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The Revenge of the Repressed

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Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories, Lost and Found

by Lenore Terr
Basic Books, 282 pp., \$22.00

The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse

by Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham
St. Martin's, 290 pp., \$22.95

Remembering Satan

by Lawrence Wright
Knopf, 205 pp., \$22.00

The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (3rd edition)

by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis
Harper Perennial, 604 pp., \$22.50 (paper)

Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria

by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters
Scribner's, 340 pp., \$23.00

Victims of Memory: Incest Accusations and Shattered Lives

by Mark Pendergrast
Upper Access, 603 pp., \$24.95 (paper)

1.

Throughout the past decade or so, a shock wave has been sweeping across North American psychotherapy, and in the process causing major repercussions within our families, courts, and hospitals. A single diagnosis for miscellaneous complaints—that of unconsciously repressed sexual abuse in childhood—has grown in this brief span from virtual nonexistence to epidemic frequency. As Mark Pendergrast shows in *Victims of Memory*, if we put together the number of licensed American psychotherapists (roughly 255,000) with survey results about their beliefs and practices, it appears that well over

50,000 of them are now willing to help their clients realize that they must have endured early molesta-tion. Those professionals have been joined by countless untrained operators who use the yellow pages and flea market ads to solicit “incest work.” It is hard to form even a rough idea of the number of persuaded clients, because most of them take no publicly recorded action against the accused, but a conservative guess would be a million persons since 1988 alone. The number *affected* is of course vastly higher, since, as all parties acknowledge, virtually every case sows dissension and sorrow throughout a family.

When one explanation for mental distress rockets to prominence so quickly, we ought to ask whether we are looking at a medical breakthrough or a fad. However, the choice between those alternatives is not always simple. As its main proponents insist, “recovered memory” is by now not just a diagnosis but a formidable sociopolitical movement. In the words of one of that movement’s founders, the Harvard psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman,

The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women and children. Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial.

The larger movement in question is, of course, women’s liberation, including what Herman calls “a collective feminist project of reinventing the basic concepts of normal development and abnormal psychology...”¹

However uneasy one may feel about an ideologically driven “reinvention” of scientific notions, it is possible that the feminist critique of received psychological lore is substantially right. Feminists were certainly warranted, in the 1970s and 1980s, in declaring that the sexual abuse of children was being scandalously underreported. If they now go on to claim that untold millions of victims, mostly female, have *forgotten* what was done to them, their claim cannot be discredited by the mere fact that it sprang from an activist commitment. Obviously, it needs to be assessed on independent grounds.

Yet such grounds are hard to come by. How can one count authentic cases of repressed memory when the very concept of repression stands in doubt? And what, for that matter, do the champions of recovered memory mean by repression? It is fruitless to press them very hard on this point, since most of them show an impatience with or outright ignorance of conceptual subtleties. Thus in the movement’s most influential document, *The Courage to Heal*, first published in 1988, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis proclaim that “none of what is presented here is based on psychological theories.” Instead, Bass and Davis appeal directly to “the experiences of survivors”—who, however, may or may not *be* survivors of abuse, depending on whether they have actually learned the previously repressed truth or succumbed to therapeutically induced delusion.

Although it is no secret that the idea of repression derives from Sigmund Freud, few of the movement's practitioners have actually studied his texts. Consequently, they are unrestrained by certain ambiguities and outright contradictions implicit in the Freudian theory of repression.² Freud's uncertainty, for example, whether *events* or *fantasies* make up the typical content of the repressed gets resolved in favor of events; as Herman puts it in the opening sentence of *Trauma and Recovery*, "the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness." Again, whereas Freud confusingly treated repression as both a conscious and an unconscious mechanism, his activist successors think of it as strictly unconscious—so much so, indeed, that they can routinely regard a young incest victim as leading two parallel but wholly independent lives, one in the warm daylight of normal family affection and the other in continually repressed horror. And while Freud only occasionally portrayed the undoing of repression as yielding undisguised, accurate information about a patient's early past, contemporary "retrievers" entertain no doubts on the point; with the right coaxing, their patients can allegedly reproduce the exact details of their long-repressed traumas.

By today, recovered memory has enlisted the enthusiasm of many psychotherapists who lack the explicit feminist agenda of Herman, Bass and Davis, and other advocates whose views we will examine later. But all parties do share the core tenet of repression—namely, that the mind can shield itself from ugly experiences, thoughts, or feelings by relegating them to a special "timeless" region where they indefinitely retain a symptom-producing virulence. Clinical experience, the therapists agree, has proven the cogency of this tenet in numberless successfully resolved cases.

But has it, really? When arbitrary assumptions leak into "clinical experience," confirming results can be pumped out as easily as bilge water. That is why research psychologists would insist that the concept of repression be required to pass tests in which variables are controlled and rival explanations for the gathered data are ruled out. Yet while psychoanalytic loyalists have repeatedly attempted to conduct just such experiments, their positive results have at best shown a compatibility with repression, not a demonstration of its existence. As David S. Holmes recently concluded after reviewing a sixty-year history of such efforts, "there is no controlled laboratory evidence supporting the concept of repression."³

Of course, repression cannot be experimentally disproved, either. Since the concept entails no agreed-upon behavioral markers, we are free to posit its operation whenever we please—just as we are free to invoke orgone energy or chakras or the life force. Indeed, as Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham remark in their lively new book, *The Myth of Repressed Memory*,⁴ belief in repression has the same standing as belief in God. The idea may be true, but it is consistent with too many eventualities to be falsifiable—that is, amenable to scientific assessment.

