

# Wolfgang Borchert's *Die Küchenuhr*

## A Study in Responding to Injury

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Born in Hamburg on 20 May 1921, Wolfgang Borchert succumbed to his steadily deteriorating condition in Basel on 20 November, 1947.<sup>1</sup> Written between the fall of 1946 and the summer of the following year, »Die Küchenuhr« was published on June 27, 1947,<sup>2</sup> less than six months before Borchert's death. It belongs to a collection of nineteen stories, dedicated to his father and entitled »An diesem Dienstag.«<sup>3</sup> At first glance it may only rate as a slip of a story. Nevertheless, its scant three pages belie the text's masterful strokes and their lasting impact. Their message is clear. Coping with injury, particularly significant injury, can be facilitated by means of a double-pronged approach. First, the severity of the loss should be acknowledged and subsequently the particulars of life before its occurrence should be visualized.

In Borchert's characteristic straightforward manner, the title already announces the narrative's primary focus. When your days are numbered, you hasten to make your point. Or as Heinrich Böll observed: »Zwei Jahre blieben ihm zum Schreiben, und er schrieb in diesen beiden Jahren, wie jemand im Wettlauf mit dem Tode schreibt. Wolfgang Borchert hatte keine Zeit, und er wußte es.«<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the kitchen clock and its pronoun are mentioned eight and 19 times respectively. Though critics tend to attribute this frequency to Borchert's predilection for repetition, it means so much more.

At the outset of the interpretation, some contextualizing remarks may be in order. This brief story tells of a 20-year-old man, who would have been reminiscent of Borchert's age upon the narrative's publication date. Borchert turned

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1 | Peter Rühmkorf: Wolfgang Borchert: In Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten [1961]. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1968, p. 155–168; Gordon Burgess: The Life and Work of Wolfgang Borchert. Rochester (NY): Camden 2003, p. 125–129.

2 | Gordon J. A. Burgess: Wolfgang Borchert. Hamburg: Hans Christians 1985 (Hamburger Bibliographien 24), p. 140.

3 | Wolfgang Borchert: Das Gesamtwerk [1949]. Hamburg: Rowohlt 1985, p. 167 f. All citations from *Die Küchenuhr* (p. 201–204), accompanied by page numbers within the interpretation, are taken from this edition.

4 | Burgess, Borchert, p. 16.

twenty-six on May 20, 1947. Except for the aforementioned kitchen clock (and obviously his own person), the narrative's central figure loses his parents, his home, his belongings, consequently, his daily routine and all the expectations these engendered. He forfeits them not in a series of events, not one by one, but all at once. Not only has the ship been torn from its moorings, the moorings are gone as well.<sup>5</sup>

Trauma theories abound. Yet several interrelated elements consistently appear: catastrophe<sup>6</sup> or atrocity,<sup>7</sup> »infliction of a wound,«<sup>8</sup> searing pain or overwhelming suffering,<sup>9</sup> stunned disbelief, the injury's »very incomprehensibility«<sup>10</sup> and consequently the difficulty articulating the terrible reality, »even as it becomes the only reality,«<sup>11</sup> the violent as well as sudden shredding of life's normal fabric, the aftermath, physical, mental, emotional or, more likely, all three. »Disasters [...] disturb what people think, feel and believe.«<sup>12</sup> They »shut down ordinary life.«<sup>13</sup> One devastating blow robs the main character of everyone, who mattered to him, of everything dear to him. In other words, he suffers trauma. A bomb did not miss its target; a single, destructive act obliterated virtually everyone and everything in its wake. As readers we are allowed to eavesdrop as the young man first absorbs and subsequently attempts to cope with the incalculable scale of his losses. We are invited to witness his response; given the story's brevity, we catch only a glimpse of his grieving process.

These tragic, at times awkward, at times bewildering realizations unfold in stages. Or do they? Some researchers maintain that the grieving process evolves

**5** | Borchert, *Das Gesamtwerk*, p. 5. – Borchert himself used this image. »Ich möchte Leuchtturm sein / in Nacht und Wind – / für Dorsch und Stint, / für jedes Boot – / und ich bin doch selbst / ein Schiff in Not!«

**6** | [Cathy Caruth:] *Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP 1996, p. 3.

**7** | Bessel A. Van der Kolk et al. (Eds.): *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society*. New York: Guilford 1996, p. 31.

