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In recent years, the seriousness of even apparently minor concussions has become more evident, and brain injuries and traumatic stress are far better understood, in part due to the prevalence of head/stress injuries in our recent crazy wars. Yet the more subtle symptoms, such as the lingering sensations of inhabiting a palpably different subjectivity and personality, are still not fully recognized.

Over the course of a long evening spent by the fireplace during the winter of the polar vortex, the ephemeral cultural theorist Damona Wolff grilled me on the creative impacts and influences of an entirely unexpected event that literally changed who I am. The transcript of our fireside chat follows, edited for clarity:



*DW You were sixteen, in the summer, in Maine, on a rainy night, a passenger in a car driving down dark country road...*

*GW Yes, we were six in the car, five of us Counselors In Training (CITs) for an archetypal old-style Maine summer camp; the sixth, the driver, a Junior Counselor, was one year older. It was the night before the campers were due to arrive, so we were out for a last night of partying, not out on the town exactly, but out by the lake, a picnic area. There was a bonfire, and the welcome company of lots of counselors including CITs from the nearby girls camp, so spirits were high; some fairly wild dancing, lots of singing, flirting, showing off.*

*DW I imagine, this being the seventies, there may have been a whiff of something herbal in the air?*

*GW Strange as it may seem, no. One of the older counselors gave us one beer, I kid you not, one beer, and told us to share it, though the Junior Counselor driver got his own beer. Maybe the older counselors had something else besides beer, but if they did, we didn't know about it. Eventually, the fire burned down and the word went around, time to head back to camp, the kiddies would soon be arriving. So the five of us CITs piled into the car driven by the JC and hit the road, singing, laughing, in absolutely top spirits, lots of joking, and some jockeying over who sat where. Because I had taken the window front seat on the way to the party, I ended up in the back seat, on the right hand side. Of course, all this jockeying would take on fresh meaning about a half hour later.*

*DW That's when....*

GW Crash. Yes. Head on. We were going about fifty miles an hour, fifteen miles over the speed limit, and the other car was going forty five or so. We took one curve way too wide, not expecting anyone else on the road, and crashed head on with the other car, a Toyota. We were in an old Volvo station wagon that belonged to the camp, built like a tank, and it pretty much cut right through the Toyota, that's the only to describe it, and then we veered off and slammed into a telephone pole. My last memory is of the oncoming headlights, a split second before the crash; everything else I know from the policeman who visited in the hospital, and from the trial, months later, for the driver of our car.

*DW Vehicular homicide?*

GW Something like that, maybe driving to endanger; I have never been clear about it, whether it was a criminal charge with implications for insurance, or a civil trial that was actually all about insurance, and award of damages. Anyway, the two elderly people in the other car were killed instantly, massive trauma, and there were very serious injuries in our car, including the boy in front of me who was partially paralyzed, and another who almost bled out from a deep puncture wound to the neck. Many broken bones, countless lacerations, internal injuries, you name it. The driver was completely crushed, mentally, unable to cope. The couple in the other car were returning home just ten miles or so away after a family gathering, seeing the grand kids, all too terrible to contemplate.

*DW But alcohol was not an issue, right?*

GW Well, I am not sure I could say that because I have always felt that even one beer may have made some slight difference, I mean we are talking about tiny decisions here, all adding up to the one bad turn that leads to a fatal crash, and so I've inspected every second of the time before, wondering what might have been different. One moment we're a car full of happy teenagers, and a second later, there is just this absolute carnage, wreckage, death. Fortunately, someone else drove by the scene right away, and alerted the police in the next town, and an ambulance was there within a half hour.



VIOLINS VIOLENCE SILENCE

*DW I remember reading in [one of your essays](#) something about a decapitation?*

GW Yes, well I know the injuries to the couple in the other car were horrific, nobody was wearing seat belts in either car, and in the days and weeks after the crash I had terrible intrusive thoughts, not a head cut off, but the neck, just a fountain of blood, bubbling out, so I must have seen something like that, I had no history of those sorts of visions prior to the accident. I was conscious, but I have no direct memory, just these flashing pictures out of the dark, and evidence from the trial, where a description of the various wounds and injuries seemed to go on forever.

