

**THE DEAD IN THE MEMORY PALACE:
THE DETECTIVE WORK OF MEMORY
AND MOURNING IN THE MENTALIST (CBS, 2008-)¹**

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Abstract: *My paper investigates several representations of the workings of memory and mourning in several sample cases from the American TV series The Mentalist (CBS, 2008-). The main investigative energies of this TV drama are concentrated around police consultant Patrick Jane, former TV psychic and fraud, whose wife and daughter were murdered by a serial killer who dubs himself "Red John." In his attempt to discover the killer, and avenge the death of his family, Patrick Jane participates in many police murder investigations. These are, however, merely the stage upon which Patrick Jane's mnemonic techniques receive full display. Jane often explains his "Memory Palace" technique, and relates memory and place in the mind, which connection apparently enables him to reconstruct scenes that he has actually never witnessed. The manner in which the creators of the show choose to represent memory (both post-traumatic, in the case of Patrick Jane's and others' flashbacks, as well as everyday memory), contributes to and reflects the manner in which the audience of the show understands the way we remember.*

In his TED talk, entitled "Feats of Memory Anyone Can Do," Joshua Foer references a few memory techniques, among which the famous "Memory Palace," which teaches us that if we want to remember a significant amount of information we need to break it down into manageable elements, then fashion an architectural construction (i.e. a palace) and furnish it with those elements. When asked to reproduce them, we would simply imagine taking a walk around the memory palace and retrieving them. Foer, who was a USA Memory Champion in 2006 and has since published a book called *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*,² encourages his audience to live "a memorable life," i.e. "be the kind of person who remembers to remember." He claims that in our present-day culture various factors have discouraged the active practice of remembering, an art that is worth cultivating because it provides "a kind of depth of processing, a kind of mindfulness

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² For more information, see Foer's website, www.joshuafoer.com.

that most of us don't normally walk around exercising." Since "our lives are the sums of our memories," Foer says we should not be willing to cut them short "by not paying attention to the human being across from us who is talking to us, by being so lazy that we're not willing to process deeply." Here, Foer raises a lot of concerns, but for the purpose of this paper I am mostly interested in examining two of his suggestions: 1. that memory is a skill one trains and that relies on attention, and not on some innate supernatural capacity; and 2. that our lives are the sums of our memories, with the implication that the more we remember, the better the quality of our lives. Since he is speaking at TED, an international platform where individuals deemed to be opinion makers deliver brief talks, Foer is clearly hoping that his talk will help shape certain social practices. At the same time, it mirrors often-voiced concerns about the way our memory has been shaped by the ability to google information, and our attention span shortened by our devotion to phones and tablets.

In this paper, I would like to pit Foer's plea for a memorable life against contemporary American norms of mourning as they emerge from CBS's series *The Mentalist*, created by Bruno Heller, and recently renewed for a sixth season.³ A cursory examination of the staple psychoanalytical literature on mourning will show that mourners are expected to show respect for the dead by remembering them adequately within a specific time frame that varies from culture to culture.

Closely connected to the issue of post-traumatic healing is the manifestation of a certain anxiety of sincerity felt by the survivor (and the main character is tortured by the impossibility of testifying to a truth he does not possess, i.e. the circumstances of his family's death). It partly stems from the sentiment that by the mere fact of surviving one has abandoned the dead; in Patrick Jane's case, this issue is complicated by the fact that his actions provoked a serial killer and led to his wife and child's death. The question of surviving his loved ones complicates the already fraught issue of the "truth" of the post-traumatic confession, as Cathy Caruth has shown in *Unclaimed Experience*. In trying to disentangle this issue, Caruth proposes that within the post-traumatic mechanism of repetition and struggle with non-assignable meaning is also lodged the difficult matter of the impossibility of living (also previously identified by Freud and others), brought about by the subject's imperfect or non-existent realization that one has survived death or even encountered it, "It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living" (Caruth 62). In other words, if the story of unbearable trauma becomes translatable into language, the silent dead are, in a sense, betrayed because the silence of the shock of loss is replaced with the language of life that tells the story of what it survived. At the same time, telling stories of the dead is part of the duties of mourning.

Mourning has an important mnemonic and performative component. More importantly, it is prescriptively finite, and its end is possibly perceived by some

³ The fact that the TV series has not yet come to an end will inevitably delay some of the answers to the questions in this paper.

survivors as forgetfulness and/or betrayal of the dead. In this context, *The Mentalist*, whose main character negotiates his own survival after his family's demise, offers a good starting-point for a discussion about how Foer's imperative ("remember to remember") works in the context of the prescriptive healing that mourning entails. In other words, I am interested in the prescriptive transformation of traumatic memory into everyday memory that the end of mourning entails. Does this process take place by building private "sites of memory," as Nora would say (and Hirsch would dub "points of memory"), to signal and treat the death of authentic memory? And once these monuments to dead memories have been built, should the subject place them inside a memory palace and, whenever required, start walking around the correctly labeled monuments signaling the end of once powerful grief?