**8** | [Caruth,] *Experience*, p. 6.

**9** | Kathleen M. O'Connor: *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise*. Minneapolis: Fortress 2011, p. 3.

**10** | *Ibid.*

**11** | *Ibid.*

**12** | *Ibid.*

**13** | *Ibid.*

in three,<sup>14</sup> five<sup>15</sup> perhaps even more phases.<sup>16</sup> Some theorists contend that mourners may indeed oscillate among them.<sup>17</sup> Robert Kastenbaum, one of this field's lead researchers, does not speak of stages or phases, but rather of waves of emotion, of fluctuations,<sup>18</sup> appropriating the term from Erich Lindemann's even earlier clinical studies. Robert Neimeyer suggests five challenges to those grieving from the obvious to the complex: acknowledging the reality of the loss as well as the ensuing pain, revising your assumptions, reconstructing your relationship to the loss itself, reconfiguring your priorities.<sup>19</sup> While John W. James and Frank Cherry, co-founders of the Grief Recovery Institute, assign sixteen and more tasks, which should be completed in order to achieve recovery.<sup>20</sup> Another researcher enumerates the thirteen possible grief reactions.<sup>21</sup> None of these theories appear to be mutually exclusive, but rather tend to build one upon other, blend into one another, as they evolve. In other words, much has been debated, undergone revision, learned and relearned, since Freud broached this area of inquiry and discussed the notion of »Trauerarbeit« in an essay, published in 1916: »Trauer und Melancholie.«<sup>22</sup>

Borchert's story is too short to enumerate all the possible stages, emotional fluctuations, tasks or characteristics of grief, the few or the many, but nevertheless we do notice some verifiable, some substantial, coping strategies. The needle moves forward, for it must. Whether we wish it to go on or not, life does go on. Or as a recent best seller proclaims, while quoting Samuel Beckett: »I can't go on. I'll go on.«<sup>23</sup>

**14** | George A. Bonnano: *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*. New York: Basic 2009, p. 7. For an overview of the development of grief theory, consult p. 11–24 of the volume just cited; Judith Lewis Herman: *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic 1992, p. 155; Robert A. Neimeyer: *Lessons of Loss: A Guide to Coping*. New York: McGraw/Hill 1998, p. 5–10.

**15** | John W. James/Frank Cherry: *The Grief Recovery Handbook: A Step-by-Step Program for Moving Beyond Loss*. New York: Harper & Row 1988, p. 101.

**16** | Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 155.

**17** | Bonnano, *Other Side of Sadness*, p. 39–42; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 155.

**18** | Robert J. Kastenbaum: *Death, Society and Human Experience*. Saint Louis: C. V. Mosby 1977, p. 243.

**19** | Neimeyer, *Lessons of Loss*, p. 40–48.

**20** | James/Cherry, *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, p. 53–159.

**21** | George W. Bowman: *Dying, Grieving, Faith and Family: A Pastoral Care Approach*. New York/London: Haworth 1998, p. 84–97.

**22** | Sigm[und] Freud: *Gesammelte Werke*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer 1940/London: Imago 1978, p. 430 ff.: *Trauer und Melancholie* (p. 428–446).

**23** | Samuel Beckett: *I can't go on, I'll go on*. Ed. by Richard W. Seaver. New York: Grove 1976. – Ironically enough, these lines rang true for another young man, whose relentless disease condemned him to a premature death. While completing a residen-

These attempts to survive begin so unobtrusively that they could easily be overlooked. He – we never learn his name for he represents millions – walks towards some folks seated on a bench. The opening lines are told exclusively from their perspective: »Sie sahen ihn schon von weitem auf sich zukommen [...]« (201) Though still a considerable distance from them, they can't help but notice the man's approach. There's something unusual about him. Though his gait reveals his tender years, his face betrays suffering and suggests not a young, but an old man. »Er hatte ein ganz altes Gesicht, aber wie er ging, daran sah man, daß er erst zwanzig war.« (201) To arrest our attention Borchert uses synecdoche. »Er setzte sich mit seinem alten Gesicht zu ihnen auf die Bank.« (201) The exemplary insertion of *pars pro toto* implies that the young man might as well have sat down with a package he was carrying; the grammatical structure of the simple sentence – one subject and verb – only encourages the reader's glance to linger a while longer.

