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Still Falls the Rain: On the Practice and Poetics of Area Bombing*

William Snell

O, it is excellent
To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.

Shakespeare: Measure for Measure. Act ii. Sc. 2.

Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.

Mme de Staël

Introduction:

In December 2001, the scholar, writer and novelist W. G. Sebald, professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, England, died in a tragic car accident. He was 57. Born in May 1944, in the Alpine village of Wertlach in Allgäu, Germany, Sebald studied German language and literature in Freiburg, Switzerland and later at Manchester University. His *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Hanser, 1999) published posthumously in translation and in a slightly altered form, contains his revised

* This essay is in respectful memory of Professor Masahiko Kimbara (1940–2004); W. G. Sebald (1944–2001); and my father's cousin, George Frederick Clulow, Flight Sergeant, Royal Air force Volunteer Reserve, 207 Squadron, 5 Group (killed March 31st 1944, age 20).

lectures on “Air War and Literature” which he delivered in Zürich in the late autumn of 1997. *On the Natural History of Destruction*,¹ takes its title from an abandoned report for Cyril Connolly’s journal *Horizon* by Solly (later Lord) Zuckerman (1904–1993).² Zuckerman worked as scientific advisor to a British government survey of the impact of the Allied bombing strategy during World War II on people and buildings, and was involved in the discussion of the most effective attacking strategy. He visited the ruins of Cologne to ascertain the effects of the bombing there, and was overwhelmed by what he saw. Sebald interviewed him in the 1980s:

When I questioned him on the subject... he could no longer remember in detail what he had wanted to say at the time. All that remained in his mind was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble.³

Sebald’s original first lecture proposed to show, through quotations from his own writings, how despite the fact that he himself was virtually untouched by the catastrophe of the war, it nonetheless left a mark on his mind. In his published lectures, however, Sebald chose to excise this part and concentrate on why, given “the sense of unparalleled national humiliation

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- 1 W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* trans. Anthea Bell (N.Y.: The Modern Library, 2004), pp. 1–104.
 - 2 The Zuckerman Archive is one of the largest of the collections currently housed in the University of East Anglia’s Library, documenting a public life and career covering nearly three-quarters of the 20th Century.
 - 3 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, pp.31–32.

felt by millions in the last years of the war...” the German people had “never really found verbal expression,” and that those directly affected by the experience “neither shared it with each other nor passed on has written the great German epic of the wartime and postwar periods...”⁴ He continues

... when we turn to take a retrospective view, particularly of the years 1930 to 1950, we [Germans today] are always looking and looking away at the same time.⁵

Sebald examines why, given that during the Second World War 131 German cities and towns were targeted by the Allies from February 1942 for bombing, a great number of which were almost completely flattened; given that some 600,000 German civilians were killed, a figure twice that of all American war casualties; and given that 3.5 million homes were destroyed and 7.5 million Germans left homeless — why does the subject occupy such little space in German’s cultural memory?⁶ In so doing, Sebald directly confronts the topic around which his own fiction circles.

The subject of strategic (also known as “area”, “aerial”, “mass”, “high-altitude non-precision”, “saturation”, “pattern”, or “carpet”) bombing, is one that even today remains contentious. The names Cologne, Coventry, Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, etc. still provoke very polarized

4 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p.viii.

5 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p.vix.

6 “The images of this horrifying chapter of our [German] history has never really crossed the threshold of the national consciousness.” *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p.11.



opinions.⁷ It is not my intention here to enter into the moral debate — one which, to my eternal regret, I made the mistake of briefly participating in several years ago and recently rekindled by Britain’s Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Germany earlier in 2004⁸ — but simply to add some observations and to augment those made by Sebald.

