

# Spells of Trauma in Catherine Bush's *Minus Time*

---

JOHN MCKINNON

In her award-winning novel, *A Good House*, Bonnie Burnard manages to convey a sense of the rhythms and textures of domestic life in a tone that is intimate, even confidential. But she also offers some pointed, if passing, social commentary, particularly concerning modern liberal assumptions about perfectibility, the notion that, with only that much more information and ably tutored “skills,” we could tame misfortune and ward off tragedy. Throughout the novel, assorted voices caution against the belief that others can save us, that rescue is possible, that turmoil can be irreversibly stilled and our conflicts painlessly resolved (19, 166, 216-17, 219). Such naïve faith in the power of institutions, experts, and our newly sensitized selves to elide difficulty and limit damage reflects the prevailing conviction that the possibility of harm looms everywhere and that our survival depends upon both a studied avoidance of risk and an eager acceptance of new controls. When the narrator remarks that in post-War Ontario, parents “did not want to load...kids up with the burden of possible but highly unlikely danger,” and that “most of them disapproved of exaggeration generally,” believing that “[n]othing good came from blowing things out of proportion,” the contrast with our own anxious times could not be more starkly drawn (16, 19).

Every culture assumes the responsibility of teaching its young not just how to behave and what to believe, but what to beware. According to John Maxcy Zane, the belief among “primordial men” that every natural force and phenomenon constitutes a dark power that can only be appeased by supplication or sacrifice engendered a fear from which we have “never entirely recovered” (41). Indeed, adds Paul Zweig, it is easy to forget that human beings “have existed from age to age on the edge of social collapse and spiritual crisis,” that civilized life “has often been experienced as a borderline condition in the process of getting worse,” and that history “is, ultimately, the story of bad times” (viii). And yet, no one would claim that conceptions of harm and experiences of fear are uniform across every age and culture. We confidently, and quite naturally, note variations in temperament and obsession, either to characterize particular times and places, to draw distinctions among them, or to identify trends and watersheds, the first stirrings of what we eventually come to regard as instances of cultural advance or decline. As much as fear may prove an inescapable feature of human experience, then, it is bound over time to attach itself to different objects, or at least to broader or narrower ranges of objects, and to be experienced with varying degrees of intensity.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, the complaints expressed in *A Good House* presume to identify a shift over the course of recent decades in attitudes toward harm, its sources and possibilities. In an effort to explain the emergence of what he calls our “culture of fear,” Frank Furedi contrasts responses to the Aberfan disaster in South Wales in 1966 with more recent experiences, and interpretations, of adversity.<sup>2</sup> The current suspicion of stoicism, indeed the tendency to pathologize a wide range of emotional responses, together with the prevailing eagerness to extend the metaphor of stress “to virtually every social setting,” illustrate profound changes over the past three or four decades in the norms we depend upon to assess “emotion, individual behavior and vulnerability.”<sup>3</sup> Describing heightened perceptions of risk in the contemporary West as a “problem,” Mary Douglas attributes their emergence, with curious precision, to significant cultural changes “since 1969” (3).

In his book, *Post-traumatic Culture*, Kirby Farrell addresses this contemporary “mood of cultural crisis,” the oppressive sense “that something has gone terribly wrong in the modern world, something that we can neither assimilate nor put right” (ix-x). Although he grants that Western culture as a whole “is grounded in traumatic stories,” this common inheritance can not account for emerging cultural contrasts, for those periodic irruptions of change and conflict that intensify feelings of daring or dread, vigor or lassitude, and that warrant our characterizing a particular age as confident, enterprising, and adventurous, say, or, alternatively, as sick, enervated, and anxious (44).<sup>4</sup> Our own culture, he says, exhibits with unnerving clarity the telltale post-traumatic symptoms of anxiety and estrangement, disenchantment and despair, skepticism and self-alienation (44). In ages such as ours, he says, “[m]ourning...reshape[s] the world,” generating a new faith in the cultural hegemony of psychology as a profession and the psychological as a category, in institutional expertise generally, and in secular, and radically expansive, models of illness (104). But why us, Farrell wants to know, and why now?

Although the reigning obsession with harm and determination to avoid risk are issues on which Burnard offers passing commentary in *A Good House*, they constitute the most fundamental assumptions behind Catherine Bush's intriguing and highly original novel, *Minus Time*. Indeed, Bush's novel can be said to unfold against what Farrell calls “the white noise of background dread” (xiii). In such frantic and fragmented conditions, Bush wants to ask, what kind of human relationships are possible? How are we even able to imagine the future? In a number of striking ways, in fact, Farrell's *Post-traumatic Culture* and Bush's *Minus Time* count as complementary, even parallel, texts. This is particularly evident in their approach to two important claims: first, that trauma overwhelms not just the self, but what Farrell calls “the ground of the self”; and, second, that the experience of trauma can ultimately be put to different uses, that it presents us with widely divergent options. My aim in what follows is to consider the efforts both writers make to address these claims and to examine the ways in which the work of the one serves to confirm, illuminate, and amplify the insights of the other.

