

Born to Flying Glass
Nurseries of Terror and Trauma in the 'post war' world
Prolegomena to a research project

Phil Cohen

Summary

In this talk, given to a number of conferences and seminars in Germany, Sweden and the UK in 2005/6 I discuss a number of theoretical and methodological issues related to a research project on early childhood memories of civilian bombing in World War Two.

Born to flying glass
bombs strafing shrapnel murder
from me expect no pleasing tones
no obscurities
Reared in the light of the fires
gorging themselves on human flesh
my mind was clarified

Keith Barnes

How have the changing politics of national memory in Britain and Germany since 1945 shaped the life stories of those who were 'born to flying glass' in the Blitzes of London, Hamburg and Dresden ?

In this talk I am going to try and describe some of my starting points for an oral history project that treats the Blitz as the ground zero of representation for considering changing regimes of war, memory, childhood, and the body politic over the last half century. Does Walter Benjamin's catastrophe theory of history, and his personal refusal to mourn, provide us with a still topical map for wandering through the ruins of childhoods devastated by war? Or does Freud's insistence on a break, or interval, between the bodily experience of terror and its re-tracing in the symptoms of trauma offer us a better model for understanding the living of stories which oscillate between the foreclosing of events and their chronic re-enactment? Does the promotion of children onto the front line and the front page help or hinder the working through of childhood memories of war? And what happens to the image of the body politic as a protective mother or fatherland when everything that was once solid about its territorial defence systems melts down in the face of surprise attacks from the air?

I will introduce some of the ideas I have found useful in struggling with some of these larger questions thrown up by the nature of my enquiry, starting with my previous research.

Beginnings

'Finding the Way Home'¹ was a study of young peoples perceptions of safety and danger in two areas of Docklands both characterised by high levels of racial conflict, but different patterns of immigration and settlement. Part of the study was ethnographic, but part, following the work of Jefferson and Hollway on crime victims focused on the role which unconscious phantasy played in structuring the young peoples stories about things that had happened to or in people, and places familiar to them. We used a guided phantasy exercise and an art project to explore these issues and found that young people who had had very similar experiences, for example of racism or bullying produced very different mental maps. Some drew a picture of a basically safe world with a few dangerous place-places that were to be avoided, but might also in some cases be found to be rather exciting, and there were others who inhabited a very dangerous and threatening world, but fascinating bits - dangerous world, safe bits- Was this difference to be sought in the psyche or the social or in some cultural mix of the two?

The work of Michael Balint – Thrills and Regression in which he looks at the early emotional origins of relations to place, from normal attachments to home and neighbourhood, to the construction of phobic space - agoraphobia and claustrophobia. For Balint the home base symbolises the safe mother, the mothers lap and its territorial analogues - there are some who cling for dear life to this safe space, and feel hesitant and frightened when they are outside their own territory (ocnephiles) while others enjoy leaving in search of adventures and thrills, and feel trapped, or bored when 'grounded'(philobats)

Ocnephiles only feel safe when they stay close to home, when they are surrounded by familiar objects, signs and landmarks, where they feel in touch with their surrounding; they cannot bear the thought of exposing themselves to danger. They are always making little dens for themselves. The ocnophilic world consists of safe objects separated by horrid empty object spaces - horrid because they unconsciously represent maternal abandonment, there is no good mother there, only a bad persecuting one - and this relates to the primordial sense of being dropped, let down, losing or being torn away from objects. That is why there is so much clinging to the object - anaclitic attachment to place- in the belief that it will somehow click in and shield you from external danger. Behind this the desire/demand for a totally benign and protective environment, a world in which all risk and anxiety has been eliminated, and one is held forever in a state of permanent ontological security. A primarily tactile landscape constructed through strategies of holding onto oneself when all is lost.

Philobats in contrast enjoy exploring the wide open spaces are always on the look out for new experiences and dares, challenges to resourcefulness - they like courting danger and the unknown. their landscape consists of warm friendly expanses which are felt to be safe maternal, holding and encompassing as a support for exciting performance (the infant has the whole wide world in her arms, the world is your oyster and you are its pearl) but this landscape is dotted more or less densely with dangerous and unpredictable objects, threatening in their independence - hazards that have to be overcome through the exercise of skill. Yet the world as a whole will click in and with

¹ For further information about this project see the video 'Finding the Way Home' in this section of the website.

the aid of your chosen equipment you will be able to scan the horizon and anticipate or head off potential disaster. A visual landscape centred around a strategy for looking after yourself with the self as vanishing point. These are not personality types, but subject positions anchored to particular kinds of object relation, and particular forms of symbolic or narrative landscape.

In the middle of thinking how to apply this model to my research findings, a series of personal events brought me into much more direct contact with what Balint was talking about. A mental breakdown in which I found myself very far from home, which involved being thrown back into states of terror I had first experienced as a very young baby in the Blitz, or rather in the period of the doodlebugs and V2s in 1944, and also the reliving of a traumatic separation at the age of 18 months when I was taken down and left to be looked after by my grandmother in Wales. As part of the process of recovering from this breakdown I became interested in the whole contested area of memory and trauma, especially in relation to what are sometimes called psychosomatic anxiety states, and their relation to the death drive, how the experience of terror, in this case engendered by exploding bombs, impacts on the infant's inner world, in particular on the way the infant keeps the mother's body unconsciously in mind at a point before narrative and even speech is available as a way of representing these overwhelming fears of annihilation.

