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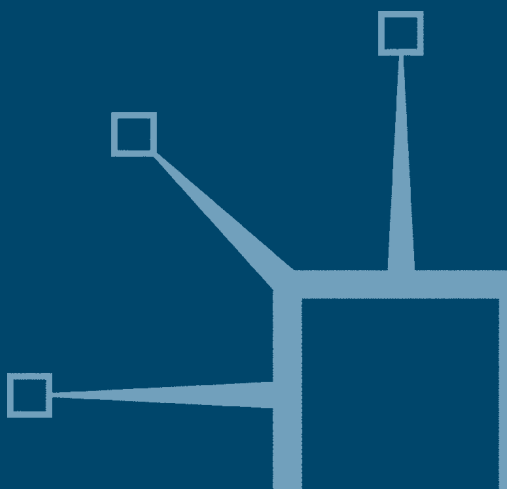
The Writing of Anxiety

Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture

Lyndsey Stonebridge



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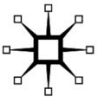

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For Shaun, Joe and Mizzy, and in memory of Max

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Contents

List of Illustrations viii

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction: 'Dreading Forward': the Writing of Anxiety at Mid-Century 1

1 Anxiety at a Time of Crisis: Psychoanalysis and Wartime 14

2 The Childhood of Anxiety 33

3 Bombs and Roses: the Writing of Anxiety in Henry Green's *Caught* 55

4 Bombs, Birth and Trauma: Henry Moore and D.W. Winnicott 75

5 The Writing of Post-War Guilt: Rose Macaulay and Rebecca West 92

6 Hearing Them Speak: Voices in Bion, Muriel Spark and Penelope Fitzgerald 115

Notes 135

Select Bibliography 159

Index 168

List of Illustrations

I.1 Dame Laura Knight, *The Nuremberg Trial 1946* (oil), the Art Archive, Imperial War Museum (ref. AA 333 221) 11

1.1 Drawing of Melanie Klein by Richard, aged 10, from Melanie Klein, *Narrative of a Child Analysis* (1961), the Melanie Klein Trust 27

2.1 David Seymour ('Chim'), *Land Distribution Meeting, Estremadura, Spain, 1936* © David Seymour/Magnum Photos 39

2.2 David Seymour ('Chim'), *Terezka, a Disturbed Child in an Orphanage, Poland 1948* © David Seymour/Magnum Photos 42

4.1 Henry Moore, *Study for 'Tube Shelter Perspective: the Liverpool St. Extension'*, 1940–41 (HMF 1649), Henry Moore Foundation and British Museum 78

4.2 Henry Moore, *September 3rd 1939,* 1939 (HMF 1551), Henry Moore Foundation 81

4.3 Henry Moore, *Crowd Looking at a Tied-Up Object*, 1942 (HMF 2064), Henry Moore Foundation 83

4.4 Henry Moore, *Girl Reading to a Woman Holding a Child, c.* 1946 (HMF 2385), Henry Moore Foundation 90

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Introduction: 'Dreading Forward': the Writing of Anxiety at Mid-Century

> Caught up in the turmoil of this wartime, one-sidely informed, without distance from the great transformations that have already occurred or are beginning to, and without a glimmer of the future taking shape, we ourselves are waylaid by the significance of impressions that overwhelm us and by the values of the judgements which we form.
>
> Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915)[1]

> 'Whatever else I forget about the war, I hope I may never forget my own dreams, or some of the other dreams I have been told. We have never dreamed like this before; and I suppose we shall never dream like it again.'
>
> From Elizabeth Bowen, Postscript to *The Demon Lover* (1945)[2]

In his famous 1915 essay, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', Freud wrote about how war exposed the madness that lurked at the heart of the West's illusions about what it meant to be civilized. As studies of modernism and trauma have demonstrated, that madness found eloquent and tortured expression in the cultural imagination of the first part of the twentieth century.[3] This book adds to this work by suggesting how the psychopathology of wartime was registered by two second-generations: the generation of psychoanalysts who came after Freud, and whose work thrived in 1940s Britain; and by some of those late modernists who had cut their teeth on the expressive verve of their war-shocked elders, only to find themselves having to re-invent an aesthetic not only for another war, but for the prolongation

of a state of war consciousness that was to last for the remainder of the twentieth century – and beyond.[4] This is not, however, simply a book about trauma, but rather has a slightly different starting point which I attempt to describe here, with a perhaps necessary historical awkwardness, as the writing of anxiety.