## The Trauma of Transition

In the Victorian era, remarks G.K. Chesterton, “the old spirit of liberty” was overwhelmed by both progressive and reactionary forces, “barricaded by Bismarck with blood and iron,” on the one hand, “and by Darwin [with] blood and bone,” on the other. The “enormous depression” that infected many individuals at the time and the “curious cold air of emptiness” that gripped the culture itself were caused, he suggests, by this “coincident collapse” of both political and religious idealism. According to Chesterton, a condition of such profound disenchantment, pessimism and anxiety is “extremely unusual in the history of mankind” (66).<sup>5</sup> And yet, Farrell maintains that there are a number of distinct parallels between the psychological dislocation associated with the late-Victorian era and our own. In fact, he commits himself in *Post-traumatic Culture* to exploring the ways in which the concept of trauma has shaped dominant narratives in both periods.<sup>6</sup>

According to Farrell, modernism amounts to “a cumulative series of upheavals,” which he conceives of as “spikes in a rising baseline of stress: markers for massive, disorienting storms of new information and technology” (27). Although he proceeds to identify a number of such instances over the course of recent centuries, juxtaposing the late-Victorian period with our own, he suggests, can provide a particularly “vivid, stereoscopic view of modernism” (4). Both can be described as cultures “dazzled and disoriented by change,” principally due to technological advances that have radically altered social relations and destabilized conventional views of the self (23).<sup>7</sup> Even when the effects of these developments are not themselves catastrophic, they are symptomatic of a social upheaval that leaves people feeling unmoored, and their values, trust and sense of purpose undermined. Central to this response, in fact, is not just a disabling vertigo, but a powerful and pervasive skepticism.

The “perceived pandemonium” of both late-Victorian culture and the contemporary West is accompanied, Farrell maintains, by “paradigm shifts” that confront us with “baffling ambiguities,” exposing our beliefs and principles as mere conventions and the world itself as “a tissue of interpretations,” while alerting us to the endless possibility of deception (30, 33, 176, 44, xii). Under the weight of these contradictions, cultural models collapse, threatening social consensus and the stable transmission of values from one generation to another (51, 3). As cultural integrity erodes, and the world comes to feel “false and ungrounded,” we are increasingly impressed by how vulnerable we are, and how ephemeral our existence (xii, 176). What Farrell calls “grim new injuries” proliferate, “death anxiety” intensifies, and survival emerges as an ideal far more alluring than those of either nurture or self-fulfillment (2, 12, 30). These “cumulative stresses,” Farrell says, result in “the annihilation of meaning and identity,” a preoccupation with decline and degeneration, and a growing belief that the world is slipping “threateningly out of control” (3, 18, 2).

In *Minus Time*, Bush dramatizes our efforts to confront these same disquietudes. The novel opens on the gravel shoulder of a Florida highway, where Helen Urie and her

brother, Paul, watch the launch of their mother’s spacecraft. Barbara Urie is trying to become “the first Canadian mother in space” and, together with her American colleague, Peter Carter, to set a record for human space habitation. As the rockets rise from the platform, the air itself seems to crack open, flames burn “in a blinding dance,” and the ground shudders beneath them (3). These images of speed, instability, and impending collapse dominate the novel. Helen recalls her father, David, explaining how, contrary to appearances, “the continents are always moving, very, very slowly under our feet” (23). A continental drift specialist, he had drawn a map for her as a child, showing her all the fault lines in North America, describing the occurrence of small earthquakes, even in the center of the continent where they lived. “Everywhere she had looked,” Helen remembers of the hand-drawn map, “there were fault lines” (167). Later, David tells her how “researchers were no longer talking simply in terms of fault lines but fault segments, which responded differently to the buildup of stress: some crept, some lurched, some waited years then ruptured” (179).

Here, stress and the threat of chaos in our physical environment is intended to serve as a parallel for the fragility of the human psyche. Accordingly, as Barbara’s spacecraft soars through the sky, Helen feels as if she has been “lifted off the ground, divided, pulled outside her body” (3). Standing before Paul’s bathroom mirror, her outline trembles, “restless at the edges,” a description that is at least as fitting for her frayed sense of self (36). Later, she confesses to feeling as if she had been knocked “off balance,” and, elsewhere, “split in two” (187, 183).

This threat of fragmentation extends to the modern family as well. In the years leading up to her space flight, Barbara had had to spend extended periods of time in her Toronto laboratory, and later at the two national space headquarters in Houston and Montreal. Even more disruptive had been David’s dramatic decision to abandon his career as seismologist and science writer to become a disaster-relief specialist. In the midst of Barbara’s intensive preparations for her mission, and evidently feeling diminished by her momentous success, he leaves his young family to assist in the aftermath of the Los Angeles earthquake. Now, with Barbara hurtling toward space and Helen and Paul watching from the roadside, David sorts through the rubble of earthquake-devastated Mexico City, having been away from his wife and children for five years. According to Helen, she and Paul had grown up learning to live with the possibility that one parent or another would leave, since “marriages could always split up” (128, 148). She describes her family as specializing “in disappearing tricks,” as “fissioning in all directions, spiraling through the air,” and imagines the day when they would begin to reclaim their lost intimacy and start “hurtling through the thinning air toward each other” (8, 159, 253).