Just as it is the young man, who seeks out the folks on the bench and joins them there, it is he, who initiates the verbal exchange. He utters four words: »Das war unsere Küchenuhr [...]« (Ibid.) And then follows this statement with the simply shattering: »Ja, ich habe sie noch gefunden. Sie ist übriggeblieben.« (201) They can easily surmise what that means. Only the clock survived the incendiary attack; all else was obliterated.

He then proceeds to describe the exact nature of his family's kitchen clock using a traditional, a classical method: definition by dint of negation. James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus explains this literary device in his disarming manner:

But temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as self-bounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehend it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness. That is *integritas*.

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Having first felt that it is *one* thing you feel now that it is a *thing*. You apprehend it as complex, multiple, divisible, separable, made up of its parts, the result of its parts and their sum, harmonious. That is *consonantia*.<sup>24</sup>

In an ingenious blending of *integritas* and *consonantia*, the young man enumerates for those on the bench all that the clock is not. No one has to tell him that it no longer holds any monetary value. He anticipates their negative assessment:

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cy in neurosurgery, Paul Kalanithi, M.D. was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic lung cancer. He was 36 and died just weeks prior to what would have been his 38th birthday. Paul Kalanithi: When Breath Becomes Air. New York: Random 2016, p. 149.

**24** | James Joyce: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Ed. by Chester G. Anderson. New York: Viking 1968, p. 212.

»Sie hat weiter keinen Wert, meinte er entschuldigend, das weiß ich auch.« (Ibid.) It does not qualify as particularly attractive either. Though the hands may be painted blue, they are only made of tin. Even in its prime, it did not elicit much attention, let alone admiration. And now he readily admits that this mundane timepiece even fails to perform its essential function.

Yet despite one disclaimer after another, how he handles the clock tells us unequivocally how much it means to him. Even now. With his finger, he dabs its blue hands and a few moments later, a similarly gentle gesture follows: »Er machte mit der Fingerspitze einen vorsichtigen Kreis auf dem Rande der Telleruhr entlang.« (202) In other words, he reverentially touches virtually all parts of the clock; he almost cradles it. In order to safeguard the sacredness of the moment, he speaks softly and assures his listeners again that after all the destruction had ceased, it was the only thing left. »Und er sagte leise: Und sie ist übriggeblieben.« (Ibid.)

To this juncture, he has made all the overtures to reach out. To remain alone (no siblings or extended family members are mentioned) would consign him to greater isolation and loneliness than already his lot. This random collection of individuals may not qualify as his first choice in listeners, but they evidently represent his only option. »The bereaved may be very driven to share memories and feelings with others, to talk of the deceased, to go over repeatedly aspects of the lost relationship, to put these memories outside, to look at them with others, to make meaning of them [...].«<sup>25</sup> Though he may not even be aware of doing so, in sharing his insights, he fulfills these and a host of other purposes. He reconnects with the greater community, indicated by a sampling of its members, e. g., a young mother, her infant, a man. He separates his memories into trauma and non-trauma, and, for the moment, chooses to focus exclusively on the positive and consequently marginalize the negative. The healing process must begin somewhere and he elects to begin with this multi-pronged approach. He hazards a step into the future through riveting his gaze onto the past. He chooses to move into the vagueness of the unknown from the verifiable known.

He joins those on the bench, shows them his clock. He looks at each person seated there individually; he describes his clock in both its physical and emotional dimensions. He expends no fewer than 14 utterances (most are sentences) in this totally one-sided effort. At last he elicits a response or two, even if not those he had in mind. He lowers his voice, but those on the bench hear him nonetheless and they do understand the import of his words. They are just not yet willing to acknowledge their realization. »But more often than not, the most healing thing that we can do with someone who is in pain, rather than trying to get rid of that pain, is to sit there and be willing to share it. We have to learn to

**25** | Beverly Raphael: *The Anatomy of Bereavement*. New York: Basic 1983, p. 44.

hear and to bear other people's pain.«<sup>26</sup> They signal their reluctance to do so in refusing to make eye contact. »Die auf der Bank in der Sonne saßen, sahen ihn nicht an.« (Ibid.) A man looks in the direction of his shoes, a woman at her baby carriage. Men, mothers, infants, shoes and carriages: who wouldn't instantly recognize those timeless signs of life, of motion at its most elementary?

