Post-Traumatic Culture

Injury and Interpretation in the 90s

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Acknowledgements

This book promised to be a short scientific expedition among misty peaks, sudden villages, and unknown lives. The actual trek offered that and much more--close study of quicksand, underbrush, and heartsick swamp. The truth is, I was encouraged in this enchanted folly by my dearest friends. Especially culpable are Kathy Conway, Kay Smith, and Bruce Wilcox, who looked at my first scribbled maps and began organizing a bon voyage party on the spot. Kay Smith, Frank Brownlow, and Steve Helmling kept up with the expedition most of the way, making heady conversation and stepping over the sleeping crocodiles; Chris Williams, Jean Boase-Beier, Bill Perry, Les Gasser, Claire and Bob Hopley, Neil Elgee, Mimi Sprengnether, and Uli Martzinek each helped me in more ways than I can say. My family has been wondrously good-natured about having the expedition's camels tethered in the house along with the box turtles, the cats, and Susan's giant hissing cockroaches. Long ago Vanessa Farrell showed me how you can learn to drive in your sleep, an invaluable tip for getting around in a dark world. The book is dedicated to all these crucial souls, and especially to the two Helenas.

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Preface

Strange to say, this book grew out of an essay on Sherlock Holmes. The essay discovered violent ambivalence toward children and colonial "children" in The Sign of Four, yet like Holmes injecting cocaine, I had a nagging sense of unfinished business after criticism had closed its case. Then I noticed that Holmes's antagonist is named Small, his henchman is a murderous black dwarf from the colonies small enough to be mistaken for a child, and Holmes anguishes over the ultimate smallness of death. At that point, with a sort of crystalline naivete, the novel fell open to the hammer tap of analysis, revealing obsessive connections between death-anxiety and the cultural prejudices of late-Victorian England. In effect, the peculiar social world of the novel unfolds from a hidden injury associated with childhood and death.

A similar pattern caught my eye in a recent American novel marketed for young readers. In Virginia Hamilton's Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush (1984) a ghostly figure leads a young black girl into a trancelike state where she recovers her lost childhood and confronts her fear of death. The novel's upbeat ending appears to celebrate the girl's hard-won autonomy and a vision of racial and feminist solidarity, and yet--astonishingly--it answers her disabling fears by silently borrowing heroic values from 1980s America, so that the girl ends up in solitary triumph with nearly all the other characters marginalized or doomed.

Eventually Sherlock Holmes led me to investigate a cluster of late-Victorian fantasies, among them Rider Haggard's She, Jekyll and Hyde, Dorian Gray, H.G. Wells's scientific romances, and Bram Stoker's predatory patriarch. Then an essay I wrote on the Disney Beauty and the Beast (1991), of all things, spurred my interest in a group of recent American films that included, among many others, Michael Moore's Roger and Me (1989), some post-Vietnam sagas, and Schindler's List. (1993).

The present book crystallized when I realized that what had drawn me to these stories from the ends of two centuries--what they all share, suffusing and energizing them, latent and yet formative--is a mood of cultural crisis: a sense that something has gone terribly wrong in the modern world, something that we can neither assimilate nor put right. The mood's special poignancy comes not only from life's usual struggles and sorrows, but also from a sense that the ground of experience has been compromised. Implicitly, that is, these are fantasies about trauma. But they are also particular uses of trauma to interpret and adapt to the world, and that is the central concern of this book.

Late-Victorian physicians created the clinical concept of traumatic neurosis in an era when "modern life" was routinely categorized as sick, degenerate, and stressful. In the Introduction that follows I explore the origins of the clinical concept and some of the ways it has interacted with a host of ideological concerns outside the doctor's office, from the defeat in Vietnam to massive layoffs. The term has become metaphorical even as its clinical significance persists, contributing to increasingly psychologized and medicalized explanations for behavior.[1]

These days journalists and screenwriters routinely use the trope of childhood trauma to account for the behavior of serial killers, superstars, and even corporate executives. On another level, recent novels and films like White Noise (1986) and Passion Fish (1992) argue that modern life is inherently crippling. Though neurological evidence points the other way, conventional wisdom--as in the movie Look Who's Talking (1989)--assumes that birth itself is traumatic. In the 1970s Dr. Frederick

Leboyer's crusade for the soothing treatment of newborns echoed Otto Rank in attributing adult anxiety to birth trauma.[2] It would be hard to overestimate the plasticity and the elemental power of the concept. People use trauma as an enabling fiction, an explanatory tool for managing unquiet minds in an overwhelming world. But I will also be arguing that it has that explanatory power because, however overstated or implausible it sounds, people feel, or are prepared to feel, whether aware of it or not, as if they have been traumatized.

To recognize representations of trauma in stories is easier than to see how those fictions may express the world that created them. What spurred me to that second step was a moment's insight in a schoolyard in Kazakhstan, in the former Soviet Union, where I was doing some work in 1993 for the Peace Corps. One Monday morning I was about to enter a grammar school near the Chinese border. The Tien Shan mountains to the east had scarcely changed since the days of Marco Polo, but on the human scale, cultural forms were shivering from the psychic quake that had ended the Cold War. The flat-roofed brick school building could have been in Abilene Kansas were it not for the junked Soviet fighter-bomber playing the role of jungle gym out in the playground. Watching the kids clamber over the rusty jet, I suddenly thought of my own childhood in postwar America: remembered playing heroic war games in sunny New England backyards, dimly aware of the satanic Communists supposedly hiding under every bed. The fighter-bomber brought to mind a school trip in the 1950s, a Cold War propaganda junket to a battery of pretentious and probably incompetent Nike missles that had been installed across town in order to shoot down Soviet bombers and their nuclear payloads over the suburbs of Boston. The offspring of those hospital white Nike missles are with us today in the Patriot missles hyped in Gulf War press releases, and in "Star Wars" pipedreams.

Pausing in that school yard in Central Asia, watching kids at play with a modern military-industrial tool for mass killing, I had one of those moments when you are able to savor the deep current of insanity that courses smoothly through everyday life. In that moment I could feel the power of dissociation--Orwell called it "doublethink"--that had invisibly tyrannized the world of my childhood as it does the present. In a flash of associations the jet fighter in the playground evoked for me a sense of menace that had haunted my neighborhood in those days of Ike and sunshine: Korean war comic books slaughtering "gooks" and "yellow devils" with a stylized rage that eventually exploded for real in Vietnam; but also insidious threats hovering around the subjects of money, jobs, race, and the "battle of the sexes"--conflicts that flame up in today's headlines. With a pang I saw more clearly than ever that I had grown up in a world of public illusions and disconnected emotions. Nor did the associations stop there. When I went to write about that morning weeks later, my thoughts went back to my own childhood again, this time even closer to the unsettled ground of experience, when I was nine years old and suddenly understood that one day I was going to die.

The death of a grandfatherly neighbor shocked me, My father broke the news with the gentle-but-resolute manner he admired in Gary Cooper, but he had lost his parents about my age, and I sensed his own dread. That night while my mother was out visiting, I lay in my bed in a state of gathering panic. It wasn't dying that terrified me, it was the idea of not being, of being dead forever. In the wisdom of slang, the idea "got to" me. A storm of adrenaline shook me. One by one I called up a thousand arguments to save my mind, and one by one they fell to shreds. When I tried to think of religion, I realized that I couldn't imagine heaven: couldn't believe in it. Heaven was a word,

something people said to calm each other. The feeling of utter helplessness was as much a shock to me as imminent death. Finally in a spasm of horror I leapt out of bed and ran into my father in the kitchen. I was sweating anguish, leaking tears, and I couldn't talk. And the fear was contagious. In his brusque confusion I felt my father's own invisible, helpless fear.

Standing there in my pajamas, stammering evasions, struggling to swallow back my panic, I was undergoing an initiation. My father too was afraid—on some deep level everybody was. We had to stay calm, everybody had to, because there is no remedy and panic is contagious. When my father sent me back to bed, I lay awake in a state of heart-pounding vigilance, envying the family mutt her innocence, trying various mental tricks to compose myself. In my terror I was looking for other people, for culture, to rescue me from death. I can remember the shock of realizing that nobody had an answer. And when I realized how helpless we are, I saw how invented the human world is: how wishful and counterfeit.

For months I suffered from anxiety and memories of that first rush of terror. I felt sick and nearly paralyzed, as if trying to walk underwater. At one point my mother took me to the family doctor, the practical Dr. Bier, who looked like Peter Lorre and prescribed "the green medicine"—some sort of sedative. By then I suspect my mother had made out my death-anxiety, although she had no idea what to do about it. Dr. Bier's exam turned up nothing physical. But he knew enough to prescribe not only the green anodyne but also the cultural remedy of denial. "Ziss boy," he told my mother, "he has a type of mind, always he muss be kept very busy."

Dr. Bier probably thought of my distress as anxiety; for my parents it was "nerves." My own diagnosis would be a mild case of trauma. I bring up this story because it illustrates so plainly what can happen when, for whatever reason, we blunder outside the magic circle of everyday life. Natural catastrophe or human violence readily break the circle, but under the right conditions any pile-up of stresses, any mortal terror can do it. In trauma, terror overwhelms not just the self, but the ground of the self, which is to say our trust in the world. In this way trauma is an injury not just to the central nervous system or to the psyche, but also to the culture which sustains body and soul. Prescribing busy-ness, Dr. Bier was wisely prodding the child to resume spinning a cultural cocoon that could safely enclose an imagination that had somehow gone too far.

What Dr. Bier did not say, what took me years to see, is that terror made the world around me feel false and ungrounded, a tissue of interpretations. But the reverse was also true. Something about that particular world had contributed to my vulnerability in the first place. I had grown up sensing fear around me as I sensed it in my father that night, yet the world denied—disconfirmed—all that terrible inner experience. Much of the terror came from that isolation. In part my experience was a contagious effect of trauma in my parents' early lives, and in a nation that had been maimed by the Great Depression: an America still mourning its dead from World War II and Korea; spooked by the new Soviet H-bomb and by spectral Communist spies. Prosperity and the neurotic-sounding military-industrial "complex" presented totally incompatible realities. Like a shaken war veteran, the nation reassured the neighbors it felt on top of the world, yet it slept badly, with the light on, one eye open, and a pistol under the pillow.

In the Vietnam era those gathering contradictions surfaced. Would the "great society" invest in the lives of marginal Americans: women, racial minorities, the young, the desperately poor—people who might otherwise have reason to feel victimized? Or

would resources go into military-financial triumphalism? The Vietnam debacle shook the nation's self-esteem, discredited its leaders, and bankrupted efforts at social progress at home. By the 1980s and -90s there were no "evil empires" left to make sense of Cold War sacrifices, and a growing gap between rich and poor, institutional power and everyday people, had recreated the grinding contradictions of the Gilded Age. As a sense of disorientation spread, the idea of trauma flourished too.

This interplay of injury and interpretation distinguishes the texts explored in these pages. The book has been subdivided in various ways to allow readers access to particular themes, writers, books, and movies. But its basic aim is to unfold a continuous if wide-ranging argument. Dr. Bier's green medicine, whatever it was, anticipated Dylar, the drug invented to calm the fear of death in Don DeLillo's queasy, comic White Noise (1986)—a novel unimaginable in Ike's America. Once you see through the conventional world to the vastness of things, never again can you wholly screen out the white noise of background dread. But then, the same loss of certainties—the same letting go—can spur imagination to new creativity. I suppose this is why, as the old Soviet world dissolved around us, a sunny moment in a school yard in Kazakhstan could lead my imagination back to a long-ago crisis of childhood insight, and now a step further, into the clusters of stories I described above, and into this meditation on the cultures that gave them being.