*DW So your injuries were not so bad, you were still conscious and on your feet?*

GW It turns out my injuries were extremely serious, but the human body generates opiates to keep functioning when wounded, plus the jolts of adrenaline, so even though I had a jaw and nose smashed so badly that something punctured my dura mater, which is the membrane that separates the brain from the skull and keeps the brain fluid in, I managed to get out of the wreckage. So there I was with brain fluid leaking out my nose, and all sorts of facial and arm gashes, and various internal bruising and bleedings, plus the brain disruption, hard to know how to classify it; axonal reconfiguration? Anyway, despite all that, I was on my feet, and so were a couple of the others. We must have seen that we were all still alive, so we went over to the other car. The policeman arrived, then the ambulance; I must have faded fairly dramatically en route to the Portland Medical Center because when we got there I was triaged out.

*DW What, not treated?*

GW It was the middle of the night, not much staff on hand in the ER, so they had to make the usual triage decisions, and someone decided I was not looking likely to survive, so they sort of parked me out in the hall for a while. Then an intern came by, felt for my pulse and wondered what

I was doing out there, so she wheeled me into the ER herself, and I guess I got a transfusion very quickly, since I had lost so much blood. She checked in with me a few days later and told me the story; sadly, I don't even know her name, though she may have saved my life. One of the senior counselors at the camp later told me that the first edition of the regional paper mentioned one dead from our car, but I never saw that. My mother bought the later edition when she arrived the next day, and by then we were all listed as "critical", all except the driver, who had only very minor physical injuries. The elderly husband and wife were listed as having died at the scene.

*DW And everyone else in your car lived?*

*GW* Yes, but we were not in good shape. It's not like we were seeing each other walking the halls or in the recovery room; everyone was in separate rooms, then three of us were transported to other hospitals closer to New York. The driver was taken home by his parents; his physical injuries were minor, but he was severely depressed. In fact, I did not see any of the others until the trial, much later. Once I was wheeled out of intensive care, I was put in a double room with a young man, maybe early twenties, with a brain tumor. He would scream things in the middle of the night, strange words and phrases, and then the next minute, he'd be laughing to himself, or that's how it sounded. Anyway, at that point the docs were mostly worried about the physical head and facial injuries, the brain fluid loss and the puncture of the dura mater. In more recent years, they probably would have been more concerned about coup contrecoup injury and post-concussive syndrome.