It is possible, however, to mount experimental challenges to corollary tenets that are crucial to recovered memory therapy. That is just what Loftus, a highly regarded researcher and a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, has done in her own experimental work—and that is also why she has been pilloried by the recovery movement as an enemy to incest survivors. *The Myth of Repressed Memory* recounts some of that vilification and tries to head off more of it by taking a conciliatory tone wherever possible. But there is simply nothing to negotiate over. The burden of Loftus's argument is that memory does not function in anything like the way that the recovery movement presupposes.

Loftus offers no encouragement to the retrievers' notion that "videotaped" records of events are stored in a special part of the brain and then suddenly yielded up to near-perfect recall. Empirical science, she reports, has established that memory is inherently sketchy, reconstructive, and unlocalizable. Whether pleasant or unpleasant, it decays drastically over time, though less so if the experience in question gets periodically "rehearsed"—just the opposite of what the retrievers' theory would predict. Furthermore, memory is easily corrupted, if not with an experimenter's deliberate intervention or a therapist's unwitting one, then with a normal "retrospective bias" that accommodates one's sense of the past to one's present values. Flashbacks to an early age, then, are highly unreliable sources of information about any event. All in all, Loftus finds no basis for thinking that repression, as opposed to a gradual avoidance and atrophy of painful recollections, has figured in a single molestation case to date.

Once we have recognized that a memory can disappear because of factors other than repression, even the best anecdotal evidence for that mechanism loses its punch. Consider, for example, the closely watched case of Ross Cheit, a Brown University professor who has recently proved beyond question that his suddenly recalled 1968 molestation by a music camp administrator was real.⁵ But had that abuse been repressed in the first place? In a phone conversation with me on September 7, 1994, Cheit declared that while he takes no position on the existence of repression, he is inclined to doubt that he abruptly and completely consigned his experience to oblivion. A more likely account is that the adult Cheit *refocused* his faded but unrepressed experiences after he had read a book about pedophilia (as he did) and became morally exercised about it. While this, too, is guesswork, the fact that it can't be ruled out renders Cheit's case useless as a demonstration.

Useless, that is, from the standpoint of logic. For another purpose, that of inducing popular belief in the theory of repression, anecdotes can be powerfully effective. The very idea of repression and its unraveling is an embryonic romance about a hidden mystery, an arduous journey, and a gratifyingly neat denouement that can ascribe our otherwise drab shortcomings and pains to deep necessity. When that romance is fleshed out by a gifted

storyteller who also bears impressive credentials as an expert on the mind, most readers in our culture will be disinclined to put up intellectual resistance.

One such narrator, of course, was Freud, whose shifting views about the content of the repressed will prove pivotal to an understanding of the recovery movement's intellectual ancestry. But Freud's stories purportedly explaining tics, obsessions, and inhibitions among the turn-of-the-century Austrian bourgeoisie are beginning to seem not just remote but eccentric. Not so the case histories recounted by the memory retrievers' most distinguished and fluent ally, Lenore Terr, who is not only a practicing therapist but also a professor of psychiatry at the University of California at San Francisco. Terr's deftly written book, *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories, Lost and Found*, has already been welcomed both by the Book-of-the-Month Club and by early reviewers who perceived it as a balanced and learned brief for repression.

The publication of *Unchained Memories* has been especially cheering to recovery advocates because Terr is not afraid to challenge their *bête noire*, Elizabeth Loftus. "[P]sychological experiments on university students," Terr writes, taking dead aim at Loftus's work,

do not duplicate in any way the clinician's observations. What comes from the memory lab does not apply well to the perceptions, storage, and retrieval of such things as childhood murders, rapes, or kidnappings. Trauma sets up new rules for memory.

From Loftus's vantage, of course, such a passage begs the question of how these new rules are to be validated without succumbing to the notorious circularity of "clinical experience." Isn't Terr simply handing herself a conceptual blank check? Nevertheless, she scores a strong rhetorical point with her animadversion against hothouse science. If Terr is right about the special character of real-world trauma, we may have to fall back on sheer stories after all.

2.

Among Terr's own stories, none carries more weight than the George Franklin/Eileen Lipsker case, which occupies the first two chapters of her book. The case, in which Terr herself served as an expert witness "to explain," as she says, "'repression' and 'the return of the repressed,'" came to national attention in 1989 with newspaper and television reports of Eileen Franklin Lipsker's long-buried but amazingly lucid recollection of the way her father, in her terrified presence in 1969, had raped her eight-year-old best friend in the back of his Volkswagen bus and then shattered the girl's skull with a rock and covered the body on a wooded hillside south of San Francisco. In Terr's rendering, this story has

about it a ring of unanswerable truth, backed up by the soberest of corroborators, a jury in a murder trial.

But Terr's account is not the only one available. It was preceded by Harry N. MacLean's scrupulous book-length retelling of the murder story, *Once Upon a Time*, and now it has been scrutinized by MacLean himself, by Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham in *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, and by Richard Ofshe, professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Ethan Watters in an even more trenchant new book, *Making Monsters*.⁶ In view of their findings, the Franklin matter may come to serve as a very different object lesson from the one that Terr intended. If so, a man's freedom hangs in the balance—not a good man, surely, but a man who may have been wrongly convicted.

