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**Troubled Memories:
Posttraumatic Stress,
German Writers, and the
Bombings of World War Two**

The heavy air raids that turned German cities into rubble during World War Two have emerged as an important topic of discussion in Germany in the past few years. Particularly in the culture sections of many newspapers, journalists have engaged in a debate about wartime bombings and their effects on the population, as well as their depiction in literature. The discussion started as a reaction to a series of lectures entitled “Luftkrieg und Literatur” (“Air War and Literature”) that were held by the author and scholar W.G. Sebald (1944-2001) in 1997. Here, Sebald tried to investigate why the number of literary accounts dealing with the bombings of German cities in World War Two is rather small even though the events affected such a large number of people.¹ Indeed, the aerial bombardments had not been widely publicly discussed up to this date, but the interest Sebald’s lectures sparked both in the newspapers and the general public suggests a need for more consideration of this part of the German past. This impression was confirmed by the tremendous success of Jörg Friedrich’s historical analysis of the bombings, *Der Brand (The Fire)*, which immediately became a German bestseller after its publication in 2002. Yet the long hesitation of authors and critics to deal with the topic is not surprising since it necessarily raises questions about whether such study engages in a process of historical revisionism by focusing on the Germans, the aggressors and perpetrators in the war, as victims.

Sebald claims that immediately following the war a taboo about the events was established, causing the silence of German authors concerning the bombings:

There was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described. The darkest aspects of the

final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population, remained under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret, a secret that perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged.²

While Sebald notes an erasure from memory of the bombing war both on a collective and an individual level, he expresses great disappointment with German postwar authors. He suggests that, after the Nazi years, they were only concerned with creating a new identity for themselves and with being viewed favorably by others instead of describing these particular events (ix). He perceives it as “scandalous” that they have not created what in his opinion would be adequate representations of these experiences (70).

Feature writers commenting on Sebald’s talks were split in their assessment. Some critics praised Sebald for breaking the silence about the bombings. They agreed with the author’s judgment and expressed their disappointment that writers and readers had shunned the topic despite its far-reaching consequences for large parts of the population. In contrast, other critics did not see the need for such literature on the air raids. They feared that talking about the topic could send the message that German crimes were atoned for by the suffering Germans endured during and after the bombings. Instead, they saw silence as the most appropriate expression of the shame Germans should and must feel in regards to the war.³ Both sides agreed, however, that the number of narratives about the bombings is rather small, and that the literary accounts often lack an audience as well. The debate thus largely supported Sebald’s assessment of a taboo and suggests a ‘double-silence’ in German society concerning aerial bombardments—both on part of the authors and on part of the audience.

Even though Sebald’s taboo-thesis about the air war easily complements popular ideas about the German postwar situation, in a larger context Sebald’s point of view reveals weaknesses. It is true that the air war had not been publicly discussed at great length before this recent debate if one leaves aside its politicization both by groups on the right and by the East German government. It cannot be denied, however, that there has always been some degree of local and private interest in the subject. There are many publications dealing with the destructions of individual cities, and in family circles experiences of bombardments have been talked about and shared. Sebald also neglects the fact that most writers did not actually experience the bombings, be it because they were soldiers, exiles or because they were living in places that were not affected by the air raids. Bombings were the daily reality for city people, while Germans in the countryside did not truly understand the severity of the destruction and its consequences. When evacuated

to rural areas, many who had just escaped death and lost everything they had owned, were confronted with mistrust and a complete lack of compassion. In his fictionalized memoir of growing up in a village at Lake Constance during the Second World War, *Ein springender Brunnen* (*A Lively Fountain*), for example, Martin Walser describes how a family from Berlin is asked to live in a barn, one part of which is still used as a pigsty, and has to beg for discarded food items.⁴ This is seen as normal by the village population who views these strangers as curious outsiders and avoids any contact with them (304). In his autobiographical bombing novel *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (*The Boy with the Bloody Shoes*) from 1995, the author Dieter Forte, who experienced repeated bombings as a child in Düsseldorf, tells a similar story. When the protagonist's family is evacuated from Düsseldorf to a small town in southern Germany, they are seen as intruders who exaggerate their plight,⁵ have no nerves (230), and try to sabotage the war effort when they talk about the bombings (234). In the end, they prefer to return to the bombed-out city with no food or shelter and the daily air raids rather than stay in this unwelcoming place (235).

At the same time, Sebald, and with him many critics, also underestimates the severity of the internal and external psychological pressures the writers who did live through the air war were exposed to. While feelings of guilt and shame clearly cannot be neglected when discussing the effects of the air raids and the silence surrounding the events, they are not solely responsible for the difficulty of both writing and reading about the bombings. Living through the air raids was, in the words of Dieter Forte, "a horror beyond language, an unspeakable terror, there are eyes, mouths, and screams, which cannot be expressed in words."⁶ Whether this war strategy was necessary and justified or not, the experience of the bombings had lasting psychological effects on the people who lived through them. In fact, even narratives by people whose lives were constantly threatened in Nazi Germany and thus emphasize that they welcomed the bombs as signs of the end of the war, show similar psychological consequences.⁷ So although questions of guilt and shame are ever present, it is also appropriate and necessary to explore the traumatizing nature of the air raid experiences to understand their effects on both the people who endured them and the production and reception of the literature about them.