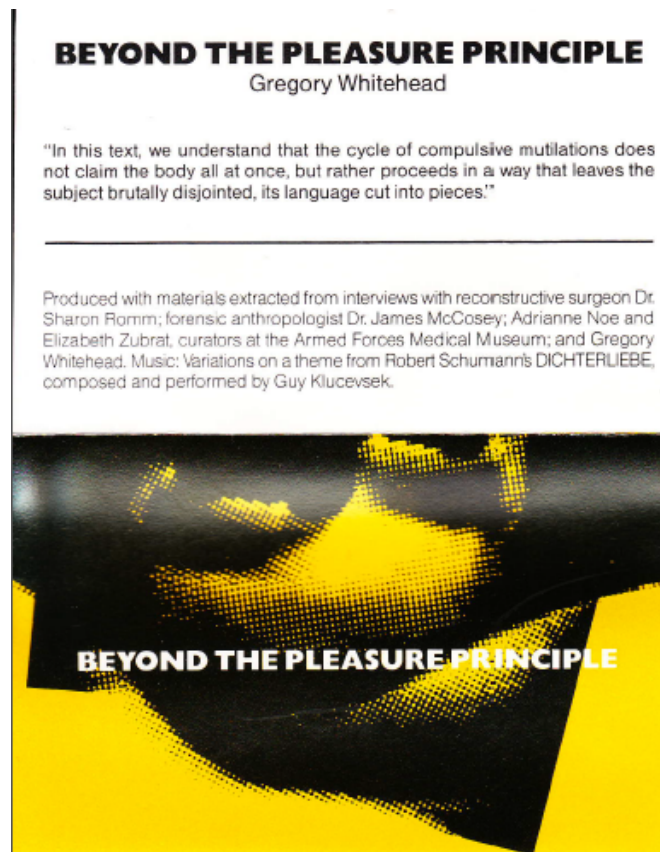


JIM BALLARD AND HIS CRASH

*DW What did the doctors tell you?*

*GW* They didn't say much, they just sort of looked at me, slightly surprised, as in *how can this*

*boy still be alive?* One big problem: I couldn't talk very well. My jaw was wired, and I had lost several teeth, plus my head was swollen and stitched up, bruises everywhere; I was unable to physically move my "speech apparatus" in a way that would produce anything resembling dialogue; it was more one word answers, or half words. I was aware that I was thinking differently, that things had shifted around up there inside the egg shell. To be honest, as an adolescent used to being the nice-looking golden boy in the room, I was mostly terrified that I had lost my entire face; why else would they remove the mirror from the bathroom? So there was this certain panic, oh no, I'm going to die a virgin; all these cute young nurses wandering around, and there I was, the wired up monster, in the room with the screaming brain tumor man; it was all fairly grim, and then there was also the perception that I was literally out of my head, or that the head that I now had was not my own - and every time I closed my eyes, I saw these terrible images - the headlights, and the fountain of blood. Nothing the doctors said addressed any of these "issues". Not their fault, mind you, they surely had no idea what was running through my head.



*DW At some point, your family arrived?*

*GW* My mother arrived late the next day; I was still in the intensive care unit. My father was away on business, so he had further to travel, and there were no friends or anyone from the camp, really, I mean the whole camp was in crisis after such a major accident involving unsupervised minors, well after midnight, with fatalities from the local community, and the camp leadership went into a combination of damage control and denial, plus dealing with suddenly being short six

counselors. Eventually, the camp director showed up for a visit, but it was all very stiff and pro forma.

*DW What sort of tests did they run, for the head injury?*

GW CT scans were in their infancy, and things were still pretty much in the dark ages in terms of understanding brain injuries and trauma, so they were more concerned about stopping the leak of the brain fluid, which they were able to do fairly quickly, and soon after that, they became more concerned with various "bruits" they were hearing inside my torso.

*DW Bruits? As in french for "noises"?*

GW Yes, I guess the french "bruits" is traditionally used for odd interior soundings. The first time he said it, I thought the doc was saying "brewy", and I was thinking, no, wait, I only had a few sips of beer! Anyway, checking out the bruits meant hooking me up to every piece of hardware they had, including kidney tests with urinary catheterization, not exactly a welcome procedure for a sixteen year old already terrified he was doomed to a life of celibacy, and now a nurse just a couple of years older is approaching with a thin glass rod, no I cannot say any of that was terribly welcome. Meanwhile, I had massive absolutely screaming headaches, but I didn't tell anyone because I was worried they would start poking around in there, too; all I wanted was to lie still in the dark, in the silence, and try to gather myself together.

*DW It sounds like torture.*

GW That is how I experienced it, and I say this while stressing that I also completely understand that everyone was being compassionate and professional; there was just something so profoundly wrong in the underlying structure of the hospital, and all its own internal imperatives and protocols. To this day, I have a severe hospital phobia, and dread ever having to go back for any reason. In some deep way, I felt like I was being harvested, rather than healed. I mean, not harvested of a kidney or anything, but harvested of data and measurements and signs and wonders, harvested of myself, of my subjectivity, beat up as it was. The complete elimination of privacy, above all for a massively self-conscious teenager who had just been violently defaced, or so I imagined, all this was intolerable.