Finally someone says something, betrays a modicum of interest and asks: »Sie haben wohl alles verloren?« (Ibid.) Despite the question mark, those words do not so much qualify as a question, as the confirmation of something already well established. Whoever poses the question knows the answer, the factual answer. That so-called inquiry and the truth it transmits remains entirely in the non-emotional, the safe realm. Then a woman adds to the literal catalogue, to the stonewalling, in telling the young man what he had already verbalized some moments ago: »Aber sie geht doch nicht mehr [...].« (Ibid.) The motivation for her steadfast refusal to enter his emotional world, to share in his tragedy proves simple. As indicated earlier, though she knows of it, she wishes to avoid his pain. She uses this classic defense mechanism for the same reasons all of us from time to time reach for such psychological maneuvers: »to protect the individual from experiencing excessive anxiety, and to protect the integration of the self.«<sup>27</sup> She does not intend to assess the situation in its ramifications or assist the young man; her instantaneous, her unreflective response only addresses her needs, not his. She opts for a defense rather than a coping mechanism. The latter always presumes the intent to understand, manage or solve a problem; a defense mechanism, on the other hand, only attempts to mitigate pain and secure the self. Though a coping strategy may in effect reduce pain and restore equilibrium, its primary consideration remains the resolution of a problem. Attempts to cope focus on the needs of the other, while at least temporarily bracketing the needs of the self, as legitimate as these may be.<sup>28</sup> The young man assures the woman once more that he remains well aware that his clock is broken; he also shows her, and all the others seated near him, the clock for the third time.

In doing so, he initiates the second phase of his grieving process. Though he has both fully acknowledged and integrated into his psyche the clock's undeniable and marked deficiencies, he now radically changes perspective and focuses on everything that is right and good about the timepiece. He does so with all the enthusiasm, all the energy of someone chancing upon a treasure. »Und was das Schönste ist, fuhr er aufgeregt fort, das habe ich Ihnen ja noch überhaupt nicht erzählt. Das Schönste kommt nämlich noch [...].« (Ibid.) Inviting his listeners once more to enter his psychic world and leave theirs aside, at least momentar-

**26** | M[organ] Scott Peck: *Further Along The Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Toward Spiritual Growth*. New York: Simon & Schuster 1993, p. 28.

**27** | Phebe Cramer: *Protecting the Self: Defense Mechanism in Action*. New York: Guilford 2006, p. 7.

**28** | Ibid., p. 8.

ily, he enunciates his discovery twice using chiasmic word order: »Denken Sie mal, sie ist um halb drei stehengeblieben. Ausgerechnet um halbe drei, denken Sie mal!« (Ibid.) Yet again one of the men seated nearby attempts to curtail, if not extinguish his fervor so seemingly unjustified, when seen exclusively from a literal point of view. »Dann wurde Ihr Haus sicher um halb drei getroffen, sagte der Mann und schob wichtig die Unterlippe vor.« (Ibid.) Of course, that is exactly what happened. The young man knows this fact, has internalized it, but chooses to divert his attention from the destruction to its diametric opposite, to something salvific. Before explaining, however, he admonishes in rather unequivocal terms the fellow who interrupted him. He uses at least four overt negations in multiple rapid-fire sentences: »Nein, lieber Herr, nein, da irren Sie sich. Das hat mit den Bomben nichts zu tun. Sie müssen nicht immer von den Bomben reden.« (Ibid.) He forcibly endeavors to redirect the attention of his listeners and methodically explains why it is so significant that the clock stopped at two-thirty and not at some other hour. Before elucidating further, he tries to make eye contact yet again and fails yet again. English speakers refer to the clock face; German speakers do not. Wolfgang Borchert personifies the *Zifferblatt*: »Da nickte er seiner Uhr zu« (ibid.) only to repeat that personification at the conclusion of his straightforward and yet, in view of the gravity of his loss, heart-rending description: »Da sagte er der Uhr leise ins weißblaue runde Gesicht [...].« (203)

Each night around two-thirty, he would return home from work and his mother would reheat his dinner. As expected, she had been sleeping, but nevertheless she would arise and make sure her son ate something. That she had been asleep did not prove the only inconvenience, although she would not have considered it such. In her estimation what she did for him was as natural as breathing. She would not have given it a second thought. His was not a moneyed family. The signs are omnipresent. The customary wood – or coal – burning stove found in several rooms would not have been lit at night.<sup>29</sup> His mother owns neither a robe nor slippers to offset the cold of the kitchen tiles. »Schuhe zog sie nachts nie an.« (Ibid.) Given the advanced hour, she doesn't engage her son in a lengthy conversation, she only says: »So spät wieder.« (Ibid.) Perhaps the repetition of this hackneyed phrase and its implied admonition even annoyed the young man, when hearing it night after night. Though his mother could have returned to bed immediately after serving him his meal, she does not but rather elects to remain with him, until his hunger is satisfied. She may not say much, but her gestures speak for her. No one would question the level of her commitment. It has been ever thus. It was she, who fed him from the moment of his birth. Presence and sustenance, be it physical and/or psychic, constitute the essence of care. And we need care, are utterly dependent upon it, from con-