It is significant that, although the topic has not become a dominant theme in German literature and only received limited attention by the audience, writers did repeatedly try to come to terms with the bombings. Despite some of the claims to the contrary in the recent debate, authors were involved with translating the air raids, particularly their own memories, into literary texts. This process was complicated by the lack of available literary patterns or language to describe

the aerial bombardments. In their magnitude and duration they constituted a completely new experience, beyond any ordinary expectation while at the same time posing questions of guilt for those who had lived through them—difficulties that repeatedly mark the texts. Writers had to overcome this interwoven web of trauma and guilt as well as find new ways to express their experiences in their literature.⁸ The texts are thus apt sources to study the full complexity of the issue of the bombings in German society.

In the past few years, trauma theory has started to occupy an important role within the area of literary and cultural studies. However, the approach developed in the humanities towards trauma, dominated by such often-quoted scholars as Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience*), or Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (*Testimony*), is limited in its applicability and appears partially misguided. Here, trauma is characterized as an experience that, as Caruth describes it, is “never simply one’s own.”⁹ Trauma is thus not a certain event that affects people who are exposed to the occurrence, but it cannot be specifically located and influences everyone within our culture, no matter whether one was personally part of the trauma experience or not. For Caruth, this ‘contagious’ nature of trauma has become our only way to gain access to our past in a world that is understood and characterized as a “post-traumatic century.”¹⁰ It allows a “not fully conscious” departure into a history,¹¹ which, since the traumatic event is not fully experienced when it occurs, is allowed through trauma to return literally and unaltered (particularly visible in flashback experiences).¹² Witnessing trauma thus at the same time means receiving privileged access to unaltered history and being denied access as the witnessing never occurs on a conscious level. According to Dori Laub, a trauma is actually only then fully witnessed when it is shared, for example with a therapist. Yet Laub goes even further, as “[b]y extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself.”¹³

This approach, however, contains several problems. Even though Caruth continually refers to psychiatry and neuroscience in her texts, her approach does not truly reflect the results of studies about trauma in the sciences. Particularly, there is no evidence that supports that trauma memories remain unaltered. In addition, with her concentration on the return of the trauma event, especially through flashbacks, Caruth prioritizes one of the observed symptoms caused by trauma while neglecting many others, which will be described in detail below. What is most disturbing about this approach, however, is its looseness of definition. An understanding of trauma, which is seen as an unconscious part of all of us due to its contagious nature and experienced by a therapist just as much as by the person who went through it, severely diminishes the role

of personal suffering of the individual who actually lived through the trauma. It becomes impossible to grasp and describe with any accuracy what can or cannot be viewed as traumatic events and what specific effects they entail for the individuals who experienced them.

Paradoxically, while trauma is often expanded to describe the situation of our whole society, by which the suffering of the individual is necessarily minimized, many scholars in the humanities at the same time also unnecessarily limit the applicability of the term. The suffering from trauma is then automatically equated with victimhood which is given special status and high moral authority. This view usually ignores the fact that not everyone who goes through a traumatic experience and suffers from its consequences can be easily characterized as a pure victim. The approach favored in the humanities at the moment is thus especially ill fit to discuss situations where perpetrator and victim roles are not necessarily clearly defined. Soldiers in war, for example, can return severely traumatized from their experience, but they are also usually involved in killing other soldiers and sometimes commit terrible war crimes. In the case of the air raids on German civilians during World War Two, the situation is particularly complicated. While suffering under the bombings, Germans obviously cannot be identified as pure victims in the war. Yet again and again the bombings have been used by right-wing political forces to introduce this very idea. These groups have continuously presented German suffering under the bombs as atonement for the crimes committed under National Socialism. Writing about the bombings is thus always under suspicion of trying to revise history in a way that could show Germans in a more favorable light or as victims themselves. This assessment is confirmed by the recent debate on the bombings which takes place under such characteristic headings as the title of a new essay collection on the air war: *Ein Volk von Opfern (A People of Victims?)*.¹⁴

When studying trauma texts on the bombing experience within German postwar literature, it is thus essential to embrace a more systematic approach. The criteria now established by psychiatrists to diagnose Acute and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (ASD and PTSD) offer themselves as an alternative to the predominant direction of trauma studies in the humanities. Based on both experimental and observational research, these can provide an objective avenue into a somewhat muddled world of trauma and guilt, victims and perpetrators that surrounds a strategy which, even though used against the aggressors of the war, specifically targeted civilian lives.

Sparked by extensive research concerning Vietnam veterans, PTSD was first included as an independent psychiatric classification in the 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) thus providing psychiatrists with both a name and operational criteria to assess the effects of

traumatic experiences. In general, PTSD stems from “an inadequate way of coping with extreme stress.”¹⁵ The fourth edition of the *Manual* (DSM-IV) introduced a more specific definition in 1994, which involves a characterization of the stressor and of the reaction by the individual, accounting for both the objective and subjective elements of trauma. This definition was also included in the newest edition of the *Manual* (DSM-IV-TR) in 2000.¹⁶ PTSD can arise when exposed to or witnessing “an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity.”¹⁷ The level of severity of the stress event, including such factors as its intensity or the physical proximity of a person to the stressor, can be predictive of the likelihood of developing the disorder.¹⁸ However, illness does not necessarily arise from the experience, as people respond differently to the exposure to trauma. This means that the reaction of the individual to the situation is crucial as well and has to involve “intense fear, helplessness, or horror.”¹⁹

