and popular attention. Much of this attention is directed at the way the text experiments with form and at the way it becomes a feminist text which lays bare the suffering and marginalization of the female body. This article seeks to explore the corporeality of trauma present in the text. Through its autodiegetic narrator – Joy Stone – the text becomes a testimony of her depression in the aftermath her boyfriend. The text relies heavily on the physical and psychological pain, and more significantly, the physical manifestation of psychological pain. As such, this article looks at how *The Trick* presents and represents trauma and loss through Joy's body and through the formal configurations of the text, and argues that trauma becomes the main catalyst to point at the irresolutely interconnected formal and thematic engagements of the text.

**Key Words:** Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, trauma, corporeality, Contemporary Scottish Fiction.

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# Janice Galloway'in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* adlı Romanında Travma ve Kaybın Bedenselliği

#### Öz

Janice Galloway'in 1989 yılında yayımlanmış olan ilk romanı *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* hem akademik hem de popüler anlamda ilgi çekmiştir. Bu ilginin büyük bir kısmı metnin biçeme karşı deneysel yaklaşımı ve aynı zamanda metnin kadın bedeninin acısı ve ötekileştirilmesini ortaya koyan feminist bir metin olmasından kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu makale ise metinde mevcut olan travmanın bedenselliği ile ilgilenmektedir. Metin, birinci kişi anlatıcı üzerinden, Joy Stone'un erkek arkadaşını kaybetmesinin ardından deneyimlediği depresyonunun bir beyanı haline gelmektedir. Metinde birçok fiziki ve psikolojik acı ifadesi, daha da önemlisi psikolojik acının fiziki belirtisine dair ifadeler yer almaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu makale, romanın travma ve kaybı Joy'un bedeni ve formel yapısı üzerinden nasıl sunup temsil ettiğine bakmaktadır ve travma metnin biçimsel ve tematik meşguliyetlerinin ayrılmaz biçimde ilintili ilişkisinin ana göstergesidir demektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, travma, bedensellik, Çağdaş İskoç Edebiyatı

The Trick is to Keep Breathing (1989) is Janice Galloway's highly acclaimed first novel; it was shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award (1989) and won the Mind Book of the Year. It was also academically well-received; various critics noted its allegorical contextualization of (the traumatic) Scottish history (March, 2002; Germana, 2011) and its exploration of the female and the feminine (Metzstein, 1993; Babinec, 1994; Delgado, 2000). Acknowledging the validity of such readings, this article, however, focuses on how Galloway's novel not only technically but also thematically tackles with the way the protagonist and narrator Joy struggles to cope with loss.

The Trick is to Keep Breathing is the autodiegetic narrative of Joy Stone, a twenty-seven-year-old drama teacher who has an affair with her married colleague, Michael. They go to Spain to "escape" from their relationship problems; but the trip is cut short by Michael's

sudden death as he drowns in a swimming pool. In the aftermath of this loss, Joy suffers from melancholia and later anorexia nervosa; and the text becomes a testimony to how she can or cannot cope with losing the man she loves. This article sets out to examine the representation of Joy's trauma in two levels. Firstly, it looks into this representation as reflected in the bodily changes that Joy experiences. Secondly, it delves into her trauma as reflected in and through the technical experimentation of the text itself.

### The Traumatized Body

Trauma is an event in which "the individual's ability to integrate his/her emotional experience is overwhelmed, or the individual experiences are (subjectively) a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity" (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995, p.60). It can also be defined as "the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth, 1996, p.3). In this sense, trauma disrupts the harmony of the self, how the self relates to the world, and how it experiences time. Moreover, "trauma is a piercing breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication" (Luckhurst, 2008, p.3). In other words, trauma blurs distinctions between the binaries; even if they communicate, it is an uneasy one.

The materiality of trauma or its physical visibility is oftentimes disregarded while its psychological aspects have been thought as primary. Ironically, however, in its first usage in English, which dates back to the seventeenth century, the word refers to "a bodily injury caused by an external agent" (Luckhurst, p.2). In his *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst maintains that only in the nineteenth century did the word trauma begin to denote a psychological state, arguing that this shift indeed points at a "drift of trauma from the physical to the mental realm that would start taking place in the late nineteenth century" (p.2-3). Thinking of trauma as having psychological rather than physical repercussions falls short in the context of Galloway's text. Indeed, *The Trick* depicts a highly embodied Joy, especially in relation to her traumatic experience. In other words, her psychological turmoil finds a material outlet throughout the text.

Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2012) describes The Trick as a "deftly executed work in both its narrative experimentation and treatment of a sensitive, difficult topic - the body as receptacle of lingering trauma" (p.238). Body is the site through which psychological trauma finds an outlet for visibility. Throughout the novel, Joy's body is dramatically present, almost omnipresent due to the trauma of losing her boyfriend. Yet, this omnipresence is counterbalanced by Joy's overt attempts to efface her body (through dissociation, anorexia, and eventually through a suicide attempt), which ironically renders its visibility even more evident. Her uneasy relationship with her own body is evinced in the opening lines of the text when Joy says "I watch myself from the corner of the room" (Galloway, 1991, p.7). This statement indicates a paradoxical "out of body experience;" it is paradoxical since she cannot have such a vantage point. What she watches is her "self" or rather her body that she recognizes as herself; but then the question is who enacts the watching if Joy's self is at the corner of the room? Dissociation in this case is looking at your own body as if "you" are not inside of it, and this is a problematic statement since what constitutes "you" is both the body and the mind, so to speak, not either one *or* the other.

Joy's visceral reaction to loss (and hence to trauma) is evident specifically in two instances: her abject horror of food and her fascination with blood (or its lack thereof). She stops eating after a detailed account of her incident with a can of vegetable soup:

I found the opener and dug it into the top, lifting it higher with each turn of the handle. Some of the stuff inside smeared on my knuckle. It felt slimy, unpleasant. Inside the can the surface was a kind of flattened jelly, dark red with bits of green and yellow poking through. Watery stuff like plasma started seeping up the sides of the viscous block. It didn't look like food at all. (Galloway, p.38)

Her grotesque depiction of food concludes with her accidentally cutting her hand with the soup can. Her blood and the soup become one; since they are both red it is not possible to distinguish them. Seeing her blood peculiarly drives her to the conclusion "I didn't need to eat" (p.38). This is the onset of her anorexia nervosa. According to

Freud (1975), the "refusal to take nourishment" (p.246) is related to the perceived lack of self-worth on part of the individual, a sensation which, in severe cases, overcomes the will to live "which compels every living thing to cling to life" (p.246). Her sense of worth is low due to the instability she experiences both in her workplace and in her lived environment. After Michael's death, she is reduced to a home-wrecker with no legitimate claim even to the house she inhabits, because it was leased to Michael. Her work place is tense because she is a woman who had an affair with a married colleague. Thus, she is in a rather precarious situation with no real support system, either financially or socially.

Without any certainty for a happy future and lacking a positive self-image with which she can enjoy acceptance, Joy turns to her body to maintain a modicum of control in a world where everything seems out of control. In fact, as Stefanie Lehner (2011) puts it, "Joy constructs her body as abject, which comes especially to the fore through her anorexia" (p.138). Related to the idea of abject is the Joy's relationship with blood. She gnashes her teeth so hard when she sleeps that she wakes up on a bloodied pillow. Discussing Kristeva's notion of the abject, Ng (2012) suggests that "blood is abject because it is something that should necessarily be kept within the borders of the body and rendered invisible" (p.244). By bursting out of her veins, it is ostensibly displaced, and the blood in this context becomes abject. Moreover, it points at a disruption in the order of things, a loss of control that haunts Joy throughout the text which eventually leads to anorexia. Joy paranoidly thinks that "they want to feed you as part of a conspiracy of fatness to undermine your hard-won control" (Galloway, p.85). The body, then, is seen by her as the site to undermine one's hold on authority over the self. Anorexia serves as a means of making sense of a world where the self is constantly threatened, whether real or perceived. However, as Christie L. March (2002) contends, "Joy's physical erasure and her attempts to assist that erasure through her anorexic behavior leave her feeling increasingly vulnerable and fragile - physically displaced" (p.124). By refusing to nurture her body, she stops menstruating. In a way, the order of her body is disrupted, and her body becomes socially awkward,

if not downright unacceptable. Her inability to menstruate implies that she is incapable of reproduction. In other words, her "worth" as a woman becomes even more problematic now that she is not only a mistress but a mistress who is deprived of the womanly function of her body. Similarly, Lehner (2011) suggests that "given her abject positioning as mistress, Joy must abject her corporeality, in particular her potentially promiscuous female sexuality" (p.139). Anorexia is the means through which this abjection takes place.

