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Hamburg: “This Marshy, Watery City”

Like Berlin, Hamburg is a German city set in a swamp. Hamburg is Germany’s second largest city after Berlin. Both were founded in the thirteenth century. The name “Hamburg” is a compound of “Ham,” an old Saxon term for “marshland,” and “burg,” meaning castle or fortress (Jefferies, 2011: 1). Hamburg is thus literally “marsh castle,” castle in or of the marsh. Hamburg is similar to St. Petersburg as both cities were a fortress built in a marshland as we will see with St. Petersburg in the following chapter. Hamburg, as Lowe (2007: 3 and 5) puts it, “is situated on a fluvial plain, most of the ground is little better than a marsh, and it is prone to flooding.” It is like a number of other modern cities built on wetlands, such as London, St. Petersburg, Boston, New York, and New Orleans. Hamburg is also like Venice in that it is “a city on water” and so it is an “amphibious city” (Jefferies, 2011: 59) as much at home, or at unhome, in the water as on the land. Unlike an amphibious creature like a frog which is at home on land and in water, Hamburg is an ambiguous city rather than an amphibious city as, like all European cities, it is not at home in the water.

Like all the cities mentioned above, the site for the city of Hamburg was not propitious for a city, but it was for a port and a fort. Kenneth Asch (1994: 32) describes how the site “was a swamp until the year 1250. At that time a dam was constructed across the sluggish Alster River where it flows into the broad Elbe. Thus was the impetus provided for changing a sleepy local port 62 miles from the open sea into the dynamic metropolis of today.” London, Boston, Toronto, New York, and other port cities drained and filled their wetlands, whereas others, like Hamburg and Venice, built canals and

waterways and so, as Lowe (2007: 3) goes on to argue, “the element that most dominates the city is water,” just like Venice.

Yet rather than water, the element that dominated Hamburg is fire when it destroyed its center on four occasions. Hamburg for Jefferies (2011: v, 59–96, 97–122) is both “a city on water” and “a city on fire.” To both topics he devotes a chapter. The destruction of Hamburg by fire culminated during World War II. Grayling (2006: 18) describes how in July 1943 “the first ever firestorm caused by bombing” was created in Hamburg. Ironically the domination of water made the city more susceptible to fire bombing. Lowe (2007: 32) points out that “the soggy, waterlogged soil upon which Hamburg was built meant that whole districts were devoid of cellars—the high-water table of the Elbe floodplain would simply have swamped them.” The very element of water that quenches fire made the city, or at least its citizens, more vulnerable to fire, or at least to firebombing from the air. Lowe says that the Hamburg firestorm was “one of the biggest man-made fires the world has ever seen” (182). Later he says that “no other large fire in recorded history has ever equaled it in intensity” and that it was “the greatest firestorm the world has ever seen” (185). These claims are contestable when considered in relation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hans Erich Nossack (2004: 1–2) witnessed the destruction of Hamburg as a spectator from outside the city. Hamburg for Nossack was “the first big city to be annihilated” (32) in World War II. He bore witness to the destruction in his book called *The End*. The title refers not only to the end of the city as he knew it, but also to the end of the world in time and space in apocalyptic times and tones. What he calls “the ruin of Hamburg” (6) is also variously described in apocalyptic terms as “the abyss” (6), “the end” (8), and “the netherworld” (11), terms that have also been applied to the slummy underside of other cities, such as London as we saw in Chapter 4. Not merely “anti-city,” the destruction of Hamburg by fire also pitted nature against nature for “even nature had risen up in hatred against herself” (11). The military strategy of modern aerial and naval warfare is antinature as two forces of nature (fire, storm) are both harnessed by militaristic men and unleashed against nature and the earth. All wars are fought against nature and the earth and produce a war-torn landscape of destruction and ruination. The result for Nossack is “the raging of the world against itself” and “the earth writhed in agony” (15).

These are the death throes of “raging destruction” (13) inflicted by the world and the earth upon itself by a world- and earth-hating military whose end (in two senses) is “the ruined world” (13). “The horror” of “the disaster” (16) was that it was both natural and cultural, the forces of nature directed against both nature and culture by natural and cultural human beings against other natural and cultural human beings.

Part of the horror for Nossack (2004: 17) was the fact that the refugees fleeing from the city “brought with them an uncanny silence. No one dared question these mute figures.” They had ceased to be human, to be natural and cultural beings, because they were deprived of speech and had become speechless automatons who mimicked and mocked human behavior in an uncanny manner. The fact that this disastrous destruction of Hamburg was “the end” for its residents of 1943 meant “we no longer have a past” (23), only a present that was unbearable and an unthinkable future torn away from any connection with the past. Perhaps they did not even have a present and future as “we no longer had any time at all, we were outside of time.” In other words, they transcended time into eternity (40). Space and time ceased to exist as they had been known to exist in the past.