**29** | For a realistic look at Germany's post-war conditions, consult: Rühmkorf, Borchert, p. 155, and Burgess, *The Life and Works of Wolfgang Borchert*, p. 116, 119.

ception to death, no matter who we are, no matter when, where or to whom we are born. That's part and parcel of being a human being.<sup>30</sup>

Care is a state in which something does *matter*; care is the opposite of apathy. Care is the necessary source of eros, the source of human tenderness. Fortunate, indeed, is it that care is born in the same act as the infant. Biologically, if the child were not cared for by its mother, it would scarcely live out the first day. Psychologically, we know, from the researches of Spitz, that the child withdraws to his bed corner, withers away, never developing but remaining in a stupor, if as an infant he does not receive mothering care.<sup>31</sup>

Borchert underscores this mother's sustained and sustaining care in a rather unobtrusive and consequently all the more remarkable manner. In the hopes of not waking his mother, the young man forages in the kitchen without turning

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**30** | Rollo May: *Love and Will*. New York: Bantam Doubleday 1969/New York: Dell 1989, p. 289.

**31** | So synonymous with humanity is eating that the risen Christ identifies himself to his disciples in first asking for something to eat and subsequently doing so in their company. – »While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ›Peace be with you.‹ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost [...]. ›Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.‹ [...] While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ›Have you anything here to eat?‹ They gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate in their presence.« (Luke 24: 36–43) – Another example. »Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ›Children, you have no fish, have you?‹ They answered him, ›No.‹ He said to them, ›Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.‹ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ›It is the Lord.‹« (John 21: 4–7) The aforementioned examples are but two of many; several meals serve as highlights of Christ's public ministry, e. g., the wedding in Cana (John 2: 1–11), the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6: 34–44), the last supper (Matthew 26: 26–29). – The Eucharist, from the Greek: thanksgiving, constitutes the source and summit, the alpha and omega, of life and worship (The Documents of Vatican II. Ed. by Walter M. Abbott, trans. ed. by Joseph Gallagher. 14th rpt. Chicago: Follett 1966, p. 142 f.) in these classic Christian traditions: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican/Episcopalian. For a comprehensive history of the Eucharist, as it evolved from the meal customs of the Greco-Romans to the sacrament of the modern day, consult Bradshaw and Johnson's *The Eucharistic Liturgies*. See also Robert Barron's *Eucharist*. – All Biblical citations, followed by chapter and verse, are taken from this edition: *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: An ecumenical Study Bible*, Eds. Bruce M. Metzger, and Roland E. Murphy. Oxford/New York: Oxford UP 1991.



on the light. Instead she does so. »Und wenn ich in der dunklen Küche etwas zu essen suchte, ging plötzlich das Licht an. Dann stand sie da in ihrer Wolljacke und mit einem roten Schal um.« (203) Of course, she would be the one turning the light on; he hadn't turned it on in order not to waken her, but she heard him nonetheless and is already awake. Yet another more profound reason comes to the fore. She gave birth to him. German speakers reading Borchert's narrative would readily recall this formulaic expression of a traditional birth announcement: das Kind erblickte das Licht der Welt [...]. Light means life. We need only remember the opening chapters of Genesis.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, »Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good [...]«. (Gen 1: 1-4)

Light consequently stands at the threshold of all creation, of all goodness.

Did the young man acknowledge his mother's devotion? Did he ever consider thanking her? Probably not. We tend not to acknowledge and therefore fail to express gratitude for something we take utterly for granted, something that has always been there and, should we bother to think about it at all, we presume will always be there. Do we thank the sun for rising? »Und ich dachte, das könnte nie aufhören. Es war mir so selbstverständlich. Das alles war doch immer so gewesen.« (203)

Finally the folks seated on the bench understand why this broken clock means so much. »Einen Atemzug lang war es ganz still auf der Bank.« (203) He awaits some acknowledgement of what he just said; none is forthcoming. Though he looks at the others, they do not return his gaze. »Er sah die anderen an. Aber er fand sie nicht.« (Ibid.) He has no other avenue and consequently once again addresses the personified clock face: »Da sagte er der Uhr leise ins weißblaue runde Gesicht: Jetzt, jetzt weiß ich, daß es das Paradies war.« (203) To underscore the depth of his vivid, even if in his eyes belated, realization, he says it again: »Das richtige Paradies.« (Ibid.)