While symptoms of traumatic stress often become visible very soon after the events, they do not always last longer than a few days or weeks. In order to account for these shorter episodes, DSM-IV introduced Acute Stress Disorder as a diagnosis which is applied to cases that last from a few days to a maximum of four weeks, and occur within four weeks of the traumatic event (471). When the problems persist for at least one month, the diagnosis is changed to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. The criteria of the two diagnoses are thus very similar with the exception of some additional dissociative symptoms which need to occur during or after the event in order to justify the diagnosis of ASD.²⁰ For example, the events are often characterized by the individual as dreamlike and unreal (471). In addition, emotional reactions may be so extreme that one cannot recall parts of or even sometimes the entirety of the trauma.²¹ One might experience “numbing, detachment, or absence of emotional responsiveness,”²² which has also been described as “psychic closing-off.”²³ The trauma experience often causes an alteration in time perspective and in cognitive ability.²⁴ Other reactions include trouble sleeping, feelings of “hopelessness” as well as “survival guilt.”²⁵

The other symptoms of Acute Stress Disorder agree with the three major symptom clusters of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, which are intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal. The term “intrusion” is applied when, involuntarily,²⁶ the individual persistently reexperiences the traumatic event “in the form of distressing images, thoughts, perceptions, dreams, or reliving.”²⁷ They are often triggered by internal or external clues that remind one of a part of the trauma, such as certain “sights, sounds, and smells.”²⁸ These intrusion symptoms are linked to symptoms of avoidance. Since thinking of the trauma is extremely distressing, precautions are taken to avoid any activities, places, thoughts, or conversations which could

bring it back to memory.²⁹ These attempts at avoidance often are associated with a sense of a foreshortened future and some of the dissociative symptoms described earlier for ASD, such as emotional numbing (464). However, avoidance hardly ever completely shuts out the traumatic experience and intrusions continually break through these barriers, causing stress for the person and again reinforcing the attempts at avoidance. Evidence suggests that the more a person tries to suppress the intrusions, the more frequently they occur.³⁰ This oscillation between intrusion and avoidance thus “further exacerbates the traumatized person’s sense of unpredictability and helplessness” and “is therefore potentially self-perpetuating.”³¹ The third symptom cluster associated with both ASD and PTSD describes increased arousal and anxiety. This state can cause sleep disturbances (often associated with nightmares) or trouble with concentrating. It also leaves people feeling unable to relax, always on the edge, and constantly on guard.³²

It has been shown that ASD and PTSD can be observed in the civilian responses to aerial bombing. Daya J. Somasundaram, when studying the effects of war bombings on civilians in Sri Lanka, has found a strong link between the experience of bombing and later traumatic responses.³³ Evaluating the survivors of a single air raid on a school building in which they had sought refuge, Somasundaram found that 74 percent experienced various degrees of acute stress reactions while later 63 percent still displayed partial or full PTSD (1467). While this link between bombing experiences and trauma cannot be directly studied any longer in the case of World War Two air raids, the German literary depictions of the bombings, both in their content and form suggest a similar connection. Approaching them with psychiatric trauma theory can help shed some light on the experience of the bombings and its psychological consequences both collectively for the German population and for the individual, the author. This approach further allows insight into authorial decisions on content and form as the writers are dealing with events not easily expressed through traditional literary patterns or common language.

One of the earliest accounts is Hans Erich Nossack’s *Der Untergang (Doom and Destruction)*, which describes the destruction of Hamburg in 1943. Nossack, who wrote the text three months after the bombings which he observed while vacationing right outside of his hometown, seems deeply affected by the traumatic events and displays symptoms of Acute and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. His report is marked by a sense of unreality concerning the destruction of Hamburg: “it will never be possible for the mind [...] to understand the reality of what happened back then and to include it in its memory structures.”³⁴ When having to watch the attack, he feels dazed, helpless, limited to a solely physical presence, and unable to think clearly (17). Later, when the Hamburg refugees start coming to the village, he also encounters emotional numbness and detachment among

them: their arrival is characterized by an “eerie silence” with “no complaints and no tears” (24) displaying complete “indifference” (28). The report also shows many instances of avoidance. Nossack and his wife try not to visit places or discuss anything that would remind them of the traumatic events (31-2). Instead, they try to act “as if nothing had happened” (32). Yet, as is typical for individuals who faced trauma, it intrudes repeatedly into their lives and interrupts any attempt to return to normalcy. Nossack experiences these intrusions as the voices of all those things lost and destroyed in the air raids:

We assumed that their voices would quiet over time, as we left the fire behind us, but they were not that easily betrayed. If we had known back then that the torture was growing week by week and that we would have to speak more and more quietly and often had to stop mid-sentence because the voices were confusing us, we had considered ourselves lucky if we had died with them. (34)

Not surprisingly, the derealization, numbness, pessimism, emotional detachment, and the persistent avoidance and denial seen in Nossack’s account are common features in many of the works about the bombings. Similar effects are also portrayed in Alexander Kluge’s “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945” (“The Air Raid against Halberstadt on April 8, 1945”). The author experienced this bombing raid as a child and in 1977 transformed his memory into a montage of both invented and real individual story lines, pictures, and graphs about the attack. The characters display various forms of trauma, particularly in their usually completely fruitless attempts to counteract the disaster. The theater manager Frau Schrader, for example, who survives the direct hit of a movie theater, desperately tries to continue with the daily movie schedule even though the building is largely destroyed by a direct hit and several patrons lie dismembered in the ruins.³⁵ In the face of the catastrophe, Schrader is left without any adequate pathways to react. Such emotional numbing and complete lack of orientation, which expresses itself through the desperate clinging to established patterns, returns over and over in the individual story fragments of Kluge’s montage. After the war is over, these immediate reactions are followed by complete passivity except for the wish to leave as soon as possible: “The question whether they would emigrate to the United States, 82% answer with: I would love to. [...] Attempts to rebuild were scarce, even when the material was available. There were only six attempts in the city to fix up houses and make them more livable” (80).