Anxiety is an affect with a profligate cultural history – there have been many ages of anxiety within the history of modernity, and there are many ways in which the modern history of anxiety could be told: through the history of architecture, for example, through which the anxious spaces of twentieth-century culture find one of their most articulate expressions; or through the history of a philosophy which, from Heidegger through to Beckett, connects our contemporary breathlessness to the anxiety of being in time.[5] The readings of anxiety collected here touch on these larger histories, but their focus is – far too relentlessly no doubt for some tastes – psychoanalytic. It is so, at least in part, because it seems to me that we still have a good deal to learn from thinking about the wartime madness that so troubled Freud when he described how the ego lost its way amid the whirlwind of impressions which was his contemporary wartime. When Melanie Klein and Anna Freud tried to describe what it might mean to be a child in the Second World War fifteen years later, they too were not just talking about the psychic fall-out of war, but about how it is that war settles into the darkest parts of our being, and into our understanding of ourselves as both subjects of war and of a politics – of a 'civilization' – that legitimized war. For writers such as Elizabeth Bowen, Rebecca West, Henry Green, and Rose Macaulay, as for the psychoanalysts who were redefining Freud's legacy amid an imploding Europe that more than justified his bleak imaginings about the future in the early part of the century, it was never in any doubt that war had a psychic charge that was at least as anxiety-provoking as anything that actually might fall from the sky.

Then (as now), anxiety fills the gap between reason and imagination. It is what we feel when we are caught in a situation which, as Bowen put it in the postscript to the American edition of her collection of wartime short stories, *The Demon Lover*, is radically 'out of proportion to our faculties of thinking and knowing'. Commenting on the hauntingly oneiric quality of the stories, Bowen writes:

> The hallucinations in the stories are not a peril; nor are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive saving resort on the part of the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and

> impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in *some* way [...] Dreams by night, and the fantasies – these often childishly innocent – with which formerly matter-of-fact people consoled themselves by day were compensations. Apart from them, I do not think that the *desiccation*, by war, of our day-to-day lives can be enough stressed. The outsize World War news was stupefying; headlines and broadcasts came down and down on us in hammerlike chops, with great impact but, oddly, little reverberation. The simple way to put it was: 'One cannot take things in'. What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up.[6]

Although the consciousness of Bowen's characters stretch across time and space with a mind-distorting elasticity, neither they nor her writing are completely shattered by historical experience. They dream on, and Bowen writes on, disclosing with a verbal brilliance that captures the claustrophobia of wartime in the contortions of her syntax, what happens to the modern psyche when it is confronted by a situation which is 'out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up'.

In his famous essay on Baudelaire, first published in 1939, Walter Benjamin described how the 'issueless private character', the dreams, memories, and hallucinations that make up the troubled subjectivity of estranged modernist consciousness, did not emerge spontaneously in the latter half of the nineteenth century but were a response to a situation in which 'man' was 'increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience'.[7] When data shocks but fails to reverberate, there is no meaningful place left for consciousness to go except, as it were, back into itself, in a movement that reconnects the subject to history precisely by marking its estrangement from it (Baudelaire, notes Benjamin, intended the intense lyricism of his poetry to be understood as thoroughly historical).[8] Along with Proust, Valéry and Baudelaire, one of Benjamin's key reference points in the opening pages of his study is Freud and, in particular, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Trauma turns us neurotic, Freud notes in this crucial and complex text, not when it wounds our bodies, but when it fissures our minds; leaving us shattered and out of time by something we fail to comprehend. This quality of the 'missed encounter', of not quite being in an experience which nonetheless manifests itself in your repetitions, your dreams, your hallucinations and imperfect memories, has generated much work in contemporary trauma theory.[9] Back in 1920 Freud

was still trying to work out what kind of mind could emerge from the overwhelming catastrophe of the First World War. Before we learned to say, with Lacan for example, that the death drive takes us way beyond the self-mastery of any putative ego, there remained, for Freud at least, quite a few ways for the subject, emotionally torn and impoverished by change as she might have been, to react to the history she was failing to comprehend.

This is where anxiety becomes important to Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trauma is what happens when anxiety fails to do its work. ' "Anxiety" ', writes Freud, unlike fear or fright, 'describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one.' Anxiety tilts us towards the hammerlike blows; as breathlessly paralysed as we might be in the face of a history that seems incomprehensible, anxiety is also the affective register of a form of historical anticipation. 'I do not believe', Freud continues, 'anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses.'[10] Anxiety is a 'protection' against trauma; it is a way of staying in relation to history without being consumed by it. (Another reason for thinking about the psychopathology of wartime in terms of anxiety might be that substantially more people are anxious about, rather than actually traumatized by, war – pinched at the nerve ends by its uncertainties but not, as Freud describes the real victims of traumatic neuroses, psychically blasted to pieces.) And while anxiety might work as a prophylactic against trauma, as a sort of psychic defence against history, it is not an emotion that has much truck with a concept of history perceived in terms of linear time. Anxiety dreams, writes Freud, are 'endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neuroses'.[11] It is this sort of energetic out-of-time way of responding to trauma in Freud's essay that so attracted Benjamin in the late 1930s. The writing he was drawn to was one that registered the shocks of modern life (and so prevented them from becoming traumatic) *and*, 'if need be', enlisted the work of dreams and memories to recreate the anxious capacity for receiving more shocks.[12] What Benjamin rediscovered in Baudelaire, on the eve both of the Second World War and of his own death, then, was a writing of anxiety of the most exemplary kind for his time. And while the lyrical exuberance with which Baudelaire parried the shocks of modernity may well have been lost to the generations of writers who followed him, the writing of anxiety – a writing which is eloquent on the subject of trauma, but not consumed by its impossibilities – was not.