Introduction:

Trauma as an Interpretation of Injury

> Individuals with hysterical symptoms are found in all cultures. Indeed the form that the hysterical symptom assumes seems to be culturally defined. This suggests that the forms are learned and have symbolic meanings.[1]
>
> Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates a fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused.
>
> --Jonathan Shay, Achilles in Vietnam

An airliner has crashed. A few survivors stagger through a cornfield escaping the wreckage. Near-death brings out a rapturous, nearly superhuman calm in one of the survivors, a family man and architect. Like the high that sometimes gives soldiers a sense of invulnerability under fire, this ecstasy enables the architect to overcome his terror and save others. In the aftermath experts minister to the survivors; ambulance chasing lawyers browbeat them. The architect goes home, but feels alienated from his old life and even his lovely wife. Flashbacks and nightmares harass him. Before long he develops a powerful bond with another survivor, a young mother immobilized by the loss of her child in the disaster. Surrounded by insensitive people, the two traumatized survivors come to feel that American society itself has crashed. To face down his terror and prove his immortality, the architect keeps compulsively daring death, at one point making himself walk the parapet of an office building. Finally he straps the young mother into his Volvo with him and recreates the plane crash by plunging them into a concrete wall. This suicidal--and potentially homicidal--smash-up breaks the spell of disaster and frees both survivors to go back to their families.

This is the plot of the film Fearless (1993) and a particularly forthright example of what I am calling post-traumatic culture. The screenplay gives the crash survivors clinical symptoms of trauma, but the entire culture is figuratively afflicted. As the anguished mother laments, "The U.S. is falling apart." Like the late Victorians who invented the term "traumatic neurosis," Fearless registers the shock of radical historical change. At the end of the nineteenth century, when railroad accidents could produce 10,000 deaths in a year, the flood of passenger litigation included many psychosomatic injuries that doctors began to call traumatic neurosis.[2] In Fearless passengers are now airborne and death may be broadcast nationwide like the Challenger explosion, with contagious post-traumatic effects on spectators, including children. The architect in Fearless returns to a society in which numbed and alienated strangers are eager to exploit a sense of victimization in lawsuits. The film assumes that its audiences will find

this post-traumatic behavior realistic, either from personal experience or from conventional ideas about trauma.

In contemporary culture as in Fearless, trauma is both a clinical syndrome and also a trope something like the Renaissance figure of the world as stage: a strategic fiction which a complex, stressful society is using to account for a world that seems threateningly out of control. Historically, a post-traumatic mood makes sense as an aftershock of the great catastrophes of mid-century, the Great Depression and the Second World War. The "postwar" years advertised compensatory serenity, but they also inaugurated the Cold War, Korean War, McCarthyism, threats of nuclear annihilation, and new racial and socioeconomic tensions.

With Ike's departure, grim new injuries followed. A list could begin with the Kennedy assassination, encompass the Vietnam War, urban riots, Watergate, the Savings and Loan scandals, and race on. In their symptomatically titled America: What Went Wrong? Barlett and Steele show how technological change, Machiavellian financiers, and corporate muscle have wrecked the postwar economic compact. As the battered labor movement picks through rustbelt rubble, new economic forces are "tending to split society in two," says Paul Krug, and "may eventually trigger a social crisis," the "impending collapse of the social order" that Christopher Lasch and survivalist groups foresee. For the young, the split marks "the first generation of Americans to suffer a lower standard of living than their parents."[3] After "the trauma of defeat" in the Vietnam War,[4] American middle-class incomes began a steady decline. The massive entry of women into the workforce partially masked that slippage, although not without additional stress on families and children.[5] During the 1980s the world's greatest creditor nation became its greatest debtor.[6]

The Cold War has shrivelled up like a vampire in the sunshine, and so have the stories that gave it purpose. This is the end of "Victory Culture."[7] And yet the headlines still shudder over a "war" on drugs, holocausts in Bosnia and Rwanda, and epidemics of AIDS, rape, domestic battering, teen violence, and child abuse. As the rainforests go up in smoke, environmentalists deplore global climate change and species-extinctions. These shocks haunt Harry Angstrom after his heart attack in John Updike's Rabbit at Rest (1990), when he leads a local Fourth of July parade dressed as Uncle Sam, queasy with fatality and rue. As if traumatized, Harry keeps reliving old moments of anguish trying to give his life coherence.

A particular disaster may immediately cripple some survivors, but most will begin repairing their lives, often with a renewed sense of solidarity. The mood I am describing is post-traumatic--belated, epiphenomenal, the outcome of cumulative stresses. It reflects a disturbance in the ground of collective experience: a shock to people's values, trust, and sense of purpose; an obsessive awareness that nations, leaders, even we ourselves can die. In a popular diet book (1993) a doctor explains our evolutionary "fight-or-flight response" in terms that imply post-traumatic victimization: "If a saber-tooth tiger jumps out in front of you, then these changes help you survive . . . . However, in modern times, there are 'tigers' everywhere, and these mechanisms are chronically activated. Because of this overstimulation, the blood may clot and the arteries may constrict . . . This can lead to a heart attack."[8] Change exacerbates the mood by undercutting social consensus and the stable transmission of values from one generation to another. Its most emergent symptoms express anxiety about loss of control and decline or degeneration, with the death-anxiety they often mask. "To a majority of conservative leaders and pundits, moral and cultural decline far

outweighs economic slippage as an explanation of the nation's 1990s trauma."[9] In the ivory tower "postmodern" theory has rediscovered the instability of meanings and the constructedness of human reality as if for the first time. Bookstores display The Decline of American Empire, The Withering of the American Dream, and The Decline of Intelligence in America. Publishers light the night sky with the funeral pyres of heroic verities: The Death of Literature, The Death of Intimacy, and The Death of Meaning, to name only a few.

Historically, when a millennium slouches to a close, western imaginations have begun apprehensively summing up, and Norman Cohn's classic study of millennial thought demonstrates how readily its doomsday themes assume new guises.[10] Closer to hand is the precedent of the last fin de siecle, when Victorians thronged to buy Max Nordau's thrilling indictment of contemporary degeneration and, crash-landing in the future, H. G. Wells's Time Traveller came face to face with hidden rot in the present and cosmic annihilation to come (1895). A century later mutations of apocalyptic thought surfaced in President Reagan's bizarre references to Armageddon, and have played out in group delusions such as the September 1994 doomsday Harold Camping touted on forty family-owned radio stations.[11]

However perfect the world to follow, apocalyptic visions are rooted in fantasies of exterminatory rage. They remind us that reactions to traumatic injury can be violent as well as depressive or anxious. Doomsday ideation regularly invokes cosmic warfare and rage akin to combat berserking. In The War of the Worlds (1898), Wells threatens humankind with cosmic cannibalism. A "Christian thriller" written by politician and preacher Pat Robertson called The End of the Age (1995) "describes the events preliminary to the second coming of Christ, among them a meteor falling on Los Angeles and the Antichrist at large in the White House."[12] In calling his social criticism Slouching toward Gomorrah (1996), Supreme Court nominee Robert H. Bork threatens a disobedient nation with a cosmic death sentence.

Juxtaposed, the 1890s and 1990s can provide a vivid, as it were stereoscopic view of Modernism. Part One of this book explores post-traumatic imagination in some late Victorian writers, principally Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, H. G. Wells, and Oscar Wilde. Then Part Two turns to some American films and texts a century later, in the process examining mutations of earlier themes. Histories of the fin de siecle regularly spotlight imagery of a crash. G. M. Young pictures the 1880s "struggling for a foothold in the swirl and wreckage of new ideas and old beliefs."[13] Men in particular shuddered that modern life would prostrate western civilization at the feet of barbarian hordes and domineering women. The terrorist bombings of the World Trade Center and a federal building in Oklahoma City (1995) could have headlined newspapers a century ago, when Fenians and anarchists resolved to shake the social order. "Doomsday" plagues like H-IV and the Ebola virus had a counterpart in hereditary syphilis. Periodicals published a profusion of articles "announcing the decline or decay of such phenomena as cricket, genius, war, classical quotations, romance, marriage, faith, bookselling, and even canine fidelity."[14]

Hindsight helps to clarify the role of interpretation and belief in post-traumatic behavior, and criticism can try to assess the imaginative shocks encoded in texts. To some extent such analyses are always provisional and hypothetical. While Darwinism plainly helped to hollow out Victorian religion, for instance, we have no precise way of measuring the effects of those developments on particular groups. Like other visions of "progress," such shifts in collective belief both swelled and deflated human self-esteem.

They could feel liberating or poisonous. Criticism can identify developmental patterns of belief. Criticism can also examine the uses to which beliefs are put in a particular cultural moment, as when alienated people construe the immolation of David Koresh's apocalyptic Branch Davidians in Waco Texas as an injury that justifies retaliatory mass murder in a Government office building in Oklahoma City.

This sketch makes the post-traumatic mood a fairly straightforward response to the slings and arrows of recent history. People are shaken and it shows in their thinking about the world. The reality is of course more complex than this doodle. In the concatenation of motives and agents that makes up history there is always more causality than we can process. From one point of view every generation's experience is potentially traumatic, since no era wholly avoids misfortune, battered idealism, and reminders of death. When has urban decay in America not been appalling? Why should trauma be a hot topic now? And if everyone is traumatized, does the concept have any useful meaning at all? Or is it culturally significant but clinically as superficial as the star-spangled plastic bandages parents put on a child's sore finger? And if berserk violence in life and onscreen represents one sure method of settling scores and relieving the stress of an excruciatingly competitive society, can trauma exercise a sinister attraction?

I will be arguing that post-traumatic stress does help to explain some cultural behavior, and that the mood sketched above does reflect a collective experience of historical shock. Having made that claim, I have to begin a long process of qualifying it--a process that is, in effect, this book. .

2

Clinically, trauma is an acute injury. The term comes from the Greek word for a wound, and the analogy to a physical wound often influences thinking about psychological trauma. Clinical definitions posit overwhelmed psychic defenses and a destabilized nervous system. "Traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe."[15] *The Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* defines the core experience as "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation."[16] From the standpoint of existential psychology, the *Textbook* is describing stress that impairs lifelong defenses against humankind's primary terror of death, which would help to explain its effect on all areas of psychic life.[17]

Traumatic stress overwhelms the body's autonomic fight-or-flight response. Theories usually construe the result as a shock or freeze which leaves the stress unassimilated and induces changes in the central nervous system. In effect, the short-circuit imprints the triggering event, leaving the victim in a state of neurological hyperaroused and vulnerable to distress that may emerge long after the crisis is past. This is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Therapy usually tries to help the victim complete the blocked process of integration by re-experiencing the crisis in a safe environment. Most theorists "speculate that the repetitive reliving of the traumatic experience must represent a spontaneous, unsuccessful attempt at healing" (Herman, 44). PTSD interferes with the natural processes of relearning through which the brain ordinarily goes about extinguishing a conditioned fear, so therapy works to structure and support relearning.[18]

The variety of post-traumatic suffering makes clear how capacious a concept trauma can be. Symptoms may range from paralysis to frantic, disorganized action. They may be intrusive, as when flashbacks, nightmares, or troubling thoughts haunt the victim. Life may feel meaningless and futile, and the victim may become alienated from others. Numbness or depression may constrict feeling, or hyper-alertness may produce impulses to aggression, startle responses, panic reactions, and a feeling of losing control. The victim may suffer mental confusion, have trouble with concentration or memory. Dissociative and personality disorders may also be attributed to the catastrophic event, as well as neurotic conditions, atypical psychoses, and many impulse control and substance abuse disorders. And all of these symptoms may play out against a ground of anxiety, with physical problems such as digestive disorders or fatigue, or with chronic dread.

To bring some order to this array of symptoms theories of trauma have had to be elastic. The paradigm of combat neurosis has been expanded and analogized far beyond the battlefield. But causality has always been debatable. Has a traumatic memory produced the patient's psychiatric problems, or have those problems shaped or even caused the memory? If the effects are "post-traumatic," operating at some remove from any unequivocal etiological source, the more ground for doubt. Like the medical ethnographer Allan Young, I believe that "the disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and presented by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources." Yet the experience can be real even if the explanation for it is untrue. In Young's words, "the reality of PTSD is confirmed empirically by its place in people's lives, by their experiences and convictions, and by the personal and collective investments that have been made in it."[19]

For this reason I will be emphasizing post-traumatic themes. In particular I focus on three principle modes of coping with traumatic stress: social adaptation and relearning; depressive withdrawal or numbing; and impulsive force (berserking). In the movie Fearless, the therapist models the effort to reestablish social bonds. Following traditional gender roles, Carla withdraws into depression. By contrast, the hero defies God and death. In the crash and in bonding with Carla, he experiences a messianic sense of purpose and invulnerability. When he smashes his car to restore Carla's conviction, his behavior is a benignly intended form of berserking. This, as I will argue in Part Two, is only one of many contemporary uses of berserking to serve supervening cultural, ideological ends.