Another continuously recurring theme in the literature of the bombings is an altered perception of time both during and after the air raids. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman reports that prisoners of war who suffered from PTSD felt during their captivity as if they were “reduced to living in an endless present,” a state that continued on after their release, when, a “prisoner may give the appearance of returning to ordinary time, while psychologically remaining bound in the timelessness of the prison.”³⁶ Similarly, Nossack repeatedly emphasizes: “We have no past any longer.”³⁷ The bombings thus left many survivors without past or future, but in a continuous state of inner destruction. This state is also emphasized in another author who has dealt with the bombings and their effects, Wolfgang Borchert. The Hamburg writer, who died very young shortly after the war, saw himself as a spokesperson of all those who had grown up during the Hitler era and whose youth and young adulthood was characterized by war and destruction. A loss of a sense of time and history plays an integral part in his stories and poems. In “Die Küchenuhr” (“The Kitchen Clock”), for example, the protagonist focuses all his attention on the clock that he recovered from the debris of his parents’ house which had fallen victim to a bombing attack: “It is broken inside, that’s for sure, but it still looks just like it used to.”³⁸ More than a metaphor for the inner destruction of the protagonist,³⁹ the stopped clock implies that time has lost linearity. Through the bombs, the young man’s natural development has been distorted, leaving the twenty-year-old with a “really old face.”⁴⁰ As a bystander remarks: “When the bomb comes down, the clocks stop” (104).

However, for the victims of Nazi Germany whose lives were constantly threatened, the aerial bombardments take on new meaning. Even though perceived as tragic and dangerous, they are also identified as positive signs of impending freedom and the end of the war. The posthumously published diaries *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten* (*I Will Bear Witness*) by the Jewish scholar Victor Klemperer, which chronicle the cruelty of the Third Reich, clearly display this double role. Living in Dresden, which was long spared from air attacks, the bombs literally lead to freedom, since the destruction of the city in February of 1945 and the following confusion gave him the possibility to flee and thus avoid impending deportation.⁴¹ Despite his liberation, however, the bombing of Dresden deeply affected Klemperer psychologically as well. Just as other trauma survivors, the air raids leave him disoriented, and again, the objective and subjective perceptions of time do not match (35). Even after the attack is over, Klemperer is still lost: “I was [...] so exhausted from the catastrophe that I had completely lost my sense of time” (40). He is unable to process the events and describes himself as “without any emotion” (35) and unable to think (42). He is

thus left in the strange position of both wishing for the destruction of Dresden and at the same time deeply regretting it (31).

The political poet and songwriter Wolf Biermann, whose father was Jewish and whose parents were both committed communists, made similar experiences. When he was six years old, he witnessed the bombing of his hometown Hamburg. Due to his background, he emphasizes the positive side of the air raids in the song “Jan Gat unterm Himmel in Rotterdam” (“Jan Gat Under the Sky in Rotterdam”), which contains a stanza on the Hamburg bombings:

And because it was under the Yellow Star
That I was born in Germany
That's why we accepted the English bombs
Like presents from heaven⁴²

Yet despite this realization, the horrors of the destruction of Hamburg also became a lasting memory for him. Just as Borchert, Biermann uses the image of the stopped clock to describe how the bombing of Hamburg had a strong psychological effect on him:

There is a great picture of a burnt-out casing of a pocket watch in Hiroshima. The hands of the watch melted onto the dial at the time of the explosion. Ever since I have seen this picture, I have known that my small life clock in my ribcage has also melted down, it stopped in the firestorm of this one night. I was six and a half years old back then and that's how old I stayed for the rest of my life. I am a child turned gray...⁴³

Just like these examples, most literary accounts on the bombings concentrate only or mostly on the immediate consequences of the events. Exceptions are the two autobiographically influenced novels *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (*The Boy with the Bloody Shoes*) and *In der Erinnerung* (*In Memory*) by Dieter Forte. The texts focus on “the boy,” their nameless protagonist, and describe the time in Düsseldorf during the bombings and the life in the ruins after the war. The novels reveal a deep and ongoing traumatization of their characters. During and after the attacks, many clearly suffer from Acute Stress Disorder and reveal an array of dissociative symptoms. Overwhelmed by their inability to help, firemen give up their attempts to control the flames, and simply sit down “like mannequins, in unnatural, twisted positions, completely removed and not reacting to anything.”⁴⁴ Others on the streets are in constant motion, running into each other, circling

aimlessly, but all this “without a sound and calmly, as if they were dreaming” (147). As if physically removed from the events, the boy observes the people around him: “A woman carefully carried a number of hangers, which once had held something. [...] A man pulled a wooden cart with crooked wheels with all his might yet there was nothing on it” (147). Unable to articulate such experiences, the boy flees into silence and for some time loses his ability to speak (144). After these initial reactions, more and more signs of lasting trauma emerge in the texts. A deathlike numbness falls over people, because “whoever lives in the zone of death is dead, even if he still, according to his old habits, moves about” (212). It is complemented by constant nervousness manifested in “restless, fast, uncoordinated movements” (229). Even after the boy has been evacuated to a village away from the attacks, the Düsseldorf experiences manifest themselves repeatedly in his and his family’s behavior. They move about fast, “constantly running, looking for something, which might not exist any longer within minutes” (229). Typically for PTSD, the memories intrude into his life through dreams and flashbacks of sirens and attacks: “he could not imagine a city without sirens, a life without the nightly sound of sirens, he was trained to hear these sirens, heard them in his deep sleep, kept jumping out of bed” (229-30). These flashbacks and intrusive memories do not stop with the end of the war and are now often triggered by images the boy associates with the experiences or show themselves in nightmares. Similarly to Nossack’s notion of having fallen out of time, Forte also describes a world which exists outside of historical chronology. The characters find themselves in the “zero hour [...], which did not count, which was no time, which stopped the course of the world.”⁴⁵ In this scenario, the end of the war becomes almost meaningless for the inner state of the people, as memories keep intruding so strongly that any return to normal life is made impossible. As Forte puts it in an interview: “One’s own existence has been damaged forever, one can never find peace.”⁴⁶