Thus Virginia Woolf, also writing at the beginning of the war and on the eve of her suicide, reflected upon her 'shock receiving capacity' as a writer in her memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past'. 'I hazard the explanation', Woolf noted in a passage which reads as a good place to start thinking about modernism and trauma, 'that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy [...] it is or will become a revelation of some order.'[13] Parrying the shocks for Woolf creates an opportunity to affirm the mysteriousness of human consciousness. Woolf too was looking back at an earlier version of modernism – not least, of her own. Yet while the manner of her writing testifies to the capacity for memory to more than compensate for the out-of-life experience of trauma, Woolf's repeated insistence on the transcendent power of art also points to an aesthetic under pressure. As much as the memoir beautifully recreates the exquisite living-pains of her famous childhood, the present war is never far from its writing: 'every night the Germans fly over England', 'John came in, looked white about the gills, his pale eyes paler than usual, and said the French have stopped fighting', 'invasion still impends', 'five German raiders passed so close over Monks House that they brushed the tree at the gate'.[14] The closer the war gets to the gate, the more urgent Woolf's memorializing becomes; as if her hallucinations ('the feeling [...] of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow'[15]), might allow something like consciousness to survive in anticipation of an imminent trauma: '[i]f we are beaten then – however we solve that problem, and one solution is apparently suicide [...] – book writing becomes doubtful. But I wish to go on, not settle down in that dismal puddle.'[16] 'Dreading forward' was the phrase Henry Green used at the beginning of the war to describe a similar kind of anticipatory response to the uncertainty of the future. The writing of anxiety in Green's wartime fiction, as I describe in Chapter 3, fleshes out such anxious memorializing with an erotic exuberance which, like Baudelaire's, insists on being read as historical.

The writing of anxiety, then, can be read as describing a kind of historiography of trauma; a writing which treats history not so much as enigmatic or unrepresentable (common tropes in much trauma writing), as a form of imaginative provocation. A provocation is how I think that many writers and artists thought about history in the 1940s: from the shocking power of the first photographs to emerge from the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s, to the perpetual crises of aerial warfare during the war, to the numbing horror of the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal; the decade was characterized not only by the shocks of history, but by a

demand that the imagination should continue to discover ways of being in history – or perhaps ways of *staying* in it. A constant theme of this book is the extent to which for many 'dreading forward', also meant recycling versions of the past, as Rose Macaulay discovered when she tried to create a poetics capable of articulating post-war guilt; or returning to versions of pre-history, as Henry Moore's drawings of the anxious spaces of wartime Britain reveal. 'The past is literally blasted into consciousness with the Blitz in London', noted the poet H.D. in 1944, as she sat down to write her memoir of her analysis with Freud, *Tribute to Freud* (1956).[17] The rubble of the Blitz proved fertile ground for the growth of new primitivisms and for the late flowering of mythic modernism. In this book, however, I am not so concerned with the cultural iconography of such pre-historical turns as with what they imply for an understanding of a question Freud raised back in 1915: if wartime also signifies the emergence of a state of war-consciousness (and war-unconsciousness), how is it possible to maintain a relation to a history whose violence is felt as an extremely poignant type of discontinuity in the very depths of the psyche?

Keeping anxious, Freud had argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, was a way of ensuring the mind could endure – if only in its dreams and hallucinations. Six years later Freud wove this insight into his final theory of trauma in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926). Although this is not a text that figures much in contemporary trauma theory, as I argue in the first chapter, its premises were crucial for the thinking of the second generation of psychoanalysts who were working in wartime Britain. By the late 1920s Freud is describing trauma, not so much as a kind of breaching or effraction, both metaphors that dominate *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but in terms of object-loss. Freud's emphasis now is on how the ego manages an anxiety that, in effect, defines the ways in which we are able to imagine ourselves in the world. The ego, says Freud, is the 'seat' of anxiety. The ego, however, turns out to be a somewhat incommodious piece of furniture; a fragile entity which while shaped by anxiety (without object-loss there can be no ego), is simultaneously always threatened by it. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* raises two key problems for Freud's followers. First, by linking anxiety with the origins of the object, Freud also linked affect to questions about representation and meaning. Second, and in the same move, Freud raises the question of what kind of subject is addressed by anxiety. The issue thus is not only what (and how) does anxiety signal our relationship to trauma (what is it telling us about our place in the world?), but *who* is anxiety talking to – what kind of subject does it address? Does anxiety continually put

the ego into question by harassing it from both inside and out? Or does the anxiety 'make' the ego out of the defences of this shattered psyche? Does the helplessness it signals end with self-mastery (existential transcendence through the back door of psychoanalytic theory)?[18]