During the 1990 murder trial in Redwood City, California, it turned out that no concrete evidence implicated Franklin in Susan Nason's death. On the contrary, Franklin's junked van from 1969, located and microscopically studied by police investigators, bore no trace of the twenty-year-old crime. Until a recollection on the part of Eileen's vindictive sister Janice was conveniently revised under therapy, Franklin had a solid alibi for his whereabouts at the time of the abduction. The jury, however, determined with little difficulty that Eileen Lipsker's recovered memory too closely matched the known facts of the unsolved murder to be considered specious. As a result, Franklin is now serving a life sentence in state prison, and the theory of recovered memory has acquired an imposing trophy.

Lenore Terr appears to have assumed from the outset that Franklin was guilty as charged, and she was eager to make herself useful to the prosecution. Awkwardly, however, her research interest in actual cases of repressed memory was quite new; it seems to have postdated the writing of her 1990 book, *Too Scared to Cry*, which contains no index entry for "repression" and which reports on cases of continuously remembered rather than forgotten trauma.⁷ Terr's expertise on sudden recall, moreover, dated from her first interview with Eileen Lipsker herself—and was then swelled by a flood of highly dubious anecdotes about other women's therapeutically prompted visions of incest. But Terr is a thoroughly trained Freudian, and as such she felt qualified, after all, to offer the Franklin jury what she calls "an education" in the reality of repressed memory and its retrieval. Coordinating strategy with the prosecutor and tailoring her testimony, as she now relates, to the job of rendering Eileen Lipsker a wholly credible witness, Terr exceeded the expectations of her temporary employers.

Of course, Terr testified, an expert such as herself can verify the authenticity of a recovered memory through careful interpretation of the subject's symptoms. In some cases, she continued, the expert can even reliably infer the nature of an *unknown* trauma.

Indeed, she herself had recently done exactly that, deducing from Stephen King's novels and films the certain knowledge that in his childhood King had watched a playmate die under the wheels of a railroad train.

As Terr now recounts, she mentioned that feat of detection in order to create a helpful analogy in the jurors' minds.⁸ She hoped they would see that, like Stephen King in his violence-ridden fiction, Eileen Franklin, for five years after the murder, had symptomatically acted out the awful scene that she had observed but almost immediately repressed. According to prosecutors, between the ages of nine and fourteen Eileen had continually pulled out all the hair from one segment of her crown, leaving what Terr calls "a big, bleeding bald spot." That spot uncannily corresponded to the part of Susan Nason's head that had allegedly been smashed by George Franklin. Eileen, then, had apparently turned herself into a living hieroglyph of a crime that Terr could have inferred all by herself, simply by translating the language of Eileen's symptomatic behavior into its mnemonic source within her repressed unconscious.

In an ordinary trial, caught up in claims and counterclaims about the purport of submitted evidence, the mesmerizing quality of Terr's self-depiction as a Freudian Sherlock Holmes could scarcely have assumed much importance. But this was no ordinary trial. Factually impoverished, it came down to little more than a twelve-person referendum on the photographic return of the repressed. According to the later word of several jurors, and to Terr's great present satisfaction, her testimony was decisive in obtaining George Franklin's conviction.

What most impressed both Terr and the jury about Eileen Lipsker's recovered memory was its extraordinary vividness and precision. The brands of beer and cigarettes consumed by George Franklin at the murder scene; Susan Nason's raising her right hand to ward off the fatal blow; the glint of the sun in her clear blue eyes as George brought the rock down on her head; "a crushed, stoneless, silver child's ring" on the now lifeless hand—all of these details and more were as fresh to Eileen in 1989, Terr says, as they had allegedly been twenty years before. How, then, could they not be authentic and conclusively damning?

One answer to that question was provided at the trial by none other than Elizabeth Loftus herself, an expert witness on the other side. Tests on thousands of subjects have shown conclusively, Loftus told the court, not only that memory always fades with the passage of time but that it readily incorporates "post-event information" (whether true or false) that becomes indistinguishable from the actual event. Those two facts together suggest that the sharpness of Eileen Lipsker's "memory" must have been caused by *recent* images—and, as we will see, there was no shortage of such potential contaminants at hand.⁹

With coaching from Terr, however, the prosecution was ready to remove the sting from Loftus's reported findings. Did any of her experiments, she was asked in cross-examination, deal with memories that were two decades old? Wasn't it the case that her experimentally induced distortions of memory affected only some details and not loss of the brute fact that an event had occurred? And had she ever studied a repressed memory? No, she hadn't, for two excellent reasons: she wasn't sure that such memories exist, and even if they do, she couldn't imagine how one could get at them for controlled study.

Regrettably, however, this answer occurred to Loftus after she had left the stand. What she replied instead was that post-event information would probably corrupt a repressed memory in just the way that it assuredly corrupts a nonrepressed one. The concept of repression was thus left unchallenged, and the befuddled jury had no recourse but to side with the rival expert witness—the one who boasted intimacy with the dark and subtle workings of the unconscious.

