

FRACTURE

STORIES OF HOW GREAT LIVES
TAKE ROOT IN TRAUMA

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	xi
1 An attack of The Morbids	1
2 Affliction	16
Ada Lovelace	18
Antonio Gramsci	22
Carl Jung	27
Frida Kahlo	31
3 Isolation	35
The waif who had to say no	36
Charlie Chaplin	51
Napoleon Bonaparte	54
Orson Welles	59
Tupac Shakur	64
Freddie Mercury	68

4	Chaos	77
	The panther's scream	78
	Eva Duarte de Perón	103
	Alexander Hamilton	108
	John Lennon	112
	Edith Piaf	115
5	Cruelty	119
	Shamed in the streets of Southsea	121
	Louise Bourgeois	147
	Rudolf Nureyev	151
	The Brontë sisters	155
	Frederick Douglass	159
	Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury	163
6	Shock	168
	A Polish patriot	169
	Machado de Assis	190
	Genghis Khan	194
	Martin Luther King	198
	Muhammad Ali	201
	Simón Bolívar	205
	Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov – aka V. I. Lenin	209
	Ludwig Wittgenstein	212
7	Children's Literature	217

8 Religion, Myth and Legend	230
9 The Literature and the Science	251
10 Conclusion	266
<i>Notes</i>	269
<i>Bibliography</i>	271
<i>Copyright acknowledgements</i>	279
<i>Index</i>	281

CHAPTER ONE

AN ATTACK OF THE MORBIDS

The clowns tumbled and fooled across the green field in the sinking sun. Happy music drifted over as the afternoon slipped into twilight: a twilight that would never be forgotten by the seven-year-old standing next to his father, looking on.

All was merry. On that evening in 1819 the two had made the short journey up to Highgate from their home in the nearby village of Holloway on the outskirts of London. As the light faded father and son returned home. The boy went up to his room, alone. There he sat – and wept for half the night.

Something had shattered the ‘scene of gaiety’ (his words) at the rural show: something would henceforward cut into his memory with a bitter clarity. In the dark of night, peaks of happiness turned into troughs of misery. The memory tormented him cruelly for days afterwards and marked the start of an affliction which would dog him for the rest of his life.

Our age has found a name for it. But what we would now call acute depression was to the boy almost a creature, a sort of living thing – and though he could not explain it or understand it, he named it: The Morbids. This terrifying

Fracture

low after every high, this consuming misery, this happiness lost, remained forever a thorn in his side. As an adult he would keep himself constantly on the move and 'look ahead as little as possible' for fear of The Morbids smothering his thoughts. The Morbids and their heart-eating melancholy were among the chief struggles of this young boy's life. But they were far from the only ones.

His earliest memories were happy. Born in 1812 he could recall, aged three, being rolled in a rug and lifted to the window to watch fireworks exploding over London after the victory at Waterloo. But even this joy spelled trouble. The boy's father was a stockbroker and in the tumult that followed Waterloo he defaulted on the Stock Exchange. His debts were not quite big enough to be fatal so, helped by a friend, he was just about able to go back into business, though not before the loss of the family's large house in Holloway. Bowman's Lodge stood on the junction of the Holloway Road and Seven Sisters road: now it is a roaring multi-lane thoroughfare of buses, cars and exhaust fumes, but then it was considered higher ground with good, clean air, at a premium as London grew.

The house had to be let, and the boy and his family decamped from what had been a happy home. That might have been tolerable. Happy families have coped with worse. But when the family returned to live more frugally in their old house the boy's mother (perhaps exhausted by childbirth, her husband's woes, the loss of domestic help and a souring marriage) rejected her little son, the twenty-first of her twenty-two children and one for whom it seemed she had no time or love left. He was palmed off on his eldest sister. The effect on the boy was sharp. Four was an age at

An attack of The Morbids

which he could feel in full the hurt without being able to grasp what lay behind it. Now he developed asthma.

But his eldest sister and foster mother, twenty-two years his senior, was caring and devoted – mothering, schooling and tending to this frail child. She was also a devout Christian, and this had sadder consequences. Even before *The Morbids* struck, the small boy had encountered a darker terror, just as inexplicable to him.

He was five or six when he suffered his first attack. Had you been watching, you would have seen him stop dead, his eyes blanked with a glassy stillness, his hands and lips fluttering and shaking and his whole body beginning to sway. We now know this as epilepsy: specifically the *petit mal* form.

But that little boy in a big, now shabbier Georgian house knew nothing of the affliction's hazy pathology: only the fear that gripped him. And shame, too, because his pious sister led him to believe the seizures were somehow demonic. For the rest of his life he would call his fits visits by *The Demon*.