W.G. Sebald observes that there was a German postwar creation of “a new, faceless reality, pointing the population exclusively towards the future and enjoining on it silence about the past.”⁹ A self-imposed silence. The few accounts written in German are mainly by former exiles. Those writers who chose to remain in the country during the war, such as Walter von Molo and Frank Thiess 1890–1977, “refrained entirely from commenting on the

7 See Max Hastings, Saturday Essay: “Don’t Say Sorry, Ma’am” (*Daily Mail*, Saturday October 30th 2004).

8 See *The Japan Times* July 1st 1992, p. 24; July 15th 1992, p. 22; and July 19th 1992, p. 20.

9 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p.7.

process and outcome of destruction, probably not least for fear that accurate descriptions might get them into trouble with occupying forces.”¹⁰ He states that of all the literary works written at the end of the 1940s, probably only Heinrich Böll’s *Der Engel schwieg* (The Angel Was Silent) gives any idea of the depths of horror of the ruins, with its “irremediable gloom”... yet it was not published until 1992, almost 50 years later. In addition, he points to an “individual and collective amnesia” which was “probably influenced by a preconscious self-censorship — a means of obscuring a world that could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms.”¹¹ Sebald goes on to maintain that “There was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself would not be described.” It became “a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret,” one that “perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged.”¹²

Connected with this is the lack of open debate in the country after 1945 over the subject of, or moral justification for, the aerial bombing. The debate, Sebald asserts, probably never came about because “a nation which had murdered and worked to death millions of people in its camps could hardly call upon the victorious powers to explain the military and political logic that dictated the destruction of the German cities.” And, like the people of medieval Europe who witnessed the Black Death and other plagues, he postulates that many Germans viewed the Allied bombing as a form of just, or even Divine, retribution.¹³

10 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p.9.

11 “People’s ability to forget what they do not want to know, was seldom put to the test better than in Germany at that time.” p.41.

12 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 10.

13 “It is... quite possible, as sources like Hans Erich Nossack’s account of the destruction of Hamburg [*Interview mit dem Tode* (1948)] indicate, that quite a number of those affected by the air raids, despite their grim but impotent fury in the face of obvious ↗

The “amnesia” that Sebald ascribes to the German people is one that was also to some extent manifest in England after Germany’s unconditional surrender: accounts of the bombings and pictures of the devastated areas, as they began to appear in England, not to mention the realization of losses suffered by the British air crews, created a growing sense of revulsion. In human terms, 7,448 Bomber Command aircrew died between September 1939 and February 1942. From the time Sir Arthur Harris took charge of the expanded bombing operations until the end of the war, an additional 56,000 commissioned officers and NCOs lost their lives, more officers than the British lost during World War I.¹⁴ Sebald quotes the historian Max Hastings: “In the safety of peace, the bombers’ part in the war was one that many politicians and civilians would prefer to forget.”¹⁵ Arguments supporting the ethical and other expediency of the bombing strategy continued in various memoirs with a swing between admiration on the one hand for the grand organization of the bombing campaign and lament for the sacrifice of so many young men, and “criticism of the futility and atrocity of an operation mercilessly carried through to the end against the dictates of good sense.”¹⁶

Air Marshall Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris (1892–1984), Chief of Bomber Command, has been and remains to this day a controversial

↘ madness, regarded the great firestorms as a just punishment, even an act of retribution on the part of a higher power with which there could be no dispute.” *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 14.

14 See Hugh Haughton, ed. *Second World War Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) p. xxii “The aerial (area) bombing campaign killed 4 times as many civilians as Hiroshima; British bomber crew casualties were 55,000 more than the British officers killed in the First World War.”

15 Max Hastings, *Bomber Command: the Myths and Reality of the Strategic Bombing Offensive 1939–45* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979), p. 346.

16 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p.15.



figure. Like Douglas (Earl) Haig (1861–1928) who sent young men by the thousands to die in futile battle during the First World War, Harris has been accused of being the author of destruction and needless death. It was he who instigated the area bombing campaign, despite the fact that many opposed it — a programme which accelerated through the autumn and winter of 1944, to some extent in defiance of his superior, the Chief of Air Staff, Sir Charles Portal, who became more and more convinced that oil targets were more effective than cities, culminating in the appalling firebombing and destruction of Dresden on 13th February 1945 when, in a single night, thirty-five thousand people were killed.¹⁷ To quote Max Hastings, “...Harris

17 “The historical response to the brutality of Harris’ mass bombing campaign was evident in letters to *The Times* on the occasion of the erection of a statue of him outside St. Clement Danes church in London on 30 May 1992. The statue was commissioned by the Bomber Command Association (*The Times* 26, 29 May 1992).” Joan Montgomery Byles, *War, Women, and Poetry, 1914–1945: British and German Writers and Activists* (Newark: Univ. Delaware Press, 1995), footnote to p. 126.