In 1926 Freud also moves anxiety backwards; away from the nightmares of returning soldiers and back to the inhibitions and phobias of the nursery that had first made its appearance in Freud's case history of the five-year-old Little Hans in 1909, and which had re-emerged in his famous account of his grandson's game with a cotton-reel in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* itself.[19] It was this emphasis on what can be described as the childhood of anxiety that was to fascinate those child-analysts, such as Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, Donald Winnicott, W.R.D. Fairbairn and Wilfred Bion, who were so boldly to take the war into the nursery in 1940s Britain. This fascination with the most primitive of anxieties is partly what makes their work so illuminating to read alongside some of their late modernist contemporaries. Both disclose an imaginary world in which cartographies of fantasy are also those of war – history happening in the mind; but both also ask how it is possible for the self to establish itself, to find a location, within such a world – the mind happening (or failing to happen) in history.

Where is the ego in all this anxiety? is a question Freud was compelled to ask himself again and again in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, and one that I have found myself asking repeatedly in these pages. What seems to be so overwhelming about the first atrocity photographs that emerged from the Spanish Civil War (discussed in Chapter 2), for example, seems to have as much to do with their shocking nature as it does with the way our responses to them reveal a kind of psychopolitical helplessness. Similarly, behind the mythic monumentalism of Henry Moore's best-known war art, the subject of Chapter 4, there is an anxiety-provoking doubling of the visual field in a series of drawings which suggests a far more uncomfortable relationship with history than is often associated with his work. The ego slips its moorings amid the anxiety of wartime, I attempt to argue here, but it doesn't necessarily always lose its place. As Anna Freud and Melanie Klein discover in their work with child-evacuees, while anxiety might set a limit on historical agency, it also has an inventiveness that allows the ego to survive in ways which do not so much transcend wartime, as re-work its most violent pathologies into some kind of relationship with the future.

The question of psychic agency emerges frequently in the chapters that follow. For psychoanalysis, as for the writers and artists I discuss here, there is no outside simply attacking an inside, no shelter for

psychologism, but an anxious self often hopelessly entangled with the violence it is witness to. Wartime, as Samuel Weber has argued apropos of Freud's 'Thoughts for the Times', newly reveals the extent to which self-determination itself is a form of violence; in its strenuous efforts to re-imagine a place for itself within the whirlwinds of wartime, the ego (as Freud describes it) redoubles the violence it feels to be internal onto the outside world – which is one reason why witnessing the deaths of so many others is not as ego-shattering as it perhaps ought to be.[20] How it might be possible to apprehend the world without either losing oneself in it or reduplicating its violence turned out to be a question that persisted beyond the immediacy of the war. How, for example, asks Rebecca West in her writings on the Nuremberg trials, is it possible to make guilt meaningful when the metaphorics of the war-machine have gobbled up the capacity for agency? What do the self-determinations necessary for democracy mean, asks the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, working out of his experience with groups of war-ravaged soldiers, when we find the psychic proximity of other people's voices intolerable?

Post-war, the writing of anxiety in Britain took its own existential turn. What I have tried to do here is to find a way of addressing a moment that comes after modernism but just before the war and its shocking moral aftermath became the 'human condition'. My emotions, Sartre wrote in the late 1930s, signify something for my psychic life: they allow me to perpetuate myself in the imaginary, to apprehend what I can of the world without losing myself in it. The more subtle emotions, he adds, can transcend themselves: my anxiety in the face of horror, thus, can also give me an 'intuition of the absolute'.[21] In the claustrophobic and agoraphobic spaces of wartime Europe, Sartre was not the only one for whom anxiety had come to signal something about the determinations of psychic life. For Sartre those determinations were intended to be lived. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, first published in Britain in 1948 (his short stories had started to appear in John Lehmann's *New Writing* in the early 1940s), Sartre describes the dilemma facing a young man who comes to him, after the death of his only brother, unable to decide whether he should join the resistance or whether, mindful of his mother's loss, he should save himself for her. Sartre's point is that the boy should turn his anxiety into an act of self-determination; that he should find a way of transcending his uncertainty and so rediscover his historical agency.[22] For psychoanalysis we can never transcend anxiety (for Freud, as for Kierkegaard, anxiety is always a form of destiny) and nor, indeed, should we: that way lies mania – the everyday mania, perhaps, of historical self-determination.