The boy's and later the man's relationship with *The Demon* was (so far as possible) hidden from others but not unacknowledged by him. The visits mark his diaries in a coded refrain, quietly staining the days when they troubled him. He would inscribe each seizure in his diary with only an X, followed by a number indicating the number of seizures that month or that day. Sometimes comment would be attached, often it would not. These silent black marks were *The Demon's* visits. Sometimes he called it *The Terrible Demon*.

His illness made him reclusive and secretive. Yet because

Fracture

it was the *petit mal* form of epilepsy – rather than the *grand mal* form which causes full-body seizures – he was able to hide it from all but close family. His practice, and he grew adept at this, was to make himself scarce just before an attack. He had learned the warning signs, and it became a central but almost secret part of his life to navigate the affliction.

The Demon and The Morbids were just names: names by which the boy gave a shape to his interior struggles. It was, in a way, an explosion of creativity. He was creating monsters out of his sadnesses and magic out of his monsters.

It was they that made him the man he became. This was the genius he bequeathed his age and the ages to come. From the sorrow and seclusion came words and worlds, clownings and grotesqueries bursting with imagination and laughter. From the rejection and self-doubt came kindness and vigour. From the shy child came an adult who understood children and their interior lives. From that childhood came a famous painter, a respected, imaginative and successful travel writer, a musician, the survivor of a doomed and unrequited homosexual yearning, and the finest author of English Nonsense there ever was.

Forged in the wreckage of a childhood, fractured and then re-made, came Edward Lear.

★

For over a decade I have presented a biographical programme, *Great Lives*, on BBC radio. The format is simple. We choose as our guest someone of some present

An attack of The Morbids

distinction. My guest then chooses from the past (ancient or modern) a great life they wish to champion. They make their case in our studio alongside a witness who is expert in the life in question. Our only stipulations are that the individual must no longer be alive, our guest must believe this was a great life, and our expert witness must know a lot about them.

Our series has covered more than four hundred lives: so many that names slip from the mind. These lives have been plucked from every age and every field of human endeavour, and they've been enormously various – from soldiers to composers to explorers to poets, politicians, brave feminists, early apostles of black emancipation, revolutionary military strategists, singers and scientists.

And so many of them have something in common. This began to dawn on me early: at first as a vague impression, then as a growing observation, finally as something approaching a theory. At first I simply thought 'how odd, how apparently unlikely'. Now, looking back, the link seems to me to leap from the evidence. Time after time, life after life, my hypothesis has become harder to ignore. Genius is linked to childhood trauma.

So, this book is about wrecked childhood – or 'fracture' as we call it here – and the great men and women who crawled from the wreckage. But my theme is not the emergence of genius *despite* early troubles, but the emergence of genius *because* of those torments. It is my belief that calamitous early years in a person's development can – *can* rather than *must* – release those extraordinary qualities to which we give names like 'genius', 'greatness,' 'exceptional creativity' or 'originality'.

Fracture

That the wreckage of a childhood could bring the gift of extraordinary powers of imagination or reasoning, or of artistic and intellectual courage, at first glance runs against ordinary common sense. But things that seem unlikely are not necessarily untrue: there are Eucalyptus trees in Australia whose seeds will not germinate unless burned by fire, cracking what encases the kernel. What we mean by 'genius' is that kernel; what we mean by 'greatness' is too various to be captured in words; yet the terms have meaning, and rarely mean less than a kind of rejection of the familiar, and a lashing out for the new and different.

Of course, no childhood is without sorrow or difficulty, and many, many people can wax tragic about their lonely youth, bullying at school, cash-strapped circumstances or an unkind or uncaring parent. They are not making this up: childhood is a raw thing and for most of us memories are often cruel and sharp. But the lives I'm describing have been marked by experience when young that's in a different league of anxiety and horror. Over the last thirteen years, folded into the pages of my own happy and undistinguished life, I have listened to many hundreds of the kind of lives I'm describing.

Something went so badly wrong for these individuals, usually in infancy, childhood or youth, that you may wonder how they survived at all. A striking proportion lost one or both parents. Some came from families whose circumstances were shattered by illness, war, drugs or financial ruin. Some were pulled between two parents from different cultures speaking different languages; others wrenched from one culture and taken to another. Trouble may come to the young of our species in an infinity of

An attack of The Morbids

guises, but so many of these are exceptional. See and judge for yourself as we proceed.