But Lenore Terr first needed to tiptoe across a theoretical minefield of her own. Her studies of children who had lived through the notorious Chowchilla bus kidnapping and the *Challenger* explosion had shown unambiguously that such experiences do not get repressed. Why, then, should the jury believe that Eileen Lipsker had repressed her harrowing ordeal? Just in time for the trial, but too late for prior publication, Terr came up with a face-saving theory.¹⁰ True, she granted, one-time trauma victims always remember the event; but victims of multiple trauma like Eileen Lipsker, whose father had been a bullying drunk and a sexual abuser of two of his other daughters, turn repression into a daily routine. By the time of the murder, according to Terr, Eileen had become an old hand at stuffing bad memories into the mental freezer.

Terr's brainstorm was remarkable in several respects. For one thing, it overlooked the fact, later acknowledged in *Unchained Memories*, that Eileen had always remembered her father's violence around the house. Second, it contradicted universal human experience of protracted duress. Has anyone past the age of, say, six who has survived racial persecution, a famine, a bombing campaign, or a brutal enemy occupation ever forgotten that it occurred? Terr had evidently confused the normal fading of *individual instances* of repeated, patterned mistreatment with willed unawareness of that mistreatment. And third, Terr was refusing to grant any distinction in memorability between George Franklin's usual brutality and the witnessed rape and murder of Eileen's best girlhood friend.

Beyond the already mentioned dubieties in Terr's version of the Franklin case lie a good number of others emphasized by MacLean, Loftus and Ketcham, and Ofshe and Watters, and more briefly by Mark Pendergrast as well. The cardinal point is that Eileen Lipsker's certainty that she had attended the murder of Susan Nason did *not* overwhelm her in a single unprompted flash on what Terr calls "a quiet winter afternoon in 1989." That was

the least plausible of five distinct stories that Lipsker kept changing to forestall objections. As the trial record shows, Lipsker, whom Terr characterizes as having known “nothing at all” about repression, had already been consulting two therapists who were helping her probe her childhood “memories” and her conscious, long-standing suspicions about the murder. Both practitioners employed the theory of repression and had discussed it with her. Moreover, Eileen was aided in producing increasingly bizarre visions of George Franklin committing another murder—this one not just unsolved but completely unknown to police or anyone else—with herself as a witness and of his raping or otherwise sexually abusing her, sometimes in the presence of oblivious family members, from the ages of three through fourteen. She even came to believe that George had physically assisted her godfather in raping her. Incredibly, though, none of these barbarities had left a glint of long-term memory in her conscious mind.¹¹

Terr omits any mention of George’s second “murder” committed in Eileen’s presence, but she does cite the equally implausible memories of incest scenes. In doing so, however, she offers no clue that all this knowledge emanated from a regimen of therapeutic dowsing and that some of it *preceded* the original murder flashback. This latter fact is important because Eileen’s newly formed belief that she had spent her childhood being molested provided her with an extra motive for wanting to see George imprisoned. Terr as author is no more interested in dwelling on such motives than the prosecution was. She uses Eileen’s sexual “memories” only in the partisan and highly effective way that they were used in the trial, to establish that a beast like George was just the sort of person who could have raped Susan Nason and then bludgeoned her to death.

The fact that memory therapy lay at the very heart of the Franklin case was manifested in little-noted testimony from one of Eileen’s therapists, Kirk Barrett. According to Barrett, as Ofshe and Watters report,

Eileen’s memories “developed” over the course of the therapy sessions and often during the encounter itself. With the relaxation exercises and the free-association techniques, these memories often became more detailed during their hour-and-a-half meetings....

Barrett remembers that from June [1989], when she initially visualized the first element of what was to become the crime scene, through July, Eileen worked both in and out of the sessions trying to sort out the meaning of her feelings, visualizations, and memories. He assured Eileen at the time that it “wasn’t important... whether her visualizations were real or not,” and that they could “sort that out later.” In and out of therapy the details slowly cohered into a narrative. One day she came in and reported to Barrett that she had seen a flash image of someone hitting Susan with a rock—*but that she couldn’t make out who the person was*. According to Barrett it was several

sessions later, in a highly emotional moment, that Eileen revealed that she was finally able to see the face of the man who killed [Susan]. It was her father's.

Eileen Lipsker originally told her brother that the murder scene had revealed itself to her *in hypnosis* during her therapy. Later, she told a sister that she had *dreamed* the crucial knowledge—an equally suggestive fact, since recovered memory therapy often employs either hypnosis or dream analysis or both. Lenore Terr wants us to regard these statements as forgivable “lies” and to put our trust in the more enchanting image of Eileen's single flashback to the murder scene. It makes a good deal more sense to suppose that Eileen only belatedly learned that evidence from hypnosis had recently been deemed inadmissible in California courts.

Kirk Barrett's neglected testimony does exculpate Eileen Lipsker in one respect: she had sincerely come to believe that her father was the murderer. Once committed to having him put away, however, she allowed her “memories” to evolve as expediency required, picking up new details and dropping others as newspaper reports disclosed the content of old police records. As Ofshe and Watters remark, virtually the only correct details in her original report were “that Susan had been killed with a rock and that her ring had been crushed—facts that she had told Barrett she had known all her life.”¹²

There remains, however, the one striking detail that captivated both the jurors and, I am sure, the early readers of Terr's book: the bleeding bald spot that was said to have marred Eileen Franklin's pate for five straight years after the murder. Quite simply, it turns out to be a figment of Eileen's adult imagination. As Ofshe and Watters discovered, more than forty photographs of her in the relevant period—potential exhibits that the prosecution wrongly withheld from the defense—show no trace of missing hair. Eileen's mother, Leah, who has changed her mind about George's guilt after finding the narrative in *Unchained Memories* so erroneous, has told Ofshe and Watters that she couldn't have failed to notice any such disfiguration if it had occurred even once. An older and a younger sister have also refuted this claim. If, as Terr believes, every symptom tells a story, in this instance the story is a fairy tale.