Conditioning these modes of coping are two other basic themes. From the beginning the idea of traumatic neurosis has been accompanied by concerns for compensation. In Fearless the crash survivors enter a robust subculture centered on legal and therapeutic compensation. Much of the psychiatric science of PTSD has evolved through the Veterans Administration and government support for Vietnam veterans. In a larger sense the idea of trauma also "compensates" for distress that may otherwise be impossible to focus or control. Ultimately, that is, trauma is a radical form of terror management. The plane crash in Fearless offers the survivors --and the movie audience--a framework within which to locate fears that "the U.S. is falling apart" and each of us will die someday.

Whatever the physical distress, then, trauma is also psychocultural, since the injury entails interpretation of the injury. I underscore that phrase because terror afflicts

the body, but it also demands to be interpreted and if possible integrated into character. In an effort to master danger the victim may symbolically transform it, compulsively reexperience it, or deny it. And those interpretations are profoundly influenced by the particular cultural context. Evolution gives everyone a survival drive, but combat stress would probably have different effects on a Roman centurion than on a suburban teenage conscript in Vietnam. A culture may make terror and loss heroically meaningful and so diminish its damage, but culture may also contribute to psychic ruin. For exactly this reason--because trauma can be ideologically manipulated, reinforced, and exploited--it calls for critical analysis as well as psychiatric intervention.

Although trauma-like pathologies have been recognized for centuries, the concept began to find its modern form a century ago, in "the idea of a memory that is embedded in the neurophysiology of pain and fear rather than in words and images" (Young, 13). 1866 the British surgeon John Erichsen published *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System,* which held that physical shock to neural tissue could result in mental injury. In the 1870s, with a shift of emphasis, the neurologist Charcot discerned a relationship between fright and neurosis. Terror of death or crippling injury, he hypothesized, "was translated into an electrical shock that spread through the nerves and so brought down the nervous organization. The moment of looking death in the eye had jarred the nervous system, toppling it like a house of cards. So hysteria had broken out."[20] Charcot recognized that trauma not only represents a specific threat, it also breaches defenses against death-anxiety that form the ground of personality. In turn, as Becker and others have shown, those defenses are profoundly cultural as well as individual.

Just as the medical fantasy of electricity overwhelming the nerves reapplies ideas from science and industry, so late Victorians focussed on the stress of modernism, what Matthew Arnold called "this strange disease of modern life." The scale of the new was itself shocking, comparable in psychic impact to the inhuman vastness of the first atom bombs. When Isambard Brunel's iron steamship the Great Eastern was rising in a Thames shipyard in 1854, "the huge black shape slowly rising above the marshy Isle of Dogs was so immense it defied comprehension. It seems, wrote one observer, to 'weigh upon the mind as a kind of iron nightmare.'"[21] As technologies such as the telegraph and railway overcame the resistance of time and space, they thrilled but also frightened people, and that ambivalence is still deeply embedded in cultural imagination. Freud and Rossini suffered railway phobias; a major wreck left Dickens with post-traumatic symptoms. From their inception in the 1830s the railroads inspired an anxious folklore about their debilitating effects on nature--not unlike twentieth-century consumer anxiety about microwave ovens and cancer-causing electrical fields. We have largely forgotten the lore of Victorian industrialism in which the steam engine was the iron horse but also the iron monster. Such fears were psychosomatic and psychocultural, since they combined direct experience of pollution, noise, and accidents with a traditional, highly moralized worldview alarmed at Faustian tampering with nature, and led to worries that the overwhelmed nervous system would sicken with scientific-sounding "nervosity." .

But there is an existential dimension to the railway syndrome too. As a prosthetic tool for magnifying human freedom and power, technologies destabilized self-image just as Darwinism did. What kind of creatures are we? Jules Verne could envision people on the moon. Edison could actually turn night into day and make a voice live forever on a wax cylinder. Such self-enhancement made poverty, failure, and death harder to

accept, as reformers kept rediscovering. Railway travel created a particular double bind. In his Journal Julien Green observes that most people travel "to deceive ennui," and that ennui "quite simply is one of the faces of death, and that it is death that many people flee when they travel."[22] Home is safe but deadening; yet escape through technology (the railway) can be fatal too. If travel relieves and arouses death-anxiety, that magnifies any threat to safety on a train or plane.

Railway travel brought an epidemic of symptoms such as anxiety reactions, phobias, and the specific conversion hysteria--paralysis or loss of responsiveness in part of the body--called "railway spine." Promptly doctors and attorneys rushed in to alleviate this crisis. An influential treatise by Herbert Page, a surgeon for the London and Northwest Railway, cites more than two hundred cases of possible hysteria. What Charcot called "traumatic hysteria," the Berlin doctor Hermann Oppenheim renamed "traumatic neurosis," keeping the idea of "psychic shock" but expanding the range of symptoms and elaborating a theory of "molecular alternations" to give his more amorphous term a more authoritative basis in physiology (Drinka, 118). In lawsuits, where fraud and neurosis had to be sorted out, doctors struggled over truth as they do today in the controversy over "false memory syndrome" in child sexual abuse. "Once they had names such as 'hysteria,' 'railway spine,' and 'traumatic neurosis,' doctors--armed with the theories of Charcot, Oppenheim, Page, and others--believed that the railways were causing profound injuries to many unsuspecting persons" (129). In 1864, an amendment to the Campbell Act extended its provisions to compensate victims of railway accidents. "According to Page, the British public was fully aware of the provisions of the Campbell Act, and people involved in railway accidents were now unable to think of injuries in isolation from their possible monetary significance" (Young, 17).[23]

In the nineteenth century investigators surrounded and attacked trauma and hysteria, but without closure. Theories failed, and still fail, to meet the test of parsimony, as the volume of recent studies attests.[24] Yet there were advances. Not only did physicians come to recognize the psychological dimension of hysteria, but they gradually sorted out some psychosomatic and iatrogenic ambiguities. Twentieth-century studies have clarified cultural influences such as gender roles, medical ideology, and conditions within the medical profession. An overview of studies, however, makes plain how profoundly interpretive hysteria is. Feminist approaches alone present a complex assortment of disagreements, with differing methods and assumptions driving toward interesting, usually plausible, yet partial accounts.[25]

Rather than try to unfold a history of hysteria from a set of universal laws, Micale adopts what amounts to a symbolic interactionist stance: "The conclusion, it seems to me, is that once a disease concept enters the domain of public discussion, it effectively becomes impossible to chart its lines of cultural origin, influence, and evolution with any accuracy. Rather, visual, dramatic, and medical theories and images become inextricably caught up with one another. Eventually, this criss-cross of ideas, information, and associations forms a single sociocultural milieu from which all authors--professional and popular, scientific and literary--may draw. Ultimately, in writing the cultural history of medicine, I believe it will prove most appropriate and productive to work toward a model of influence that is neither one- nor two-directional but circular" (238). In Shattered Nerves, Janet Oppenheim uses just such dynamic circularity to interrelate a prodigious store of sources.[26]

Victorian theories of trauma deepened considerably when the First World War sent home a generation of "shell-shocked" men. The victims suffered a host of torments from catatonic immobility and suicidal depression to fits of rage. During the Second World War psychiatry gave trauma theory its modern form in texts like Kardiner and Spiegel's War, Stress, and Neurotic Illness.[27] Kardiner and others grasped the crucial role of bonding in protecting soldiers from terror, an insight that in some post-Vietnam War thinking foregrounds the critical relationship between combat breakdowns and soldiers' disillusionment with the moral integrity of their culture.[28]

At the same time, as bitterly satirized in Joseph Heller's Catch 22., military psychiatry borrowed techniques from industrial management to return soldiers to combat expediently. To explain hysteria, Victorian "alienists regularly invoked 'the spirit of the age,' the pace of contemporary life, the 'wear and tear' wrought by modern pressures"--blaming a "vast and amorphous causative agent" and deflecting criticism "from specific abuses in the living and working conditions of the masses" (103). The "wear and tear" of war is no less a cultural creation. If a culture denies responsibility for the foxhole and the slum, dissociating or limiting their reality, then the culture itself--not just modernism or warfare--contributes to traumatization.

3

"Post-traumatic Stress Disorder" first became widely familiar after the Vietnam War when journalists reported on its use as a legal defense for veterans in trouble with the law, and veterans demanded it be included in the The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (1980).[29] The term posits that even long after a soldier's return home stress can reactivate disturbances that originated in combat. Mentally, neurologically, the veteran is still at war, in a survival mode, unable to come to terms with that original horror. Similar dynamics are assumed in more recent syndromes sprung from the same family tree, such as "battered persons syndrome" and "parental abuse syndrome."

There are four characteristics of post-traumatic stress that make the concept useful for thinking about culture. The first is the proposition that an injury can continue to influence behavior long after the initial impact. Symptoms may surface belatedly and in disguised forms. From this point of view, a given behavior need not be a direct reaction to a massive injury, but may represent the cumulative effect of a number of small but synergistic shocks. Such a view is akin to the ego psychologists' premise that adult personality is shaped by an accretion of potentially neurotic defenses or character armor.

Closely related to the discontinuous persistence of symptoms is the frequency of dissociation in post-traumatic stress. In Herman's account, "traumatized people [may] alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event. The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness, which George Orwell, one of the committed truth-tellers of our century, called 'doublethink,' and which mental health professionals . . . call 'dissociation" (1). Orwell's 1984 makes an apt illustration, since it envisions the postwar world as a nightmarish post-traumatic culture in which traumatic dissociation is "Big Brother's" basic tool of social control.

The third quality of post-traumatic stress to emphasize is its contagiousness. Herman describes in detail the "vicarious traumatization" that may afflict therapists when working with victims (140ff.). Explicit symptoms such as phobias or rage are likely to disturb people around the victim. And as the etymology of the word "panic"

witnesses, and as Victorian doctors acknowledged in one meaning of the diagnostic term "hysteria," we are creatures susceptible to infectious fear and arousal. But even where symptoms are latent, we unconsciously communicate emotions such as anger to sorrow. Because of this capacity for suggestibility post-traumatic stress can be seen as a category of experience that mediates between a specific individual's injury and a group or even a culture. A vivid example is the way Hitler, who was nearly killed in World War One, infected an entire nation with his post-traumatic symptoms. In a sense all of his policies obsessively attempted to undo that earlier calamity through fantastic aggression. In cultural applications, then, it is useful to see post-traumatic experience as a sort of critically responsive interface between people: a space in which patterns of supremely important, often dangerous symbols and emotions may reinforce each other, gaining momentum, confirmation, and force when particular social conditions and historical pressures intersect. This model offers one way to understand the rapid coalescence of lynch mobs in the American south when a white woman reported a traumatic sexual assault.

The fourth characteristic of post-traumatic experience is the way it destabilizes the ground of conventional reality and arouses death-anxiety.[30] A catastrophe "blows" the mind. In a different way childhood sexual abuse, say, may subvert the stability of the world as lies and denial create conflicting realities. The problem is not simply a victim's loss of trust in particular guarantees, but the recognition that no life can be absolutely grounded. As Becker, Bauman, Shay, and others demonstrate, cultural integrity and death-anxiety are closely and reciprocally interrelated. The centrality of terror management in trauma relates it to the basic developmental project of coming to terms with mortality. Post-traumatic symptoms, that is, are related to the coping processes of everyday life.