In the earliest stages of grief, the bereaved tends to review aspects of his/her former life in the most idealized of terms; »the deceased and the relationship [are] remembered in perfection.«<sup>32</sup> At funerals the deceased are frequently eulogized in laudatory terms, whether merited or not. In this instance, the bereaved man wouldn't have had the chance to say good-bye in a dignified ritual; for that reason alone he should be given latitude to express his loss in an idealistic

**32** | Raphael, 44; Sally S. Roach/Beatriz C. Nieto: *Healing and the Grief Process*, Albany (NY): Delmar 1997, p. 76.

framework.<sup>33</sup> Yet who would accuse this young man of hyperbole? Furthermore he draws the distinctions between his past and current situations in stark and thoroughly realistic terms. What he had could not be described as either opulent or splendid by any means and yet it was exactly what he needed, exactly what he assumed would always be there for him. Considering the yawning chasm between his past and present, for him it was paradise. That simple meal and his mother seated at the table with him constituted his Eden.

Something decisive, something remarkable has happened in the course of this narrative. In this story within a story, the main character undergoes a transformation, a radical change of perspective. In sharing his plight, his irreversible plight, with these strangers, he now realizes something he had not begun to fathom before the bombs fell. What had formerly been relegated to the periphery of his mind now fills his consciousness to overflowing. What had blithely been taken for granted now dominates his psyche and his emotions to the exclusion of everything else. Dismissal and marginalization have evolved into unqualified, into overwhelming gratitude. Paradoxically it is only in losing what was precious, without any hope of its restoration, that he acknowledges the full measure of its value. And yet the paradoxical doesn't end there. Three more such examples characterize this total reversal of perspective, this change of insight. Some would call it an epiphany, but it lacks the mystical element that some scholars require for the designation.<sup>34</sup>

One moment of brutal and deafening destruction prompts him to remember its polar opposite: an enduring series of life-sustaining events, utterly gentle, utterly tranquil. Only muted sounds would have punctuated the night silence: the door opening ever so quietly, the flipping of the light switch, his mother's voice, her bare feet rubbing against one another and the clearing of the table. »Und dann hörte ich sie noch die Teller wegsetzen, wenn ich in meinem Zimmer schon das Licht ausgemacht hatte.« (203)

He doesn't say much, if indeed anything, in response to his mother's predictable observation: »So spät wieder.« (Ibid.) Now he spares himself no effort in verbalizing his memories, their inferences. Now he does all the talking he didn't do then, didn't have to do then; he and his mother communicated perfectly, understood each other instinctively without words and hence without the slightest difficulty. It may have been cold in the kitchen, but both mother and son shared an undeniable warmth.

The 20-year old and his mother shared the closest biological bond. These folks on the bench belong neither to his immediate nor his extended family; nor do they number among his friends or acquaintances. They are strangers. Only

**33** | Shasta Gaughen (Ed.): *Coping with Death*. San Diego: Thomson/Gale: Greenhaven 2003, p. 94.

**34** | William R. Miller/Janet C'de Baca: *Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudan Insights Transform Ordinary Lives*. New York: Guilford 2001, p. 72 f.

reluctantly do they hear him out. In fits and starts, they allow themselves to comprehend his current situation, to share his psychic world, that world which has been torn asunder, irretrievably scattered in a myriad of shards.

One more point. Toward the story's conclusion, one of the women asks about his family: »Und Ihre Familie?« (Ibid.) He smiles at her apologetically and attempts to reassure her that the unbelievable has indeed come to pass, that she and all the others seated on the bench should believe the unbelievable. His parents and everything else has been obliterated. As has happened so often before in this exchange, they cannot bear to look at him.

Er lächelte verlegen von einem zum anderen. Aber sie sahen ihn nicht an.

Da hob er wieder die Uhr hoch und er lachte. Er lachte: Nur sie hier. Sie ist übrig. (203 f.)