I began then to formulate a new research project which would explore aspects of infant memory in the warzone, and their relation to subsequent life stories, applying Balint's model to an analysis of what was in play in different accounts of the Blitz. All research has an autobiographical dimension, whether acknowledged or not. This can be a source of strength, in terms of motivation and commitment, but it can also be a weakness, in blinding you to what is significant in stories other than your own. In starting a project in which my own personal beginnings are so heavily implicated I have had to build in certain safeguards, of both personal and professional kind into the design and method of research.

I was just beginning to formulate this new project when, as if out of the blue, came an event which brutally complicated, if it did not completely interrupt this line of thought. From my point of view September 11 raises questions about changing technologies of terror and their impact on both civil society and the wider geopolitical arena – it raises questions about the status of a new kind of Empire, not a maritime or a land empire, but an empire of the air, an empire that rules waves that do not break on any shore, and whose material and ideological power is relayed as much through orbiting satellite systems, and the Internet, as through aircraft carriers and stealth bombers.

Now one of the interesting things about initial public reactions to the shock of the attack on the world trade centre was the reflex of a reference back to World War 2. To find some point of comparison. The Americans remembered Pearl Harbour, the British wondered aloud whether New Yorkers after September 11 2001 would show the same Blitz spirit as Londoners had on September 8 1940 – that mixture of resourcefulness, resilience, fortitude, bravery and good humour under continuous attack from the air – that our national mythography tells us was embodied above all by the Cockney when the East End was in flames, a spirit which, in the story I grew up with decisively helped us win the war.

In an interview given to the Daily Mirror, shortly after the Prime Minister had committed British troops to the USA coalition against terror, the Minister of defence Geoff Hoon had this to say :

I was brought up surrounded by stories of war. It dominated everything. The tales of rationing, deprivation and the threat of bombs (we lived down the road from the Rolls Royce factory in Derby) made it seem more like the present than the past. My father didn't talk a lot about the war, but in our house Armistice Day was always respected. ... a once strapping lad came home from being a Japanese POW, weighing six stone. He said he only survived as the beauty of orchids visible from a crack in his tent gave him the will to live. That man lived across the road from us. He was affected by his experience and some of the kids would make fun of him. My dad saw this and fortunately I'd not been involved. But he warned me I'd not sit comfortably if I did. Only then did he explain a little bit about the things he'd seen. It's the only time I got a sense of what he'd been doing out there in India and Burma and I saw it as frightening. The sort of horrors you'd want to protect your children from. It's very important to listen carefully to all these stories from those who have been through the war in deciding what our course of action should now be'

There are number things which are interesting about this statement. Firstly a senior government minister, draws on his own autobiographical resources to give a human face to a policy that will lead to blowing the wretched of the earth in Afghanistan to smithereens. He wants to legitimate his position by referring to another, earlier war story in a way which demonstrates his belonging to a shared community of suffering. Yet he is talking about a world we have all but lost, a world in which the beauty of nature transcends the human wretchedness of concentration camps, in which war stories are powerful oral tradition spanning the generations, where people are still said to be affected by their experiences', rather than to be suffering from a chronic psychiatric condition called post traumatic stress disorder, a word in which the sanction of elders is respected enough to be effective against juvenile delinquency and where fathers can wallop their sons without being accused of child abuse. What we are fighting for, in this military adventure story, then, is to bring back this lost world, to rediscover, or re-invent the past in the present, at a juncture when we are also being told, we are entering a new and unprecedented era of a global war.

In broader terms then September 11 raised the question of historical periodicity and its paradigms – what kind of event or sequence of events is constituted by wartime as contrasted with 'peacetime' and how do these different chronotopes shape the way stories of war and peace are told, both in official historiographies, and in life stories.. When did the post war begin -in 1919 or 1945. Did the second world war really begin not in Munich in 1939, but in Spain in 1936? Was 1989 and the fall of the Berlin wall, heralded as marking not only the end of the cold war, but of History itself and also widely celebrated as ushering in a new era of perpetual peace and prosperity, did this date really mark the beginning of a new kind of war without end, whose substantive, if not formal declaration took place last September. Are we in fact a new period in which no one knows where peace begins and war ends and which principle of time or duration to apply. As war becomes one of the central metaphors we live by in peace time, civil wars are continually being declared against poverty, against crime, against drugs, against AIDS, and these war are

continually beginning again, being redeclared either because the objectives are unrealisable, or being continually redefined, or because the link between means and ends is broken, so how now do we tell the story of war and peace?