was obdurate. To the very end of the war, he continued to pound urban centers. Portal lacked the courage and authority to sack his subordinate, as he probably should have done, for deliberately defying the air policy set by the Allied chiefs of staff.”¹⁸

Sebald comments:

I believe that if ... the strategic aims of the offensive were not modified, and the bomber crews, many of them boys who had only just left school, were still exposed to a game of Russian roulette costing sixty out of a hundred of them their lives, it was for reasons largely ignored in the official histories. One was that an enterprise of the material and organizational dimensions of the bombing offensive ... had such a momentum of its own short term corrections in the course and restrictions were more or less ruled out, especially when, after three years of the intensive expansion of factories and production plants, that enterprise had reached the peak of its development — in other words, its maximum destructive capacity.¹⁹

He charges that just letting the aircraft and their valuable freight stand idle on airfields ran counter to any economic instinct and that another conclusive factor in deciding to continue the offensive was Harris’s dogmatic adherence to it: “Sir Arthur Harris’s position was unassailable because of his unlimited interest in destruction. His plan for successive devastating strikes, which he followed uncompromisingly to the end, was overwhelmingly simple in its

18 Max Hastings, Saturday Essay: “Don’t Say Sorry, Ma’am” (*Daily Mail*, Saturday October 30th 2004).

19 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 18.

logic, and by comparison any real strategic alternatives such as disabling the fuel supply were bound to look like mere diversionary tactics”²⁰ Harris’s was a strategy to bolster the British morale; hence the then Prime Minister Churchill’s unwillingness to dismiss him.

Winston Churchill wrote that when he visited bombed-out Londoners in the winter of 1940, he was glad to hear them shout “Give it ‘em back” and “Let them have it too.” He continues: “I undertook forthwith to see that their wishes were carried out; and this promise was certainly kept.”²¹ However, writing after the war, Churchill states:

The debt was repaid tenfold, twentyfold, in the frightful routine of bombardment of German cities, which grew in intensity as our air power developed, as the bombs became far heavier and the explosives more powerful. Certainly the enemy got it all back in good measure, pressed down and running over. Alas for poor humanity!²²

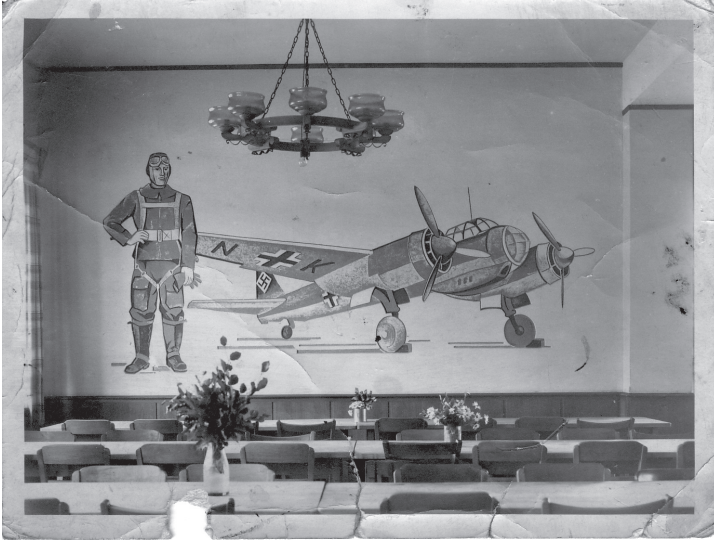
Joan Montgomery Byles in her 1995 book *War, Women, and Poetry, 1914–1945* has commented:

In August of 1943 the growing horror of the air war over Germany surpassed all powers of imagination, and still there seemed to be no diminishment in the power of its citizens to endure such unmitigated

20 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 19. He quotes Zuckerman again: “Harris was a man who liked destruction for its own sake.” Solly Zuckerman, *From Apes to Warlords* (New York: Harper, 1978), p.74.

21 Byles, p.129. (See Footnote 17)

22 Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (1949) (New York: Bantam, 1962), p.299. Quoted by Byles, p.129.



violence. As in Britain, the effect upon German citizens of mass bombing was not anger and revolt, but apathy and fatigue, and a mechanical endeavor to save what could be saved.²³

Yet no one, least of all Sebald, would deny that Germany initiated the terrible strategy of bombing civilian-populated targets:

The majority of Germans today know, or at least it is to be hoped, that we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived. Scarcely anyone can doubt that Air Marshal Göing would have wiped out London if his technical recourses had allowed him to do so. ...The real pioneering achievements in bomb warfare — Guernica,

²³ Byles, p.123.