Helen is repeatedly assured that “contact is always possible,” but where there is contact, there is also the possibility of conflict, of dissonance (159, 188).<sup>8</sup> Virtually every action and encounter in *Minus Time*, indeed every movement and touch, is described, one is tempted to say analyzed, in terms of its impact and reverberations.

Like planets, people exert a gravitational pull on one another. The air between them is “fragile,” alive with energy, prickly with static (286). One person’s glance grazes another, mere touch can bruise, while simple bodily movement changes the shape of the air (271, 70, 274). When David leaves, he is said to have “unpeeled” himself from his wife and children (159). Absent from her family, Barbara yet maintains a presence for them, a weight and bulk (277).

Of the Uries, David and Helen are the afflicted ones. They are cautious, skeptical, and, each confesses, unable at critical junctures of their lives to even think about or look toward the future (78, 175). For them, Barbara’s presence is not just inescapable, but burdensome. Overwhelmed by her prodigious talent and indomitable will, unable to match her poise, tenacity and conviction, they each struggle for a renewed sense of identity and purpose. While Helen is perhaps most unnerved by her mother’s perilous position in space, her father’s intermittent reports from various scenes of devastation, and by her general awareness of the prospects for conflict in human affairs, her anxiety is both intensified and complicated by her particular efforts to free herself from her mother’s orbit, to find her own identity, determine her own direction, and come to enjoy “some kind of independent life” (262).

The sources of Helen’s anxiety, in fact, are almost limitless. The media’s febrile and unstinting attention to various catastrophes heightens her distress. Their ravenous interest in her, as the daughter of an astronaut, and their cavalier attitude toward facts unsettle and anger her, but also contribute to her increasingly destabilized sense of self. In media reports about her, she says, her life “became infinitely malleable, as elastic as the limbs of a contortionist, stretching and bending in all directions” (115). Meanwhile, her growing commitment to the animal rights group, United Species, exposes her to the horrors of slaughterhouses and factory farming, as well as the perils of public protest. And yet, even the most basic elements of her urban existence are a source of disquiet. As Farrell observes, the very technologies that manage to tame “menacing forces” and increase efficiency can also “suffocate the spirit and make life’s inevitable terrors more plainly unmanageable” (52). The enhancements we enjoy, that is, are secured at the expense of dizzying increases in what Mark Kingwell calls “the volume and velocity of everyday life,” as well as the disruption of perspective, the steady erosion of belief, attention, and memory that they occasion (187).

In a halting effort to explain her agitation, Helen muses, “it’s everything—the speed” (124). At a number of critical points in the novel, she realizes, “anything could happen” (2, 11, 187). Her decision to remain in Toronto while the rest of her family scatters is due, in part, she says, to a sense of responsibility, “a feeling that someone should stick around in case anything...happened” (72). She confesses to Barbara how much she worries about “all the terrible things that could happen” to her in space (250). And at a particularly tremulous moment, she asks, “where do we go from here?” and, elsewhere, “what now?” (160, 4).

Hers is a condition, then, not just of disorientation and estrangement, but of anxious anticipation, an interval in which her future appears held in abeyance, as if suspending her in time. Upset by an impromptu visit from her father, and by his hastened departure to tend to victims of a chemical fire in Ohio, Helen races off to Montreal to stay with Paul. Sitting in his kitchen, she sips wine, “still dazzled by the receding heat and the shock of arrival” (201). Later, she is advised about what space agency psychologists call “the trauma of return,” those psychological struggles endured by astronauts in their efforts to readjust to life on Earth (289, 286). But if arrival and return are occasions for shock or trauma, so too is the transition between the two. In fact, the notion of minus time is intended to identify precisely such an interval, describing “those terrible, anticipatory moments” just before some life-altering shift or upheaval (283). Minus time, says the narrator, “could either be the beginning or the end,” a period between rupture and recovery, where time itself feels “compressed and uncontrollable,” and through which one moves “toward the moment of cumulative choice” (1, 123, 300). Minus time refers, then, to a passage in Helen’s life, one that is occasioned by traumatic disruption and consumed by anxiety, imposing upon her a shift in perspective, a “whole new angle of vision,” that, however bewildering, presents her with the possibility of some important, self-illuminating choice (3). Bush is particularly effective in conveying a sense of Helen’s virtually uninterrupted feelings of disorientation and dread. Above all, however, she is determined to ask, what is at stake for individuals or cultures caught in the grip of such a condition? And, even more, what is to be done?