The Research Questions

In putting these different sets of issues together, in getting them to ask each other questions, my object came a bit more into focus. I was concerned to investigate the unconscious history of terror and trauma and the nature of the defences, psychic, social, cultural and institutional that have been mobilised against them. In reading the many literatures that converged or touched on this topic, the difficulty was to discern a pattern of connections, and also of gaps in knowledge that would somehow cohere into a single, do-able, and hence fundable piece of empirical research.

It would be an oral history project that treats the Blitz as the ground zero of representation for considering changing regimes of war, memory, childhood, and the body politic over the last half century. It would have to start by revisiting the archive, both the public record and existing collections of memoirs and oral testimony in Britain and Germany, to get both sides of the official war story, to trace through the very different trajectories of national memory and their institutionalised cultures of mourning, and their impact on changing strategies of life story telling since 1945. I would also need to consider the recent rise of what has been called testimonial and confessional culture, often linked to new victimologies and trauma discourses and also at the whole process of individualisation, whereby biographies have floated free from any fixed anchorage in social structures and have consequently to carry more of the burden of psychic and social integration. All this might have a powerful retroactive effect on the way war stories are told over time, especially in contexts where narrative identities are increasingly conflicted. In the process some themes hitherto marginalised might become more central, and some story tellers displaced.

In addition to this secondary analysis, the re-reading and rewriting of already authorised accounts, the study would involve gaining access to primary sources, in the sense of interviewing people whose war stories had remained for various reasons untold. I would need to make contact with people who had been infants at the time of the blanket bombing of East London, Hamburg and Dresden, who had been too young to be evacuated, but not old enough to register their own stories in their own name and voice. I would need to find ways of tracing this so called lost generation of war babies, whose fate had been the subject of so much public debate and scientific enquiry at the time, yet whose subsequent lives had been almost totally ignored. For reasons which have to do with the process of post war reconstruction in both countries, longitudinal studies began and ended with the cohort of children born after the war, the so called baby boomers. So one of my revisionary aims is to write the experience of this historical generation, which is of course my own, back into the account, as one of its missing links. I haven't time to go into the special problems of access, interview method and research ethics which this project entails, but perhaps we could address some of these in the discussion.

Lines of Conjecture

In approaching such a task, you needs two things – a basic sense of what your looking for, not exactly a fully fledged hypothesis, but a series of hunches , which connect into some kind of thematic framework for an emerging research story. And you need reliable guides , people whose voices and pictures you can trust as you struggle against the great mess of imprecision of feeling. So first I will briefly summarise the line of thought I am going to try to take for a walk. I must emphasise that like Paul Klee's this is not a walk with a predetermined destination , but moving freely under its own momentum and where it will lead may be in quite a different direction to the one I am about to sketch out. But for what its worth the argument so far goes something like this:

WW2 was less a pale imitation of 'The Great War or a culmination of its unresolved conflicts, but marked a more decisive break with the past. In this war civilians and especially children were for the first time placed in the front line of terror, as a result of the new role which air power , and saturation bombing played in its conduct .In Britain , because of the key role played by psychoanalysts such as Winnicott, Bowlby and above all Edward Glover in government thinking about civilian morale, a model of trauma prevention derived from the treatment of shell shocked soldiers in WW1 was widely applied to civil defence especially to the protection of children .

A new element was however added in that what Freud called the psychic shield-the unconscious minds defence against trauma - was maternalised . It was the mother whose protective arms around the infant were to provide a second line of defence when the German bombers penetrated the barrage balloons, and anti aircraft guns around the major cities. Whereas in an earlier maritime trope of national integrity , it was the coastline itself, epitomised by the white cliffs of Dover, which stood in the way of invasion , and symbolised little England's defiant stand against a hostile world so now in the era of air power, when territorial defences could be breached almost at will from the air, it was the mother-child couple who stood alone, constituting an island fortress against a sea of troubles , a haven of peace and calm amidst the shrieking sirens, collapsing buildings and raging firestorms of the Blitz .

In the great debate over evacuation the competing claims of women's roles as mothers and workers, were played out in conflicting claims about the psychological needs and dispositions of the young child in whose name , and for whose future, this war was being fought. It was against this background too that both girls own and boys own adventure stories of war time life was constructed. The genre of so called 'blitz kids' tales celebrated a nation of little philobats (whose slogan might have been Cockneyphiles not Ocnephiles !) and whose manic defences against anxiety were amplified through a triumphalist rhetoric of 'living through the Blitz'.

The myth of the Blitz as the peoples war, uniting all sections of society in a common struggle for 'victory on the home front' and with the mother/child couple at its heart was then prolonged as the heroic basis of post war reconstruction . But what this all left out of account was firstly the impact on children and the family of the absence or loss of the father, and secondly the fact that in many cases neither the mother , nor her substitutes were adequately able to shield the child against internalising the terrors of war. Popular anger at the failure of the State to provide adequate protection of its most vulnerable members, and at the forcible splitting up of

families through evacuation also began to surface albeit often in indirect and displaced form. With advent of peace time Ocnephiles came out of hiding and began to manifest a whole range of symptoms which were not however easily traceable to wartime conditions.