Joy's body becomes a foreign body whose language she seems unable to understand. Towards the end of the novel, she refers to the moment Michael died saying that "[m]y body knew he was dead before I did. It shouted and yelled and punched the nurse who came with the needle, thumped its fists off the walls and screamed to try and wake up" (Galloway, p.195). Just like the instance Joy looks at herself from outside at the beginning of the novel, she recalls her reception of Michael's death and points at her dissociation again. This exclusion of the body from the conceptualization of self is evidently due to her state of shock. The aftermath is no different for her either; during their intimate moments with Tony, her boss and occasional sex partner, Joy feels terribly apathic, narrating their sexual encounter with a clinical detachment: "[h]e leaned into my shoulder and kissed my neck, tilting towards the bed, one hand slackening his shirt. I fell back as he spread out against me, pressing into the bone. His hands moved across my clothes lightly, like surgeon's gloves. No real substance. But I knew he was real. It was me who had no substance, nothing under the skin" (p.175). She objectifies her body so much so that she locates it outside herself.

Literary critics such as Dalia Said Mostafa, Silke Arnold-de-Simine, and Stef Craps, just to name a few, as well as scholars from fields as diverse as philosophy to neurology draw attention to the relationship between memory and trauma. Susan J. Brison (1999), for instance, notes that "the undoing of the self in trauma involves a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present and typically an inability to envision a future" (p.39). In *The Trick*, Joy's past or her memory of the past continually disrupts the flow of the present, creating a rupture in the fabric of how Joy perceives reality

or the external world. Brison further maintains that "[m]emories of traumatic events can be themselves uncontrollable, intrusive, and frequently somatic. They are experienced by the survivor as inflicted, not chosen - as flashbacks to the events themselves" (p.40). Joy's loss and trauma trigger a series of painful memories not only of her relationship with Michael but also different and seemingly unrelated bits and pieces from her past such as her failed relationship with Paul - high school sweetheart turned 7 year-long partner who eventually leaves her - and with her sister Myra, who terrorizes Joy with her needy and overbearing personality. These memories are not necessarily related to Michael's death. Nevertheless, they are brought to the fore from the depths of her memory in the face of this loss. What she remembers are not the things in their totality but in fragments, in distorted images rather than coherent and rational wholes. In other words, Joy's remembering of the past is fractured, and definitely not linear. Spontaneous and random outbursts of memory crowd the text and sneak into Joy's present, which is continually and persistently threatened by trauma as it causes her to spiral into chaos.

Her loss even alters the way she perceives and reacts (or remains unresponsive) to her present: "there are split seconds in the morning between waking and sleep when you know nothing. Not just things missing like where or who you are, but nothing. No awareness of skin and bone, the trap inside the skull. For these split seconds you hover in the sky like Icarus. Then you remember" (p.138) (italics in the original). Remembering is a constant issue as she repeatedly voices in her narrative. Yet, what she remembers and how she remembers them are critical. What Joy experiences can be called a "pathological mourning" (Freud, 1975, p.250), which Freud names melancholia, or severe depression as it is understood today. Defining it as "a mourning without end," David Eng and David Kazanjian (2003) argue that "the inability to resolve the grief and ambivalence precipitated by the loss of the loved object, place, or ideal" is what causes melancholia (Introduction p.3). They maintain that "unlike mourning, in which the past is resolved, finished, and dead, in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present [and there is] a continuous engagement with loss and its remains" (Introduction p.3-4) in melancholia. It is retrospective because the gaze of the person experiencing it is directed at the past to make sense of the disarray that is the present. Moreover, the remains, by their very nature, do not form a coherent whole; they come and go in waves, and they are like incompatible puzzle pieces that do not necessarily fit.