Once understood in its true lineaments, the Franklin/Lipsker matter turns out to be highly typical of other recovered memory cases. There is, in the first place, the eerily dreamlike quality of the “memories” themselves, whose floating perspective, blow-up details, and motivational anomalies point to the contribution of fantasy.¹³ There is the therapist's reckless encouragement of the client to indulge her visions and worry “later”—usually never—whether or not they are true, along with his “supportive” absence of concern to check the emerging allegations against available knowledge. There is the interpretation of the “survivor's” moral frailties as further evidence that she is a “trauma victim.”¹⁴ There is also, we can infer, the therapist's false promise that excavation of the repressed past will

lead to psychic mending instead of to the actual, nearly inevitable, result—disorientation, panic, vengefulness, and the severing of family ties. And there is the flouting or overlooking of what is scientifically known about memory, leaving the field free for dubious theories exfoliating from the original dogma of repression.

One remaining feature of the Lipsker case turns out to be reproduced in nearly every controversy over therapeutically assisted recall. The Franklin jury members, like many people who must weigh the credibility of “survivors,” felt that they had to accept Eileen’s story because she stood to gain nothing and lose everything by accusing her own father of murder. Of course, that was an oversimplification; Eileen felt that the pedophile George was a threat to her own child, and besides, as many observers perceived, she had a distinct taste for fame.¹⁵ In a deeper sense, however, the jury was right: Eileen had opened a Pandora’s box of bitterness and recrimination that will probably trouble her for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, the cardinal point about all this self-destructiveness went completely unnoticed. Eileen Lipsker did not *decide* to send her mind into a tailspin after making rational calculations about the opposing claims of justice and filial loyalty; she was progressively *encouraged* to do so by therapists who believed that full psychic health must wait upon a vomiting up of the repressed past.

Disastrously missed at the trial, this cardinal fact slipped away once again on a subsequent Faith Daniels talk show where, for the first time, Eileen Lipsker and Elizabeth Loftus sat down together. “Why would you want to suffer if you didn’t have to?” asked one member of the audience who, like nearly all the others, believed Eileen’s story and considered Loftus a heartless crank. “Why would you want to put yourself through it? There’s no logic behind it.” As Loftus now tells us in her book, she smiled stoically as the audience continued to berate her and rally to Lipsker’s cause. And then the program was over.

Reading about this episode, one experiences an extreme frustration. Couldn’t Loftus have pointed out that other parties besides Eileen had “put her through it”? That, however, was four years ago, when no one yet had an explanatory handle on the burgeoning plague that still besieges us. Now at last, thanks to the inquiries of Loftus and others, it is starting to make an eerie kind of sense.

3.

The Franklin/Lipsker case, so attractive to Lenore Terr as Exhibit A of validated repression, actually shows how a “memory” originating in conscious hunches and resentments can be crystallized by protracted therapeutic *suggestion*, or the subliminal contagion of ideas between a dominant and a subordinate party. That is what we regularly find when missing elements of recovered memory stories are filled in; where repression was, there shall suggestion be. Indeed, someone who reviews many such cases will

eventually realize that the salient question isn't whether or not a bona fide instance of repression can be found, but rather whether there are any limits at all to the malleability of the human mind. Therapists, it seems, are helpful but not strictly necessary to the production of wildly fantastic memories. Given a facilitating belief structure, the compliant subject can use the merest hints as triggers to delusion.

To illustrate this fact, there is nothing quite like the sequence of events recounted in Lawrence Wright's *Remembering Satan*, a short but gripping and brilliantly constructed book that will already be familiar to some readers from its serialization in *The New Yorker* in May 1993. Wright tells of Paul Ingram, an Olympia, Washington, sheriff's deputy, a born-again Christian, and the chair of his county Republican committee, who was eventually thought to have raped both of his daughters as well as one of his sons innumerable times, to have passed the daughters around sexually as poker nights at home turned into gang rapes, to have hideously tortured the girls and forced them and his wife to have sex with goats and dogs, and to have murdered and cannibalized many babies at huge gatherings of his Satanic cult—where, be it noted, long gowns, pitchforks, and “Viking hats” were *de rigueur*. The still greater novelty, however, is that Ingram, though he initially remembered none of those atrocities, succeeded in visualizing most of them through the exercise of prayerful introspection. Indeed, he labored so hard to admit to new crimes that his tale-spinning daughters sometimes fell behind his pace.