Investigation and Post-traumatic Memory

The Mentalist is a detective drama whose main storyline features a group of police investigators based in Sacramento (California) who are helped by police consultant Patrick Jane, a former TV psychic who had, in his previous career, falsely claimed to be able to communicate with the dead. After having publicly insulted serial killer Red John, the latter kills Patrick's wife and daughter, leaving him a note and his custom signature, a smiley face drawn with his fingers in blood on the victims' wall. Thus, although the team solves many murders, always with Patrick's invaluable insight and prodigious memory and imagination, the main narrative prop of the series is the elusive serial killer Red John, the very reason Patrick works with the police, and so far his biggest failure as a detective. Although most of Patrick's colleagues are also deeply affected by personal tragedy and by the wear-and-tear of the job, the trauma of the title character⁴ is proposed as the most important one of the many introduced in every episode of *The Mentalist*. The series thus creates a hierarchy of traumas of which Patrick Jane's comes off as the most damaging, an inevitable plot decision that creates the premises for the series' reading of this particular trauma as exemplary.

The most frequent method used to narrate the main trauma of the series, i.e. the death of Patrick Jane's family, is the flashback technique. It is repeatedly used to tell the fragmented story of Patrick Jane's discovery of the murder scene five years before the action of the show begins; the frequency of the flashbacks is not merely used to quickly inform latecomers about the main plot points, but also to suggest the intrusive nature of traumatic memory in Patrick's everyday life. In this particular scene, however, when Patrick opens the door to the bedroom of his house where his wife and daughter lie dead,

⁴ The term "mentalist" is defined in the intro as "someone who uses mental acuity, hypnosis and/or suggestion" and "a master manipulator of thoughts and behavior." Patrick Jane is the only character actually present in the intro, and hence immediately associated with the term. It references his unorthodox investigative methods which rely not only on observation, intelligence, and memory, but also on the manipulation of the suspects, some of whom he sometimes illegally hypnotizes. His techniques create the image of a typical "investigator gone rogue," who impishly refuses to go by the book, and who is forgiven mainly because his methods work.

the camera suddenly turns towards him instead of the room, and then back again to show us the red mark on the wall. While other victims of Red John's are shown to us throughout the show, this major traumatic episode remains a blank, or rather it is replaced by these two images: Patrick's face and Red John's signature, in the shape of a smiley face.

The fact that the victims' bodies are not shown is first of all an indication of how the show chooses to read the representability of Patrick's trauma. In other words, the invisibility of the butchered bodies of the wife and child suggests that the scene of trauma is unrepresentable for Patrick because it was too shattering, although it cannot have been bloodier than the other murder scenes by Red John that we are actually shown. At the same time, the implication is that, after having read the killer's note on the door and seen the red smiley face that is his signature, Patrick does not need to look to know what happened. The trace of the killer replaces the murder scene, or, in other words, through his smiley face label, Red John mockingly inscribes his own writing over the murder scene. Red John's smile of satisfaction is only his own, but the victims are forced to co-sign this last interpretation of their deaths, post-mortem⁵ and through their most intimate genetic identifier (i.e. their blood), in the sham ritual through which the killer associates smiling and torture. His sign is the only story told to the audience about Patrick's wife and daughter, in the absence of their dead bodies. In other investigations, the dead speak to Patrick through their bodies, which he investigates, but here their silence is symptomatic of the magnitude of trauma, giving Red John the last word. The murderer, intimately connected to the bodies of Patrick's loved ones through touch and presence (he is the last one to have touched them and the last one to have seen them alive), thus remains not only the sole witness to the last moments of their lives, but also the bearer of meaning, the writer of a scene only he remembers, and whose story he writes in blood on the wall.⁶

The invisibility of the dead bodies is also associated with the blankness behind Red John's signature. Thus, when Patrick accidentally finds out from Lorelei Martins, a former Red John acolyte and subsequent victim, that he has already met and shook hands with Red John, the investigation also becomes a question of healing the investigator's blindness, or, in other words, an attempt to assign meaning to what one has already seen but failed to understand. The fact that there is no face to attach to Red John's signature, and yet the latter is always present, lends him the qualities of a ghost who haunts Patrick and is also inextricably linked to the absence of his wife and child. In this case, simply possessing an excellent memory (like Patrick's) is not enough to unravel the mystery behind Red John's identity.⁷

⁵ Red John apparently dips three fingers in his victims' blood after they are dead, in order to make his famous signature.