Warsaw, Belgrade, Rotterdam — were the work of the Germans.²⁴

As Alan Bance points out in his chapter in *The Second World War in Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984):

Germany was responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War in a sense that is not paralleled by her part in the events which led to the Great War... the inevitable fulfillment of Hitler's ideology. This fact colours German fiction dealing with the war, and the response of readers, native or foreign to German war books.²⁵

He points to the fact that the years from 1939 to 1945 produced very little fiction dealing with the war itself, other than adolescent fiction intended to prepare young men for military call-up.²⁶ He even goes so far as to say that "The history of German Second World War fiction begins... after the Nazi period itself."

The reasons Bance suggests are as follows: those with firsthand experience of combat in the war were 'otherwise engaged', particularly after the tide of war turned against Germany; "Realism, the hallmark of the novel form, was officially discouraged..."²⁷ Censorship prevailed, together with a preference for lyricism, the mythical, and the theatrical; i.e. for Wagner. In 1942 a leading Nazi *Literat*, Gerhard Schumann, typically rejected the

24 *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 104.

25 Alan Bance, "Germany" in Holger Klein, John Fowler and Eric Homberger eds., *The Second World War in Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 88–130: p.88.

26 Bance cites such titles as *Mit Stukas und Panzern nach Frankreich* and *Achtung—ich werfe!* p. 89.

27 Bance, p. 90.

novel as too analytical a genre for war writing. While prose fiction “casts its flickering light on events”, the lyric is “the fire itself”, the flame of myth, irrationalism and purification of the race through war. Theatricality prevailed: the novel could not compete.²⁸

Bance, like Sebald (see Footnote 13 above), picks up on the Kafaesque writer Hans Erich Nossack (1901–77), whose powerful collection of stories *Interview mit dem Tode* (1948) includes a depiction of the destruction of Hamburg by Allied bombing in July 1943. In “Der Untergang” Nossack asks in the course of the description of the bombing

What did those affected expect [from their hosts in the country villages where they sought refuge]? ... We expected that somebody would call out to us: ‘Wake up! It’s only a bad dream!’²⁹

Dieter Kühn’s 1975 compilation with the ironic title *Luftkrieg als Abenteuer* (The Air War as Adventure) is a protest, constructed by juxtaposing cheap fictional accounts with the comment and documentary materials, against the popularizing and glorifying of the war in the air.³⁰ It was perhaps influenced by the anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam conflict. At that time also the German people, East and West, had other social and political preoccupations to contend with... The Wall, among them.

Yet Sebald’s assertion that German writers chose to ignore the topic is additionally supported by the lack of reference to the bombing raids in

28 Banse p. 90 .

29 Bance, p. 98.

30 Banse, p. 172.

31 Haughton, ed. *Second World War Poems* (see Footnote 14)

poems by German authors in a recently published anthology of war poetry by Hugh Haughton, University of York,³¹ which provides further material for discussion. Haughton's collection of WWII verse contains poems by eight German poets. One is Johannes Bobrowsky (1917–65), who served in the German army and was a prisoner of war in Russia 1945–9, after which he returned to East Berlin. Another is the playwright Bertold Brecht (1891–1956), whose “This Summer’s Sky” is included in the anthology:

High above the lake a bomber flies.
From the rowing boats
Children look up, women, an old man. From a distance
They appear like young starlings, their beaks
Wide open for food.³²

However, Brecht fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and afterwards worked in exile in Denmark and Finland before taking refuge in America in 1941, only to return to Eastern Germany in 1947 after appearing before the HUAC (House Anti-American Activities Committee) in that year.

The other poets featured are Günter Eich (1907–72), who fought in the German army from 1939–45; Peter Huchel (1903–81), who also served in the army during WWII and was a POW in Russia, settling in East Berlin after the war; Günter Kunert (1929–) declared unfit to serve in the German army due to part-Jewish descent; Nelly Sachs (1891–1970) a Jewess who in 1940 escaped from Nazi Germany to Sweden; Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), a Dadaist who fled to Norway in 1937, then sought refuge in England in

32 Haughton, p. 36, trans. Michael Hamburger. From John Willett and Ralph Manheim, eds. *Poems 1913–1956* (Methuen, 1976).