Not only was the spatial landscape transformed, but also the temporal timescape as well: “the infinite behind man wafted unhindered in the endlessness before him and hallowed his countenance for the passage of what is beyond time” (Nossack, 2004: 29). Space and time are collapsed together into the landscape of eternity and infinity, into the sublime where space and time are collapsed. By mixing fire and air and sublimating solid matter into gaseous flame and smoke, the firebombing of cities in World War II was sublime (see Giblett, 2009: Chapter 5). The less, or more, than human figures who people this landscape are not only mute automatons but also icons with eyes “grown larger and transparent” (Nossack, 2004: 29) through witnessing the horrors of fiery destruction of their city and the (its, their) past.

Writing on the firebombing of German cities by Allied bombers, W. G. Sebald (2003b: 19) argues “the war in the air was war pure and undisguised.” In this “pure air war” “the innermost principle of every war, which is to aim for a wholesale annihilation of the enemy with his dwellings, his history, and his natural environment as can possibly be achieved” was pursued and largely

achieved. This principle was exercised by war being taken to the new heights achievable by fighter and bomber planes that not only produced “a kind of mobile front line” as Sebald puts it moving to and fro across the horizontal dimension of space, but also up and down within its vertical dimension (17). Planes and balloons had been used in World War I but it was predominantly an earth-bound war that took place on, and in, the earth, in mud, the watery depths beneath the surface as we have seen in the chapter on London and to which I return in the chapter on Washington.

World War II was less earth-bound and took place on, and above, the surface of the earth. The results were different too with whole French towns and villages obliterated by artillery bombardment and their residents killed or displaced as refugees in World War I, whereas in World War II many German cities were ruined from firebombing and their residents burnt to death or displaced too. Both landscapes, however, were described as “lunar landscapes” as with World War I and as Sebald (2003b) remarks with World War II. The lunar landscapes of both World Wars I and II were produced by bombardment and both were wastelands (74) and products of modern industrial warfare (64), or more precisely “the machinery of annihilation operating on an industrial scale” (96) as Sebald puts it.

Yet the two world wars were different in that the lunar landscape of World War I was characterized by craters full of water on and below the surface of the earth whereas the lunar landscape of World War II was made up of “mounds of rubble” (Sebald, 2003b: 36 and 74) on and above the earth’s surface. The former was wet and cold, and the latter dry and hot. The countryside of World War I trench warfare was a waste wetlandscape of artificial “swamps” whereas the bombed cities of World War II aerial warfare were “a landscape of ruins” (46). Although Blunden ([1928] 2000), Hurley (1917), and Thomas ([1917] 1978) comment repeatedly on the ruins of World War I, these ruins were of individual buildings and villages, not of large proportions of cities as in World War II. Sebald (2003b: 30) called some areas of Germany during World War II “that vast wilderness, perhaps the most horrifying expanse of ruins in the whole of Europe.” From France as “swamp” to Germany as ruin marks a profound, elemental shift in the exercise of armament, in the deployment of firepower, and its destructive force and the experience of war for civilian and soldier citizens.

Walter Benjamin (1999: 732) argued that in what he called “positional warfare” of World War I “a generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.” Benjamin took his own life in 1940 before he could remark about the next generation that had gone to school in electric streetcars and steam railways, who in the strategic warfare of World War II now sat huddled in the closed air of bomb shelters amid a landscape of ruins in which they could not even see the clouds, but still at its center, in a force field of greater destructive torrents of fire and exploding bombs, was the still tiny, fragile human body. Yet whereas the tiny, fragile human body that Benjamin remarked upon in World War I trench warfare in the country was the soldier body, the tiny, fragile human body in World War II strategic bombing of the city was the civilian body.

These changes in the conduct of warfare mark a shift in the type of landscape produced: from feral swamp to ruined cities; and from human-made countryside remade into human-made swamp to human-made city remade into human-made ruin. A ruin is defined by Solnit (2005a: 88) as “a human construction abandoned to nature.” A bombed city is an artificial ruin, a human construction destroyed by culture. A feral swamp is a native construction abandoned by humans. Both swamp and ruin stand as figures for the unconscious. Just as the swamp is a figure for the cultural unconscious (see Giblett, 1996), so ruins for Solnit (2005a: 89) “become the unconscious of the city.” Out of both new life can spring as Solnit argues that “with ruin a city comes to death, but a generative death like the corpse that feeds flowers” (90), just as the corpses did in the battlefields of World War I.

Cities and citizens, generally located well away from troops fighting on the ground, became the front line in aerial warfare. In modern war, for Jörg Friedrich (2006: 357), “the difference between soldier and civilian no longer existed; everyone was a warrior.” In the air war everyone was a combatant and a target. “Civilian warriors,” as Friedrich calls them, “were defenceless; they had no weapons” (358). The front line was not merely mobile in time and space but also socially mobile across the distinction between soldier and civilian. Civilians for Pimlott (1988: 123) were “the new front line in total war” with devastating consequences for them and their cities and homes.