If that is what I mean by ‘fracture’, what do I mean by ‘genius’, a term that has been done to death as few others have? All I can do is reel off a thesaurus of synonym words and phrases. An inner flame, a one-off quality, *sui generis*, a pusher of the boundaries, a capacity for the imaginative leap, for thinking laterally, ‘outside the box’ ... but there we go again: the clichés begin to roll. Perhaps, though, you sense what I am getting at. Deep exceptionality. Originality. Brave new thinking. These are the kinds of greatness I believe are so often linked to early fracture. But the answer is that I cannot entirely define what such very fuzzy expressions as ‘genius’ or ‘great life’ mean; nobody can.

So I shall hardly try. Instead, I have left it to others – my radio guests on the *Great Lives* programme. Asked to nominate a ‘great’ life my radio guests have hardly ever complained that they don’t know how to use the word – and hardly ever have they nominated a life where listeners would protest that they don’t see how anyone could call it great. We know it when we see it even if we find it hard to define.

However, I have not entirely sheathed my critical faculties in selecting examples for this book, and in cases where I’m simply unable to see why a life has been called great, you will not find it in these pages. Importantly, I’ve also excluded another class of women and men we’d call great: those to whom it was all handed on a plate.

As a wag once wrote: ‘The Hall of Fame is high and wide, and the waiting room is full / And some go in by the door marked “push” and some by the door marked “pull”.’

Lives may achieve greatness mainly because of where fate placed a person: history handed them their robes, and they wore them well. But they themselves did not make their own place in the human story: good fortune did. Many (not all) monarchs are obvious examples, but wealth and position may come in other ways – by inheritance, by chance or by appointment. The silver spoon in the newborn's mouth is sometimes the only explanation we need for their later success. So this book looks mostly at those who came in by the door marked 'push'. In some important way my examples are people who – whether their origins were humble or lofty – made their own distinction.

This does not mean the chosen individual must have started poor or in obscurity: look, for instance, at the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury (see p. 163). But at the root of their modern fame lies something extraordinary about the individual, something outstanding, that broke through: a life that seems to be more than the sum of its parts – even to defy its own ingredients.

To my evidence, then, in a moment – because correlation is not necessarily causation, and a list is of limited interest without a theory.

Here's mine.

Right at the centre of mankind's self-knowledge is the understanding that few break new ground, see new worlds, dream of new continents, reach for new revelations, without being kicked hard by fate, often to the ground. An early trauma can trigger the mould-breaking characteristics we associate with human greatness. Something in these young lives has broken. Familiar certainties have been ripped away. The security of the hearth and

An attack of The Morbids

the moral and intellectual shelter lent by what we call a 'stable' upbringing has been shattered in the way a Kansas tornado shattered Dorothy's constricting girlhood and hurled her through the heavens to Oz.

Instinctively we know that old habits of thought and belief may need to be shattered, often violently, before the new can be born. The phoenix wings upward from the flames. To rise again we may first have to be broken down. At some deep level we know this, and all through history we say it to ourselves in legend, in religion, in fiction and in fable. That's why Jesus and Mohammed began their lives in trouble and distress. That's why Romulus and Remus were abandoned and suckled by a she-wolf. That's why the Ugly Duckling becomes a swan, and Simba returns to rule over his father's lands in *The Lion King*.

Deep down we know that easy mental habit suffocates, know we are in some sense prisoners of untroubled childhoods. We know we're stuck in a comfortable mental groove, know that the longer we stay in it the harder it becomes to break away, know that the earlier we are knocked out of it the better the prospect of permanent escape.

Nor do we ourselves necessarily wish to explore these possibilities of escape. They're for others. Most of us just want to jog along comfortably within the assumptions – moral and practical – we were born into.

Indeed, doing so is a survival mechanism. Darwinian forces favour the moulding of offspring into conformity with the ways and mental habits of the larger group. A tribe would not function well if most individuals broke ranks and marched to the beat of their own drums. Upbringing

Fracture

is designed to squeeze and restrict – and sometimes to stifle – pure individuality; and life will usually be easiest and happiest for those who conform. We don't want our private selves to chafe too hard or too often with the times we live in and the people we live among. We've no intention of breaking away. But we're fascinated, drawn, by stories about those who did.

I am not suggesting that the breaking of a child will usually launch creative genius. A damaged child most often becomes a damaged adult. Of course, I absolutely don't advocate messing up your child's early years in hopes of triggering genius. There is no guarantee that they would find, as the individuals whose stories I will tell here have found, the disregard and the personal autonomy – the sense of self-worth – to wake in the dead of night and hear the blackbird sing and at some almost mystical level know – while knowing it to be literally untrue – that the blackbird is singing to them alone.