### **The Layers of Things**

As in the late-Victorian era, so in the contemporary West, “all sorts of boundaries are shifting,” says Farrell, “with predictable effects on people’s sense of moral order, communal integrity, and family coherence” (213). In fact, he tends to characterize these convulsions less in terms of shifting boundaries and far more in terms of shifting, or crumbling, ground, which, he says, is “slipping and quaking all the time” (214). Among the most prominent characteristics of post-traumatic experience, he notes, is its tendency to destabilize “the ground of conventional reality” and to arouse, in turn, “death anxiety” (12, 3, 97). Elsewhere, he describes “the ground of personality” as consisting in “defenses against” this same affliction (8; also 176, 180, 196, 211, 243). That preserving the ground of both conventional reality, on the one hand, and individual personality, on the other, requires the forestalling of death anxiety may suggest some confusion on Farrell’s part. Indeed, while on a number of occasions he refers to the ground of “the self,” “identity,” or “experience,” elsewhere he associates it with “society,” “civilization,” “culture,” “being,” “existence,” and “life,” that is, with collective, or objective, as opposed to personal, or subjective, experience.<sup>9</sup>

This apparent confusion is traceable, I think, to Farrell’s intending the phrase, “the ground of,” sometimes in a causal, and at other times a constitutive, sense.<sup>10</sup> The “ground of the self,” for instance, refers to the source of the self in culture, society, or civilization. Accordingly, the “ground of culture” simply identifies culture as constituting

that source, that which gives rise to and sustains the self. The ground that the self *requires*, in other words, is furnished by the ground that *is* culture. And yet, some of Farrell's remarks indicate that "the ground of culture" is intended in a causal sense as well, such that culture itself could be said to require some source that gives rise to and sustains it. If identity is grounded in culture, that is, so culture itself is grounded in certain "guarantees" (97).

While there are important conceptual distinctions to draw among these elements—the condition of the self, of the culture upon which the self depends, and of those guarantees upon which culture depends—their fortunes are intimately connected. For when the integrity of the "guarantees" is compromised, culture grows increasingly disordered, unable any longer to ground and sustain the self.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Farrell treats our concern to "substantiate" both the self and the ground of the self as virtually interchangeable, since to substantiate the one, we must substantiate the other (293, 329, 336). And, of course, to substantiate the ground of self, or culture, we must substantiate the guarantees, moral and metaphysical, that ground it. Any distinction between self and culture, then, is better understood as being drawn, not between two orders of experience at all, but rather between experience, on the one hand, and some sort of normative order, on the other.

Farrell's claim that "the self and its world disintegrate together" vindicates Bush's efforts throughout *Minus Time* to reflect Helen's inner agitations in external upheavals (293). These upheavals are occasioned not just by nature's random destructiveness, but by the excesses of human ambition, particularly as reflected in our technological prowess and our appetite for the benefits it promises. In this respect, Bush's decision to develop her narrative against the background of an instance of space flight is especially apt. Indeed, the capacity of revolutionary means of travel to inspire both wonder and fear has been widely remarked. "In the memoirs or diaries of the Victorians," writes Max Beerbohm, "you will find that the first journey by rail made [a] deep dint on sensibility" (399).<sup>12</sup> According to George Frederick Drinka, in fact, it was not just train travel, but the simple proximity of trains that heightened anxiety among Victorians (109, 120).<sup>13</sup> Eventually, symptoms were identified and new afflictions christened. And while this widespread fear diminished as train travel grew safer, much of it lingered, resurfacing, notes Drinka, "after a great train wreck." Thus, he concludes, "the magic and flair of the railway, mixing together wonderment and fright, smoke and fire, made it an image of impersonal power in an age of mechanized empire and its evil, neurosis" (112).

On Farrell's analysis, the image of the plane crash has displaced that of the train wreck as the most powerful means in contemporary culture of registering "the shock of radical historical change" and evoking "the traumatic potential of modernism" (2, 175). And yet, in the wake of the *Challenger* and *Columbia* shuttle disasters, the calamities of space travel provide a more powerful image still. In the novel, Helen's memories of the televised explosion of the fictional shuttle, *Victory*, prove particularly affecting, feeding her anxiety about her mother's space mission and, more generally, about the

modern world. It is this disabling anxiety that affords Bush the opportunity to address in a more current and vital context perennial concerns about the impact of technology and our reliance upon it.

When David refers to those "fault segments" that jostle beneath the Earth's surface, he not only hints at the possibility of eventual catastrophe, but also suggests that things are not what they seem.<sup>14</sup> This is a matter that Bush pursues with notable persistence throughout the novel. Helen recalls, for instance, how her mother would describe to her and Paul how an ordinary rock from Minnow Lake "contained particles that had been in existence since the beginning of time," and how the jittery static of the family TV set could well be "traces of energy traveling across space from the earliest days of the universe. What you saw," in other words, "was not always what it seemed" (27-28). In the same way, "the stars we see are really old, traveling light," Barbara says. "The stars are always moving. They are not what they seem" (69-70).

Through all of Helen's struggles, what remains "the constant," for her, "the point of origin" of her encounter with minus time, is Barbara's decision to become an astronaut (174). And yet, she is repeatedly impressed by how the upheaval that attends such a decision can coincide with the persistence of the ordinary. "How could you anticipate any of this," she asks, "the sameness and the chasm from the moment before?" (82). The fact of her mother's having become an astronaut, however momentous, "slipped seamlessly over her," Helen observes, such that Barbara could stand before her family "exactly as she had been the moment before" (107). In the wake of some life-altering choice or event, Helen asks, "did houses suddenly look different...? Did people? Did they look less substantial, did they start to disappear?" (114). She recalls how, on the day of the *Victory* tragedy, the family home "looked just as it had when we'd left it that morning," as if she had expected some more dramatic rent in the fabric of ordinary life (237). David reports how he had been attacked by a man whom he had to keep from returning to his home after the Los Angeles earthquake. Even though the foundation of the house had been shattered, he recalls, the man had protested, "*It looks exactly the same*" (179).<sup>15</sup> And while David himself had the capacity to "leave a trail of disasters behind him," it is with distinct surprise that Helen notes, following his visit to her Toronto apartment, that "[t]he room, the blue sofa, the TV set didn't move" (183).