EVA HESSE, NO TITLE

*DW When did you realize something was really and truly wrong in your head, I mean, that your brain was....*

GW Let's say "different", with a nod to [Catherine Malabou](#) and her spirited celebrations of neuroplasticity. Very different. Small, little things, but in sum, very different. I was aware of it in the hospital, but I also told myself it must be the meds, so I guess I didn't really have to confront reality until I was back at camp, weeks later, and tapering off the pain pills, which I disliked taking anyway, all the way down to a couple of aspirin.

*DW What, back at camp, how did that happen?*

GW Somehow the decision was made that I would be better off at camp, even though none of the other CITs were there, they had all been sent home to recover, but somehow I was sent back to camp, and was in fact put in charge of a cabin with four boys, ages 12-13. I knew something was a little wrong when I couldn't remember their names from the morning to the afternoon; I eventually had to keep an index card in my back pocket.

*DW That's serious.*

GW I had always been a voracious reader, yet one day early on back at camp I struggled to get through the first pages of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, not exactly *Finnegan's Wake*. That was terrifying, though the camp nurse kept saying that was normal, everything was normal, not to worry, it would get better, as she gave me my vanilla protein shake, which was all I could eat with

my wired jaw, that and liquified vegetables. Mainly, though, I just felt like a different person - feelings, thoughts, dreams, everything. I know now that this is a very common symptom, even with minor concussions, but at the time, nobody was aware of any of it; there was the idea that if you waited long enough, everything would just go back to normal. As the summer went on, my reading abilities did get back to normal, so in terms of cognitive capabilities, all clear, more or less, but the sense of being a different person persisted, and the loneliness of not being able to talk to anyone about it was quite harsh. Radio played a huge positive role. I would listen late into the night, the transistor beneath my pillow, which I had been doing since early tweenhood. I could almost feel old, familiar pathways firing up in the brain, as I roamed the dial.

*DW We'll talk more about radio later, but aside for the nurse, how did everyone else treat you once you were back at camp?*

GW Like a ghost. I mean, nobody even wanted to look at me. It was extremely uncomfortable, and meanwhile the camp owners and directors were fearful that the litigation and insurance costs would bankrupt the camp. With a wired jaw, I could not communicate very well, had to eat with a straw. I mean, I was just a walking downer, not exactly the vision of happy-go-lucky summer fun. I was a ghost to myself, too, there was just this existential fog all around me. In a way I guess I was relieved that people would look right through me, because the fact is, I did not want to engage with them, either, I was such a mass of anxiety and confusion. None of this was beneficial, since I really needed interaction and connection to a group to help me put myself together again. Yes, these are subtle changes I'm talking about, and from the outside I doubt anybody noticed much; the sensation of being separated from my own emotions, everything seemed foggy and incoherent, blurs around the edges. In a way, though, the subtlety of it all made it worse, because I could not even really grasp it, or name it, not even to myself, not the old self, and not the new self. Maybe that's why I have always been fascinated with limbo zones, in between, why those sorts of places seem so familiar.



RROSE HELPS OUT IN  
THE TRAUMA WARD



*DW What were the main changes, between the pre-crash and post-crash selves?*

GW I would not have described my childhood as happy, far from it, but I had never experienced anything even remotely resembling the sort of soul-crushing darkness of the depressions after the crash. Volatile emotions, with sudden eruptions of rage and anger that would leave me shaking and bewildered; toxic negativity about myself and everyone else; very poor impulse control, diminished ability to connect actions with consequences, and to process emotions; all this would have been completely foreign to the pre-crash phantom self, even as a teenager. The fact that I was still going through adolescence may have provided others with an easy explanation for such massive changes in behavior and character, but that certainly was not my explanation. My old self was disappeared by the accident, so who was this imposter?