Survivors of traumatic experiences thus often feel conflicted about telling their story. On the one hand they have a strong urge to unburden themselves and share their memories, on the other they strive to suppress and deny the traumatic events as they cause them great emotional stress.⁴⁷ Recounting the events means working against one’s own mechanisms of avoidance, and studies have shown that people feel unhappier immediately after writing down or telling their experiences, since it necessarily means confronting uncomfortable memories.⁴⁸ In addition, the events are so-called “speechless terror[s],” in which “the emotional impact of the event may interfere with the capacity to capture the experience in words or symbols.”⁴⁹ Forte echoes this very problem when he describes himself as part of a generation of children, “who can remember, when they find the words to do so – and for these words one has to wait a lifetime.”⁵⁰ The matter is further complicated by the

complex position of the German writers, as they were and are acutely aware of the possible implications when writing and publishing about their suffering. After all, without a doubt, Germans were the true victimizers of the war. It has been shown that feelings of guilt can lead to even stronger avoidance reactions.⁵¹ The difficulty of describing the experiences was and is thus doubly reinforced, both by processes of avoidance and denial and by questions of guilt and shame. Forte himself remained silent for fifty years: “I suppressed it for a long time [. . .]. I have never talked about what I experienced during and after the war, not even to my wife.”⁵²

However, telling and narrating can be an important step in the recovery from trauma since it allows the sufferer to “transfor[m] the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story.”⁵³ The urge to tell what has happened can thus be understood as an attempt at self-therapy. Studies have repeatedly shown that, while making symptoms worse at first, writing about stressful events has positive long-term health benefits both physically and psychologically.⁵⁴ Research has also indicated that it is not the story in itself that is beneficial in the healing process, but the actual construction of the story, the very process of making it.⁵⁵ These findings are reflected in theoretical models, which try to explain how PTSD could arise, as well as the possibilities to overcome the disorder.⁵⁶ In the case of PTSD, particularly cognitive models have been developed extensively (193). According to these theories, an individual has sets of schematic representations of the world, of others, and of themselves which are based on prior experiences. When one encounters new information, this needs to be matched with these pre-existing beliefs and models. When a traumatic event occurs, an individual is suddenly faced with important information which is at the same time incompatible with the person’s existing schemes. This incongruent information cannot be neglected and yet at the same time it cannot easily be included either. It thus stays in what Mardi J. Horowitz terms “active memory.”⁵⁷ The unsuccessful attempt to integrate the trauma-related information into existing models prevents a “completion” of processing to take place and leads to various PTSD reactions of both trying to suppress the new information (avoidance) and its repeated reoccurrence (intrusion). One way to resolve this problematic inclusion process is, for example, to change the preexisting models so that they are able to accommodate the trauma experience. This theoretical model thus has practical implications. Based on this approach, therapy for PTSD has to focus on the successful processing of the trauma. Verbalizing it can play an active role in this process. It does not aim at forgetting the memories of the event, but at making them a conscious part of one’s past.

When breaking the silence, questions of how to write about the traumatic experiences become central concerns. Part of the difficulty of fictionalizing trauma

is the problem of finding the fitting language and style to represent the experience in a way that the story still comes across as truthful and real. Traumatic experiences are usually outside of the normal range of events humans face. Therefore, traditional story telling and established literary patterns are not necessarily fit to capture the full experience. The processes writers have to go through in order to create a story of the trauma can be compared to the ones described in the cognitive PTSD models. Just as individuals have certain sets of beliefs about the world and people around them before they are confronted with the trauma experience, so are writers part of literary traditions and writing styles developed to describe these schemata. When an individual goes through an experience outside of his or her models of how the world behaves, the events cannot be properly processed and included without changing these very belief structures. Writers face a similar problem. In order to capture the experience, new ways of writing have to be explored, a new language and style needs to be developed in order to achieve a successful representation of the trauma and its aftermath. Completing a fictional piece about the trauma, one that works and is convincing in its representation, is thus comparable to processing the trauma and including it in one's memory structure, the most important step in therapy.

The texts are records of this search to find a form that allows the writer to heal from the effects of the trauma as well as be sensitive to the issues of guilt. Nossack, for example, continuously reflects on the dangers of writing down his experiences.⁵⁸ Nossack fears that once written down, the text could be misinterpreted or misused. It is therefore not surprising that he opts for the form of the report to describe the destruction of Hamburg. He hopes to function as an objective onlooker who tells what happened without emotional involvement (7). This form allows him to talk about the events despite the sensitivity of the topic while at the same time psychologically dissociating himself from the horror he encountered. Yet the enormous power of the experience is too overwhelming and his disengaged position breaks down repeatedly. Nossack's story is not only a description of what happened, but also the sight of a personal journey of working through the events. Similar to the oscillation between avoidance and intrusion in PTSD, the text is interspersed with personal comments, questions, and emotions.⁵⁹ An objective report in the traditional sense does not seem to capture the event in its entirety nor give Nossack the personal closure he tries to achieve with it.