⁶ This murder scene is part of a larger blank: we do not know what happened in the five years after Patrick loses his wife and child, except for a flashback that shows us he spent time in a mental institution. In fact, we know nothing about his family life with his wife and child.

⁷ In fact, finding out Red John's identity seems to be a venture that has no connection to Patrick Jane's hope of healing; so far, it has been suggested that there is no possibility of him working through his trauma, and that he may be experiencing a possibly endless embedding in the work of mourning.

In *The Mentalist*, post-traumatic sight is described as precise, clean, but also frustratingly disconnected from the ability to interpret what one has seen. For instance, in Season Two, in the episode entitled “His Red Right Hand,” Rebecca, one of Red John’s many devoted disciples, claims that, by murdering his wife and child, he has actually given the gift of sight to Patrick: “Look at you. Until your wife and daughter were killed, you were blind, weren’t you? You were living an illusion. Red John opened your eyes. Now you see the world for what it truly is.” Following the murder of his family, Patrick actually gives up his profitable career as a professional “psychic,” but keeps using his ability to remember, infer and manipulate people’s reactions, this time to solve crime.

The inability of assigning meaning to trauma (cf. Caruth), in spite of one’s ability to remember the past in great detail, is tied together with the suggestion that Patrick’s trauma is unrepresentable. In fact, it is also suggested that Red John’s considerable intelligence is also behind Patrick’s inability to solve the case, especially since the latter is not the only character left without the ability to recover the use of his memories. Kristina Frye, a friend and romantic interest of Patrick Jane’s, who claims she can speak with the dead and lets Patrick know that his daughter had mercifully been asleep when Red John struck, loses all ability to communicate with the world after she is kidnapped by Red John. The only way Patrick can get through to her is by using hypnosis, and then she refers to herself as a ghost with no memory of what happened to her. It thus seems that *The Mentalist* singles out the survivors whom Red John allows to stay alive as spokespeople for the uniqueness of the trauma they experienced.

For instance, although Patrick is offered several suggestions that communication with the dead is possible, most memorably from his psychic friend, Kristina, he constantly contradicts the possibility. However, in his investigations he treats the dead bodies as he would memory boxes or the black box of an airplane that has crashed, and often reconstructs the actions of the dead, thus performing small acts of resurrection, acts of memory and imagination that make him a witness to something from the past he can only see because he is paying attention. It is precisely his ability to perform this kind of magic that makes his futile attempts to catch Red John so frustrating.

Endless Mourning

The Mentalist constantly reminds us that Patrick Jane does not hope for redemption, and he often interprets his work with the police either as a welcome distraction or as good practice for catching Red John. He often identifies revenge as his main purpose, but he also seems to be animated by other feelings – such as affection – for his co-workers. Since the show is not yet over, it is difficult to say if the writers and creators will decide that there is an end in sight for Patrick’s mourning.

However, throughout the five seasons that have aired so far, the conventions of contemporary mourning are constantly debated. The contemporary parameters of

mourning⁸ – evidenced, for instance, by books written by practicing psychoanalysts like Darien Leader or Ilany Kogan – are still set against Freud’s much-quoted essay, “On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia.” There, he warned against melancholia, a pathological state of endless suffering, where the subject symbolically cannibalizes the dead or absent and inadvertently ingests “self-reproaches as accusations against a love-object” (208) that has been lost, an operation that results in a general sense of self-deprecation. Thus, in melancholia, the lament (*Klagen*) becomes an accusation (*Anklagen*) only apparently pointed at oneself, but actually turned toward the absent. Freud famously warns against the permanent settling of this fleeting “shadow of the object” (209) on the ego because this may mean not only a sinking of the subject into a possibly endless pit of depression, but also an inability to form any other affective bonds and ultimately remain disconnected from the world of the living. Since then, substantial critical ink has been spilled by attempting not only to tweak Freud’s definitions of mourning and melancholia, but, more importantly for this particular paper, to reinterpret the rigid social norms of mourning that have been working within the paradigm “mourning-good/melancholia-bad” in order to police grief and dictate when and with what results mourning should end.