*DW Have you ever met up with your friends in the car, since the trial?*

GW Four of us - not the driver, who was still very depressed, and not the boy who was paralyzed, though we tried to contact him, and I hope he fully recovered - went to a Knicks playoff game the following spring, and it was uncomfortable. I think we were all still struggling in various ways with what happened, but being teenagers, we did not really know how to talk about it in any meaningful or helpful way, so we just watched the game, bantered and made lots of jokes, and then we went our separate ways again, barely mentioning the accident. Possibly, they were coming to grips with their own phantom selves.

*DW What was it like going home and returning to school, after the summer?*

GW Very hard. The school was a standard preppie meat grinder sort of place, not naturally disposed towards the healing of wounded souls. Then in October, I broke my leg on the soccer pitch, collided with the goalie, another head on crash. The break was so bad the bones came right through the skin, I could see them; hit my head on the ground, too, which was not exactly what the doctor ordered. I was in bed for six weeks, more pain meds, which I hated because they mucked with my head even more. All because everyone including myself wanted to pretend everything was fine; that I would simply go back to how things were before, and carry on where I left off, the niggling problem being that I was no longer actually that person. Then to top everything off, my parents got divorced, which I completely understood and accepted, but the timing was a bit unfortunate.

*DW That sounds like a lot of bad news, in a short period of time.*

GW Well, the gods play with us all, and I have read so many stories of TBI and PTSD that are far far worse, in every dimension - I only want to help people understand that these are invisible wounds, for the most part, but very consequential wounds; damaging to the sense of self, and most

importantly to the way emotions are experienced and processed. I had major trouble processing emotion well into my twenties. I would behave in these ridiculous ways and then look down from a high height, and it would all seem so far away, not of myself, yet undeniably mine. It was if all the emotional intelligence I had accumulated through childhood was not available to me, and I had to begin all over again. Things did get better, with time. Music, writing, late-night radio and the love of a few close and faithful friends got me through.

*DW Why is any of this important for understanding your work, and how did it figure in your actual process of creativity, from the woundscape?*

GW It's not essential for experiencing the work, I don't think, but it might be of interest, above all to others who have experienced any sort of severe trauma. When these themes and sounds and structures appear throughout my work, they are not gratuitous or intellectual, they are visceral, lodged in my own body and mind.

*DW Specific examples?*

GW OK, in pieces like Beyond the Pleasure Principle, [Dead Letters](#), [Respirator](#) or [Display Wounds](#), the connection is obvious and explicit, but the same themes also appear in later pieces like [Pressures of the Unspeakable](#), [the PKD play](#) and [The Club](#). I've had lots of correspondence from people who offer their own stories about psychological or physical traumas, and they say things like, Gregory, how do you know these things, as if I am operating on pure intuition. Nothing against intuition, but if you really want to understand the woundscape, you have to go there, be there, live there, inside out.

# PHANTOM PAIN

Gregory Whitehead

Operations → Ecstasy → Theatre

"When the clot occurs in the conventional notion of a clot, you say alright, that's the Drama."

Produced with the participation of military surgeon Dr. James Salander, artist Aimée Rankin and theorist Herbert Blau.



DW *What about the brain "reconfiguration", specifically, how does that express itself in your work?*

GW For a while in the eighties, I became fascinated with phantom pain, and I began to theorize that my experience since the accident has been shaped by a sort of "phantom self", a pre-accident self that I get glimpses of from time to time; a self that is present yet inaccessible, like a phantom limb, or a sort of prosthetic self, as in [How to Pronounce "Prosthesis"](#). Another stream that runs through my work is the slipperiness of identity, shaped by specific neural maps, and those maps are fragile and malleable, so each person contains a million possible selves, depending on the rhythms and patterns of the neural network - Whitman's multitudes. Also, how the space of "the accident" is very much present in our everyday world. There exists this whole parallel woundscape zone, just one wrong turn away from normal life. I suppose that explains some of the sudden acoustic interruptions I use, structurally, the little explosions of sound, little windows or cracks opening into this chaos zone that is always just beneath the surface of our well-tempered everyday lives.