1940 after the Nazi invasion of Norway. He was interned in the Isle of Man and then spent 1942–5 in London, moving to the Lake District after the war; and Franz Baerman Steiner (1909–52), another German Jew who emigrated to England, after which he worked for the Institute of Anthropology at Oxford. None of the poems refer to the Allied bombing.

The English-born American physicist and mathematician Freeman Dyson entered Cambridge University as the war was beginning and was in 1943 assigned to the Royal Air Force bomber command where he researched statistical studies that were doomed, when they countered the official wisdom, to be ignored. Dyson, disillusioned by the evidence before him and the official line he was forced to tow, observes that by 1943, "... the war had made us all insensitive. Poetry did not heighten our feelings then as it had done earlier. In 1943 Cecil Day Lewis spoke for us in a short poem entitled "Where Are the War Poets?"³³

They who in folly or mere greed
 Enslaved religion, market, laws,
 Borrow our language now and bid
 Us to speak up in freedom's cause.

It is the logic of our times,
 No subject for immortal verse—
 That we who lived by honest dreams
 Defend the bad against the worse.

33 Freeman Dyson, *Weapons and Hope* (New York: Harper Row, 1984), p. 120.

Poetry may not have heightened feelings, but poetry there was. Indeed, on the British side of the continent there was a comparative wealth of Blitz literature, much of it elegiac and both poetic and fictional. Haughton's collection contains Dylan Thomas's "Deaths and Entrances" ("On almost the incendiary eve/ Of several near deaths"), and "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", along with Louis MacNeice's (1907–63) "Brother Fire":

When our brother Fire was having his dog's day
Jumping the London streets with millions of cans
Clanking at his tail, we heard some shadow say
'Give the dog a bone' — and so we gave him ours;
Night after night we watched him slaver and crunch away
The beams of human life, the tops of topless towers. ...

... Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear,
When you were looting the shops in elemental joy
And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,
Echo your thought in ours? 'Destroy! Destroy!'³⁴

Ironically, of the poems on the German Blitz (the German air attacks on British cities in 1940) that Haughton includes is one by the American poet Lorine Niedecker (1903–70), "Bombings":

You could go to the Underground's platform
for a three half-penny tube fare;

34 Haughton p. 162, from *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 1966)

safe vaults of the Bank of England
you couldn't go there.

The sheltered slept
under eiderdown,
Lady Diana and the Lord himself
in apartments deep in the ground.³⁵

Neidecker had no experience of the bombing herself,³⁶ but many other women authors writing in English did. The novelist poet Stevie Smith (1902–71) worked as a secretary in London during the war and displays no reticence in referring to the bombing inflicted by the Luftwaffe:

It was my bridal night I remember,
an old man of seventy-three
I lay with my young bride in my arms,
A girl with t.b.
It was war-time, and overhead
The Germans were making a particularly heavy raid on
Hampstead.
What rendered the confusion worse, perversely
Our bombers had chosen the moment to set out for
Germany.

35 Haughton p. 194, quoted from *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, trans. and ed. Jenny Lynn Penberthy (Univ. California Press, 2002).

36 Lorine Niedecker lived most of her life in a remote part of Wisconsin. See Marjorie Perloff, "Canon and Loaded Gun," in *Poetic License: Essays on the Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1990), pp. 41–42.

Harry, do they ever collide?
I do not think it has ever happened,
Oh my bride, my bride.

“I Remember”³⁷

A poem conspicuously absent from Haughton’s collection, however, is one of the most famous written on the Blitz — Edith Sitwell’s “Still Falls the Rain: The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn.”³⁸ The war became a major inspiration for Edith Sitwell, and this poem was written during an air raid in which she sees the devil raining down death, destruction in religious terms; and rain as a metaphor for bombing and as well as healing:³⁹

Still falls the Rain—
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss—
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross. ...

Yet she asserts a kind of tragic affirmation and writes of how hope still exists, symbolized by the merciful Christ on the cross: “Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.”