Like Barbara's instruction to her children at Minnow Lake, all of these passages involve "stories about the layers of things" (27). In refining this important image, Bush invokes geological phenomena, as is apparent in David's "endless talk of earthquakes" and Barbara's interest in rock composition and glacial formation, but draws too upon our growing reliance on technological networks, referring, for instance, to the "layers of pipes and cables" that run beneath Helen's feet, "the whole precarious, invisible web that held each building, each house suspended in air" (93, 27-28, 222).<sup>16</sup> What most interests her, however, is the parallel that immediately suggests itself between such complex systems and the human subject. For in the latter case, too, we are inclined to speak of surface features and deeper dimensions that, together, constitute a fragile whole.<sup>17</sup>

If, in the physical world, then, subterranean menace lurks beneath stable surfaces, and if our trust in technology is tempered by an anxiety about the increasing range of experience that falls outside of our control, so the surface coherence of the self conceals unanticipated layers of complexity. Here, the image of layers assumes, for Bush, a fundamentally epistemological significance. For instance, layers separate people, “like a screen, like an extra skin,” preventing us from knowing one another (264; also 140). Their existence prompts questions that can only be avoided if we “press down” new experiences upon them, suppressing them and whatever challenges or insights they might provide (125, 139). Surfaces deceive: what outwardly appears safe in fact poses danger, while what appears to cause harm offers solace; seemingly unruffled conduct disguises panic; a majestic launch, considered from a different perspective, is a dangerous explosion; a daring adventure is at once an escape; what bleeds, eliciting disgust, promises nourishment; an increase in distance enhances intimacy (187; 30-31; 72; 238-39; 247; 246, 249, 32, 251).

Since every perception and proposition has a “flip side,” our encounters with hidden layers do not so much afford a deeper understanding as confront us with contradictions, which, Helen agonizes, are “everywhere” (247, 251). Indeed, the sheer multiplicity of layers suggests that truth is an illusion, that there are claims that one can both affirm and deny, and that all we have left are our fitful interpretations (262). Unsurprisingly, then, the world comes to feel “thin and porous” to Helen, everything awash in “sudden relativity” (123, 251). Her fragmented experience of the world confirms, as Farrell suggests it must, a like fragmentation of herself. In order further to convey the ruptures and discontinuities in Helen’s self-perception, Bush resorts frequently to the image of the double, particularly in the form of reflections, simulations, and replicas. For her, like Farrell, the proliferation of meanings, perspectives, and identities not only registers the tensions that destabilize, but also affords the means of ultimately “corroborating,” the self and its world (134, 136). But how is Helen to manage this?

Farrell claims that self and world disintegrate together because “identity is a prosthetic construction” (293). Here, “prosthetic” is intended to emphasize that, not just tools, but relationships, can “make up for our creaturely limitations” (175). Since other people “can extend our wills as tools do,” after all, our relationships with them, no less than with instruments, enable us to expand and deepen our engagement with the world (175, 179). Disruption of these connections not only heightens anxiety, but erodes trust, diminishing our confidence in what we take ourselves to value. Accordingly, the otherwise grand and sweeping claim that self-recovery requires recovery of the world amounts simply to the suggestion that these disrupted prosthetic networks be restored, which itself requires the restoring of our trust in the world and in others. And if the disruption in question is more a sundering, such that restoration is impossible, then new sources of trust and value must be found.

### Trauma and Its Uses

To confront the “damaged ground of life” is to feel one’s own self “queasily

ungrounded,” laboring under what Farrell calls “the spell of trauma” (99, 71, 271). And yet, this experience of shock and displacement, together with the attendant loss of certainty and sense of mourning, can be construed, or used, in different ways. Trauma can occasion lasting injury, inflict “numbness and derangement,” and encourage “a sense of doom,” to be sure, but it can also offer up a “purifying ideal,” facilitate “deeper insight and integration,” and promise “a way back to life” (217, 20, 79). The determination of the traumatized personality to avoid the former set of afflictions is exemplified in his efforts to devise for himself “convincing grounds for identity” (179). Indeed, the post-traumatic effort to recover the self and its cultural ground is a “creative act,” says Farrell, a “moral negotiation” (184, 187). As such, however, it is also a deeply ideological activity, which can be manipulated, reinforced, or exploited (184, 234, 7). And this suggests that the latitude for creativity and negotiation is not without limit, for certain strategies are less “healthy” than others, more “problematic,” even “weakly grounded, if not untenable” (231, 357, 211). They can represent an evasion of responsibility, contribute to “psychic ruin,” or establish tyrannical or sadistic relationships (231, 7, 282, 243). Mastery of trauma, meanwhile, consolidates relationships that are supportive, perhaps “symbiotic,” fortifying the self, renewing its trust in, and enabling it to negotiate “reentry” into, the world (187). But what accounts for such mastery? What makes certain grounds for identity “convincing,” and the devising of them particularly artful?