As a result an unexploded time bomb was unwittingly planted in the cenotaphs and other places of memory that marked the official culture of post war mourning which again drew on many of the tropes and sites of Ist WW. For although the myth of the Blitz attempted to collapse the distance between the public and private memory of war, a residue of unconscious phantasy remained at the heart of many untold life stories, untold because they lacked the symbolic means to make those raids on the inarticulate that are required for the successfully working through and letting go of trauma. It was in this gap, which was neither a latency intrinsic to traumatic experience nor the simple recapitulation of the war in its aftermath, but a socially produced hiatus, that the internal saboteur takes up residence, and bides its time.

In Germany where the theory and practice of the blitzkrieg was first developed as a response to the bloody stalemates of the Somme and Paschendale a quite different trajectory unfolded. The German High Command drew up a new strategy of war. It involved a sudden lightning strike by tanks and planes which punched a hole in the enemies line at its weakest point, and kept on going, keeping leaving centres of resistance to be mopped up by a second wave of infantry and artillery. This strategy was appropriated by the nazis as a general model for the conduct of their onslaught on German civil society. The same elite squads of storm troopers who made the lightning strike against the Jewish community in Kristallnacht, were the ones to be used in blitzkriegs against France and the low countries in 1939/40.

In other words there was a single strategy of terror which was both systematic and unpredictable. You never knew when and where and who they were going to hit next. This was a model of psychological attack, which lacked a properly developed defensive strategy. In Nazi thinking the corporatist state was the only protection any citizen needed and this role was exclusively paternal. The fatherland and the fuehrer as its supreme patriarch consigned German women to the role of safeguarding the future of the Aryan race in a purely biological sense; in the racist ideology of the nation with its immaculate conception of origins and destiny, it is the ancestral body – i.e. an always already dead body - that has to be re-animated and reproduced identically from generation to generation. So that each new generation is born already pledged to the blood sacrifice demanded by the father of the nation: to die for the fuehrer and the Reich or to regain the immortality vouchsafed by ones race. In Nazi thinking, there was no need to train the German population in civil defence, because they were sheltered under the protective shield of their racial purity. As a result the population were unprepared both psychologically and materially for the onslaught unleashed by allied saturation bombing in the latter stages of the war. The destruction of whole cities, Hamburg, Dresden., Munich, Berlin, in which over a quarter of a million people were killed, was a catastrophe which no-one had anticipated. And which no one, subsequently was allowed to publicly narrate.

The post war politics of national memory in Germany split into two opposed mythographies, two different ways of forgetting what had happened between 1936 and 1945. The story of the blitz in Hamburg and Dresden was buried in the post war

reconstruction of collective memory - that was anyway split into a dual representation East and West - but in both cases ignored civilian suffering in the war, in favour of asserting continuities between the capitalist or communist present, and the pre nazi past.

In Western Germany an image of the past was created that balanced outright rejection of nazism with empathy for the suffering and sacrifices of the German people. By distancing the nazi regime from the people and associating the hardships of the people with its brutality, the ordinary German was presented as much of a victim of Hitler, as the Jews. In the GDR the communist regime sought to align its own programme with those of anti fascist struggles in the Weimar republic. The heroism of underground resistance to Hitler provided a connecting thread. German working class history was similarly rewritten to emphasise its socialist and anti capitalist long duree.

After German reunification the Neue Wache monument in Berlin was rededicated 'to the victims of war and tyranny' uniting the victims of the camps and the German victims of allied bombing in a final democracy of death. This was the last in a series of moves in a continuing quest, both East and West to establish a figure of innocent victimhood that would both give absolution to the dead and exonerate the living. In the genre of trummefilme, the figure of the abandoned or orphaned child wandering alone in the ruined city provides a template from which a whole post war literature of abjection was written. In this official culture of remembering neither real mourning or reparation were possible, because the underlying plot of the German war story remains repressed. Orphans are not allowed histories unless they adopt those of families other than their own.

In a society without the father, but with a legacy of mothers who produced a generation of symbolically stillborn children it was essential to find alternative strategies of memory work in which to recover what had been silenced about both personal origins and destinies. War memorials that sink into the ground with the impress of every name signed on them until they disappear from sight, narratives that proceed by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompletions, tangles and cuts, these are just some of the ways a new post 89 generation of poets and artists has attempted to bring their own dead childhoods back to life.

Born to Flying Glass

Selected Texts

1. Wandering through the ruins : or how German philosophers and poets elaborated a catastrophe theory of history in response to the shock of modernity and against the official culture of war memorials

Catastrophe OED / Encarta 1. Synonym for disaster a terrible accident , especially one that leads to great loss of life 2. absolute failure often in humiliating or embarrassing circumstances 3. sudden turn of events, the final event in a dramatic series, especially in classical tragedy, when the plot is resolved 4. geological : violent seismic change caused by an earthquake, flood or other natural process. An event producing a subversion in the order or system of things 5. mathematical : bifurcations between different states of equilibria , or fixed point attractors . A formalism used for modelling non linear or complex systems – made up of manifolds and singularities. Has been used to explain the point at which a piece of stressed metal snaps, or a volcanic irruption occurs, or a stock market crashes , the switch from fight to flight in animals, why a prison riot breaks out or why people suffer sudden mental breakdowns.