Other authors develop new objective narrative forms in order to distance themselves from the text and still capture the reality of the events they describe. Kluge, for example, puts together a different kind of report, a montage of various perspectives and story lines, which resemble the uncontrollable structure of the aerial bombardment.⁶⁰ The report reads like a documentary, but most of the pieces Kluge includes are fictional. He invents a story that appears factual

and real both because of its objective style and its multiplicity of views even though the author stays emotionally detached and does not directly describe his personal memories. Walter Kempowski chooses a similar path in his collection of quotations, *Echolot: Fuga Furiosa (Sonar: Fuga Furiosa)*, when he focuses on the destruction of Dresden.⁶¹ Kempowski does not include any fictional elements, but exclusively puts together authentic sources such as letters, memories or diary excerpts. The texts thus offer a multiplicity of opinions, and Kempowski does not add any authorial comments. It is the reader's role to construct the final story out of the various building blocks he provides.

Another way some authors solve the problem of representing the psychological effects of the bombings without portraying Germans as victims is by focusing instead on the air raids flown by the Germans. For example, as mentioned earlier, Biermann, whose family was subject to German persecution, opts in his literary production to concentrate on the bombing of Rotterdam by the Germans and to identify with the Dutch victims. While his personal experiences of the Hamburg air raids were clearly traumatizing, they are largely banned from the literary text. It is not only the burden of the trauma that confines Biermann to silence, but he makes a conscious choice not to speak: "The memory of this inferno is burnt into me like nothing else. Everything before, everything after, I have forgotten, but about this fire I could write a novel, if I were capable of writing novels."⁶² Yet the well-written, powerful account of his experiences, which he offers in the afterword of his poetry collection, suggests that it is not necessarily the author's limited skills, but rather the implications of the events that makes the writing of the novel about the bombing of Hamburg impossible. Biermann does not want to present Germans as victims in order to avoid taking away attention from the horror of the German crimes during the Nazi era. He thus deliberately ends his account not by talking about the bombings, but with comments on the Holocaust: "Where we were then lying with other survivors was exactly the same swampy pasture at the Dammtor train station, where two years earlier the Jews of Hamburg had to gather for their transport to Minsk. That was certain death" (185). Two other writers, Gert Ledig and Dieter Forte, choose the form of the novel, in which they incorporate personal experiences, to talk about the bombings. They thus fictionalize the events. This process has been shown to offer therapeutic benefits. A recent study exploring the effects of writing about trauma suggests that when a posttrauma-sufferer imagines a trauma experience and writes it down, even if it is different from the one he or she went through, the exercise has the same positive long-term health benefits as when one writes about one's own trauma. In addition, it does not cause the distress often felt immediately after writing or talking about one's own experiences.⁶³ However, fictionalizing or imagining the trauma alone does not relieve all the effects it caused

when the narrated story is void of emotion. In order to deal with the emotional effects of trauma, the imaginary context can be particularly helpful. It allows someone to become affectively immersed in the trauma while at the same time still being distanced from it through the fictional character of the event. Using fiction consequently allows an emotional reaction and working-through process without causing the same level of distress as a non-imaginary telling would.

These effects also seem to hold true for embedding autobiographical experiences and the emotions that go with them in a fictional context, depending on the degree of personal detail that is included. Gert Ledig, for example, was a witness to several air raids during the war and the bombings became a haunting memory for him: "A dream still haunted him years after the end of the war: he lies on a platform, high up, on all sides lurks the abyss, no stairs, no hiding place – and then the planes come and shoot at him."⁶⁴ While his novel *Vergeltung (Revenge)* focuses on the experiences of many different people during an attack, similar to the multi-perspectivity that both Kluge and Kempowski aim for, the author's own trauma is also included in the novel, but reinvented within the fictional context. One of the most haunting stories that Ledig develops in the book is very much a reenactment and expansion of his nightmare scenario:

They were lying on a platform, and their fingernails were clawed into the concrete. The ropes were tight. Their connection to the ground. 'Shoot,' yelled the leading gunman. [...] In a cloud, a flame was visible. It exploded into a comet. Lightning came down. The bunker started shaking from a hit at the same time [...]. A second later the air pressure lifted him up and threw him on his back. The leading gunman was sliding with open arms [...]. If the ropes broke, he would fall into the abyss. Down four stories.⁶⁵

Forte's novels reveal even more of the author's personal trauma. His mode of narration nearly completely denies the distance between writer and subject matter and consequently does not allow the author much dissociation from the events. While fictionalizing it seems the only way to narrate the trauma and its effects at all, writing in this mode is still extremely challenging: "It only works in a kind of unconsciousness, by lowering oneself into the depth of the long forgotten, which can only resurface in memory through language. A torturous process, one has to be prepared for breakdowns."⁶⁶

This approach is obviously mentally a more difficult one for the writer, since it cannot as clearly provide the dissociation from the subject a documentary or

unemotional distanced report offer. In addition, since it includes the emotional reaction to the trauma, the text might be much more easily attacked for being inappropriately sympathetic to the Germans, requiring a very careful and balanced construction. However, the mixture of autobiography and fiction and the emotional working-through of the experience and its consequences is not only a more effective path to recovery, but also seems to be the only way to give a more complete picture of the bombings and their effects on the civilian population. Ledig's and, to an even larger extent, Forte's novels do not have the sterility and non-literary aura that surround works such as Kluge's or Kempowski's montages, but the authors allow both themselves and the audience to get more emotionally involved and to re-live the experience.