If Farrell’s *Post-traumatic Culture* can be said to document the alternating rhythms of fragmentation and coalescence, the contest between centrifugal and centripetal forces in modern life, Bush’s *Minus Time* dramatizes and projects them. Objects, faces, families and psyches break up and fly apart, but eventually solidify, slip into focus, sharpening their outlines. For Bush, emergence from the convulsions of minus time is reflected in a growing sense of self-possession and commitment, which in turn requires, as Farrell suggests, a choice among options. In the novel, the most obvious such option appears to be that between optimism and pessimism, affirmation and skepticism, between the radiant triumphalism of modernity and the bleak disenchantment of its critics. But as Barbara herself protests, “[w]hy does it always have to be one way or the other?” (249). Advertising the premiere of *Frontiers*, the science show from space, she asks her audience to imagine the Earth as a basketball, and then to imagine sticking a piece of Scotch tape on it, in order to demonstrate how thin and fragile that layer of atmosphere is that sustains us, and to urge a greater care for it and our planet (91-92). And in a stirring scene near the end of the novel, when two crowds converge along the shores of Lake Ontario, one cheering on Barbara, encouraging her to stay in space, the other campaigning for the diversion of funds from space travel to environmental protection, they are presented as virtually mirroring one another, commanding not just our sympathy, but, in some measure, each other’s (303).

In fact, the prospect of reconciling, of finding some balance between, otherwise contradictory propositions or world-views, is one of Bush’s central concerns. For Helen, the most noteworthy of Paul’s architecture classes is his course in statics, “the science of how buildings stand up and why” (38). Barbara’s own scholarly research

involves a motion-sickness machine designed to test the relationship between the nervous and vestibular systems that enables people to find and maintain their balance (13, 24, 110). These respective academic interests reflect a shared psychological propensity, for just as Paul is said to will by acts of concentrated stillness that things not fall apart, so Barbara is determined to “confound contradictions” by balancing “several worlds inside her head at once” (36, 144, 300, 41). By contrast, Helen confesses to not knowing “what to do about the contradictions,” a confusion that leaves her struggling “tippily” to strike some balance “between different parts of her life” (262, 146, 169).

In a scene that proves unexpectedly instructive, Helen remembers drifting in a rowboat on Minnow Lake as a child, under a sky full of stars. “I held onto the side of the boat and looked around dizzily,” she recalls, “searching for our cottage, some horizon, but all the yellow lights along the shore, even the line between the sky and earth, had disappeared” (59). Looking outward, and upward, she is unable to orient herself, and over the course of the novel comes to conclude that she will never find her bearings by looking anywhere but within. While it is true that Barbara regards the stars as a source of safety and guidance, “a reflection of home,” Helen conceives home, in turn, as “portable,” no static location, but “something she could carry with her, inside her...” (184, 277-78).

If substantiation of the self hinges on a choice between options, then, that choice ought not to aim at what is external to us, whether in the form of some settled plan or a formula that we can use to calculate a comfortable mid-point between opposing positions. Concerning both of these proposals, Aristotle’s remarks in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are especially helpful. According to Aristotle, the superior individual must pursue an end that is self-sufficient and subordinate to no other. He identifies this end with *eudaimonia*, a state of character achieved by one who has lived a happy, well-rounded life. And yet, one can hardly be said to “choose” it (III.2.1111b 27-32). Instead, we “lay down” or “wish for” that end, committing ourselves to it, but deliberating about and choosing only what promotes it (III.3.1112a 16-17; III.5.1114b 24-25; III.2.1111b 27-28; III.4.1113a 15; III.5.1113b 4-5). How this end appears to a particular person may depend, in part, on her (III.5.1114b 17-18). She can never be sure that the cumulative effect of her choices will secure that end or, for that matter, how stable the end itself will remain (III.5.1115a 2-4). No doubt, her conception of what it amounts to is progressively refined as she approaches it. Accordingly, no plan for success can be prescribed in advance of the particular choices she will have to make.

And yet, her efforts to achieve *eudaimonia* are by no means aimless, since she is guided by what Aristotle calls “the mean,” that intermediate course between excess and deficiency. Many are quick to ridicule this doctrine, interpreting it as urging a life of cautious calculation, while wryly countering that moderation is all very well, if only in moderation.<sup>18</sup> But while acting in accordance with the mean is a formal ethical requirement that applies to all, says Aristotle, what counts as the mean in a particular

situation “is not the same for everyone” (II.6.1106a 30-34). So sensitive must our application of the mean be to the particularities of a given case that acting well can be said to be a matter of responding “at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (II.6.1106b 21-24). Indeed, it is precisely because the mean furnishes no quantitative test or rough-and-ready formula that it is “hard work,” according to Aristotle, to live well (II.9.1109a 24-25).<sup>19</sup>