Despite its ambiguities, I use the term "post-traumatic" because it is widely current today, and <u>because</u> its expanded scope has allowed people to "fill it" with fantasies. It is the most serviceable term I can find for trauma-understood-as-an-interpretive-process. I don't expect readers to be able to make absolute distinctions between post-traumatic and traumatic symptoms: much of the time clinicians can't either. The truth is, it would be hard to invent a more comprehensive problem than trauma. It enfolds organic and psychic disorders, with causality capable of moving in both directions, and engages fundamental defenses against death-anxiety. Given the feedback loop of self-awareness, the psyche contends not just with death-anxiety but also with the fear of being--in the immemorial phrase--scared to death. Not only do defenses and threshholds vary from one individual to another, but the injury is also an assessment of the injury, subject to all the contingencies of interpretation.

Stress, then, is not self-evident. Neurobiological studies continue to refine charts of brain circuitry that supports fear and its expression, and the expanding literature abounds with tantalizing speculation about such structures as the amygdala and hippocampus.[31] But "stressors" do not come in standard units, and in some cases clinical inquiry may be reifying a phantom. Even what common sense calls physical pain is an interpretive construct, as studies of dental patients show, especially when juxtaposed with tribal people who happily file their teeth with primitive tools or scarify themselves for an extra touch of beauty. Like pain, threat also entails interpretation--choices--as does any conflict of values presented by crime or taboo or violation.

In turn, interpretation is anything but self-contained, since a victim builds on past experience and anticipates a future outcome--a process that depends on cultural

meanings. As Jonathan Shay emphasizes in Achilles in Vietnam, injustices in the war and in American culture exacerbated the combat breakdown of troops in Vietnam. Soldiers began berserking not only out of terror and loss, but also because they felt betrayed by their own culture. How you construe your suffering determines how likely you are to feel the ground of your existence undermined. The New York Times (February 13, 1995) reports the murder of an Amish housewife by a teenage farm hand, and implies amazement that the grieving widower and the community calmly accept the horror as God's inscrutable plan (1). The family and the community use a truly profound fatalism to calm each other and repair psychic damage. This is one mode of trauma control: of deliberately using social and ideological controls to train people to reinforce each other's self-control. It has roots in ancient religious techniques for calming the central nervous system to prevent or to relieve terror.

In sharp contrast, the nation at large is confused and ambivalent in its attitude toward victims.[32] Official and popular perceptions entangle victims in complex ideological and emotional toils. The homeless are pitiful victims of a ruthless economic system and an inept social welfare system. Or they are conniving parasites--welfare queens, in President Reagan's sneering anecdote. In a Christian culture intense competition radically destabilizes attitudes toward victimization, since it can be impossible to square casualties and "losers" with a theology of compassion. This dissonance can be seen in witchcraft persecutions in the early modern period, and it resounds jarringly in the nineteenth century.[33] The idea of trauma may help to put a problematical victim safely beyond blame.

My argument examines trauma both as a clinical concept and also as a cultural trope that has filled many different needs. As an interpretation of the past, trauma is a kind of history. Like other histories, it attempts to square the present with origins. The past can be personal or collective, recent or remote: an artifact of psychoanalysis or an act of witness; a primordial myth or a use of ancestral spirits to account for misfortune or violation. Since everybody in a given culture is not likely to be neurologically afflicted, or affected the same way, trauma is always to some extent a trope. In the early modern period people used the trope that life is a play to come to terms with changing subjectivity and social possibilities. The notion of role-playing affected their outlook and even their behavior--Elizabethan sumptuary laws tried to regulate clothing styles by class in an effort to keep upstarts from "acting like" their betters. Trauma resonates in a similar manner. People may use it to account for a world in which power and authority seem staggeringly out of balance, in which personal responsibility and helplessness seem crushing, and in which cultural meanings no longer seem to transcend death. In this sense the trope may be a veiled or explicit criticism of society's defects. a cry of distress and a tool grasped in hopes of some redress, but also a justification for aggression.

4

The core experience of trauma is violence. Judith Lewis Herman contends that the study of psychological trauma "provokes such intense controversy that it periodically becomes anathema" (p. 7) and is "forgotten" or repressed. More than once in the past century the subject has languished, she thinks, because to study it is "to come face to face with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature" (7). Since perpetrators are often dangerous, since victims ask us to identify with

pain and unbearable terror, and since we have the bystander's option of doublethink, it is tempting to do nothing. "The systematic study of trauma therefore depends on the support of a political movement" which challenges, for examples, "the sacrifice of young men in war" and "the subordination of women and children" (9).

As Herman forcefully reminds us, the clinical term returned to public awareness in America when the antiwar movement bore witness to the problems of Vietnam veterans afflicted by combat neuroses. The women's movement likewise brought before the public conscience the reality of violence against children and women, which Herman calls "The Combat Neurosis of the Sex War." "Women were silenced by fear and shame," she declares, "and the silence of women gave license to every form of sexual and domestic exploitation. Women did not have a name for the tyranny of private life. It was difficult to recognize that a well-established democracy in the public sphere could coexist with conditions of primitive autocracy or advanced dictatorship in the home" (28). Herman's "sex war" alludes to this century's struggle against fascist dictatorship, with women as victims and feminists as the forces of democracy. She invites the reader to bear witness against evil as Holocaust survivors have taught us to do, for "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (1).

Underlying this argument is another massive historical change: the nineteenth's century's awakening sensitivity to human rights--meaning not only the abolition of slavery but also a new awareness of children and the developmental integrity of childhood. I will be returning to this stressful awareness again and again, because a fundamental premise of this book--let me flag the point--is that the spectre of social death can be as traumatic as literal death.

Herman sums up the tricks American society has used to deny aggression against women and children, and the murderous compulsion of warfare. To her brief we could add racial persecution and, more generally, economic violence. And yet while the denial of atrocity is unquestionably a moral question, it is also much more than that. One of the core paradoxes of trauma is that "the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy . . . may take the form of belatedness."[34] Researchers since Freud have agreed that in traumatic experience, neurophysiological processes often keep an overwhelming threat from registering in memory. I want to stress that this dissociation shades into everyday forms of self-protective denial. In this sense trauma is a particular degree and form of our creaturely denial of death.

Post-traumatic culture registers the dissonance--the shock--of meeting long-denied realities that threaten our individual and collective self-esteem. The unwilling "discovery" of military and gender atrocity may be among the deepest of seismic tremors in recent American culture, but as researchers have shown, erosion of self-esteem directly increases vulnerability to death-anxiety. Denial, then, is part of a complex feedback loop that implicates not only immediate victims but potentially a wide circle of witnesses and others. And a crucial problem for cultural studies is that people do not simply ignore or become numb to death, but seek to tame and ultimately heal it through symbolic transformations.

By this logic the present cultural mood reflects the contagious effects of clinical and political trauma, with predictable spasms of anxiety and rage, depression and mourning. Despite the chest-thumping military budgets of the 1980s, the comic-opera invasions of Grenada and Panama, and exultation over the demise of the Soviet "evil

empire," the Vietnam War continues to perplex the nation. Kali Tal argues that American culture has turned Vietnam veterans from agents of genocide into victims of trauma, and thereby rehabilitated the military for the Gulf War in 1991.[35] Brutality against women and children haunts the headlines, exacerbated since the 1980s by economic strain, including unprecedented competition between men and women in the workforce. In a direct allusion to the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, the September/October 1994 issue of MS. magazine displays on its cover, against a black background, the names of over 250 women and girls--out of an annual 1500--who have been killed by male partners or former partners. This salience has incalculable effects, from the hypnotic spell cast by the OJ Simpson trial (1995) and the celebration of heroic women killers in Hollywood films[36] to the most incidental social relations.

When the idea of trauma moves out of the psychiatrist's office and into the surrounding culture, its clinical definition recedes and its explanatory powers come to the fore. When a group suffers a trauma as, say, European Jews did the Holocaust, the survivors create new cultural forms to repair the fabric of reality. New meanings enfold the alien terror and influence the evolving identity of the group, as in Israeli military culture and the cry "Never again." Cultures not only report but classify traumatic events: a train "wreck" may be a "catastrophe" or a "tragedy" or merely an "accident." The interplay of publishers, editors, reporters, and audiences determines the meaning of an injury and the nature of our involvement.

We not only tolerate daily accounts of catastrophe, we are drawn to them--fifty-three percent of television news is devoted to crime and disaster coverage.[37] Disaster stories model a range of human relationships to misfortune and keep our defenses exercised. They may function as a reality check even as they frame and distance us from horror. As a form of post-traumatic repetition, our obsessiveness about disaster headlines may represent an effort to assimilate what has deviously frightened us since childhood, desensitizing us to the shocks that all flesh is heir to. In a complementary way the headlines invite momentary low-grade worry that, like worry beads, superstitiously promises to buy off big trouble if we submit to a little ritualized distress every day. Mundane accounts of a distant ferry boat catastrophe or earthquake both are and are not real to us. We engage them in a spirit of doublethink, registering the data with safely mediated feeling. Auto accidents command attention because their dangers and consequences are closer to us, and statistically their victims are very likely to suffer post-traumatic symptoms.[38]

In existential terms such tamed deaths have a purpose. Like the gladiatorial games which the younger Pliny praised "for preparing the spectators for death and suffering," headline disasters model what is unthinkable.[39] They vaccinate the skittish human animal against crippling dread. The news regulates doses of adversity and death, mediating horror through dissociation--embedding the story between, say, a romantic toothpaste smile and the muscular bonhomie of a beer ad. But the news also offers survival pleasure. As Aristotle remarks, luck is the moment of survival, when the soldier next to you is felled by the arrow.[40] "Better you, alas, than me." Disaster stories appeal to deep and deeply disguised motives in us: to pity and terror perhaps, but also to a magical sense of our own immunity, our own ransom from death, our ability to "beat" adversity and outlive others. At bottom, a heroic disaster is preferable to lonely, messy, vegetative extinction in a nursing home.

Just because we so often deny the addictive potency of survival ecstasy and berserking, let me quote Richard Rubenstein's bracing observation that for many World

War I veterans "real living" was a memory of intoxicating death-arousal. "It was a war of mass death in which massed men were fed for 1500 days to massed fire power so that more than 6000 corpses could be processed each day without letup. When it was over, 10,000,000 soldiers and civilians had been killed and mass death had become an acceptable part of the experience and values of European civilization. Worse still, after the war Europe was filled with men who looked back nostalgically to their war experience as the only period of real living they had ever known."[41]

At the same time, as Kai Erickson observes, "trauma is normally understood as a somewhat lonely and isolated business," yet it often elicits "revised views of the world that, in their turn, become the basis for communality."[42] Responses to trauma, that is, may be a means of creating social bonds. What complicates that salutary bonding is the human propensity to manipulate it by engineering injury. Perversely, as Rank, Becker, Girard, and others have demonstrated, people may create solidarity by scapegoating and sacrificing others.[43] However controlled it may appear, however hedged by rules and social apparatus, trauma destabilizes the ground of experience, and therefore it is always supercharged with significance and always profoundly equivocal in its interpretive possibilities. Like a traditional religious conversion experience, it can signify rebirth and promise transcendence, or it can open onto an abyss.

How does culture act to tame trauma?

As I write, my local newspaper is reporting a US Air crash in Aliquippa Pennsylvania. It could be the crash in Fearless, although there were no survivors. In a side bar, in prominent type, the newspaper quotes a clergyman at the site: "[People will ask] why, and I'll tell them I can't answer that. It's very traumatizing and a very terrible thing to see--the remains of a human being in a pile, with no way to identify him except for a belt and a piece of clothing." A paramedic concludes that "once people witness something like that, they never forget it, no matter how many crash victims they've pulled out of crumpled, flame-scarred planes."[44] What imprints the experience is the annihilation of meaning and identity. That psychic violence suddenly exposes--and compromises--processes of terror management at the center of all culture. The newspaper story is one way culture goes about assessing and repairing the damage.

And so US Air Flight 427 smashes to bits in Aliquippa Pennsylvania and under the caption "Investigators at a Loss," the journalists describe Federal investigators sorting bits of flesh and mechanical evidence trying to reconstitute causality and identity. The prospects are daunting but not hopeless. The officials are detectives, Sherlock Holmes armed with tenacious logic, and they are "reviewing the plane's black boxes," which always promise to yield the secret.[45] Like an airport paperback mystery novel, the newspaper looks for signs of foul play--a bomb, a terrorist Cain or a devil--that could supply a purposeful enemy to explain nothingness. The detectives are incipiently rescuers. Although thwarted by death this time, their labors will presumably save others like us from a similar fate in the future. They bear the burden of looking directly at horror in an effort to rescue the future.