The uninterrupted disturbance of all social content, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguishes the bourgeois epoch from earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations are swept away , all that is solid melts into air – *Karl Marx*

The past remains behind, the future hesitates, the present is without foundation ... the confused interruption, the disastrous breaking off of a former world ... the war could be nothing other than ending; it was an extreme following its own inner , a breaking off of humanity from itself , my indescribably benumbed and inhibited state of mind, this condition of invariably turning to ice , my heart almost inaccessible to me each of these shell shock hospitals can be looked on as a microcosm of the modern world showing the salient features of our society, especially its weaknesses in a terrified arena on a narrow stage. Are not the horrors of war the latest and culminating terms in a series that begins in the infernos of our industrial cities. think of the mental anguish inflicted on families subjected to the struggle for life in these torture chambers of our competitive world during the recent phase of a peace which we now see to have been but a latent war. *Rainer Maria Rilke War Letters*

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating . His eyes are staring , his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage , and hurls it in front of his feet . The angel would like to stay , awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned , while the pile of debris before him goes skyward. The storm is what we call progress.

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again’ To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke) . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

Memory as the theatre of the past . It is the medium of past experiences as the ground is the medium in which dead cities are entered. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter, to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over the soil. The task of remembrance is to save what has miscarried , and not let the dead rest in peace – *Walter Benjamin*

We are not afraid of ruins, we are going to inherit the earth. The bourgeoisie may blast and run their world before they leave the stage of history . But we carry a new world in our hearts. *Buenaventura Durutti*

Had there only been this first attack, it would have impressed itself upon me as the most terrible one so far, whereas now , superseded by the later catastrophe its already blurring into a vague outline. We very soon heard the ever deeper and louder humming of approaching squadrons, the light went out an explosion nearby.... Pause in which we caught our breath, we knelt head down between the chairs, in some groups there was whimpering and weeping – approaching aircraft once again, deadly danger once again, explosion once again. I do not know how often it was repeated. *Victor Klemperer on the bombing of Dresden 13 and 14 February 1945*

On that day , after we had left our viewing point on the promenade to stroll through the inner city, Austerlitz spoke at length about the marks of pain which , as he said he well knew, trace countless fine lines through history. In his studies of railway architecture, he said when we were sitting in a Bistro in the Glove market, later that afternoon, tired from our wandering through the city, he could never quite shake off the agony of leave taking and the fear of foreign places , although such ideas were not part of architectural history proper. Yet , he said, it is often our mightiest projects that betray the degree of our insecurity. We gaze at them in wonder a kind of wonder which is itself a form of dawning horror , for we know somehow by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them and are designated from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins.....

....Memories like this came back to me in the disused Ladies waiting room in Liverpool Street Station , memories behind and within which many things much further back in the past seemed to lie , all interlocking like the labyrinthine vaults I saw in the dusty grey light and which seemed to go on and on for ever. . I felt , said Austerlitz , as if the waiting room where I stood as if dazzled , contained all the hours of my past life , all the suppressed fears and wishes I had ever entertained . I saw there a boy sitting on a bench over to one side. His legs in white knee length socks , did not reach the floor and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap I don't think I would have known him . But for the first time , in as far back as I can remember I recollected myself as a small child . I felt something rending within me and a sense of shame and sorrow , or perhaps something quite different, quite inexpressible because we have no words for it , just as I had no words, all those years ago when the two strangers who were to be my parents, came over to me speaking a language I did not understand. *W.G Sebald Austerlitz*

2. Time bombs : beyond the latency and recapitulation theory of trauma

Trauma :an autodestruct device embedded in unconscious memory and set off not by the mere passage of time or by a body clock, but by certain mnemonic triggers activated fortuitously by a repetition in the real of the symbolic circumstances of the original event- *Adnam Houballah Destin du Traumatisme*.

It may happen that someone gets away apparently unharmed from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms which can only be ascribed to the shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a traumatic neurosis . this appears quite incomprehensible and a novel fact. The time that has elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptom is called the incubation period – a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease. – *Freud Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

It is not that the traumatic event means nothing, but that it bears nothingness within it, and feeling it to be insignificant or meaningless is the outcome of the trauma. As a trope trauma helps account for a world in which power and authority seem overwhelmingly injured. *Christopher Bollas Cracking Up*

When narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object , inside and outside becomes uncertain , the narrative is what is challenged first. If it continues nevertheless , its linearity is shattered , it proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts incompleteness, tangles and cuts. If the unbearable identity can no longer be narrated, it is cried out or is descried, the narrative yields to a crying out theme of suffering/horror , the voice of abjection - and if that fails then there is a collapse into bodily symptoms - *Julia Kristeva Suffering and Horror*

Celan's Desperate Dialogue

Deep
In the time-crevasse
By the
Honeycomb ice, there waits , as breath crystal,
Your unimpeachable
Testimony

The stand in the shadow
Of the scar up in the air
To stand-in-for-no-one-and-nothing
Unrecognised
For you alone
With all there is room for in that
Even without
Language

.....