However, just as the exposure to the trauma by writing about it is problematic for the authors, so is it for the readers when they are faced with the texts. The audience's reactions have long mirrored the difficulties writers experience in dealing with the events, so that texts about the bombings were largely ignored. This passive role of readers and critics can also be explained by the tendencies of avoidance and denial caused both by feelings of guilt and psychological trauma. The description of the bombings and their destructive powers could easily trigger memories Germans were desperately trying to erase. In *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (*The Inability to Mourn*), Alexander Mitscherlich points at "the grim determination with which the removal and clean-up of the ruins was immediately undertaken," and which, according to the author, shows "a manic quality."⁶⁷ These intense processes of avoidance also explain the reaction to Gert Ledig's novel *Vergeltung* when it was first published in 1956. As novels leave more room for writers to incorporate their own psychological experiences than objective reports, they also make it more difficult for their readers to distance themselves from the material. It is thus not surprising that Ledig faced fierce opposition by both readers and critics alike when his work first appeared. Very shortly after its publication, the book and its writer disappeared into oblivion. Had Forte's novels come out around the same time, they very well could have shared the same fate. Novels like *Vergeltung* were unwanted intrusions, bringing up emotions and memories banned from consciousness.

However, as PTSD models teach us, only when processing the events in their entirety, can a coherent and complete view of the past be established. Today, the situation has indeed changed and the public avoidance surrounding the events is weakening. Writers, critics, and readers openly talk about the air raids and their consequences and publications on the bombings have increased and receive overwhelmingly positive audience reactions. For example, Forte's novels and Kempowski's *Echolot: Fuga Furiosa* have been favorably reviewed, and recently Ledig's *Vergeltung* was successfully reissued. Thus almost sixty years after the war

ended, the bombings have suddenly become a dominant topic in public discussions. This period may reflect the necessary time it requires for Germans to start processing their memories in a more public forum. The narratives and discussions also contain a sense of urgency to share the experience before even the members of the last war generation, those who spent their childhood under the bombs, have died. The literary accounts and the way they were received by the public reveal that the events had a strong influence on the psychological make-up of the people who formed the new German society. For Germans to understand their history today, especially for postwar generations, they will need to address this part of their past. However, when studying the bombings, one always needs to be careful not to misrepresent the reality of German responsibility for the suffering during World War Two. Reading the narratives in the larger context of trauma literature and applying psychiatric criteria while at the same time studying the relationship between the effects of trauma and the German guilt, might be one way to explore the issues in a manner sensitive to both concerns. The definitions of Acute and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder can be used to assess the psychological state of an individual after going through trauma, but the application of these psychiatric concepts does not automatically award victim status. Using psychiatric theory to read the literature about the bombings is thus a helpful tool to gain better insight into the experience and its effects on the German population, without distorting the issue of victim and perpetrator during the Nazi era.

Notes

1. Sebald later published his ideas as a book under the same title in 1999 (translated into English as *Towards a Natural History of Destruction*, 2003). While the main text is almost identical to the lectures and still rather sketchy in its treatment of the literature about the bombings, an interesting additional section includes Sebald's personal reflections on the topic and the reactions he received to his talks.
2. W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (1999; New York: Random House, 2003), 10. Published translations are referenced; all other translations are provided by the author.
3. Klaus Harpprecht, "Stille, schicksallose," *Deutsche Literatur 1998*, ed. Volker Hage (1998; Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), 269.
4. Martin Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 297.
5. Dieter Forte, *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (1995; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998), 228.
6. Dieter Forte, "Menschen werden zu Herdentieren: Dieter Forte über W. G. Sebalds 'Luftkrieg' Thesen und eigene Erinnerungen an die Bomben," *Der Spiegel*, 3 April 1999, p. 222.

7. Victor Klemperer, for example, a Jewish professor who lived through the bombing of Dresden and wrote a detailed diary about his life in Nazi Germany, remarks on February 8, 1945, a few days before the Dresden firestorm: "Noone believes in a swift ending and Jew and Christian also both fear the air raids." *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten. Tagebücher 1942-45* (1995; Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1999), 24.
8. While only a limited number of works will be discussed here, in *Zeugen der Zerstörung (Witnesses of Destruction)* (Frankfurt a. M: Fischer, 2003), Volker Hage has recently completed the task of putting together a list of works that deal with the bombings and their effects either in side plots or as major themes. There are indeed many more than Sebald mentions in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*.
9. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 24.
10. Felman and Laub, 1.
11. Caruth, 24.
12. Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Batimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 5-6.
13. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.
14. Lothar Kettenacker, ed., *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2003).
15. Rolf J Kleber, Charles R. Figley, and Berthold P.R. Gersons, eds., *Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics*, The Plenum Series on Stress and Coping (New York: Plenum, 1995), 234.
16. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 2000).
17. *DSM IV TR*, 467.
18. A. C. McFarlane and Nicholas Potts, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Prevalence and Risk Factors Relative to Disasters," *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Comprehensive Text*, eds. Philip A. Saigh and J. Douglas Bremner (Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 99.
19. *DSM-IV-TR*, 467.
20. Dissociative symptoms can be understood as a disruption in the regularly "integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment" (*DSM-IV-TR*, 822).
21. Ulrik Fredrik Malt, "Traumatic Effects of Accidents," *Individual and Community Responses to Trauma and Disaster*, eds. Robert J. Ursano, Brian G. McCaughey, and Carol S. Fullerton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 107.
22. *DSM-IV-TR*, 471.
23. Robert J. Lifton, *History and Human Survival* (1970; New York: Vintage, 1971), 127.
24. Lars Weisaeth, "Psychological and Psychiatric Aspects of Technological Disasters," *Individual and Community Responses to Trauma and Disaster*, eds. Robert J. Ursano, Brian G. McCaughey, and Carol S. Fullerton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 82.
25. Harold Kaplan and Benjamin J. Sadock, eds., *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry/IV*, 6th ed. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1995), 1229.
26. Padmal de Silva and Melanie Marks, "Intrusive Thinking in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder," *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: Concepts and Therapy*, ed. William Yule (Chichester: Wiley, 1999), 163.