Patrick Jane does not hide the fact that he is in endless mourning; he still wears his wedding ring, in the first season of the show he still refers to himself as married on occasion and does not start a new relationship (his first date, with Kristina Frye, is a difficult experience), and the assumption is that he has been so contaminated by death that he is in some respects dead himself. For a good part of the show, Jane is shown sleeping in the empty (but for a single bed) room where his wife and child have been murdered, and in this image closing the second season he is shown in the same position as a corpse awaiting burial, the signature icon above the bed a sign he has yet to decipher, a smile on his lips that comes after the rehearsal of the latest clue he has received, the first stanza from Blake’s “Tyger Tyger.”

The show thus contradicts Patrick’s repeated statement that one cannot bring back the dead by placing sight outside biological limitations and physical presence, suggesting that a different way of seeing places the mourner outside conventional scopic regimes. The prodigious memory of the investigator expands the conventional limitations of sight when he takes in a murder scene only to later recall a detail and give it meaning in the narrative of an event he has not witnessed.

Patrick Jane in the Memory Palace

In *The Mentalist*, Patrick chooses to position himself intimately close to death, and is often shown examining dead bodies at an uncomfortably close range, sniffing and touching them for clues, less squeamish than any of his colleagues. He is constantly told that his attitude is disrespectful, and it often disturbs other characters who witness his handling of an investigation. This type of closeness to the dead is what bothers others; it

⁸ In this paper, I am only referring to mourning practices in the United States.

has become less and less necessary in the contemporary world, as shown, for instance, by Colin Murray Parkes, who points out that the former duties of the family have now been picked up by medical and other professionals. Patrick is actually one of these paid professionals, but since we are told that he is quite wealthy and does not absolutely need to work for a living, it follows that in positioning himself as intimately close to the dead he is privileging the investigation over the social practice of handling the dead gently, since the latter does not help him obtain any clues. Also, he symbolically helps narrow the distance between himself and his dead family, since he finds himself in front of scenes that echo that emblematic murder scene he found in his own house.

In spite of his skepticism to Kristina or van Pelt's beliefs that it is possible to communicate with the dead, the way Patrick approaches his detective work positions him in better conversation with the dead than any of the other characters on the show. This suggests that there is a significant kinship between the detective and the mourner, which, in the case of this show, is made very obvious. In mourning as in detective work, the definition of sight expands beyond the physical, the world hides details and clues, and a large looming absence (of the killer or the dead, respectively) is the motor of the search. In *The Mentalist*, Patrick Jane's past is presented to us as a large memory palace where some of the most important objects do not bear the right name tags. The images and the narrative do not fit, and that makes Jane the sum of a few frustrating memories. Jane's constant practice of seeing again what he has already seen, is rendered through the flashback technique, the same that is used to convey his intrusive traumatic memories of just the moment before he saw the image of his dead wife and child. The show thus seems to suggest that it is only when the correct caption is applied to the image of Red John, whom Patrick has apparently already met and shook hands with, will his Memory Palace be complete. The connection between the completion of this architectural construction and the end of mourning is yet to be seen, but so far the show does not link the two, and rather seems to write Patrick as a pathological mourner who could become a victim of his own prodigious memory, something he also seems to be aware of.

In her often quoted book about the art of memory, Frances Yates also starts by explaining the origins of the Memory Palace technique as told in Cicero's *De oratore*, the well-known story about the poet Simonides who manages to remember where all the guests at a banquet were sitting before the roof caved in, thus rendering their mangled bodies unidentifiable for burial. The story of the origins of the art of memory is thus also a story about death and the proper social rites surrounding it. Proper burial as a way of honoring and remembering the dead relies, in this story, on a person's photographic memory of events that preceded a terrible accident. Simonides's capacity to place each dead person in their exact physical location at the moment of the accident offers their relatives the solace of being able to commemorate them in a socially acceptable way.

In *The Mentalist*, Patrick applies the Memory Palace technique and demonstrates it quite often. His use of mnemotechnics is not only helpful in solving cases, but also and most importantly, an essential part of his work of mourning for his dead wife and child. By looking at the world's smallest details and attempting to commit them to memory,

Patrick is slowly stealing authorship from Red John, and rewriting the smiley face signature presiding over the dead bodies of his loved ones. In this manner, *The Mentalist* suggests that exceptional trauma can only be borne through exceptional mourning (i.e. through a kind of mourning that many would call pathological). So far, the series has Patrick walking around his Memory Palace, closely inspecting all the characters therein for clues of false labeling (since one of them is Red John), while his present waits outside the gates, in the shape of human connections and emotions. Since *The Mentalist* is still a work in progress, it is not yet clear if Patrick's inevitable discovery of the Red John character will also allow him to escape from the Memory Palace he has created, or whether he will be walking around it forever, an exemplary mourner forever possessed by his trauma.

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