This is related to the idea of the unspeakable and its ostensible relationship with trauma and loss. In his article "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma," Barry Stampfl (2014) draws attention to how the unspeakable is a persistent notion within trauma studies, and suggests that trauma "does not *necessarily* conclude in a state of involuntary, deeply conflicted silence" (p.16). It does have a voice; the remains of trauma are the site where to look for that voice. Indeed, the unspeakable has an ambivalent nature: on the one hand, it begs to be spoken through its remains which are traceable. On the other hand, language fails to contain it in its complexity, and therefore it remains veiled. Galloway's engagement with the body and textual strategies in *The Trick*, in this respect, should be seen as her attempt to capture this ambivalence and represent it.

Going back to Joy's reference to Icarus, which indeed calls to mind Bruegel the Elder's famous *Landscape with The Fall of Icarus*, Joy's situation can be compared to the depiction in the painting. Icarus is hard to discern at first sight despite being the namesake of the painting. Just like Bruegel's Icarus, Joy is both visible and invisible in her own story. This issue of invisibility can be easily traced in the funeral scene where Joy participates but is deemed "non-existent" both by the attendees and the priest who conducts the ceremony:

- 1. The Rev Dogsbody had chosen this service to perform a miracle.
- 2. He'd run time backwards, cleansed, absolved and got rid of the ground-in stain.
- 3. And the stain was me I didn't exist. The miracle had wiped me out. (Galloway, n. pag.)

The funeral service does not take Joy into account because as the mistress of a dead man she does not exist, either legally or socially. Being denied an acceptable position from whence she can mourn and cope with her loss accentuates Joy's sense of loss. The fact that she is not "legitimately" allowed to mourn Michael's death is probably the most obvious point of departure for her traumatization. As Lavrijsen puts it, "[n]ot being able to mourn and work through her traumatic experience, Joy falls into a severe depression. Her invisibility or absence in the public act of mourning is reflected in her own invisibility, in her physical deterioration and also in her mental weakening which even leads to dissociation" (p.7). As such, her inability to mourn properly has both physical and psychological consequences.

Judith Herman (2001) underlines how important it is for the people to be able to mourn their loss so that they can recover from trauma: "Failure to complete the normal process of grieving perpetuates the traumatic reaction" (p.69). Joy's pain festers because she is not allowed to mourn publicly. During the funeral, "Michael is posthumously reclaimed by his wife, leaving Joy to experience the full sinister effect of patriarchal marginalization: her story and feelings are declared illegitimate while Michael's marriage to his estranged wife is revalidated" (Jones, 2007, p.212). The revalidation of the wife means the invalidation or cancelling out of Joy's position as the legitimate "owner" of Michael's loss within the public domain. Jones maintains that "[h]er erasure from the public mourning process causes Joy's grief - which receives no official acknowledgment, let alone sanction - to escalate into trauma, destroying her fragile sense of self and effectively contesting her entitlement to a place in the world" (p.212). In this respect, it is not only the loss of her lover but more significantly, social exclusion and the loss of her place in the world that drives Joy into trauma. This psychological stimulus results in a highly discernible physical manifestation: the traumatic experience has significant bodily consequences for Joy as can be seen in her anorexic body, a body which reinforces the effacement she socially and psychologically experiences.

#### The Traumatized Text

Mary McGlynn (2001) contends that "critical attention to Galloway's interest in the physicality of the body extends to discussions of textual form as well" (p.12). Patrick Kane, for instance, notes how Galloway's focus on the body seeps into her experimental style of writing, and he suggests that in *The Trick*, "the actual text itself becomes a material thing, with its irregular typography and variety of forms (factual prose, theatre-text dialogue, concrete poetry" (qtd. in McGlynn p.12). Joy's experience is narrated by herself; thus, it is a personal testimony. This testimony reiterates the bodily and mental trauma of Joy most overtly through its chaotic, non-chronological sequencing of events and through its insertion of different forms into its narrative.