Speak you all
speak as the last
have your say
Speak-
but keep yes and no unsplit
and give your say this meaning
give it the shade.

Give it shade enough
give it as much
as you know has been dealt out between
midnight and midday and midnight

Look around:
look how it leaps alive –
where death is! Alive!
He speaks truly who speaks the shade

.....
Do not work ahead
do not send forth
stand
into it, enter

transfounded by nothingness
unburdened of all
prayer,
microstructured in heeding
the prescript,
unovertakable
I make you at home
instead of all
rest

.....
Illegibility
of this world. All things twice over.

The strong clocks justify
the splitting hour
hoarsely.

Yes, clamped
into your deepest part,
climb out of yourself
for ever.

.....
WORLD TO BE STUTTURED BY HEART
in which
I shall have been a guest, a name
sweated down from the wall
a wound licks up

Ground Zero

A revolution
Then a war
In those two years- that were
a fifth of my whole life-,
I had mixed feelings.
I imagined later,
as a grown
man, what conflict is like.
But as that child,
the war, for me, was simply:
dismissal of classes at school,
Isabelita in panties in the cellar,
automobile graveyards, abandoned
apartments, an indefinable hunger,
blood discovered
on the ground or cobblestones of the street
a terror that lasted
just as long as the fragile sound of the windowpanes
after the explosion
and the nearly incomprehensible
sorrow of the grown ups.
their tears, their fear,
their repressed rage
that entered my soul
through some crack
to disappear later, quickly,
in the face of one of the many
daily miracles: the discovery
of a still warm bullet
the burning
of a nearby building,
the remains of a looting
-papers and photographs
in the middle of a street..
Now its all gone,
everything is blurred now, everything
except for what I scarcely noticed
at the time
and which, many years later,
surged up again in me, to remain forever,
the pervading fear,
this sudden rage,
this unpredictable
and profound desire to weep
Angel Gonzalez Zero City in Astonishing World

Born to Flying Glass

Born to flying glass
bombs strafing shrapnel murder
from me expect no pleasing tones
no obscurities
Reared in the light of the fires
gorging themselves on human flesh
my mind was clarified

Kind words I was not born to
but the shout to shelter fast
To trees or to birds I was not born
nor to a king of any kind
nor to ambiguity in distress
held captive celebrating death

I was born to hate
and the bible for my life
was in the propaganda books
Enemy nazi jackboot
- the words that thrilled me first
Flames that light my life
to flying glass born

3. War Stories

All observers seem to agree that air raids have even less effect upon children than upon adults. One might have supposed that they would be more susceptible to the operation of a fear instinct which is stimulated by loud noise. Though sometimes frightened by the sirens or explosions when they wake up, those children I and others have observed, go to sleep again remarkably easily. *P E Vernon Psychological Effects of Air Raids Journal of Abnormal and social psychology Oct 41*

War acquires relatively little significance for children so long as it only threatens their lives, or disturbs their material comfort, and cuts their food rations. It becomes emotionally significant the moment it breaks up family life and uproots the first emotional attachment of the child within the family group. *Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham War and Children 1943*

Reinforced perhaps by excited reactions to the first sirens the most fashionable of London psychoanalysts was able to write as late as 1940 of 'the utter helplessness of the urbanised civilian today so that 'impotent fretfulness must lead to widespread collapse under the strains of total war. Shocked citizenry would seek psycho escape into infantile security. This became trade dogma for anticipated blitz reactions: people reverting to the pram, the womb or the tomb. But the beds that had been made ready in mental hospitals for the expected thousands of shell shocked civilians were never filled. The outstanding study on the theme carried out by the Rand corporation after the war concluded that psychiatric disorders could not be attributed to air attacks. There were naturally many less clear and emphatic phases of mental disturbance, including acute anxiety states, speechlessness, protracted apathy (amongst women especially) some wildness among the young. Little of this was peculiar to the blitz alone, on the whole the blitz tended to reduce fantasy anxiety; there are still people who shudder every time they hear certain sounds that recall sirens and so on. But these are smallish things, not in the same class as trouble with your bank manager, mother in law or wisdom teeth. *Tom Harrison Living through the Blitz*

The bombers started coming over and I was absolutely terrified. I thought the best thing to do was to get under the bed, then I looked up and saw the springs and I thought I don't want those in me..... after one heavy raid: Thank God we're still here. Nearer and nearer they seem to come .. writing my diary every night was my therapy, if anything distressed me I'd write it down. ... when people say were we frightened, we were t.....we were in a peculiar state of shock, we just did things automatically, you got so used to it ... wherever you went, if you went down a street where there was a row of houses and there was just nothing there. I saw a whole street go, most of the people were killed. I just happened to look out of the window when this particular bomb dropped. The only thing I ever hoped for at any time was that I wouldn't be buried alive. I don't know how we went through it, I just don't know.