All this would be hilarious Thurberesque Americana if it were not also inexpressibly sad. Whereas the Franklin household, when Eileen Lipsker went public with her vision, no longer contained a married couple or any children, in the Ingram case a devout family of seven was shattered for good. Moreover, Ingram, who is now serving a twenty-year term in prison after having confessed to six counts of child molestation, came close to being joined there by others who were caught in a widening net of lunacy—and at least two of them, who were in fact jailed briefly and then kept under house arrest for five months each, will never recover their reputations. Even those men had to think long and hard about whether they might have unknowingly lived double lives; and Ingram's wife, Sandy, did conclude that she must have been a secret Satanist. She has moved away now and lives under a different name, as does the only one of her five children who hasn't fled Olympia.

What is most arresting about the Ingram calamity is how little suggestion—indeed, how little *autosuggestion*—was required to set it in motion and then to keep it hurtling toward its climax. Ericka Ingram had a history of making unsubstantiated sexual charges prior to her “realization” at age twenty-two that her father had been raping her. That insight did not occur during therapy but at a Christian retreat in August 1988 at which a visiting charismatic healer told Ericka the news, relayed to her by the Holy Spirit, that she had been molested as a child. Ericka immediately accepted the diagnosis—and, six years later, she apparently still does.¹⁶

Similarly, during the second day of his questioning Paul Ingram easily allowed himself to be led into a trance, resulting in his confession to all of the crimes with which he was eventually charged after prosecutors had deleted the witches' sabbath material, which could have raised awkward questions in jurors' minds if the case had come to trial. Ingram's prolific later admissions were facilitated not only by prayer but by "relaxation techniques," one of which he had picked up from a magazine. And two of his sons also developed a knack of instantly becoming "dissociated" in order to provide inquisitors with the required lurid reminiscences.

This is not to say that the Ingram family generated hallucinations entirely under its own steam. To begin with, Paul Ingram's police colleagues exerted unscrupulous (though hardly unusual) pressure on him, extending the second interrogation over a mind-buckling eight-hour period and using his piety as a wedge to confession. They lied to him about what others had revealed and assured him that if he would only begin by admitting his guilt, the relevant memories would come flooding back.¹⁷ By that second day, furthermore, Paul was being advised by a Tacoma psychologist whose recent practice had included Satanic abuse cases, and who later helped Paul's son Chad to conclude that his remembered childhood dreams were proof of molestation. An assistant pastor in the Church of Living Water also helped both Paul and his wife to sustain the cleansing flow of visions. During five months of interrogation, no fewer than five psychologists and counselors kept the heat on Paul, preventing him from ever stepping back to test whether the grimmer yet more tentative of his two memory systems—his "horror movie," as he called it—was anchored to actual events.

When all this pressure has been duly weighed, however, the fact remains that the Ingram case displays a breathtaking readiness on the part of its major players to form lasting "memories" on very slight provocation. And this is important for grasping the explosive potentiality of recovered memory allegations. There was nothing exceptional about the Ingram family's prelapsarian makeup or the Olympia scene in general. Apparently, a community steeped in Biblical literalism on the one hand and *Geraldo* on the other needs only a triggering mechanism to set off a long chain reaction of paranoia.¹⁸ Yet such a community epitomizes a good portion of North America. The potential for mass havoc from "memory"-based accusations is thus no smaller today than it was in the seventeenth century. In fact, it is incomparably greater, thanks to the power of our sensation-seeking media to spread the illness instantaneously from one town or region to another.

As Lawrence Wright properly stresses, one further ingredient acts as a multiplier of trouble. Not surprisingly, it is a shared belief in the theory of repression. Only a few hours into his first grilling, Paul Ingram was ready to state, "I did violate them and abuse them and probably for a long period of time. I've repressed it." His questioners of course held the same view, which took on firmer contours as more psychologists were called in; before

long, the official version was that Paul had repressed each of his myriad offenses just as soon as he had finished committing it. A county under-sheriff (himself falsely accused of Satanism, but still an enthusiastic believer in its reality) became so enamored of this notion that he started moonlighting as a counselor to survivor groups and writing theoretical papers about the effects of repression.¹⁹ One can only second Lawrence Wright's conclusion: "[w]hatever the value of repression as a scientific concept or a therapeutic tool, unquestioning belief in it has become as dangerous as the belief in witches."

Some secular-minded readers may feel that the Ingram case, in view of its fundamentalist soil and its resultant exotic blossom of Satanism, is too outlandish to tell us much about the prudent and responsible search for incest memories. Yet the more one learns about the scare over "Satanic ritual abuse," the more porous its boundary with the larger recovered memory movement appears to be. According to surveys taken by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, at least 15 percent of all memory retrievers come to recall Satanic torture in childhood—this despite a lack of evidence to support the existence of *any* sadistic devil-worshipping cults in North America or anywhere else.²⁰ The fact is that "memories" of baby barbecues and the like are usually evoked through the same techniques of psychic exploration commended by prestigious academics such as Judith Herman and Lenore Terr. Indeed, as she testified at the Franklin trial, Terr herself has treated "victims" who thought they recalled having been forced to watch ritual human sacrifices.

Until the recovered memory movement got properly launched in the later 1980s, most Satanism charges were brought against child-care workers who were thought to have molested their little clients for the devil's sake. In such prosecutions, which continue today, a vengeful or mentally unhinged adult typically launches the accusations, which are immediately believed by police and social workers. These authorities then disconcert the toddlers with rectal and vaginal prodding, with invitations to act out naughtiness on "anatomically correct" dolls with bloated genitals, and, of course, with leading questions that persist until the child reverses an initial denial that anything happened and begins weaving the kind of tale that appears to be demanded. As many studies have shown, small children can be readily induced to believe that they have experienced just about any fictitious occurrence. In this respect, however, they do not stand fundamentally apart from their elders. The only real difference is that the grown-ups, in order to become as gullible as three-year-olds, must first subscribe to a theory such as that of demonic possession or its scientific counterpart, Freudian repression. They then become putty in the hands of their would-be helpers.