The novel employs pastiche borrowing freely from a variety of styles and forms such as newspapers, ads, and magazine articles, switching the font and the script. When she is home alone, for instance, she finds a magazine to occupy herself, and lists its highlights in quite a bland fashion:

Baked Alaska – new style
Making the most of summer's late harvest.
Our Best Ever Chocolate Cake.
7 Meals that make in Minutes.
Diet for a firmer new you!
Converting a Victorian schoolhouse into a des res!
How the royals keep looking good
Kiss Me Quick Lips – we show you how!
The Last Days of Melyssa: one mother's moving story of heartbreak and a little girl's courage against a crippling disease. (Galloway, p.26-7)

With no coherence, no stylistic or typographic unity, they look like random bits and pieces with little to do with one another. Moreover, paratexts and notes on the margins constantly seep into the narrative to highlight the physical representation of Joy's troubled mind. She recounts, for example, the night Tony comes to her place after their date and the way he has forced himself into her space and her body; and while the body text focuses on this particular in-

cident, another narrative bleed into the main narrative in bits and pieces: they are not complete sentences, only some words are discernible and others are broken: "warning s when the v happens [...] worst hap we can on blame [...] blame our" (p.175). Even the page numbers in the actual text are deliberately left out when Joy's grasp of reality becomes clouded. If the "narrative reality" (Jungert, 2013, p.202) is threatened and undermined by the traumatic experience, then this threat as well as the ultimate rupture in the narrative reality are shown through the fractured narrative style of the text, which indeed resembles Joy strongly. The fractured narrative is not merely a fancy way of telling the story, but it actually is a manifestation of the fractured psyche of the protagonist. As such, the abstract becomes concrete in the formal structure as well as within the narrative's deliberate focus on the interconnectedness of the mind and the body. Indeed, the physical and the psychological mix and merge throughout the unconventional narrative. Trauma experienced as a result of loss, and the way Joy mourns for her loss become the main catalyst to point at the irresolutely interconnected relationship between the physical and the psychological. The technical strategies of the novel accentuate this thematic focus; in this respect, The Trick is a literal as well as metaphorical representation of trauma and what trauma does.

The text also functions as an outlet for Joy to voice her trauma so that she can begin to heal. The experimental style is not only subversive but also reconstructive in the sense that Joy can make sense of her life only through such fragmentation, and only by going through such debilitating chaos can she reach at a "healing point" in the end. Towards the closing pages of the novel, she listens to some music through a walkman, and thinks of what she can do with herself; her sentences are still disconnected from one another. However, there is a speck of hope seeping through when she thinks "Maybe .... Maybe I could learn to swim" (Galloway, p.235). Moreover, she hears her own voice repeatedly saying "I forgive you" (p.235). It can be inferred that she is on the mend, that she will somehow recover from the shattered narrative that is her life after Michael's loss and all the things that loss has implied for her.

The Trick is to Keep Breathing is the story of the trauma of loss and the coping that comes afterwards. Contemporary Scottish fiction has already been noted for its various portrayals of trauma but these are "mostly presented from a masculine point of view, involving male Scottish issues such as alcoholism etc." (Lavrijsen, 2013, p.6). Alasdair Gray's 1982 Janine and James Kelman's How Late it was, How Late are just two famous examples to such works. The marked masculinity of the contemporary Scottish literary scene is evident in the Top 20 Best Scottish Novels announced in The Herald in 1998. Of the twenty books listed, only two are by female authors: Muriel Spark's The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is at number eight, and Janice Galloway's The Trick is to Keep Breathing makes it into the list at number nineteen (Riach, 2005, p.25-6). It is no coincidence that Galloway ends up in the list; she contributes to the Scottish literary scene by embarking on such important issues as "the continually subordinate role of women in society, the interaction between mind and body, [and] the values and effects of textual innovations" (McGlynn, 2001, p.15). In a literary culture where the female voice and agency are remarkably subdued, Galloway's The Trick is significant since it takes as its focal issue the female trauma with a female narrator.

Trauma prevalent throughout the text discloses itself in the merging of the materiality of the text and of Joy's pain. Her pain becomes tangible in the physical manifestations; her anorexic body, her unmenstruating ovaries, her persistently chaotic memory all attest to the thoroughly traumatized woman that is Joy. Her narrative is also an extension of her trauma, contributing to the portrayal of trauma with its fragmented nature. As such, pain ceases to be an abstraction but becomes an observable "entity." Her pain, in this sense, is "embodied" not only in her body but also in the structural formation of the text. Thus, Joy's trauma is physically present, both in and of the body, both in and through the narrative.

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