Gwyneth Thomas Blitz Diary

The world of the blitz was a world in which the everyday and the unthinkable existed side by side with the two continuing changing place. To those living through the Blitz it often seemed as if life was divided by the clock, factory, office or domestic routine by day – hell and devastation let loose when darkness fell. The courage of so called ordinary people was shown by the way they passed from one world to the other without breaking down or cracking up. *Charles Madge*

4. Philobats come out to play.

A child's view of war is much different from that of an adult. To us it was an exciting rather than a traumatic or dangerous time. Children have no fear at all unless they are involved in a particular action that can cause that emotion *Blitz Kid*

Beneath the swarm of high flying planes we were eating water melon. While we ate the bombs fell. We watched the smoke rise in the distance. We were hot in the garden and asked to take our shirts off. The watermelon made a ripe cracking sound as my mother cut it with a big knife. We also heard what we thought was thunder. We looked up. The sky was cloudless and blue. *Charles Simic the Necessity of poetry*

Gas masks smelt all rubbery and nasty but you could also have fun with them. We used to put them on and lark about and play all sorts of games with them, monsters and all that. Terrible really, looking back, but when you're a kid you see things differently.

One of our favourite games was Bombing. You nicked a quart bottle of milk from a neighbour's doorstep and bombed it to smithereens with bricks. The bomb sites were our playgrounds then. Another favourite game was what they call chicken now. When the siren went there would thousands of us kids and all the mothers used to be calling names and the last one to run to the shelter was the winner or in one case the loser. He got hit by a piece of shrapnel. You didn't fear it. Your mother at home would be worried and you would go 'Whets wrong mum?'. I can remember my old man coming home from Belgium and when he saw all this going on, all the doodlebugs and that he was scared out of his life. *Terry Waterlow Oral testimony*

A Girls Own Adventure Story

The house two doors down, where I was living in Hampstead got a direct hit. I felt all swollen up with irritation, a bloated sort of feeling, but actually it was fear, a horrid sick sort of fear, its quite different from worry, more physical. I went out into the garden to get some air. It was a beautiful summer night, so warm it was incredible and made more beautiful by the red glow from the east, where the docks were burning. We stood and stared for a minute and I tried to fix the scene in my mind because one day this will be history and I shall be one of those who saw it. I wasn't frightened any more, it was amazing; maybe its because of being out in the open you feel more in control when you see what's happening. The searchlights were beautiful its like watching the end of the world as they swoop from one end of the sky to another.

Another bomb, nearer this time and then suddenly, the weirdest sort of scratching sound just above the roofs the sound was as if someone was scratching the sky with a broken finger nail, it lasted a second, no more and then there was a god almighty crash I felt the earth juddering under me as I sat

We spent the night at friends in a neighbouring street. Mrs F insisted in piling about seven blankets on top of me and a hot water bottle as well. For the shock she said. And when I pointed out that I was feeling perfectly alright she referred darkly to 'delayed shock' instead implying that this dread phenomenon would surely hit me before the night was out.

It didn't though. I lay there feeling indescribably happy and triumphant. I've been bombed, I kept saying to myself over and over and over again, trying the phrase on like a new dress to see how it fitted. I've been *bombed*, I've been bombed-me. It seems a terrible thing to say when many people must have been killed and injured that night, but never in my whole life have I ever experienced such pure and flawless happiness.

A Boys Own Adventure story

I have been touring round the city. Glass in piles litters every street within a mile radius of the bank. I hear a time bomb exploded in Kingsway this morning. The Bank is teeming with millions and millions of being, cars, soldiers, police, fire engines, gas men. I have seen practically every kind of excitement in the City during the past three years but this – it is unparalleled. There is no panic, no worry, absolutely no feeling of fear, of anticipation of death, of the feeling that after all we may lose this war. Overall prevails the serene, all supreme air of victory, nonchalance. It's amazing. The bomb crater just outside the bank of England is terrific. Concrete blocks weighing tons are littered over the roadway as if they were pieces of paper. That bomb must have been THE HIGHEST EXPLOSIVE POSSIBLE.

In the excitement and haste of this note I am jumping like a cat on hot bricks from one story to another. I cannot hope in my breathless typing to form any kind of grammatical clear report. I merely jabber incoherently but at least the facts are all true and they will serve as interest in later peaceful times.

5. Double Takes

We had so much bombing I started sleep walking. My brother took us up to London to take a train to take us out. When we got to Bow we met under a church there, people were kneeling, crying and praying. It was a long terrible night. I became unconscious. when eventually we got upstairs everything was ablaze. We saw a bus rushing along, we stopped it and it took us to Aldgate. Then we got on a train and went to Maidenhead. My children were with me because they'd been so ill treated there. They were in a terrible state, a mass of sores, starving, they'd had no food, the people were just taking the money. We were forced to send them away otherwise they called us murderers....

