“A Secret Code of Pain and Memory”: War Trauma and Narrative Organisation in the Fiction of J.G. Ballard

Stream: Recontextualising and Reconceptualising Delineations and Infusions of Militarization in Organizational Theory and Lives

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My paper approaches autobiographical and literary narratives as organisational practices: that is, as processes by which the undifferentiated rhythms of temporal experience are ordered and rendered intelligible. It considers the challenges posed to these practices by traumatic experience – specifically childhood exposure to military conflict – through a discussion of the life and work of the British novelist J. G. Ballard.

I draw, in particular, on research by the neurobiologist Bessel A. van der Kolk and his associates, the relevance of which to literary study has been persuasively demonstrated by the literary theorist Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996). Fundamental to van der Kolk and his collaborators’ work is the assumption that psychological health is bound up with an individual’s ability to narrativise temporal experience (van der Kolk & van der Hart 1995; van der Kolk 1996). As they make clear, this theoretical position was first elaborated by Pierre Janet, a French psychiatrist active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a statement of 1919, Janet remarked:

*Memory, like belief, like all psychological phenomena, is an action; essentially, it is the action of telling a story.* [...] The teller must not only know how to [narrate the event], but must also know how to associate the happening with the other events of his life, how to put it in its place in that life-history which each one of us is perpetually building up and which for each one of us is an essential element of his personality.


Janet argued – along lines that have recently been revived by van der Kolk and others – that this mode of understanding and organising the past, which he termed “narrative memory”, is profoundly disrupted by traumatic experience. Traumatic memories refuse to be consigned to the survivor’s sense of the past, and hence resist assimilation into “narrative memory” (van der Kolk & van der Hart 1995; van der Kolk 1996). Instead, the traumatic event is relived through such insistently involuntary phenomena as intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, or hallucinations. On this point, van der Kolk and his collaborator Onno van der Hart quote Janet:

> It is only for convenience that we speak of […] a “traumatic memory”. The subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event; and yet he remains confronted by a difficult situation in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation had been imperfect, so that he continues to make efforts at adaptation. (Janet 1919-25, 2: 274; qtd in van der Kolk & van der Hart 1995: 160)

The key insight that van der Kolk and others find in Janet’s work, then, is that trauma should be viewed as a disorder of the subject’s narrativising faculty. Accordingly, the process of recovering from or “working through” trauma entails the assimilation of the traumatic event into a coherently organised narrative of the past. Van der Kolk and van der Hart write:
Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it. (176)

“Complete recovery” occurs at the point that “the story can be told, the person can look back at what happened; he has given it a place in his life history, his autobiography, and thereby in the whole of his personality” (176).

It seems likely that J. G. Ballard sustained some degree of psychological trauma as a result of his incarceration in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. My aim in this paper, however, is not to attempt to establish the nature or extent of Ballard’s putative psychopathology. I want, rather, to suggest that there are striking affinities between the changing role played by his wartime experiences in his writing, and the ways in which trauma is registered and “worked through” by its sufferers. I believe that Ballard’s career offers a fascinating example through which to explore strategies by which biographical material that is, at the very least, profoundly troubling may be organised into narrative form.

What, then, are the wartime experiences around which Ballard’s literary output orbits? James Graham Ballard was born on 15 November 1930 in Shanghai, China, where his father was the managing director of the Shanghai subsidiary of a Manchester firm of textile manufacturers. The family’s prosperous, privileged existence in the city’s International Settlement was threatened by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war and the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1937. From this time, the young Ballard inhabited an environment strewn with the human and mechanical wreckage of war, circumscribed by the restrictions on movement imposed by the Japanese, and charged with expectations of the even greater conflict to come. The Ballards were forced to leave their home in the International Settlement when Chinese and Japanese shells began passing directly overhead. In 1942, shortly after the outbreak of war between the Empire of Japan and the Allies, Ballard, his younger sister, and his parents were interned by the Japanese in a civilian prisoner-of-war camp at Lunghua, on the outskirts of Shanghai. They were held there for the remainder of the war, witnessing (and enduring) extremes of hunger, disease, and brutality. In the closing stages of the conflict, American air raids on the airbase adjoining the camp became so frequent that the prisoners often found themselves out in the open as anti-aircraft shells exploded overhead. The family survived, however, and in 1946, Ballard left China for England, a country he had never seen before, and which struck him as absurdly sedate after the violent chaos of wartime Shanghai (Stephenson 1991: 9; Ballard, From Shanghai 1984: 113-14; Delville 1998: ii-iii).