Among the rescuers, quoted twice on the same page, is the clergyman I mentioned, who witnessed "a hand with a ring on it . . . . They think it was an airline stewardess because her uniform was close by" (5). Because the shock of our nothingness is unbearable, the post-traumatic imagination grasps at the hypothetical stewardess offered by the detectives and the consoling symbols of the competent human hand, the artistic, eternalizing ring (as opposed to heaps of other body parts),

and the uniform "close by" that substantiates her official status in society as someone who served others. The clergyman's response to death is an act of imaginative value-making. To put it another way, since the values are those of his culture, death triggers a creative act of value-affirmation. What he chose to see and to recount, and the editors to print, is grisly and grievous but no less packed with heroic meaning.

Just one of those meanings is, again, the ring. It evokes marriage, which customarily encloses couples in culture as the airliner encloses travellers and a walled medieval city enclosed its citizens. As society's basic means of perpetuating itself, marriage is arguably the most important institution in culture. The ring symbolizes marriage, and through it posterity, the future--ultimately nothing less than immortality. The wife has gone but the ring endures, and with it the promise of renewal. The clergyman is implying a consoling, even happy ending. In another perspective, the ring points to a supporting framework of religious doctrine and emotions, so that implicitly the clergyman's focus on the ring makes an argument for the claims of religion against the bitter treachery of the material world.

The newspaper trauma is both an individual and a collective fantasy. It poignantly illustrates the way fantasy injures and recuperates, threatens and reassures, tests and denies and accommodates reality. This potent equivocation may help to explain why, at a time when communications technology and unprecedented capacities for self-consciousness are producing a surfeit of supercharged and unassimilable symbolic forms, a rapidly changing society of several hundred million people like 1990s America should be fantasizing so much about trauma. It can represent not only a paranoid posture, with exaggerated defenses always anxiously in need of renewal, but also a defining stimulus for healthy engagement with identity themes and the future. In a paradoxical way the idea of trauma can function as an organizing or focussing tool for a creature that must constantly balance conflicting needs for stability and change, defense and creativity.

In the above example trauma is associated with a radical, momentary change in perspective which creates an imaginative gap which compensatory cultural materials try to fill. Trauma is a "mind-blowing" experience that disintegrates a conventional mindset and compels (or makes possible) a new worldview. This is why practices as diverse as brainwashing and mysticism may manipulate the dynamics of trauma,[46] and why those dynamics may also play a part in conversion experiences. In the aftermath of shock personality may move toward numbness and derangement or toward deeper insight and reintegration. As in the account of the Aliquippa plane crash, culture readily interprets recovery, in its historically particular vocabulary, as a kind of play-death and rebirth. One anthology of memoirs by "incest survivors" proclaims, for example, that "The women in these pages have transformed themselves, like phoenixes rising from the ashes, through their own words."[47] The injury is not simply a psychic wound, but a fractured or double perspective created by the shock of near-death. The injury is a process, a way of experiencing the world, which puts the victim on the edge of conventional social reality looking outward into chaos and death, and inward toward the protective, systematic illusions of cultural heroism.

- 5 -

People not only suffer trauma, they may use it, and the idea of it, for all sorts of ends, good and ill. The trope can be ideologically manipulated, reinforced, and exploited. As a result this book has several overlapping aims: to take account of clinical

trauma and cultural correlates, but also to sort out where possible some of trauma's strategic uses. At the risk of some repetition, let me take a moment to suggest the potential scope of those uses. Beyond her immediate therapeutic purpose, for example, Judith Lewis Herman's popular book uses trauma to muster a moral campaign against violence. Hitler, by contrast, made a policy of terror. The Romans strategically killed and maimed captives to instill lasting inhibitions.[48] In this respect the infliction of trauma resembles the use of torture, as Elaine Scarry describes it, to create physical pain "so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of 'incontestable reality' on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used."[49] In this account, that is, torture is another technique for invoking a ground of being.

Many world cultures have systematically induced trauma or near-trauma in efforts to reinforce the conviction of a ground of experience and to strengthen group bonding. When an entire Iroquois village gathered to torture and eventually cannibalize a captive warrior, taking turns in the torments and actively socializing with the victim, who was expected to sing throughout the ordeal to prove his courage, it seems likely that the calculated, ritualized trauma served to reinforce the group's control over its own potentially dangerous vulnerabilities by demonstrating mastery of terror. The shared arousal of threat, mastery, and relief powerfully bonded the survivors. The ritual murder of a scapegoat affords tormentors a conviction of mastery over their own terror, helplessness, guilt, and directed rage. In the Vietnam War officers sometimes ordered new soldiers to kill enemies who were then revealed to be innocent civilians, deliberately using traumatic guilt to promote bonding among the new men.[50] Ritual ordeals such as the periodic self-mutilation of Maya rulers and the solitary, strenuous magic of Siberian shamans deliberately induced pain and dissociation in efforts to confront death and acquire special powers.[51]

These very different ritual experiences shared a common drive to violate and expand the boundary of conventional life. Through states of altered consciousness, even trance, people sought to open up the realm of death in order to tap some transcendent and transformative power that would imprint identity. The processes seem to have been dangerously equivocal, liable to kindle aggression and panic rather than exaltation if controls failed. The fundamental control is the underlying metaphor of initiation and rebirth. Experiences that we might associate with trauma mediated a kind of play-death, and the subsequent psychic reintegration signified a renewal or rebirth[52]. And this is by no means a remote fantasy. In the 1990s, Serbs have not only used terror as a weapon against others, but also made the legendary trauma of Serbian defeat at Kossovo in 1389 the ground of their "resurrected" ethnic identity and the justification for genocidal berserking. Ideology turns repetition-compulsion into heroic fidelity to a transcendent identity.

The effort to heal psychic wounds invariably involves a need to substantiate or reconfirm the self, which often entails convictions of transcendence. Senator John Danforth describes the confirmation hearing of his protege Clarence Thomas as a trauma of messianic persecution. The Supreme Court nominee exhibited clinical symptoms of traumatic stress, including fits of uncontrollable weeping and paranoia.[53] "Clarence lived in fear that people would kill him," says Senator Danforth. "In all but the strictly physical sense, the person I saw on Wednesday afternoon, Oct. 9, [1991], was dead." But "on the morning of the third day Clarence Thomas walked into the Senate

Caucus Room, took a seat at the witness table and commenced his testimony. Clarence had risen." The book closes with this resurrection and a cry of "Alleluia."

Insofar as Senator Danforth makes trauma a polemical weapon like the hideous ecstasies in Foxe's Book of Martyrs, his book is typical of many arguments in the 1990s that are grounded in the authority of victimization. Overreliance on this strategy perverts it and also threatens to blunt its effectiveness. Law professor Alan Dershowitz has attacked what he calls The Abuse Excuse, in which victims justify their own violence against someone as a reprisal for alleged earlier abuse.[54] This problem loomed vividly in British courtrooms in the 1890s. Not only was trauma bound up with tort law from the start in the railway lawsuits I described earlier, but also an explosion of libel suits dramatized a complex ideology of (mostly male) victimization that implicitly defined "assaults" on "reputation" as traumatic. Self-esteem and the sort of heroic immortality Ernest Becker describes depended on comprehensive yet often insecure cultural relations whose disruption was felt to be a grave injury.

The ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have in common a pervasive insecurity about systems of heroic value. Trauma has provided one mode of coping. Journalists commonly ground heroism in fantasies of survival magic. Mary, Queen of Scots used this ancient idea as her motto--Virescit Vulnere Virtus--"Virture thrives on injury."[55] In profiles of celebrities childhood injury functions as the motive engine for heroic ambition. In the August 1994 issue of Vanity Fair, Cathy Horyn explains that after leukemia killed her four year old brother, supermodel Cindy Crawford "strove to be the perfect child--'to make up,' as she says, 'for a dead brother.' In high school, after her parents were divorced, she pushed herself to . . . graduate first in her class" (72). Overcoming the threat of death, the "supermodel" seeks to be larger than life--"the All-American entertainment icon of the future"--a messianic "model" for a culture dazzled and disoriented by change. This formula flourishes today as it did in Horatio Alger's tales and in the Book of Job's notion of suffering as God's test of heroic belief. The dynamic of play-death and rebirth is plain to see. Surviving Troy, Aeneas gives life to glorious Rome. The ancient rhythm shapes conventional accounts of the economic postwar economic "miracle," the "rebirth" of Germany and Japan.

More perplexing is journalism that routinely discovers traumatic abuse in a criminal's childhood, predicating a moral economy in which crime is revenge that somehow balances out past injustice. However clinically accurate, this application of trauma invites ideological distortions and Oedipal feelings to rationalize disturbing material. Comparable is the use of the suffering of crime victims to justify popular policies of "getting tough" on crime, including capital punishment.

As a trope trauma helps to account for a world in which power and authority may seem overwhelmingly unjust. The trope may be a veiled or explicit criticism of society as well as a cry of distress and a tool grasped in hopes of some redress. Where competition is fierce and consolations inadequate, a claim of trauma can be a signal of submission like the bared throat that stops a fight among wolves. Trauma can be invoked to substantiate claims on the empathy of others, as a plea for special treatment, or a demand for compensation.

In Victorian railway lawsuits, plaintiffs used trauma to substantiate emerging ideological conflicts over the claims of modern and traditional values, corporate responsibility to the public, and workmen's compensation. In the post-Vietnam era, trauma has served as a courtroom exhibit in more explicitly ideological contests over victimization. Although the antiwar and women's movements have prominently used

trauma to give weight to legal arguments, the phenomenon has expanded into many areas of tort and criminal law, not to mention public policy. The 1990s brought challenges to the reliability of victims' memories in suddenly numerous lawsuits over sexual abuse, and deep divisions among researchers and therapists over what has become the "false memory controversy." Associated with ambulance-chasing shysters, trauma can be an object of satire, as in an episode of the cartoon series "The Simpsons," in which a sleazy doctor points to a cranial x-ray of Bart Simpson and announces gravely, "See that smudge that looks like my fingerprint? It's a trauma."[56] Dr. Page identified the problem a century ago: "the knowledge of compensation . . . tends, almost from the first moment of illness, to colour the course and aspect of the case, with each succeeding day to become part and parcel of the injury in the patient's mind, and unwittingly to affect his feelings towards, and impressions of, the sufferings he must undergo" (Young, 17).

Add to these problematical instances the range of symptoms and pseudo-symptoms of trauma, and its puzzles can be baffling. A woman jogger nearly stomped to death by "wilding" teenagers in Central Park contributes something fairly explicit to the national mood. But what of the mother and her family on the Sally Jessie Raphael show who won audience sympathy with their report that spirits have sexually abused them, in bed and out, in their house?[57] What of patients whose "recovered memory" therapy leads them to conclude that parents long ago subjected them to Satanic rites in which, among other abominations familiar to historians of medieval delusions, participants cannibalized infants? In the 1990s so many adults have recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse in therapy and sought redress in the courts that some psychologists (and accused parents) have formed a movement to counter what they call "false memory syndrome."

Since cultural memory is necessarily overdetermined, past injury can be ambiguous or even apocryphal and still be damaging. Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury dramatizes repercussions of the Confederacy's defeat fifty years after the fact. For Serbs, even after six centuries, Kossovo remains a "nightmare," obsessively self-conjured and yet also ambiguously intrusive. Summing up the Vietnam War as America's "loss of innocence," commentators carelessly draw on the Edenic story of overreaching ambition and demonic seduction to moralize the war's far-reaching psychic consequences. Latent in the facile phrase "loss of innocence" is the idea of rape. Ancient catastrophes continue to shape us like the vestigial gills and tails paleontologists can see in our bodies. The fall of Rome colors thinking today as it did in the Renaissance, though memory of that expiration can only be virtual.[58] Moralized Roman ruin frightened late Victorians who saw "progress" in conflict with Darwinian struggle and sapping western manliness. Their guilty dread about barbarian invaders swarming out of the colonies echoes today in business alarums about the "rise" of international (usually Asian) competition and American decline. "Memory" in this instance is an ideological artifact that rationalizes the anxiety of an elite and their efforts not only to police boundaries between classes and continents, but also to justify heroic, often harsh counter-measures. That said, the precedent of Rome, like the Great Depression, can have a real traumatic impact.