We might wonder now that he has transmitted his truth in all its desperate, its traumatic reality, why would he feel embarrassed and why would he laugh.

First and foremost, it should be noted that we feel embarrassed and laugh (or cry for that matter), when words have failed us. We might wish to say something, but we can no longer find any words, let alone the appropriate ones. Fully cognizant of the incalculable nature of his losses, their irreversibility, that realization stops him cold, renders him speechless. His sense of despair and the resultant awkwardness of his situation so overwhelm him that embarrassment ensues. Even if his listeners endeavored to do so, how could they find anything remotely consoling to say to him? In effect, he apologizes for confronting them with such an unsolvable problem. »Das Lachen klingt gepreßt, und der Verlegene oder Verzweifelte hat das Gefühl eines deplacierten Ausdrucks.«<sup>35</sup>

His response, his inability to articulate his perceptions any further, is thoroughly plausible for someone in an irredeemably hopeless situation and yet he hasn't completely surrendered. »Wer die Kraft aufbringt, [...] zu weinen oder zu lachen, hat sich noch nicht verlorengegeben, den er realisiert noch den Abstand zu seiner Lage. Ihm schwindelt, aber er ist noch nicht am Ende.«<sup>36</sup>

Yet his laughter may have arisen for an entirely different reason. The irony of the situation has not escaped him. His laughter speaks to his realization. The recognition of incongruities can reduce tensions in otherwise unbearable situations.<sup>37</sup> Though without words, in effect he is saying: Can you believe that of

**35** | Helmuth Plessner: *Gesammelte Schriften VII. Ausdruck und menschliche Natur*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1982, p. 324.

**36** | Ibid., p. 327.

**37** | Margaret S. Stroebe et al. (Eds.): *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping, and Care*. Washington (DC): American Psychological Association 2001, p. 506; George A. Bonanno: *Grief and Emotion: A Social-Functional Perspective*. In: Stroebe, *Handbook*, p. 493-515.

all the things that was destroyed, this mundane and broken timepiece was not, that this symbol, encompassing all the care, the devotion, the love he knew (and thought would be his forever) survived? Despite its undeniable shortcomings, it still marks the hour of his homecoming. That realization makes him laugh.

Wenn das Herz im Leibe hüpf, [...] wer freudig überrascht ist durch ein unerwartetes Geschenk [...] der kann lachen. Aber sein Lachen ist in Wirklichkeit Jubeln. Je unerwarteter, je überraschender das Freude auslösende Ereignis kommt, desto entfesselnder wirkt es.<sup>38</sup>

This jubilation sets him free, but only for a moment. Given his enormous losses, his joy remains short-lived. His life has changed; his time has changed. Despite his youth, he realizes that truth unequivocally. »Dann sagte er nichts mehr. Aber er hatte ein ganz altes Gesicht.« (204)

Just as he learned something, those within earshot learn something as well. Whether they expected or even intended to do so on this particular day remains beside the point. They did. They were changed. It was sunny after all. (201) Does nature not ordain that growth require sunlight? »Und der Mann, der neben ihm saß, sah auf seine Schuhe. Aber er sah seine Schuhe nicht. Er dachte immerzu an das Wort Paradies.« (204) His Eden might have been configured differently from the young man's, but when he permits himself to look inward perhaps he recognizes the outlines of his heaven nonetheless. Perhaps he also recognizes a paradise lost.

By way of summary, reviewing the hallmarks of Borchert's signature palimpsest, evident in this and so many of his utterances, may suffice. With his elementary, yet moving language he addresses everyone, everyone, who has ever or will ever suffer a loss. His symbols are readily approachable. We, the owners of the hyphen between the dates of birth and death, understand the importance of clocks and kitchen clocks in particular. We can easily empathize with his repeated attempts to come to terms with his losses. Nevertheless, the following reflection from Mary Jean Irion's *Yes, World*, may serve as an even more poignant conclusion.

Normal day, let me be aware of the treasure you are. Let me learn from you, love you, savor you, bless you before you depart.

Let me not pass you by in quest of some rare and perfect tomorrow. Let me hold you while I may, for it will not always be so.

One day I shall dig my nails into the earth, or bury my face in the pillow, or stretch myself taut, or raise my hands to the sky, and want more than all the world your return.<sup>39</sup>

**38** | Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften* VII, p. 279.

**39** | Mary Jean Irion: *Yes, World: A Mosaic of Meditation*. New York: Baron 1970, p. 53.