Virginia Woolf was another woman writer profoundly affected by the bombing and perhaps herself a “victim” of the war, who like Vera

37 Haughton, p. 272. From *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1985)

38 In Catherine Reilly’s anthology *Chaos of the Night: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1984).

39 Interestingly, Brian Gardener titles his 1966 anthology of war poetry *The Terrible Rain* (London: Methuen) .

Brittain (see below) opposed the “making or improvement” or weapons of mass destruction, and also saw the aerial bombardment of Germany as an attack against individual freedom. In early 1940 a bomb severely damaged Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s London offices and the Hogarth Press; another destroyed their former home in Tavistock Square. “All this intense physical destruction of furniture, books, and buildings together with the fear of more bombing and even invasion no doubt contributed considerably to Virginia Woolf’s despair and depression hewn, in the spring of 1941, she took her own life.”⁴⁰ In “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” she describes her feelings as German planes fly over her Sussex home:

The sound of sawing overhead has increased. All the searchlights are erect. They point at a spot exactly above this roof. At any moment a bomb may fall on this very room. One, two, three, four, five, six ... the seconds pass. The bomb did not fall. But during those seconds of suspense all thinking stopped. All feeling, save one dull dread, ceased. A nail fixed the whole being to one hard board. The emotion of fear and of hate is therefore sterile, unfertile. Directly that fear passes, the mind reaches out and instinctively revives itself by trying to create.⁴¹

Vera Brittain, pacifist and author of the classic autobiographical *Testament* trilogy, devoted much time to publishing her views in vehement opposition to mass bombing, most notably in her book *Seeds of Chaos* (1944). Her “Lament for Cologne”⁴² expresses the outrage of mothers who are forced to

40 Byles, p. 131.

41 Virginia Woolf, *The Death the Moth and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 211.

42 Published in *The Friend*, 19th June 1943.

witness the destruction of their homes, while calling on women, British and German, to unite and stop such barbaric action. “This poem has an historical double edge to it for Brittain had visited Cologne in 1924 and witnessed the abjectness of its citizens and their starvation and unemployment as a result of the Allied blockade of Germany and the demand for [World War I] reparations.”⁴³

Perhaps, when passions die and slaughters cease,
The mothers on whose homes destruction fell,
Who wailing sought their children through the hell
Of London, Warsaw, Rotterdam, Belgrade,
Will seek Cologne’s sad women, unafraid,
And cry: “God’s cause is ours. Let there be peace!”⁴⁴

Brittain writes that Hamburg experienced the equivalent (“so we are told”) of “sixty Coventries” inflicted upon it, and goes on to say that she, among others, went to Coventry just after the raid there on November 14th 1940, and saw what “the cruel attack meant to a once historic city and its inhabitants.” However, she asks if the inhabitants of Coventry really feel that Hamburg truly deserved the revenge wreaked upon them: “Does it really fill them with glee to reflect that sixty times their number of children, expectant mothers, women in childbirth, invalids, and aged people have perished in terror and anguish?” The book concludes with the opinion that “it is difficult to estimate the amount of public misgiving that exists on the subject of

43 Byles, p.123.

44 Vera Brittain, *Seeds of Chaos* (London: New Vision Publishing Co., 1944), p.134.
Quoted in Byles, p. 123.

45 Byles, p.125.

obliteration bombing,”⁴⁵ but mentions a “valuable article” in the February 12th, 1944 edition of *New Statesman* by Mass Observation: “It is regularly found, that, after a blitz, people in bus, street, and pub seldom talked of getting their own back,” and “nearly every one in four expresses feelings of uneasiness or revulsion about Britain’s present methods of bombing.”⁴⁶

Mass Observation was an organization co-founded and pioneered by English surrealist poet and journalist Charles Madge (1912–1996) and the zoologist and ecologist Tom Harrisson, in 1936. The latter, who won a DSO for wartime service in Borneo, published *Living Through the Blitz* in 1976, which goes beyond the official censorship to contemporary diaries and sources from the Mass-Observation Archive, now based at the University of Sussex in England. Like Solly Zuckerman, he occasionally wrote for *Horizon*.⁴⁷ Regarding Harris’s premise that under heavier, intensive bombardment the German populace would “crack” Harrisson writes

Although they did not, the same premise has been at the base of the vast aerial activity of the Americans in Indo-China. Other humans — of implicitly inferior race — must be subject to Douhet’s law of civilian vulnerability. Indeed, to believe otherwise might well be to deny the very significance of being an airman.⁴⁸

46 *New Statesman* p.97, quoted by Byles p. 125.