Indirectly fantasies about Rome point to another source of threat. Insofar as post-traumatic symptoms are maladaptive, they constitute part of an ongoing process of injury. Aor. Konrad Brendler argues that in Germany "the legacy of silence within the family [about the Holocaust] may have a traumatizing effect on the psyche of the

generation of the grandchildren."[59] In the aftershock of World War Two, Soviets and Americans continued obsessively fighting a "cold war" that climaxed in Soviet collapse and a America militarized to an extent once unthinkable. Post-traumatic imagination may spin compensatory dreams that risk grave deflation. In the eighth century the Maya city-state of Copan was shaken when one of its last kings, known to archeologists by his glyph-name Eighteen Rabbit, was captured during a raid on a rival city-state and probably tortured to death. Copan was badly stricken. Eighteen Rabbit's successor countered this shock by building a ceremonial staircase that contains the longest script of Maya glyphs in mesoamerica. The propaganda staircase advertised the glory of Copan and its past, striving to ground the kingdom once again and restore its sense of symbolic immortality.

Coming as it did when Copan was on the edge of extinction, the staircase project has an air of futile grandiosity like the proclamations of the later Roman emperors. As a coping strategy it is ambiguous. Does it signify a decadent, compensatory waste of resources in a time of crisis? or a wise --if in this instance unlucky--technique for transforming survival anxiety into adaptive energy? Since we too are experiencing a historical shift colored by survival anxiety the question is anything but frivolous. Our own New Jerusalem was founded by English Puritans who had left behind a world they believed due for an apocalyptic scourging, but their vision of traumatic violation aroused in them a rage to start anew, with an astonishing indifference to hardship and death. This equivocal potential for constricting or enlarging life-space is why it can be useful to view post-traumatic behaviors not primarily as symptoms or products of stress, but as ongoing symbolic interactions.

6

Since I have no master narrative that could map all the interactions of trauma and culture, the primary work of this book lies in each chapter's engagements with particular texts. Although the book attempts no methodical comparison of fin de siecle Britain and 1990s America, the play of analogies between the two cultures can be revealing, and I have tried to calibrate my instruments to catch some of them. Trying to test strict scientific hypotheses against a changing culture is akin to measuring a developing weather front with a stepladder and a yardstick. Of course meteorologists do measure weather with radar and mathematical models, but the results justify that emergency umbrella you keep in your car. To indulge the metaphor for a moment, let me suggest that films and novels are something like radar sweeps of the social atmosphere, sensitive to patches of turbulence and the movements of large air masses. The essays that follow develop interpretations of the blotchy, heuristic maps that radar's scanning generates. Their predictive powers are minimal, but they may usefully locate unsettled imaginative conditions and identify their paths of origin.

Throughout I have tried to select radar-texts that sweep the culture in a number of different directions. Some of these sweeps overlap here and there, while others are more isolated and fragmentary than I would like. Every reader is destined to find that my argument scants, distorts, or overgeneralizes some aspect of these teeming cultures. The writers in Part One, for example, are mostly professional-class white males and comprise a narrow sample of evidence. I focus on their fantasies because they spoke to such a wide audience--letters still arrive at Baker Street for Sherlock Holmes--and their texts are most likely to be familiar to readers today, having never gone out of print.[60] Not only did their middling status make professional men peculiarly

sensitive to shifting social boundaries and shocks to identity, they also had and still have a special relationship to trauma. Doctors, lawyers, scientists, journalists, writers--and now many feminist and antiwar activists--have actively sculpted the public idea of trauma. In the 1890s they faced the additional stress of trying to substantiate their social status and expertise with limited powers, often helpless to relieve the distress they saw in daily practice. At the same time I have tried to avoid retracing the paths established by the many recent feminist and medical studies of hysteria and trauma (Micale, 75-88).

Narratives of course are not the same thing as raw experience, though what we like to call raw experience is also an imaginative construction. As a result criticism is always a negotiation among inexhaustible variables. In fiction, signs of trauma can change shape, function, and coloration with any shift of perspective. When The Time Machine climaxes in the Time Traveller's rampage against the Morlocks, say, H. G. Wells is describing behavior very like berserking in combat neurosis. Yet that violence is also ambiguously a convention of the literary genre. It may at once be expressing traumatic stress in Wells and his culture, and also, through play and objectification, be embodying efforts to master that stress. For genteel readers, the novel may be supplying an intuitively regulated dose of desirable stimulation. But it may also be strategically evoking symbolically mediated stress to structure and desensitize aroused fears to make mastery possible.

While I have no comprehensive scheme to link the 1890s and 1990s, let me indicate some of the themes that connect them.

I think of Modernism as a cumulative series of upheavals that are spikes in a rising baseline of stress: markers for massive, disorienting storms of new information and technology. The level rises steeply in the early modern period, and again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even as living standards and longevity were improving. Lynn White, Jr. calls the Renaissance "the most psychically disturbed era in European history.[61] Courteous textbooks aside, the rise of the European nation state in the early modern period is a bloody saga of factional violence, religious holocaust, and lawlessness, in societies wracked by intermittent famine and plague. Survival anxiety and exterminatory fury fed on one another with consequences such as the witchcraft mania, the Hundred Years War, and New World genocide which compare with the atrocities of the twentieth century.

The next great spike of change--the French and American revolutions, abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, industrialism--tripped shockwaves that not only palpably changed people's lives, they transformed the conceptual building blocks and frames of reference with which people constructed their worlds. Out of a larger project of cultural self-examination that spurred Marx, Darwin, and Freud came a radically modified conception of human identity that complicated the radical alterations in self-image brought about by new contrivances such as the electric light and the telephone.

For all its Faustian allure, this new plasticity in human nature set the self adrift in vertiginous possibilities. Like Oscar Wilde, "Henry Adams was aware of a 'subconscious chaos' of multiple inward selves, described by a 'new psychology' that had 'split personality not only into dualism, but also into complex groups, like telephonic centres and systems.' For Adams, the coherence of individual identity became a precarious balancing act, not a given."[62] Such drastic change could be energizing or crippling, ecstatic or terrifying. It reached new levels of synergism and instability in the nineteenth century and has not let up since. Defenses against this incremental

pandemonium ranged from vigilant respectability to robust innovation, from numbness and mourning to iconoclasm and anarchist rage. Seen through the lens of trauma, what leaps into focus is a change in attitudes toward subjectivity that are the outcome of processes underway since the early modern period. More than ever, self became an object of thought, its scope expanded and yet also, so it seemed, more fluid, problematic, and ephemeral. In a period of rapid transformation social death was a real threat, but anxiety about loss or deformation of subjectivity could also be traumatic.

This is why radical existential thinkers like Rank and Becker are central to this book. They make it possible to see that in different ways people at the top and also at the bottom of society have used the trope of trauma to manage the disorientation of changing subjectivity. Ordinary people experienced the "pandemonium" of identity and social flux, even though it was--and still is--usually defined from the top down by the professional and privileged classes. My suspicion is that because people high and low experience different forms of survival-anxiety and rage--and because those different experiences may meet in the trope of trauma--we can better understand convulsions like the two world wars by exploring the post-traumatic ideation surrounding them.

While the cumulative pressure of a rising baseline change produced traumatic effects, there is another dimension of change that can be isolated as well. Richard Rubenstein has proposed that the "demographic explosion that began in Europe during the eighteenth century" initiated "the modern, worldwide phenomenon of mass surplus population" and an "age of triage." Few problems "have been as insidiously corrupting or as destructive of the common good as the phenomenon of mass surplus population" (1).[63] As episodes of wrenching modernization and genocide witness, governments and dominant economic powers tend to suppress or remove surplus populations.

In the 1890s and 1990s, when Cecil Rhodes was lamenting that "the world is nearly all parcelled out,"[64] the closing of frontiers threatened to choke off emigration as a painless solution to surplus populations. Consolidation in agriculture swept rural multitudes into the cities even as machinery was displacing human labor everywhere at a worrisome rate. Generally, intensive rationalization of economic life--the invention of the corporation and trusts, utilitarian obsession with efficiency and "the bottom line"--created an appearance of inexorable, "natural" order while depersonalizing work and diluting loyalty and responsibility. The twentieth century came to speak of "the corporation" or "the system" as if these were actual individuals whose overriding needs could justify brutal triage whenever necessary, as recorded in Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath (1939) and Michael Moore's Roger and Me (1989).

One way of conceiving the resemblance between the decades is to see it as the return of the repressed. In this account the endemic conflicts in modernism and capitalism led to--and were masked by--the twentieth century's world wars, global depression, broad government economic regulation, and finally the lingering, obsessive Cold War, whose dissolution in the late 1980s allowed basic contradictions and disequilibrium to reemerge in the industrial democracies.[65] In this perspective it is no coincidence that the concept of trauma is flourishing now as it did a century ago when it was first invented.

Nor are the analogies only structural; they are matters of cultural values--of the interpretation of injury--affected by shifting frames of reference. "One factor making this period so traumatic," says The New York Times, "is that since World War II people have expected that their lives . . . would steadily improve. 'It's important to recall that throughout American history discontent has always had less to do with material well-

being than with expectations and anxiety,' David Herbert Donald, a social historian at Harvard said. . . . 'What we are reacting against is the end of a predictable kind of life, just as the people who left the predictable rhythms of the farm in the 1880's felt such a loss of control once they were in the cities.'"[66] The unpredictability reflects disjunctions in cultural imagination. In Michael J. Sandel's words, "the gap between the scale of economic life and the terms in which people conceived their identities" has created confusion, alarm, and anger.[67]

It should be said that expectations can also be used to argue that people have become spoiled and unreasonably demanding of a subtly improving world.[68] Such critiques tacitly participate in the current sprawling debate about the ideological implications of trauma and victimization. In parodying the title of Freud's great meditation on civilization, for example, Robert J. Samuelson's The Good Life and Its Discontents not only justifies the status quo and discounts people's distress signals as "mere" hysteria or misjudgment, but also implicitly mocks the therapeutic, anti-utilitarian worldview associated with Freud. Samuelson rightly senses that people may need to invent or ground their "discontents" in a construction like "trauma." But the deeper problem is that "the good life" is so full of unexamined conflicts, injustices, and deceptions that people's "discontents" are often less foolish than they seem. Gumption matters, but so does a clear head and more candid discussions with the neighbors.

In both 90s, whichever model we use, there is a shift in emphasis as survival becomes a more prominent theme than nurture and self-fulfillment, and trauma emerges as a means of connecting--as well as euphemizing and taming--an increasingly wider-ranging competition for status and resources. To put it starkly: while people had far less reason to struggle over subsistence than in earlier centuries, they faced far more comprehensive and acute competition for the symbolic materials of subjectivity, the markers of status and autonomy that prevent social death. At the turn of the century Social Darwinist doctrine of the "survival of the fittest" fed anxieties about individual, class, and race "suicide." In conventional wisdom, migration to the cities turned (supposedly) independent "yeomen" farmers into (supposedly) faceless degenerates. In the Reagan era, as Part Two demonstrates, Social Darwinism and the fear of decline again roared loudly.

In both 90s, not always for the same reasons, people felt insecure. Late Victorian society shuddered at the fate of "down-going men," and downward pressures have lost none of their terrors.[69] Great Britain was already moving away from manufacturing toward a service and finance economy, not unlike "rustbelt" America undergoing the information and cybernetic revolutions a century later. The disproportionate beneficiaries of change in both eras were society's elite. The gilded age put a smiling, haughty face on stunning concentrations of power and wealth. In cartoon and cliche the city and big business grew strangling "tentacles." Yet anxiety affected those at the top too. They took militantly conservative positions on social issues and economic justice. At the turn of the century they hardened their views of the world into the "upper-class paranoia . . . which was to erupt with such violence in England between 1910 and 1914."[70] In the 1996 American presidential primaries similar class tensions churned in Pat Buchanan's threatening vision of the working poor "storming the castle walls"--an image we will meet again in Part Two, in Disney's Beauty and the Beast.