For Camus (2006: 40) writing during World War II, Germany was “resigned to the appalling destruction that is raining down on their cities.” Camus later conjured up “an apocalyptic image” of “its cities [that had been] transformed into shapeless rubble” (229). What had rained down from the sky had destroyed cities on the ground. Camus visited occupied Germany shortly after the Armistice and what he saw “reinforced the premonition” as he found “the rubble and the barren fields ravaged by war and dotted with military cemeteries overshadowed by ungenerous skies.” He concluded that “this indeed is the land of the dead.” Resigned or not to the destruction, the fact remains that the sky above was no longer just the generous source of life-giving air and rain but also the greedy medium of terrifying, death-dealing, and fiery destruction on cities and citizens alike.

The deployment of what Virilio (2005: 15) calls “our aero-naval modernity” against cities such as Hamburg entailed what he also called “the ‘aeropolitics’ of a mass extermination of cities” (Virilio, 2007: 8). This mass extermination of cities destroyed buildings and their inhabitants in a kind of genocide of cities, a citi-cide, or what Helphand (2006: 246) calls “urbacide,” “the willful destruction of cities.” Just as World War I turned the country into a “desert,” World War II turned the city into a “desert.” For Virilio (2007: 7) “a human environment [was] turned into a desert through the annihilation brought about by air raids.” Like the “desert” of World War I, the “desert” of World War II was not a living, “natural” ecosystem but a human-made wasteland. Whereas the “desert” of World War I was wet, muddy, and cold, the “desert” of World War II was dry, rubbly, and hot. This mass extermination of cities occurred at the tail end of World War II and on into the Cold War. For Virilio (2005: 15), “after Dresden, and especially after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this ‘aeropolitics’ turned into a cosmopolitics of nuclear terror with the *Anti-City* strategy.”

The nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki heralded for Bourke (2005: 363) the inception of “The Age of Terrorism,” which then thrived during the Cold War and continues to do so even today. This age with its anticity strategy, however, was by no means procountry but merely replaced and extended the anticountry strategy that had culminated in the landscape of trench warfare into the anticity strategy that culminated in the landscape of ruined cites. Our aero-naval hypermodernity is both anticity and anticountry.

The anticity strategy of World War II was carried out by the fire storming of strategic bombing, whereas the anticountry strategy of World War I was carried out by the earthmoving machinery of artillery bombardment and trench construction.

The ruination of European cities began in 1940 with the German Blitz of Coventry and London, increased with the Allied bombing of Hamburg in 1943 (Lowe, 2007), and culminated in the destruction of such cities as Dresden (Taylor, 2004) and Würzburg (Knell, 2003) in 1945. Goebbels evoked the bombing of London in 1940 in Dantesque terms as “an inferno of unimaginable extent. The city is coming to resemble a hell” (cited by Taylor, 2004: 100). Yet the bombing of London was limited and the resulting fire was half a square mile in extent. It was officially named a “conflagration.” For Taylor it “was the nearest London came to what later would be called a fire-storm” (108). For Grayling (2006: 18) (as we have seen), “the first ever fire-storm caused by bombing” was in Hamburg in July 1943, and not in London in 1940.

Yet a recent, two-part BBC-TV documentary on the Blitz claims that London more than came close to a fire storm as it is subtitled *London's Firestorm*. Some of the interviewees describe the event as a firestorm. “Bomber” Harris, one of the architects of the allied firestorm, witnessed the London Blitz of December 1940 and remarked of the Germans that “they are sowing the wind” (cited by Taylor, 2004: 109; Grayling, 2006: 49). The rest of this biblical verse (Hosea 8:7) goes on to prophesy that they would reap the whirlwind—as indeed Germany did as one witness remarked of the firebombing of Dresden and the resulting firestorm (Taylor, 2004: 267). Yet as Jorg Friedrich (2006: unpag., “Afterword for American and British Readers”) points out, “a characteristic of air wars is that those who sow the wind do not reap the whirlwind and those who reap the whirlwind did not sow the wind.”

The landscape of trench warfare was a battlefield for military combatants pitted against each other in the country, whereas the landscape of fire-bombed cities was the result of military operations against civilians in the city. World War I was fought in the country and over the country; it was also fought on, in, and sometimes under the ground. The theatre of operations was the countryside with its fields, hills, valleys, villages, woods, and wetlands. The immediate strategic objectives were positions in the country: that ridge or salient

or village. Paris was a long-term and remote German objective. London was bombed in 1915 and 1917, and thirteen hundred people were killed as a result of 225 tons of bombs being dropped on it (Bourke, 2005: 224). This tonnage and these casualties pale into insignificance compared to World War II.