47 Ironically, in December 1941, Harrisson described the “war fiction” that he had surveyed as a “cataract of tripe,” with only a few interesting wavelets here and there (“War Books”, *Horizon* 4, no.24 (Dec. 1947): 416–37). See Holger Klein, “Britain” in Holger Klein, John Fowler and Eric Homberger eds., *The Second World War in Literature* pp. 1–46; p.1.

48 Tom Harrisson, *Living Through the Blitz* (London: Collins, 1976), p. 301. Italian General Guilo Douhet (1869–1930) was an influential theorist of mass demoralization, basing his arguments on the German air attacks on ↗



He makes a latter-day comparison with the bombing campaign against German cities in *Living Through the Blitz*, stating that during the Vietnam War the North Vietnamese “were blitzed on a scale which was never approached in the Second World War.”⁴⁹

Harrison and his wife were killed in an accident in Bangkok in January 1976 as he was returning to Europe to correct the proofs of his book. The bus they had hired rammed into a timber lorry on a dark road.

↘ London of 1917 (see *Il dominio dell'aria*, 1921)

⁴⁹ Harrison, p. 332.

Conclusion:

... I am in blood
 Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
 Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

Shakespeare: *Macbeth*. Act iii. Sc. 4.

Thus quotes Fleeman Dyson⁵⁰ in his book *Weapons and Hope* (1984). As mentioned earlier, he became despondent of the British bombing campaign and his own role in it. In the operational research section of bomber Command Dyson learned that contrary to the essential bomber command dogma, the safety of bomber crews did not increase with experience; that escape hatches were too narrow for airmen to use in emergencies; that gun turrets slowed the aircraft and bloated the crew sizes without increasing the chances of surviving enemy fighters; and that the entire British aerial bombing campaign was a failure. From post mission photographs he saw scattershot bomb patterns, the ability of the Germans to keep factories operating despite the bombing; he worked through the firestorms of Hamburg in 1943 and Dresden in 1945, and felt himself descending into a moral hell.

The American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. experienced the Dresden

50 Son of the composer and conductor George Dyson, F. J. Dyson was born in Berkshire, England in 1923, and educated at Winchester College (1936–1941), then Trinity College, Cambridge (1941–43). He worked as an analyst for the British Bomber Command during World War II (1943–1945); after the war, he moved to Princeton University.

firebombing at first hand as a prisoner of war there.⁵¹ His semi-autobiographical best-seller *Slaughterhouse Five*⁵² is a classic of anti-war literature, a montage of his experiences as well as encapsulating the anti-war feeling against the Vietnam conflict.⁵³ It contains such remembrances of the event as “There we barricades on the main roads leading into the ruins. Germans were stopped there. They were not permitted to explore the moon.”⁵⁴ In *Slaughterhouse Five* (published, incidentally, the same year that Richard Attenborough’s film *Oh! What a Lovely War* hit cinema screens) Vonnegut quotes from Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, who was Sir Arthur Harris’s deputy in Bomber Command from 1943–45 and author of *Air Bombardment: The Story of Its Development* (N.Y.: Harper, 1961):

That the bombing of Dresden was a great tragedy none can deny. That it was really a military necessity few, after reading this book, will believe. It was one of those terrible things that sometimes happen in wartime, brought about by an unfortunate combination of

51 The title page describes him as “A fourth-generation German-American/ Now living in easy circumstances/ on Cape Cod/ [And Smoking Too Much], / Who, As an American Infantry Scout/ *Hors de Combat*/ As a Prisoner of War/ Witnessed the Fire-bombing/ Of Dresden, Germany/ ‘The Florence of the Elbe,’/ A Long Time Ago./ And Survived to Tell the Tale./ This is a Novel/ Somewhat in the Telegraphic Schizophrenic/ Manner of Takes/ Of the Planet Tralfamadore./ Where the Flying Saucers/ Come From./ Peace.”

52 Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-dance with Death* (New York: Delacorte Press/ Seymour Lawrence, 1969)

53 According to the British military historian Anthony Verrier, “Dresden was selected for no reason which anyone who fought in the strategic air offensive can justify...and its destruction achieved the rare distinction of having no open partisans at all. In every sense, Dresden exemplifies the dangers of carrying an idea to its logical conclusion.” Anthony Verrier, *The Bomber Offensive* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1968), p.301.