Our task, then, is far less a matter of crafting a settled identity than of learning how to master contingency. Bearing in mind Adam Phillips’s useful distinction, we must approach the future not impelled by destiny or design, but equipped with a “repertoire,” or as Farrell prefers, an “adaptive flexibility” that will enable us to navigate our way in the midst of uncertainty (Phillips, 59; Farrell, 357). Earlier, I described the relation between the self and its ground as that between experience and some normative order. It is important, however, to resist identifying that order with any fixed principle or set of principles. Rather, it is more like a source of motivation, no mere impulse, certainly, but an imperative that channels our free judgment, what we might call directedness without a set of directions. When Paul insists that we need a “vision,” one “that isn’t like anybody else’s,” he has something very much like this in mind (203). To know one’s own mind, in fact, is to enjoy a clarity of perception and command of one’s enthusiasms that lend free choice the force and feel of necessity (207). Moved by her brother’s independence and spirit of invention, Helen is soon able to grant this same insight (221).

It occurs to Helen that it is not change as such that disturbs her, but rather her passivity in the face of it. She must learn, she says, “to change things herself” (47). That “constant low-grade fear of catastrophe” which surges up in her through much of the novel and the “interior vigilance” she has to muster to contend with it eventually give way to wonder, the sort of care about the world that one associates with curiosity rather than control (181, 158, 259, 302-03).<sup>20</sup> She acquires a vision sufficiently complex that it is no longer defeated by ambiguity and before which “everything seems magnified,” as opposed to fragmented and diminished (303). Whereas she initially declares it impossible for her to think about the future, she later insists to her mother that she is “trying to have some sense” of it, and ultimately describes herself as being “saturated with it” (78, 249, 220).

To suggest with Burnard and Furedi that our response to difficulty, our heightened sense of our own vulnerability, and our reigning, and always mutating, anxieties, are exaggerations is to suggest that they are not just unwarranted, but somehow hysterical. And as Elaine Showalter remarks, while literature can certainly contribute to the spreading of hysteria, it can also help us understand it (99). For Farrell, too, fiction and film can serve as “radar sweeps of the social atmosphere, sensitive to patches of turbulence and the movements of large air masses.” While their predictive powers are minimal, he adds, “they may usefully locate unsettled imaginative conditions and identify their paths of development” (26). Indeed, his book includes a number of detailed

analyses of literary and cinematic works that illustrate the surprising uses of trauma in periods of cultural upheaval. While my declared aim has been to establish *Post-traumatic Culture* and *Minus Time* as complementary texts, I want to maintain, too, that Bush's novel is an exemplary instance of the sort of sensitive, insightful work that Farrell has in mind, that rare work of fiction which is able deftly to get the measure of its time, not merely to mimic and perpetuate, but to encourage our understanding of, its energies and obsessions.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> For instance, Hobbes argues that while there is a "similitude of *Passions*," including fear, "which are the same in all men," there is no such similitude "of *the objects* of the Passions," which vary according to an individual's personality, his particular education, and, we might add, the temper of his time (82-83).
- <sup>2</sup> In the disaster, 144 were killed, 116 of whom were children, when a colliery spoil-tip collapsed.
- <sup>3</sup> Furedi, "The Silent Ascendancy of Therapeutic Culture in Britain" (16, 17). See also Furedi's *Culture of Fear*. According to Micale, any history of our time must "seek to explain the astounding cultural resonance of the idea of psychological trauma today in one area of human endeavour after another" (7).
- <sup>4</sup> In a suggestively related passage, Trilling observes, "sometimes the hygiene of the soul is thought to be best served by spaces and objects whose magnitude overawes and quiets the will, or, alternatively, challenges it to heroic assertion..." (210-11).
- <sup>5</sup> Just as Chesterton discerned a "cold air of emptiness" in the Victorian era, so Young refers to the prevailing "chill in the air," and to economic and social developments so rapid and extensive as to constitute "a climatic change" (121, 21).
- <sup>6</sup> In Shields's *The Stone Diaries*, a novel that bears comparison with Burnard's *A Good House*, the great-niece of the main character, Daisy Goodwill, is described in such a way as to suggest that she is sensitive to "the contemporary plagues of displacement and disaffection" and making an effort, in turn, "to keep the bad dreams of modern life out" (265-66). The great-niece is named Victoria.
- <sup>7</sup> Lowenthal challenges "the common belief that technical invention has soared without precedent in recent decades" and accounts, in turn, for widespread social anxiety. On the contrary, Lowenthal maintains, our ancestors "suffered change more violent than ours, but *we perceive* ourselves to be its unexampled victims" (8). Here, Lowenthal hints at the concern that preoccupies Furedi (n. 3, above): what accounts for this perception of unsurpassed vulnerability?
- <sup>8</sup> "Conflict," writes Bambrough, "is a mode of contact" (39)<sup>9</sup> See xii, 83, 91, 114, 177, 181, 202, 211, 293, 357 (the ground of the self); 39, 60, 179, 222, 232 (the ground of identity); 18, 22, 76, 85, 97, 108, 135, 143, 176, 178, 195 (the ground of experience); 97, 206 (the ground of society); 39 (the ground of civilization); 206 (the ground of culture); 183, 184 (the ground of being); 13 (the ground of existence); and 99 (the ground of life)
- <sup>10</sup> For a comparable distinction between causal and constitutive senses of, in this case, artistic intention, see Zangwill (33).