World War II was fought over (in two senses) the city; it was fought on and over the ground and sometimes above the city in the air. The theatre of operations was through the countryside to the cities and over the cities. Paris and Vienna were immediate and readily achieved German objectives, London and other British cities, targets; later Dresden and Hamburg, and many other German cities were immediate Allied objectives, and targets, as were Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. Most of the major battles of World War I were land battles; some of the major, if not decisive, battles of World War II were air battles, such as the Battle of Britain fought in the air. Indeed, for Camus (2006: 45) writing in 1944 four years after the Battle of Britain, “Germany lost the war when it lost the Battle of Britain,” which rather spectacularly ignores the Russian front, a good, old-fashioned land war.

The transformation of the land in both wars had its effect on those who fought these wars and were affected by them. That reshaping took place at the fundamental level of the arrangements between the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water as we have seen. The reconfiguration of the elements in world warfare had implications for, and effects on, human sensory perception in the feral quaking zones of trench and aerial warfare (see Giblett, 2009: “Coda: The Elements and the Senses in World Warfare,” 69–85). Warfare is not only an assault on the human body in general, but also on the senses in particular. The nature of this assault changed in the transition from the trench warfare of World War I to the aerial warfare in World War II. Soldiers for Helphand (2006: 33) in World War I “saw, heard, smelled, touched, and even tasted daily, hourly, what in a sane world would only ever be [a] fleeting assault on the senses by the horrific.” Aerial bombers in World War II saw, heard, and may have smelled, but certainly did not touch and taste, daily what in the insane world of modern industrial warfare was a fleeting and limited assault on the senses by the horrific. What they saw, heard, and may have smelled would have been horrific, but they did not touch and taste the horrific, unlike the soldiers in the trenches of World War I. Bombers were also subject to the terrors of sublime aerial warfare, unlike soldiers in the previous world

war who were subjected to the horrors of slimy trench warfare (see Giblett, 2009). Bombers were sublimated up above the destruction on the earth below, whereas soldiers were slimed down in the muddy land. The sensory experience of the feral quaking zone of warfare differs also from that of the native quaking zone of wetlands. The swamp can look ugly, smell bad, feel slimy, taste muddy, and sound oozy, and produce horror and the uncanny, but its address to the senses can be pleasant, and it is certainly not as horrific nor as terrifying as the assault on the senses that warfare entails.

Yet in war, especially in modern industrial warfare, air and earth are elements of the dead and dying. They are elements of an antiaesthetics of ugly sights and cacophonous sounds. Fire-storms sucked oxygen out of the air until it ceased to be life-giving and became death-dealing. In the words of one eyewitness of the Hamburg firestorm, "the air was actually filled with fire" (cited by Grayling, 2006: 83). The bombers produced the sound of "the doom-laden drone in the heavens" (cited by Lowe, 2007: 161). The firestorm produced the sounds of "a shrill howling" that "grew into a hurricane" and "a sea of flames" (cited by Grayling, 2006: 83). Lowe (2007: 195) notes that "*Flammenmeer*, 'sea of flames,' comes up again and again in accounts of the firestorm" and he cites many instances of this usage. For Jorg Friedrich (2006: 84 and 167) "through heat, radiation, and toxic gases, the very air was being transformed into something unliveable ... the air that life needs to thrive had been exchanged for something else. The firestorm simulated the atmosphere of another planet, one incompatible with life." Earth had ceased to be earth, and air, air.

The creative mixing of the elements of air, water, and earth in wetlands becomes artificially and industrially reconstituted in the sea of flames of World War II in which air, water, and fire were no longer mixed creatively but destructively. The sensual experience of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching in a wetland becomes horrific in the industrial warfare of World Wars I and II. The surface of the body immersed in a wetland becomes in industrial warfare the site of assault not only on the senses, but also the entry point for an assault on inner organs, on the depths of the body.

Fire war is a war of radiation to the surface of the body and combustion of the surfaces of the body and the earth with burning flesh, buildings, and trees. The skin in fire war, Jorg Friedrich (2006: 440) says, "felt the

temperature and the blast of air, the build up of the blaze and the wind that carried it.” Fire war also produced toxic gases. The flames, Friedrich says, “poisoned the air. Combustion generates heat and gases, the main agents that attack the body” (330). And not just the outside surfaces but also the inside surfaces. The nose, Friedrich says, “registered the fire and odorous gases” (440). Toxic gases generated by burning were the main cause of death. In Hamburg, for example, toxic gases caused 70–80 percent of the deaths (167). Hamburg is a city that had the misfortune of being located in a marsh, and so it could not provide shelter for its citizens in cellars and bomb shelters below the surface of the earth. Its citizens were therefore exposed to the air above the surface with deadly effect on them and their city built on a marsh.