Gus said to me Cor look at those buildings falling, and then the gasometer at Bromley went up in flames. a few seconds later a stick of bombs landed along the railway lines across the road and threw a length of rail up in the air to land like a snake over the top of the flats. It seemed as if we were watching a horror movie.
Anne Jones oral testimony

I'll never forget that day. We were working at the Tuxley Cinema. The show was on and the house was full. It was a cowboy and Indian with lots of shooting but there seemed to be an awful lot of noise going on outside. Out I went with a few patrons and believe me there was bombs falling everywhere. We return to the Tuxley very quickly. Now for the laughs. The manager Mr Cheeps was on the stage trying to comfort the patrons by saying lets all sing and the song was 'There'll always be an England' and everyone was singing away and at that moment a bomb dropped nearby and the whole cinema shook. After a little silence a little cockney lad stood up and

shouted ' I'm not so bloody sure of that'. After the laughter the singing kept on till the late hours. Going home in the early hours there had been a direct hit on some of the houses. People were trying to help. My next laugh was an old lady sitting on the kerb crying her eyes out. She said that her new hat had been in the wardroom in her house. We looked at the house – it was just a pile of rubble. *John Ryan Oral testimony*

Bombs were falling in every turning. The blast was tremendous. The first person I thought of was my mother. People were really panicking. I rushed home . As I got round the corner Bang Crash the bombs started crashing again. The noise of the blast and the noise of the shrapnel pinging was really exciting. With the blast from the bombing the building seemed to fall in on itself. It was fantastic to see it. We thought it was coming down on us. When I got home my mother was standing by the kitchen sink. 'Oh' she said 'there you are. It's quite interesting to look at isn't it. I've been watching the planes flying over and they seem to be giving us quite a pasting'. And I looked at her and said 'Mum what do you mean I've nearly killed myself coming home to see you' *Henry Thompson Oral testimony* .

You lot think I'm back in the olden days , well they were not golden I can tell yer. You don't know what I'm talking about do yer. My dad told me about the first world war about the trenches and that , I didn't know anything about it , so I know how you feel, but I was interested. this war though I can remember every detail even though it was 50 years ago and its in the history books., This war wasn't like the first one , this war was about blowing civilians up , people like you , just walking about their ordinary lives and bang a V2 would drop out the sky and they'd be dead. *Joe Hendry Oral testimony*

It was strange you know I was born into the war , it was there in the background and then it was all over. It was disappointing in that sense. But in another it was quite exciting as I was too young to realise what could happen. I think I realise how horrible the bombing was though because people would come in the off-licence and say what had happened.. So I used to listen to everyone's tales , When my brother came home we would all sit around listening to his gruesome tales about dead bodies . *Anne McGovern Oral testimony*

6. The View from the Skies

Now right before us lies darkness and Germany. I'm flying in this Lancaster bomber sitting next to the navigator an Aussie from Brisbane. Our mid upper gunner was in advertising before the war and our rear gunner was a farmer in Sussex. We are now well out over the sea and looking all the time toward the enemy coast.....

there's a wall of searchlights in hundreds, in cones and clusters. It's a wall of light with very few breaks and behind that wall is a pool of fiercer light, glowing red and green and blue and over that pool myriads of flares hanging in the sky. That's the city itself. It's going to be quite soundless the impact of our bombs, the roar of our aircraft is drowning out everything else. We are running straight into the most gigantic display of soundless fireworks in the world and here we go, here we go to drop our bomb on Berlin. One of the gunners shouts By god that's a bloody good show and another Look at that fire Oh Boy. *Wynford Vaughan Thomas Wartime broadcast*

Son et Lumiere

these green and pink flames were dancing around.... and around and shooting up at the sky ... those streets of green.. pink and red rubble.... you cant deny it ... looked a lot more cheerful... a carnival of flames ... than in their normal condition.... gloomy sourpuss bricks ... it took chaos to liven them up ... an earthquake.. a conflagration with the Apocalypse coming out of it.. Hamburg had been destroyed by a liquid phosphorous .. the whole place had caught fire, houses, streets asphalt and the people running in all directions, even the gulls on the roofs.- *Celine Journey to the end of the night*

Out of this World

I flew. Saw. The whole works. Flak and tracer and vomit and kerosene and the gunner turned to meat. The photos on the desks under the lamps came alive and polychrome and I watched the light show of Dresden, burning, far below, in the dark...

A war photographer is neither there or not there, neither in or out of the thing. If you're in the thing its terrible, but there aren't any questions, you do what you have to do and you don't even have time to look. But what I'd say is someone has to be in it and step back too. Someone has to be a witness.

I used to say once, on those few occasions when I was persuaded to make public statements that photography should be about what you cannot see, because it is far away and only the camera will take you there. Or what you cannot see because it happens so suddenly or so cruelly that there is no time or even desire to see it and only the camera can show you what it like while it is still happening.

I still have this fantasy. I'm in this plane, just me, the plane and one bomb for Frank. One bomb. I'm coming in low over Surrey. I'm homing in on Frank's house. It's a Sunday morning and he's at home. He runs out onto his lawn. and first he thinks it's a joke then he throws his hands up in horror. I fire my guns just to let him know its business. Then I swoop down and let the bomb go smack into him'

Graham Swift Out of this World

7. Instead of a Conclusion

And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
with shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling
Undisciplined squads of emotion....
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found, and lost again and again; and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

T.S Eliot East Coker Easter 1940