DW *Like the "bruits".*

GW Yes, exactly. Then there's my intense skepticism about technological novelty, and my

preference for more lo-tech, hybrid analog-digital processes, with lots of room for small mistakes, in favor of avoiding the grand accident that wipes out everything with a single crash; my preference for an aesthetic of dispersion, gaps, play; all this I think is rooted in the accident, and the months and years that followed. In any event, I'm not being morbid with any of these themes and ideas, thinking they are cool intellectual zones to inhabit for a while and move on -- this is my real experience of life. Not my only experience, of course, but the accident is where this particular "me" was born, and it wasn't pretty.



INTENSIVE CARE UNIT DESIGNED  
BY MD

*DW Did writers like Ballard and Virilio help you in any way, during the late seventies and eighties?*

GW Ballard's Crash, yes, I remember the phrase "terrifying almanac of insane wounds", he got that one right; and the tone of so much of his writing, Atrocity Exhibition and many of the novels, strangely fogbound and disembodied, almost like his entire oeuvre suffers from a brain injury, that quality has always appealed to me. Virilio was tremendously exciting to read, not just the writings on dromology and the aesthetics of disappearance, but also his work on bunker archeology, yes, all these made an impression and gave me new ways of thinking about consciousness, modernity, space, acceleration, all of which had been on my mind for years.

*DW Other artists?*

GW Eva Hesse - the first time I saw her work I burst into tears, it had such a powerful effect on me, and she had died only a few years before then, very young, of a brain tumor; and Bruce Nauman, another trauma artist. Duchamp, as a pure intelligence who understands the sensual dispersion of thought and self - Rose Selavy, healer of head wounds. When I lived for a few years in Philly, I often walked over to the art museum -- past Rodin's porte de l'enfer - to gaze into [étants donnés](#) as a sort of ritual pilgrimage; it seemed to me that Duchamp knew all about the phantom self. Then Chris Marker, and his vertigo of associations, like neural maps, and his deeply intuitive

sense of the internal rhythms of disaster, and the lacerations of identity and figuration. His film *Sans Soleil* had a huge impact on me; I spent two days at Film Forum, watching over and over again, dragging in everyone I knew, to see it. And finally, lots of music; music that many people considered overly dissonant or unlistenable struck my ears as strangely comforting, composers like Harry Partch, Luigi Nono, Sun Ra, the late Coltrane.



THE PHANTOM SELF IS NOT A PROBLEM

*DW Do you still experience intrusive thoughts, images?*

*GW* Yes, but they are so familiar now, I sort of wave to them as they drift by, no longer waking up in a cold sweat, shaking. There are still times when I may be sitting in the most peaceful and happy circumstances, and I will have this incredibly powerful sense that something terrible is about to happen, I can actually feel it in my body. So I just breathe through it, or sing -- singing is actually tremendously powerful, which young children know instinctively.

*DW Ongoing researches?*

*GW* I have read everything I can get my hands on about TBI, PTSD and contemporary neurophilosophy; the immensely important work of the [Damasios](#) on the brain and emotions, and their emphasis on creativity and group connection, opening up all sorts of new territory. Malabou, as I mentioned before, and the [brilliant bridging of trauma studies with the humanities](#) accomplished by Jonathan Shay, above all his use of the *Odyssey* as a way of describing the challenges faced by the morally injured and traumatized to find their way home. And finally, my own radio plays and other projects, going into all those "wounded" media spaces and philosophical spaces that in turn provide insight into the complexities of my own composite subjectivity, with all

its [rattles and rolls](#). The dance between eros and thanatos that [I harp on and on about](#) when talking about radio art has also been my life-dance, and we help each other out, on the dance floor. Of course, the radically new understanding of the brain also has a dark side, namely increasingly sophisticated methods of psychological torture and social manipulation, and I've been [trying to shed a bit of light into those dark corners](#) via [Desperado Philosophy](#). Trauma is not always the result of an accident; consciously traumatizing other human beings is absolutely the worst crime that can be committed, by individuals and by states, and these terrible crimes [continue to go unpunished](#).