Between 1956 and 1982 Ballard published nine novels, including *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, and over 80 short stories. Reflecting, in 1975, on the effects of his wartime incarceration on his writing, Ballard commented,

The whole landscape out there had a tremendously powerful influence on me, as did the whole war experience. All the abandoned cities and towns and beach resorts that I keep returning to in my fiction were there in that huge landscape, the area just around our camp. […] All of
the images I keep using – the abandoned apartment houses and so forth – must have touched something in my mind. It was a very interesting zone psychologically, and it obviously had a big influence – as did the semi-tropical nature of the place: lush vegetation, a totally water-logged world, huge rivers, canals, paddies, great sheets of water everywhere. It was a dramatised landscape thanks to the war and to the collapse of all the irrigation systems – a landscape dramatised in a way that it is difficult to find in, say, Western Europe. (Goddard and Pringle 1975: part 1, par. 4)

Similarly, in 1980 he remarked of images that are amongst the most recognisably “Ballardian”, “all those drained swimming pools that I write about were there [i.e. in Shanghai after the outbreak of war], I remember going around looking at drained swimming pools by the dozen” (Platt 1980; qtd. in Ballard, Quotations 1984: 160). The degree of surprise that may be detected in this observation is a product, I would suggest, of Ballard’s belated organisation of previously unassimilated and free-floating images and scenarios into a coherent narrative of his wartime experiences – a process that is underway in the late 1970s and early 1980s and will coalesce in his 1984 novel Empire of the Sun.

Clearly, even the composition of Ballard’s earlier works (like all literary writing) entails an element of conscious intention that is absent from the involuntary mental states typical of trauma. As J. Stephen Murphy puts it, “the writer of poetry or fiction might desire to distort reality and conventions of narrative and logic, but the survivor [of trauma] is seemingly unable to do anything but” (2004: 63). Nonetheless, the repetitiveness with which abandoned settlements, empty apartment blocks, water-logged environments, drained swimming pools and other such scenes figure in Ballard’s pre-1980s texts, and the signifying and affective investment with which they charged, plainly bestows on them, in the critic Roger Luckhurst’s words, an “obsessive”, “compulsive”, or “driven” quality (Luckhurst 1997: 70, 165, 70). Moreover, the radical disconnection of these images from the historical continuum in which they originate – their embeddedness, instead, in narratives concerned with the mediatised pathologies of Vietnam and the JFK assassination, or with such key science-fictional themes as space flight and time travel – invites comparison with van der Kolk and van der Hart’s characterisation of traumatic memories as “unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences”.

The short story “The Dead Time” (2001 [1977]), in which a young man roams the flooded, corpse-strewn landscape surrounding his Shanghai prison camp in the days following the end of the Pacific War, constitutes Ballard’s first attempt to organise some of his most repetitively inscribed images into a narrative that approximates the circumstances in which these scenes were initially encountered. As such, the text inaugurates a process akin to that of “working through” theorised in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. As I have suggested, Ballard’s organisation of fragmented, achronological images into a coherent narrative of his childhood wartime experiences receives its most sustained expression in Empire of the Sun (1994 [1984]). Early in this novel, the protagonist, “Jamie” or “Jim”, is separated from his family during the Japanese internment of Allied residents of Shanghai. Hungry and frightened, he wanders the deserted streets, houses, and apartment blocks of the
International Settlement and the French Concession. He ponders the drained and untended swimming pools that scatter these formerly prosperous and lively suburbs, speculating that, “perhaps murder was about to be committed in all the swimming pools of Shanghai, and their walls were tilled so that the blood could be washed away” (Ballard, *Empire* 1994: 66). Eventually, he is captured by Japanese soldiers and transferred to the internment camp at Lunghua, where he is incarcerated for the following three years. The second half of the novel focuses on the closing stages and immediate aftermath of the war. Fearing the advancing American and Chinese forces, the Japanese submit the starving prisoners to a death march through the flooded paddy fields around Shanghai, which resemble a “liquid chessboard of illuminated squares, a war-table on which [are] placed crashed aircraft and abandoned tanks” (*Empire* 1994: 254). Jim hides amongst a pile of corpses, however, and escapes. For several days he roams this phantasmagoric, water-logged environment, sustained by the packs of rations dropped by the circling American bombers. Finally, he is reunited with his parents, and the narrative ends with Jim and his mother setting sail for England.