27. Kaplan and Sadock, 1227.
28. Laurence Miller, *Shocks to the System: Psychotherapy of Traumatic Disability Syndromes* (New York: Norton, 1998), 18.
29. *DSM-IV-TR*, 468.
30. Helen Trindler and Paul M. Salkovskis, "Personally Relevant Intrusions Outside the Laboratory: Long-term Suppression Increases Intrusion," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 32 (1994): 833.
31. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 47.
32. *DSM-IV-TR*, 468.
33. Daya J. Somasundaram, "Post-traumatic Responses to Aerial Bombing," *Soc. Sci. Med.* 42 (1996): 1465-1471.
34. Hans Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang* (1948; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 7-8.
35. Alexander Kluge, "Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945," 1977, *Chronik der Gefühle* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 28-29.
36. Herman, 89.
37. Nossack, 30.
38. Wolfgang Borchert, "Die Küchenuhr," *Draußen vor der Tür und ausgewählte Erzählungen* (1956; Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997), 103.
39. James L. Stark, *Wolfgang Borchert's Germany: Reflections of the Third Reich* (Lanham: UP of America, 1997), 122.
40. Borchert, 103.
41. He reports in his diary of the advice by a Jewish acquaintance during the bombings: "I should remove the star the way he had already taken his off. Eva [Klemperer's non-Jewish wife], with the help of a small pocket knife, ripped the stella off my coat." Without being marked as a Jew, Klemperer and his wife succeed in leaving Dresden with a trek of refugees (Klemperer, 37).
42. Wolf Biermann, *Alle Lieder* (Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1995), 396.
43. Wolf Biermann, Nachwort, *Alle Gedichte* (Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1995), 180-181.
44. Forte, *Junge*, 146.
45. Dieter Forte, *In der Erinnerung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998), 75.
46. Forte, "Menschen werden zu Herdentieren," 223.
47. Herman, 1.
48. James W. Pennebaker, "Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative," *Literature and Medicine* 19 (2000): 6.
49. Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress," *Essential Papers on Posttraumatic Stress*, ed. Mardi J. Horowitz (New York: New York UP, 1999), 312.
50. Forte, "Menschen werden zu Herdentieren," 222.
51. Deborah A. Lee and Peter Scragg, "The Role of Shame and Guilt in Traumatic Events: A Clinical Model of Shame-Based and Guilt-Based PTSD," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 74 (2001): 456.

52. Quoted in Volker Hage, "Kälte und Hunger hören nie auf: Dieter Fortes Romantrilogie," *Deutsche Literatur 1998* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), 131.
53. Herman, 175.
54. Pennebaker, *Telling Stories*, 1-3. Pennebaker asked a group of college freshman to write about the stressful experience of being at college while another group wrote about trivial matters. In the months after the writing sessions, the students from the first group made considerably less visits to the health center than did their peers. They also reported positive psychological effects of the writing exercise in follow-up.
55. James W. Pennebaker, "Putting Stress into Words: Health, Linguistic, and Therapeutic Implications," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 31 (1993): 546.
56. Due to the limited scope of the paper, not all models can be discussed in detail. The following description of the commonalities of cognitive theories is based on Tim Dalgleish, "Cognitive Theories of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder," *Post-traumatic Stress Disorders: Concepts and Therapy*, ed. William Yule (Chichester: Wiley, 1999), 193-220. Dalgleish also offers detailed descriptions and evaluations of the individual approaches.
57. Mardi J. Horowitz, "A Model of Mourning," *Essential Papers on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, ed. Mardi J. Horowitz (New York: New York UP, 1999), 262.
58. Nossack, 44.
59. Nossack's intention to exclude personal emotions is clearly pronounced in the text, paradoxically at the same time giving witness to his inability to do so. After a long reflection on his feelings that the destruction might offer a chance to start anew since it erased some of the compromises he had made, he suddenly ends the paragraph by questioning the validity of including these thoughts in his report: "Is this really only a personal feeling? Because then it would not belong in this report" (44).
60. Stephanie Carp, *Kriegsgeschichten: Zum Werk Alexander Kluges* (München: Fink, 1987), 141-142.
61. Walter Kempowski, *Das Echolot: Fuga Furiosa* (München: A. Knaus, 1999).
62. Biermann, *Gedichte*, 180.
63. Melanie A. Greenberg, Camille B. Wortman, and Arthur A. Stone, "Emotional Expression and Physical Health: Revising Traumatic Memories or Fostering Self-Regulation?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71 (1996): 588.
64. Volker Hage, Nachwort, *Deutsche Literatur 1998*, ed. Volker Hage (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), 204.
65. Gert Ledig, *Vergeltung* (1956; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 53.
66. Forte, "Menschen werden zu Herdentieren," 222.
67. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (1967; München: Piper, 1998), 40.

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