54 *Slaughterhouse Five*, p. 184.

circumstances. Those who approved it were neither wicked nor cruel, though it may well be that they were too remote from the harsh realities of war to understand fully the appalling destructive power of air bombardment in the spring of 1945.

The advocates of nuclear disarmament seem to believe that, if they could achieve their aim, war would become tolerable and decent. They would do well to read this book and ponder the fate of Dresden, where 135, 000 people died as a result of an air attack with conventional weapons. On the night of March 9th, 1945, an air attack on Tokyo by American heavy bombers, using incendiary and high explosive bombs, caused the death of 83, 793 people. The atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed 71, 379 people.

So it goes.⁵⁵

I conclude, however, with a poignant quotation from the American poet Randall Jarrell (1914–65). Born in Nashville, Tennessee, Jarrell was educated at Vanderbilt and taught at Kenyon College and the University of Texas, joining the Army Air Force in 1942, where he served as a celestial navigator tower operator. He published poems about his wartime experiences of wartime bombers and the bombed cities in *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) and *Losses* (1948), later establishing himself as one of the leading poetry critics of his time as literary critic of *The Nation*, and in books such as *Poetry and the Age* (1953). Tragically, like Sebold and Tom Harrisson, he was killed in a road accident (or so it was interpreted by the coroner) but under different circumstances: following an earlier suicide attempt, Jarrell was struck by a car while walking at dusk on a highway in Chapel Hill,

55 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 162.

South Carolina, October 14th 1965.

In bombers named for girls, we burned
The cities we had learned about in school —
Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among
The people we had killed and never seen.
When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;
When we died they said, ‘Our casualties were low.’
They said, ‘Here are the maps’; we burned the cities.

It was not dying — no, not ever dying;
But the night I died I dreamed that I was dead,
And the cities said to me: ‘Why are you dying?’
We are satisfied, if you are; but why did I die?⁵⁶

Appendix:

On the night of March 30th/31st 1944, 795 Royal Air Force Bomber Command aircraft operated against the city of Nuremberg. The attack was a failure. Badly forecast winds caused navigational difficulties and two Pathfinder aircraft dropped their markers at Schweinfurt; thus although 120 aircraft reported that they had bombed Nuremberg, it was subsequently revealed that they had bombed Schweinfurt, which is 50 miles north-west of Nuremberg, although much of the bombing fell outside the town and only two people were killed. Nuremberg itself was covered in a thick cloud and a fierce crosswind caused Pathfinder aircraft to mark too far to the east. It

56 “Losses” in Haughton pp. 128–29, from *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 1969).

was also a night of a full moon. “A 10-mile-long creepback also developed into the countryside north of Nuremberg. Both Pathfinders and Main Force aircraft were under heavy fighter attack throughout the raid. Little damage was caused in Nuremberg.”⁵⁷ 96 bombers failed to return. 545 airmen died, more killed in one night than died during the entire battle of Britain.; only 69 people were seemingly killed on the ground.

Flight Sergeant George Clulow’s Lancaster III plane, LM 436, was shot down by a night fighter and crashed at Freiensteinau, a small town



(Photograph courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. A. T. Snell)

57 <www.raf.mod.uk/bombercommand/diary/mar44.html>; See also Martin Middlebrook, *The Nuremberg Raid* (London: Allen Lane, 1973)

7 1/2 miles north-west of Schliichtern. The crew, stationed at Spilsby in Lincolnshire, England, were on their 5th operation; all 7 killed. Clulow is remembered on the Runnymede memorial, panel 216.

In spite of all that happened at Hamburg, bombing proved a comparatively humane method. For one thing, it saved the flower of the youth of this country and of our allies from being mown down by the military in the field, as it was in Flanders in the war of 1914–1918. But the point is often made that bombing is especially wicked because it causes casualties among civilians. This is true, but then all wars have caused casualties among civilians.⁵⁸

Air Marshall Sir Arthur Harris, who passed away at the age of ninety-one at his home in Goring-on-Thames, makes no mention of the Nuremberg raid in his memoir, *Bomber Offensive*.

So it goes.

58 Sir Arthur Harris, *Bomber Offensive* (Collins, 1947; rpt Greenhill Books, 1998), p. 176.