As it happens, the most impressive controlled illustration of this fact to date came directly from the Paul Ingram case, after the prosecutors—not the defense!—had invited the social psychologist Richard Ofshe to Olympia as an expert on cults and mind control. Perhaps,

they thought, Ofshe could cast some light into the murky Satanic corner of the affair. But Ofshe, immediately struck by the conditional quality of Ingram's confessions and their suggestion that a scene was taking place in the mind's eye ("I would've," "I must have," "I see it," etc.), decided to test Ingram's suggestibility by proposing a false memory for him to accept or reject.

"I was talking to one of your sons and one of your daughters....," Ofshe told Ingram. "It was about a time when you made them have sex with each other while you watched." This was one charge that had *not* been levied and would never be, but one day later, Paul proudly submitted a new written confession:

...I ask or tell Paul Jr. & Ericka to come upstairs.... I tell Ericka to knell [sic] and to caress Paul's genitals. When erect I tell her to put the penis into her mouth and to orally stimulate him.... I may have told the children that they needed to learn the sex acts and how to do them right.... I may have anal sex with Paul, not real clear.... Someone may have told me to do this with the kids. This is a feeling I have.

When Ofshe then informed Ingram that this memory was specious, Ingram refused to believe him. "It's just as real to me as anything else," he protested.

When, months later, Ofshe phoned Ingram in jail and begged him not to plead guilty, Ingram wavered but declined. Apart from consideration for the daughters who had so egregiously betrayed him, he cited the likelihood that he was still repressing material that would make the whole case clear. Protected at last from the ministrations of his "counselors," he did change his mind shortly thereafter, but his guilty plea had already been accepted by the court, and two subsequent appeals have failed.

The criminal cases we have examined suffice to show that the "return of the repressed," however bland its uses within the amorphous aims of Freudian therapy, can turn noxious when it is considered by police, prosecutors, jurors, and even accused malefactors to be a source of unimpeachable truth. In the light of the actual recovery *movement*, however, the Franklin and Ingram examples can be seen to lack a baleful but typical ingredient. So far as we know, neither Eileen Lipsker nor Ericka Ingram (not to mention Paul Ingram himself) was systematically recruited by self-help "recovery" books to believe that certain despicable deeds must have been committed and then wholly repressed.

Just such solicitation—we can think of it as suggestion-at-a-distance—has by now been brought to bear on myriad vulnerable people, mostly women, by advocates in search of ideological and/or financial gain. The result has been a widespread tragedy that is still unfolding before our incredulous eyes. To lay bare not just its nature but also its causes, both proximate and remote, is a socially urgent task. With the help of several excellent new critical works, we will explore that ground in the concluding portion of this essay.

(This is the first of two articles.)