The sequel to *Empire of the Sun*, *The Kindness of Women* (1994 [1991]), also begins with an account of “Jim’s” wartime internment. It then goes on to, in Janet’s words, “associate the happening with the other events” of Jim’s (and Ballard’s) life, “to put it in its place in [his] life-history”: in a sequence of events that broadly correspond to those of Ballard’s own life, Jim’s period in Shanghai is followed by study at Cambridge, a spell as an RAF pilot in Canada, marriage and children, the sudden death of his wife, immersion in the maelstrom of the 60s counter-culture, the development of a new long-term relationship, and, finally, the production of his “Shanghai novel” as a Hollywood film. The novel also traces the gradual assimilation of the past that is a condition of its composition, and to which that composition in turn contributes. As a student, Jim is “still ensnared in the past”, “still preoccupied by wartime events that now [seem] to be re-imposing themselves on the calm Cambridgeshire landscape” (*Kindness* 1994: 93, 89). In this period, Jim carries Shanghai with him “like a persistent dream that [grips his] shoulders” (93). Bourgeois domesticity brings relief from these baleful preoccupations, but the freak death of Jim’s wife, Miriam, while on holiday in Spain in the early 60s triggers their resurgence:

> The past, on which I had turned my back on the day of my marriage, had rushed up now and stood behind me. Miriam's death joined me once again to all those nameless Chinese who had died during the Second World War. (164)

It is only in the mid 1980s, with the filming of the novel he has written about his experiences in Shanghai, that Jim undergoes “the last act in a profound catharsis that [has] taken decades to draw to a close” (345). At this point, he can “almost believe that my memories of Shanghai had always been a film, endlessly played inside my head during my years in England after the war” (346).

I have argued that, in *Empire of the Sun*, Ballard weaves together many of his most repetitively inscribed images into a narrative that approximates the conditions under which those images were first imprinted on
his imagination, and that he subsequently, in *The Kindness of Women*, integrates an account of this period into the broader narrative of his life. There are affinities, I have suggested, between this process and that by which survivors of trauma attempt to work through their experiences. As Roger Luckhurst has observed, however, these two novels are not, by any means, "transparent" autobiographies (as many initial reviewers assumed them to be) (158-59). "No simple identity", Luckhurst observes, "can be established between J.G. Ballard and the Jamie/Jim figure in the texts" (158): most notably, Jim is separated from his parents in the novels, whereas Ballard was interned with his family. Moreover, "Kindness often contradicts, rewrites, and even erases sections of *Empire*" (Luckhurst 1997: 158): the death march that is such a key sequence of *Empire* never occurs in *Kindness*, for example; rather, the Jim of the later novel learns from television reports that the Japanese had merely *planned* to march the prisoners out of the camp. For Luckhurst, “both ‘autobiographies’ […] take elements of the same compulsively repetitive landscapes, scenarios, and images and recombine them in fictions which yet teasingly and forever undecidably play within the frame of the autobiographical” (165). I want to suggest that the distortions and contradictions that accompany these novels’ incorporation of key Ballardian images and scenes may themselves be understood as facets of the process of assimilating traumatic material that the texts enact.

As I have noted, Pierre Janet, and, more recently, Bessel A. van der Kolk and his associates, have argued that the organisation of traumatic events into a coherent narrative is integral to recovery or working through. It is not, however, essential, they suggest, that this narrative be a strictly accurate representation of the events as they occurred. On the contrary, in fact, narrative memories that alter or distort the reality of trauma may be positively desirable:

> In therapy, memory paradoxically needs to become an act of creation rather than the static recording of events. Because the essence of trauma is that it once confronted the victim with unacceptable reality, the patient needs to find a way of confronting the hidden secrets that no one, including the patient, wants to face. Like memories of ordinary events, the memory of the trauma needs to become merely a (often distorted) part of the patient’s personal past. (van der Kolk & McFarlane 1996: 19)

Purposefully distorting events in this way can bestow on the victim a sense of mastery and control over a previously overwhelming experience: "Memory is everything. Once flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experience. By imagining these alternative scenarios, many patients are able to soften the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror" (van der Kolk & van der Hart 1995: 178). The “failure” of *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women* to accord with fact, or with one another, invites reading in these terms; that is, as a refusal to allow historical catastrophe to dictate the manner in which it is organised into narrative form.