If stable hierarchies reduce aggressiveness and foster cooperative bonds, as research indicates,[71] then episodes of perceived pandemonium and paradigm shifts are

likely to arouse dangerously polarized wishes and dread. This principle operated in 1960s America. Accompanying dramatic if uneven progress in civil rights, long overdue and underfunded antipoverty initiatives raised such hopes and articulated such distress in decaying cities that when concrete improvements came only fitfully, urban rioting resulted. The Great Society programs raised the possibility of relief from distress, and those aroused expectations proved to be tragically volatile. Promising improved lives, the nation tacitly confirmed that the poor had been victims, and that made it harder for the poor to remain resigned or numb to their status. By the 1990s conventional wisdom had again turned against collective remedies for poverty, raising the potential for trauma by cutting the social "safety net" and blaming the poor and the young for their failures.

But there is another dynamic to consider. When change is conventionalized as a departure from, or rebellion against, tradition, innovation is usually schematized as a contest or battle. In Stevenson's paradigmatic Dr. Jekyll, scientific aspiration rebels against Respectability and strife leaves both belief systems untenable. In Haggard's She, the assertive woman overreaches and withers to nothing. Wilde conjured an aesthetic revolution and ended up in Her Majesty's Prison afraid of going mad. Wells's Time Traveller throws off the shackles of conventional reality and discovers a dying universe. While both periods are marked by resurgent conservatism, the crucial motive may be rather a growing sense of being trapped in a double bind. These are historical moments doubly uneasy about the guttering candles of "traditional values" and a century of "failed" rebellions. The "mature" 1990s dismissively labels recent social ferment "the 60s," the self-indulgence of "baby boomers," and folds it into the "trauma" of an ever-dimming Vietnam War. The mood of enervated opposition aches in the self-conscious nihilism--the ready-to-wear trauma--of novels and films such as Less than Zero and True Romance.

In both eras fantasy responses to injury oscillate between aggression akin to berserking and numbed withdrawal. Images of Faustian aggrandizement alternate with images of helpless exhaustion and paralysis. The paradigm is Sherlock Holmes, one moment godlike, the next abjectly depressed. The masters of empire slaughter mutinous natives, yet simultaneously complain of "neuraesthenia" and fret that robust barbarians are about to overrun enfeebled western civilization.[72] A century later Americans cheer as the abused Vietnam veteran John Rambo takes on an entire province of the "evil empire" in a berserk rampage, while the documentary Roger and Me shows American "big business" decimating its workforce and scattering numbed refugees to the winds like the Okies of the Great Depression.

These extremes express not only survival anxiety, but also a lack of faith in the efficacy of conventional roles. Though the everyman "me" of Roger and Me searches high and low, the agent of havoc--nominally the callous Chairman of General Motors Roger Smith--remains as unaccountable as Orwell's Big Brother or the Mafia godfather. Every walk-on hero interviewed in the film reveals shabby motives. The film's images conflate class and family conflict. The paternalistic corporation brushes aside its importunate "children"--both the filmmaker "me" and the literal preschoolers whom the camera tracks as they are evicted from their house at Christmastime while their helpless mother panics.

For comparison, here is Havelock Ellis recalling his youth in the 1880s: "I had the feeling that the universe was represented by a sort of factory filled by an inextricable web of wheels and looms and flying shuttles, in a deafening din. That, it seemed, was

the world as the most competent scientific authorities declared it to be made. It was a world I was prepared to accept and yet a world in which, I felt, I could only wander restlessly, an ignorant and homeless child."[73] In The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896), H. G. Wells evokes the same experience of radical disembeddedness and psychic dislocation. The doctor's surgical engineering has turned animals into "beast-people" no longer instinctually adapted to their surroundings. "Now they stumbled in the shackles of humanity, lived in a fear that never died, fretted by a law they could not understand." As in Ellis's imagery, this is a factory-world: "A blind fate, a vast pitiless mechanism, seemed to cut and shape the fabric of existence," and its inhabitants "were torn and crushed, ruthlessly, inevitably, amid the infinite complexity of its incessant wheels."[74] The image is as powerful and apt today as it was a century ago, and it will show up more than once in the pages that follow.

Recognizing the human animal's disembeddedness, Wells's narrator is traumatized. He "fell into a morbid state . . . alien to fear, which has left permanent scars upon my mind. I must confess I lost faith in the sanity of the world" (98) The narrator's "morbid reaction" is the traumatic "freeze response" of Munch's "The Scream." Numbing gives way to berserking when rebellion wrecks the factory-island as Fenians and anarchists tried --and still try--to explode the factory-universe or the cosmic-sounding "World Trade Center." Once home, the survivor enters a post-traumatic phase which requires psychiatric treatment: "with my return to mankind came, instead of that confidence and sympathy I had expected, a strange enhancement of the uncertainty and dread I had experienced during my stay upon the island. No one would believe me . . . . They say that terror is a disease, and anyhow I can witness that, for several years now, a restless fear has dwelt in my mind, such a restless fear as a half-tamed lion cub may feel. My trouble took the strangest form. I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls . . . . But I have confided my case to a strangely able man [who] seemed half to credit my story, a mental specialist--and he has helped me mightily" (136).

Finally, the imaginative excess of cannibals and superpredators should remind us that all interpretations of trauma are to some extent conditioned by cognitive limits. Controlled overexposure can gradually desensitize a patient to a painful stressor. A corollary, however, is that efforts to objectify and express distress require the renewal or even escalation of narrative conventions because overfamiliarity may dull the perception--and reception--of injury, even though its pain persists. As a result imagination keeps trying to devise more forceful and convincing vocabulary. Today's horror is tomorrow's cliche--in life as well as art. In the 1990s as in the 1890s, for example, there is an uneasy consciousness of excess --"decadence"--in the artistic vocabulary of sensational effects. The evolution of new cinematic technologies, especially computer simulations, has made onscreen violence in the 1990s more compelling and profitable than ever, especially since the creation of international entertainment markets, which favor violent films because they need little editing for other cultures and languages. Like so many other aspects of trauma, the problems of cognitive fatigue and escalating hyperbole can create baffling ambiguities, not least of all because sooner or later they point back to the fundamental role of psychic defenses in our lives.

Part One begins with fantasies of traumatic rescue associated with the Victorian superman, Britain's legendary St. George, whose rescue of maiden fertility functions like the triumphal staircase at Copan to overcome awareness that in the end enemies captured, tortured, and killed the Saint as they had the Maya warrior-king Eighteen Rabbit. Like the bombastic staircase at Copan, the Saint illustrates the compensatory nature of decadence at the end of Victoria's reign, when wishful medievalism flowered and faltering faith was erecting stupendous Victorian cathedrals. Late Victorians praised manly aggrandizement, but they also obsessively depicted the fallen knight, and imply that an invisible injury--the seed of futility-- was latent even in the dragonslayer's moment of glory.

My argument then uses Conan Doyle's The Sign of Four to observe traumatic rescue fantasies in action, and to define central themes such as generational and class strife. In his alternation between messianic aggressiveness (berserking) and drugged collapse (numbing, withdrawal) Sherlock dramatizes two basic modes of coping with traumatic stress. I move next to Rider Haggard and the concept of traumatic mourning; then to H. G. Wells, whose Time Machine--like St. George--implies a doomed future lurking in the unseeing present, and whose sense of traumatic stress constricted his consoling insights into evolution. Finally the argument turns to Oscar Wilde, whose ideas about identity and art in a "Philistine" culture produced a compulsively dissociated imaginative style that mediates conflicting fantasies of messianic grandiosity and imprisonment.

Part Two examines post-traumatic themes in some films and novels of the 1990s. The cross-fertilization of traumatic themes has richly hybridized late Victorian images a century later. The cannibal-killer in Doyle's The Sign of Four, say, has a counterpart in the "savage" urban gang youth who becomes in the media's crude Darwinian rhetoric a "superpredator."[75] Part Two begins by exploring identity as a "prosthetic" construction of cultural voices ("Thinking Through Others"), and then analyzes how disordered prosthetic relations shape conceptions of child abuse and domestic violence. Subsequent chapters explore areas in which the idea of post-traumatic experience has become prominent: black culture, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and narratives about romance and criminal violence. In different ways each of these areas opens into the theme of a cultural crash that gives force to trauma as a trope. Even as trauma still serves to objectify the sense of modern pandemonium that Henry Adams complained of, its ideological content remains rich and conflicted. It can be used indirectly to protest against, and seek relief from, overwhelming stress embodied in abusive figures--politicians, generals, husbands, fathers--or in a "system" felt to be unaccountable behind screens of bureaucracy, repressed childhood memory, or bigotry. But trauma can be deployed just as easily by privileged voices to moot such protests and justify their own claims to special treatment.

Post-traumatic symptoms seem to appear when power relationships are disordered and the threat is no longer engaged, as in the aftermath of Vietnam, an undeclared war against a spectral enemy, ordered by "the system." This dissociation in individual and institutional experience exacerbates the sense of victimization with a conviction of betrayal and psychic disembeddedness. Not only do the generations clash, they fail to substantiate each other, as in the slogan "Never trust anyone over thirty-five." I take this atmosphere of disconfirmation to be one source of the cognitive

disturbances that John Bowlby describes in clinical patients, but also, more generally, to be a source of the depersonalization that Louis Sass associates with modernism.[76]

Part Two explores these themes from a number of directions. As in Part One, my goal is to recognize post-traumatic culture as a clinical phenomenon where appropriate, but also to analyze it as a trope whose meanings may well fly in contrary directions. My reading of the Disney "Beauty and the Beast," for example, construes the Prince's traumatic "freeze" not only as a response to generational strife, but also as the spurious foundation for a self-serving political allegory about class conflict. Similarly, in Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush, a novel that depicts a lone black girl's triumph over adversity, trauma is both a means of representing a painful "lost" childhood and also a celebration of feminist values and racial solidarity that--as it turns out--overlays a regressive vision of ruthless Reagan-era competitiveness. Other chapters explore problematic new cultural narratives, including tales of sexual abuse such as Uncle Vampire (1993), films that depict young people "caught up" in berserk rages and the world in apocalyptic convulsion, and fantasy variations on the encyclopedic mentality of Sherlock Holmes winking in the charged aether of cyberspace.

[1]Preface

[1] The psychiatrists' diagnostic manual (DSM-IV) now contains more than three hundred mental disorders, over three times the number in the first edition (1952). See Stuart A. Kirk, Herb Kutchins, The Selling of DSM : the Rhetoric of Science in Psychiatry (New York, 1992). For a bracing appraisal of the excesses and improbabilities of the manual, see L. J. Davis, "The Encyclopedia of Insanity," Harper's Magazine (February 1997), 61-66.

[2] Frederick Leboyer, Birth without Violence (New York, 1975, t.p. 1978). Otto Rank, The Trauma of Birth (New York, 1929; rpt. 1973).

Introduction

[1] Kay H. Backer, M.D. and Joe P. Tupin, M.D., in Hysterical Personality, ed. Mardi J. Horowitz, M.D. (New York, 1977), 112.

[2] See George Frederick Drinka, M.D., The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady, and the Victorians (New York, 1984), pp. 108-22. In The Social Unrest (New York, 1903) J. C. Brooks reports 10,000 fatalities and 80,000 serious injuries in the U. S. in 1890, five times England's accident rate. See Otto L. Bettmann, The Good Old Days--They Were Terrible! (New York, 1974), 171.

[3] Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, America: What Went Wrong? (Kansas City, Mo., 1992); Paul Krug, "Long-Term Riches, Short-Term Pain," in The New York Times, September 26, 1994, 9; Christopher Lasch, The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy (New York, 1995); Katherine S. Newman, The Withering of the American Dream (New York, 1993), p. .