Letters

Down with Memory Lane December 22, 1994

'Victims of Memory': An Exchange January 12, 1995

- 1 Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (Basic Books, 1992), pp. 9, ix. ↵
- 2 On this point, see Matthew H. Erdelyi, “Repression, Reconstruction, and Defense: History and Integration of the Psychoanalytic and Experimental Frameworks,” *Repression and Dissociation: Implications for Personality Theory, Psychopathology, and Health*, edited by Jerome L. Singer (University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 1–32. Remarkably, Erdelyi welcomes Freud’s unclarity as providing a sound basis for integrating the “dynamic” with the cognitive unconscious. The idea is that since Freud didn’t really know what he meant by repression, we are free to bring the concept into alignment with current research while still thinking of ourselves as Freudians. ↵
- 3 David S. Holmes, “The Evidence for Repression: An Examination of Sixty Years of Research,” in Singer, *Repression and Dissociation*, pp. 85–102; the quotation is from p. 96. ↵
- 4 Although two of the works under consideration here have double authorship, the Loftus and Ketcham book is cast in the first person singular, and its protagonist is Loftus herself. Although Ketcham did conduct some of the interviews that inform *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, I will usually call the “author” Loftus alone. In contrast, the junior partner in *Making Monsters*, Ethan Watters, was the first journalist to sound an alarm about the recovered memory movement, and the book casts him as a full collaborator; that is why I will refer to “Ofshe and Watters” below. I will also refer interchangeably to “the recovered memory movement” and “the recovery movement,” even though the latter term is often used more broadly. ↵
- 5 See Katy Butler, “S.F. Boys Chorus Settles Abuse Suit,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 1, 1994, p. A2. ↵
- 6 See Harry N. MacLean’s *Once Upon a Time: A True Story of Memory, Murder, and the Law* (HarperCollins, 1993) and his critique of Terr in the September 1994 *False Memory Syndrome Foundation Newsletter*. The foundation can be reached at (215) 387-1865 or (800) 568-8882, or by mail at 3401 Market St., Suite 130, Philadelphia, PA 19104. ↵
- 7 Lenore Terr, *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood* (Harper and Row, 1990; Basic Books, 1992). ↵
- 8 Whether Terr had actually detected anything is open to doubt. The upsetting death of King’s boyhood friend was already familiar to her from King’s autobiography—where, however, King reports that, so far as he knows, he did *not* witness the accident in question. Thus Terr’s courtroom example of trustworthy clinical reasoning—proceeding from obsessive themes in King’s eventual artistic productions to a “repressed” fact about one early day in his life—actually dealt with a *still uncorroborated* detail superadded to a story in the public domain. Insofar, then, as the Franklin trial hinged on Terr’s testimony about Stephen King, it appears that one no-evidence case was decided on the basis of another. ↵
- 9 Eileen Lipsker’s problems with memory are echoed by Terr’s own in her capacity as storyteller. Eileen never testified about seeing what Terr calls “white socks and white child-size underwear” in the rape scene, but only something white. And Terr, bent upon condemning George Franklin as a rapist, has lately supplied the useful “fact,” which is false, that semen was found in the dead Susan Nason’s vagina. ↵
- 10 See Lenore Terr, “Childhood Traumas: An Outline and Overview,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 148 (1991), pp. 10–20. ↵
- 11 Indeed, as Terr reports, so unaware was Eileen that her subsequently divorced father had been raping her that she went off to live with him for a while at age fourteen, right after the alleged eleven years of violation had ended. Later, the two of them drove across the country together to Florida, employing the back of the VW van, the supposed site of Susan Nason’s rape, as their joint sleeping quarters. For Eileen’s nineteenth birthday celebration, she took a similar trip with George to Ensenada in the same vehicle. How strange that “the repressed” produced no symptoms or qualms to warn her against taking those risks with the rapist-murderer! ↵
- 12 Intriguingly, one of the tiny errors that survived in Eileen’s testimony, having to do with a confusion between two rings on Susan Nason’s hands, corresponded exactly to a mistake made in a newspaper story in 1969. That could only mean that Eileen’s “memories” were tainted by misinformation that she had either heard or, more probably, read in old clippings or on microfilm. Quixotically, however, the judge ruled all journalism from the murder period inadmissible—as if the only possible question to settle were whether Eileen was revealing the sheer truth or telling lies, instead perhaps of unknowingly recycling second-hand lore. Such bits of truth and error were available to her at all times, thanks to the fact that within her family George Franklin had always been considered a suspect in the Nason murder. ↵
- 13 As for anomalies, why did George Franklin take his daughter along to watch the rape and murder of her dearest friend? How could he not have expected to be found out? Why would he then make Eileen witness another killing? Why did no one in a crowded living room notice

George inserting his finger in Eileen's vagina? Etc. ↵

- 14 As Loftus and Ketcham say, "With that diagnosis all the quirks and idiosyncrasies of Eileen Franklin's personality could be explained away. Yes, she lied about being hypnotized...but that's understandable because she is a *trauma victim*. Yes, she used drugs and was arrested for prostitution...but her behavior makes sense given that she is a *trauma victim*. Yes, she repressed the memory for twenty years...but that's a defensive reaction common to *trauma victims*. Anything the defense might say in an attempt to undermine Eileen's credibility as a witness could be turned around and presented as an ongoing symptom...." ↵
- 15 Lipsker quickly became a heroine in psychotherapeutic circles, appeared on *Sixty Minutes*, collaborated on an as-told-to book, and found herself flatteringly portrayed by Shelley Long in a made-for-TV movie about the case. Her book and movie contracts, negotiated by a Hollywood entertainment lawyer, were signed before the case had gone to trial. ↵
- 16 At the sentencing, Ericka was instrumental in seeing that her father receive the stiffest allowable punishment, and afterward, like Eileen Lipsker, she advanced her cause on the tabloid talk shows. Today, I gather, she is still concerned with denouncing a coven of Satanists within the Olympia police department. ↵
- 17 The Olympia police authorities never conducted an investigation in the usual meaning of that term. "Believe the children" was their tacit motto from the word go. To this day they haven't realized the unfairness of collecting a mountain of absurd and contradictory stories from patently unstable witnesses, lopping off the charges that would be most likely to arouse a jury's suspicions about the reliability of those sources, and using the remaining, equally unsubstantiated, charges to hustle a respected colleague off to prison. Nor, in Wright's words, did the detectives "ever consider the possibility that the source of the memories was the investigation itself." ↵
- 18 One month before Paul Ingram was summoned to police headquarters for his first grilling, the Ingram family sat down to watch Geraldo Rivera's prime-time special, *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground*. The previous day's program, which they may or may not have seen, was called *Satanic Breeders: Babies for Sacrifice*. ↵
- 19 Ingram himself learned, pathetically, how to talk the self-pitying lingo of the recovered memory movement. "I have also been a victim since I was five years old," he told an interrogator, "and I learned very early that the easiest way to handle this was to hide it in unconscious memory...." ↵
- 20 For a reliable account of the way that the mania over "Satanic ritual abuse" has blended with the recovered memory movement, see Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Open Court, 1993). For the FBI's inability to locate any such abuse, see Kenneth V. Lanning, "Satanic, Occult, Ritualistic Crime: A Law Enforcement Perspective," *The Police Chief*, October 1989, pp. 62–83. Among the books under review, the question of Satanism is most fully covered in Mark Pendergrast's *Victims of Memory*. ↵

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