- <sup>11</sup> Kingwell endorses Farrell's view, remarking that "cultures begin to lose their integrity at just the same time individuals do" (186).
- <sup>12</sup> Beerbohm himself was obsessed more with the risks of automobile travel, recalling how the air rushed into his lungs "with utmost violence" as he sped along the roadway, adding that, for some, the Mercedes was "a glorious revelation, an apocalypse" (397).<sup>13</sup> See also Showalter (66, 110-11, 120).
- <sup>14</sup> The rhetoric of concealment, of course, suggests further sources of fear. For more on this, see Furedi, *Culture of Fear* (29, 34, 39, 62, 113, 130, 166); Dowbiggin (6, 14, 44, 68, 104, 132); and, as the issue bears on the more specialized field of legal reform, Farber and Sherry (123, 134-37).
- <sup>15</sup> Compare Trow's surmise that, at some point in the post-WWII period in the United States, "there happened under us a Tectonic Plate shift." While "the buildings are the same," he writes, "we are not the same nation that had these things before" (12-13).
- <sup>16</sup> For Sennett, the image of a network, as opposed to that of a hierarchy, is itself revealing, since, precisely to the extent that it is "flatter and more flexible," a network is readily subject to redefinition, even decomposition, and, as such, unstable. See his *The Corrosion of Character* (23, 48). For observations on what he calls "the 'network' mistake" and its implications for the integrity of individual elements, see Fish (100-01).
- <sup>17</sup> Thus, Erikson refers to "the deeper strata of the human mind" (66). See also Bellow's *The Dean's December*, where the narrator identifies Miss Porson's "permanent" self with her "deeper strata" (144), and Amis's *The Information*, where the narrator allows that even these levels can undergo a "gravitational collapse," resulting in a loss of identity (158).
- <sup>18</sup> See Tanner (313). For a similar misreading, see Weaver (119).
- <sup>19</sup> According to Nussbaum, the Aristotelian conception, in advocating the priority of the particular over the general, requires experience of the concrete. "This active task," she writes, "is not a technique; one learns it by guidance rather than by formula" (44).

### Works Cited

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985.
- Amis, Martin. *The Information*. New York: Vintage International, 1995.
- Bambrough, Renford. "The Shape of Ignorance." *Contemporary British Philosophy*. Ed. H.D. Lewis. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1976. 30-44
- Beerbohm, Max. "Speed." *Great Essays*. Ed. Houston Peterson. Montreal: Pocket Books of Canada, 1954. 396-403.
- Bellow, Saul. *The Dean's December*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Bush, Catherine. *Minus Time*. Toronto: Harper Perennial Canada, 2000.
- Burnard, Bonnie. *A Good House*. Toronto: Harper Perennial Canada, 1999.
- Chesterton, G.K. *The Victorian Age in Literature*. London: House of Stratus, 2000.
- Douglas, Mary. *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1985.

Dowbiggin, Ian. *Suspicious Minds: The Triumph of Paranoia in Everyday Life*. Toronto: McFarlane Walter and Ross, 1999.

Drinka, George Frederick. *The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady, and the Victorians*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984.

Erikson, Erik. *Identity and the Life-Cycle*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1994.

Farber, Daniel A. and Sherry, Suzanna. *Beyond All Reason: The Radical Assault on Truth in American Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Farrell, Kirby. *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1998.

Fish, Stanley. *Save the World on Your Own Time*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Furedi, Frank. *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*. Washington: Cassell, 1997.

———. “The Silent Ascendancy of Therapeutic Culture in Britain.” *Society* 39 (2002): 16-24.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. C.B. Macpherson. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.

Kingwell, Mark. “Building, Dwelling, Acting.” *Queen’s Quarterly* 107 (2000): 177-200

Lowenthal, David. *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Micale, Mark. “We Cannot Stress Enough.” *Times Literary Supplement* (October 27, 2000): 6-7.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Phillips, Adam. “Contingency for Beginners.” *Raritan* 13 (1993): 54-72.

Sennett, Richard. *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Injury and City Life*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992.

———. *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1998.

Shields, Carol. *The Stone Diaries*. Toronto: Vintage Books, 1993.

Showalter, Elaine. *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Tanner, Michael. Review of Robert Solomon’s *In Defense of Sentimentality*. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 312-13.

Trilling, Lionel. *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75*. Ed. Diana Trilling. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.

Trow, George W.S. *Within the Context of No Context*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997.

Weaver, Richard M. *Ideas Have Consequences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Young, G.M. *Portrait of an Age*. New York: Phoenix Press, 2002.

Zane, John Maxcy. *The Story of Law*. Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1998.

Zangwill, Nick. *The Metaphysics of Beauty*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Zweig, Paul. *The Heresy of Self-Love: A Study of Subversive Individualism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Department of Philosophy  
 Saint Mary’s University  
 Halifax, Nova Scotia,  
 Canada