[4] "A respect for international opinion would have spared the United States the trauma of defeat in war and the disruption of its economy and the unity of society." Donald W. White, The

American Century: The Rise & Decline of the United States as a World Power (New Haven, 1996), 436

[5] See John Cassidy, "Who Killed the Middle Class?" The New Yorker (Oct. 16, 1995), 113-24.

[6] John Kenneth Galbraith, The Culture of Contentment (New York, 1992), p. 118.

[7] Tom Engelhardt, The End of Victory Culture (New York, 1995).

[8] Dean Ornish, M.D., Eat More, Weigh Less (New York, 1993), 21.

[9] Kevin Phillips, Arrogant Captital (New York, 1994), 61.

[10] See Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium (New York, 1961).

[11] According to the Associated Press, Camping has written two books predicting the end, 1994 and Are You Ready? As of mid-July 1994, annual giving to his company, Family Radio, "is up 20 percent this year to $12 million."

[12] Lewis H. Lapham, "Balzac's Garret," Harper's Magazine (May 1996), 9-10. Lapham muses that in less than a year the novel sold 275,000 copies.

[13] G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (London 1936), p. 165.

[14] Karl Beckson, London in the 1890s: A Cultural History (New York: 1992), xiv.

[15] Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma & Recovery (New York, 1992), p.33.

[16] N.C. Andreasen, "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder," in The Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry, ed. H.I. Kaplan and B.J. Sadock (Baltimore, 1985), pp.918-24.

[17] See, e.g., Irvin D. Yalom, Existential Psychotherapy (New York, 1980), pp. 41-43.

[18] Neursoscience has generated a vast and rapidly expanding literature of trauma research. Daniel Goleman offers a layman's overview of this research, though not of its controversies and lacunae, in Emotional Intelligence (New York, 1995), Ch. 13 & Appendix C.

[19] Allan Young, The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Princeton, 1995), 5. For attempts to assimilate ethnocultural perspectives into an overview of PTSD, see Derek Summerfield, "Addressing Human Response to War and Atrocity," in Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics, ed. Rolf J. Kleber, Charles R. Figley, and Berthold P.

R. Gersons (New York, 1995), 17-29, and Ethnocu;ltural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, ed. Anthony J. Marsella, Matthew J. Friedman, Ellen T. Gerrity, and Raymond M. Scurfield (Washington, D.C., 1996).

[20] George Frederick Drinka, M.D., The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady, and the Victorians (New York, 1984), p. 114.

[21] Doug Stewart, "The Curse of the Great Eastern," Smithsonian (November, 1994), 25:8, 66.

[22] Quoted in Reinhard Kuhn, The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature (Princeton, 1976), p. 26.

[23] Young notes that in the year following the liberalization of the Act "juries awarded over three hundred thousand pounds to people injured on the railways" (17).

[24] The standard history has been Ilza Veith's psychoanalytically-oriented Hysteria: The History of a Dissease (Chicago, 1965). Perhaps the best-known feminist study of hysteria in the 19th century is Elaine Showalter's The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980 (New York, 1985). A more recent overview of hysteria studies, with a useful bibliography, is Mark S. Micale, Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations (Princeton, 1995).

[25] See Micale's survey (75-88).

[26] Janet Oppenheim, Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England (New York, 1991).

[27] Abraham Kardiner's The Traumatic Neuroses of War appeared in 1941, followed after the War by A. Kardiner and H. Spiegel, War, Stress, and Neurotic Illness (New York, 1947).

[28] Robert J. Lifton's Home from the War (New York, 1973) and Jonathan Shay, Achilles in Vietnam (New York, 1994).

[29] Allan Young (1996) analyzes the negotiations which created DSM-III, and documents the process by which its central categories took shape.

[30] In Regeneration (New York, 1992), her novel about the psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers and the Craiglockhart War Hospital in World War I, Pat Barker has Wilfred Owen explain the analogy of

shell-shocked patients to Antaeus, who is too strong for his adversary Hercules until his feet leave the ground rendering him helpless. Psychiatry "thinks we--the patients--are like Antaeus in the sense that we've been ungrounded by the war. And the way back to health is to re-estabish the link between oneself and the earth, but understanding 'earth' to mean society a well as nature" (123).

[31] See, e.g., Bessel van der Kolk, "The body keeps the score: Memory and the evolving psychobiology of posttraumatic stress," Harvard Review of Psychiatry (January/ February, 1994), 253-65.

[32] See Robert Elias, The Politics of Victimization: Victims, Victimology and Human Rights (New York & Oxford, 1986), ch. 1.

[33] See "Witchcraft beliefs as an explanation of suffering and a means of resolving confict," in A. D. J. Macfarlane. Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (London, 1970, rpt. New York, 1970), 192-207.

[34] Cathy Caruth, ed., Trauma; Explorations in Memory (Baltimore & London, 1995), 6.

[35] Kali Tal, Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma (New York, 1996), 9-16.

[36] Among innumerable examples are True Romance (see Part Two) and The Professional, in which a girl persuades a professional asassin to train her in what the film coyly calls "cleaning."

[37] Harper's Index, Harper's Magazine (April 1996).

[38] An article in The Toronto Star, Sept 20, 1993, pg E2, reports that auto mishaps are the biggest cause of trauma stress disorder. It cites a study in the British Medical Journal that finds 25% of motor vehicle accident victims have severe psychological disturbances lasting a year or more, and mentions a study published in The Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology (June 1992) Vol. 2 that discovers post-traumatic stress disorder in 11.5% of accident victims.

[39] C. R. Whittaker, "The Poor," in The Romans, ed. Andrea Giardina (Chicago, 1993), p.273.

[40] Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death (New York, 1973) p. 2.

[41] Richard L. Rubenstein, The Age of Triage (Boston, 1983), 161.

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[42] Kai Erickson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in Caruth, 198.

[43] See Ernest becker, Escape from Evil (New York, 1975); Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore & London, 1977); also Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, & Tom Pyszczynski, "Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements," Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 29, ed. Mark P. Zanna (New York, 1997).

[44] Associated Press story in the Daily Hampshire Gazette (Northampton, Mass), September 10-11, 1994, p. 5.

[45] Machines are supposed to work infallibly, Becker points out, "since we have to put all our trust in them [to control nature]. And so when they fail to work our whole world view begins to crumble--just as the primitives' world view did when they found their rituals were not working in the face of western culture and weaponry. I am thinking of how anxious we are to find the exact cause of an airplane crash, or how eager we are to attribute the crash to 'human error' and not machine failure" (Escape from Evil, p, 9).

[46] See William Walters Sargant, Battle for the Mind; a Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing (New York, 1971).

[47] I Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse, ed. Ellen Bass and Luise Thornton (New York, 1983), 22.

[48] For example, in A. D. 14, in what is now Westphalia, Roman soldiers exterminated a people called the Marsi in order to teach their neighbors an unforgettable lesson.

[49] See Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World (New York, 1985), 27.

[50] See Shay, 3-4.

[51] See The Blood of Kings, ed. Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller (Fort Worth, 1986). Also Richard Castillo's recent pair of articles (in Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry (1994) 18: 1-21, 1994 and 18:141-62.

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[52] In "Hysteria: a neurobiological theory," in Archives of General Psychiatry 27 (1972), A. M. Ludwig proposes that hysterical reactions to traumatic threat follow two neurobiological patterns, violent motor reaction and a sham death reflex that I associate with play-death (771-86). Blacker and Tupin sketch some reservations about Ludwig's hypothesis in Horowitz (108-09).

[53] John C. Danforth, Resurrection: the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas (New York, 1994). Among the commentators to have referred to trauma is Jeffrey Rosen: "A less self-pitying justice might have begun to recover from the trauma of his hearings by now." See "Confirmations," in The New Republic (December 19, 1994), p. 33.

[54] See, e.g., Alan M. Dershowitz, The Abuse Excuse And Other Cop Outs, Sob Stories and Evasions of Responsibility (New York, 1994). The provocative righteousness of Dershowitz's title interestingly mirrors the manipulative righteousness he scorns. A cautious effort to sort out these issues is Donald Alexander Downs, More than Victims: Battered Women, the Syndrome Society, and the Law (Chicago, 1996).

[55] During her imprisonment Mary embroidered the words in the Oxburgh hangings (1569-1584), now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The motto is not simply a sentimental consolation and Petrarchan convention, but also a self-empowering threat, as Mary's cousin Queen Elizabeth recognized by having the headsman put an end to her rival's "thriving" in a judicial murder as devious as the motto (1587).

[56] "Episode 23: 'Bart gets Hit by a Car.'"

[57] March 2, 1993. Described in Michael Yapko, Suggestions of Abuse: True and False Memories of Childhood Trauma (New York, 1994), p. 159.

[58] See, e.g., Lester Thurow's "Why Their World May Collapse," The New York Times Magazine (February 1996).

[59] Aor. Konrad Brendler, "Working through the Holocaust: Still a Task for Germany's Youth?" in Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics, ed. Rolf J. Kleber, Charles R. Figley, and Berthold P. R. Gersons (New York, 1995), 249.

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[60] One sign of this is the number of movies and novel that recreate the 1890s and its stories, from remakes of Dracula, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and the ubiquitous Sherlock Holmes, to novels like The Alienist and Waterworks, the film Century, and the BBC/PBS television serial Bramwell. See my introduction to Part Two.

[61] Lynn White, Jr., "Death and the Devil," in Robert S. Kinsman, The Dark Side of the Renaissance (Berkeley, 1974), 25-46.

[62] T. Walter Herbert, "Mozart, Hawthorne, and Mario Savio," College English 57:4 (April 1995), 403. Herbert quotes from The Education of Henry Adams, ed. Ernest Samuels (Boston, 1973), 433.

[63] Rubenstein proposes that the Enclosure Acts which drove whole peasant villages out of existence in Renaissance England were among the first signs of that triage mentality.

[64] I. F. Clarke, Voices Prophesying War (Oxford and New York, 1962, 1992), 84.

[65] A succinct and cogent argument of this sort is Sean Wilentz, "Ungolden Age," The New Republic (April 1, 1996), 20-21. A more elaborate version of the thesis appears in Phillips, Arrogant Capital.

[66] Louis Uchitelle and N. R. Kleinfield, "On the Battlefields of Business, Millions of Casualties," The New York Times, March 3, 1996, A26. The Times seven-part series on "The Downsizing of America" repeatedly uses the vocabulary of trauma to describe the economic dislocations of the 1990s.

[67] Michael J. Sandel, "America's Search for a New Public Phiosophy," The Atlantic Monthly, 227:3 (March 1996), 59, adapted from Sandel's Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of Public Philosophy (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

[68] See Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (New York, 1978). More recent and polemical are Robert J. Samuelson, The Good Life and Its Discontents: the American Dream in the Age of Entitlement 1945-1995 (New York, 1996); William Damon, Greater Expectations: Overcopming the Culture of Indulgence in America's Homes and Schools (New York, 1996);

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and Charles Sykes, Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write or Add (New York, 1996). .

[69] A New York Times poll (March 5, 1996) reported that 35% of all middle class respondents felt "at risk of falling out of the middle class." The number rises to 53% among those affected even indirectly by layoffs (A17).

[70] David Cannadine, "The Brass-Tacks Queen," The New York Review of Books (April 23, 1987), 31.

[71] Anthony Storr, Human Destructiveness (New York, 1991), 105.

[72] Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization (Chicago, 1995), ch. 1.

[73] Karl Beckson, London in the 1890s (New York, 1992), 318.

[74] H. G. Wells, The Island of Dr. Moreau (New York, 1988), 98.

[75] Peter Annin, "Superpredators Arrive: Should we cage the new breed of vicious kids?" Newsweek (January 12, 1996), 57.

[76] John Bowlby, "The Role of Childhood Experience in Cognitive Disturbance," in Cognition and Psychotherapy, ed. Michael J. Mahoney and Arthur Freeman (Plenum Publishing, 1985), 181-200. Louis A. Sass, Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought (New York, 1992), ch. 1.