★

By way of evidence, I will introduce you to the stories that first convinced me of my theory. First to real people, real reports, divided into six rough-and-ready categories of calamity that emerge as typical among their childhoods. The book will then move on to fiction, legend, myth, religion, and those age-old stories which have somehow lodged themselves in our culture down the ages. For these stories – fireside tales, tales told at a mother's knee, readings from the pulpit – be they fiction or reality, speak to a belief in the unbinding of the spirit by escape from the suffocation

An attack of The Morbids

of 'the world'. Break out! Run free! In the human imagination, largely ignored in commonly expressed theories but betrayed in the stories we remember, sits a deep understanding of the link between breakage and transcendence, between calamity and epiphany.

But before leaping in, there's something I want to make absolutely clear. What I am talking about is – at least – mental torture and spiritual despair. I'm not talking about the kind of challenges that simply toughen a person up, troublesome though these may be. Boot camps do not breed genius. This is a confusion with Friedrich Nietzsche's maxim: '[w]hatever doesn't kill you makes you strong.' The nineteenth-century German philosopher was not wrong, but he's talking about something different.

Nietzsche's idea and mine have a striking but superficial similarity, and his expresses a truth we've all seen demonstrated – including in ourselves. It has become almost a cliché, a slogan associated with the self-help industry. But we should not sneer. Nietzsche was only crystallising what is no more than a piece of common sense. Adversity can toughen us, arm us for combat; trouble is a great teacher; we know this. Any number of summer camps, Duke of Edinburgh Award route-marches, army training 'yomps' and corporate bonding weekends testify to humanity's faith that facing difficulty can be good for us. Nietzsche is talking about capacity building: the acquisition of mental and physical resilience; of learning from experience; and of life skills. His well-crafted soundbite struck a chord. Since then many voices, good and bad, have borrowed the theme. The Hitler Youth used it as a slogan. In his

autobiography Richard Nixon's assistant, Gordon Liddy, popularised it (after Watergate, and prison) when he wrote 'that which does not kill us makes us stronger'.

Not the insight of fascists and tricksters alone, it has been co-opted by international singers and popstars, too. Sinatra's 'My Way' relies upon the picture of someone who 'took the blows', who 'ate it up and spat it out'. His imagined hero is a tough old thing, not an original thinker or creative genius but an alley cat that's lost an ear or two but learned to survive. But my purpose in starting with the story of little Edward Lear is to suggest a less obvious idea. Lear was never resilient and never could become so. He was wounded and exposed, and from this experience an imaginative genius flowed.

So I'm talking about strength not in Sinatra's sense, not in the sense of muscle, callouses, toughness or experience, but in the sense of genius. Genius may be a guttering candle, a fragile and flimsy quality whose strength is not to be measured in horsepower. Among 'great' men and women are many who were not tough at all. Some – indeed a pretty striking proportion of them – were a bundle of neuroses.

Coping with adversity is a kit for survival, not a catalyst for genius. We do not remember Lear for his pluck – plucky though he was – but for early misery and the singularity of his talent. Endurance, stamina, steadiness under fire, the ability to plough on ... these are admirable attributes but billions of human beings display them. They should be distinguished from a very different class of qualities: the qualities that make a person stand out from those billions; that make a person one-in-a-million, paradigm-shifting,

An attack of The Morbids

original. The things to which we give names like ‘genius’, ‘creativity’, ‘inspiration’; the things that make a person great in that most cosmic of senses.

For genius to emerge, we may not need to be toughened up; we may not need to win a childhood battle. We may need to be broken. We may even need to lose. Only after much damage has genius often taken wing. That’s why I argue that, in the most exceptional sense of the word ‘strong’, it is not what doesn’t kill you that makes you strong. It may even be what does.

★

Here are the five categories of misfortune that (to me) emerge as typical among those traumatic childhoods we later see heralding the emergence of genius. Yet such pigeonholing can never be exhaustive, and much calamity defies easy definition. Most of the lives in this book will have been hit by more than one of these miseries. So, though categorisation lends shape and gives us something to hold on to, please don’t accuse me of hanging a story on a single hook when in reality it could be hung on more than one. To that I plead guilty at once.

Nor is the categorisation I’ve hit upon of much importance to the theory being illustrated. You may feel that some of the lives described here don’t fit neatly into the compartments, or into any compartment at all. But it’s what the stories all point to that matters: those tremendous shocks to the system, or longer-drawn-out episodes of utter wretchedness, which whatever their cause are linked to the emergence of genius.

Fracture

These are my five categories, our five horsemen of childhood apocalypse:

Affliction – physical and mental

Isolation – and dislocation

Chaos – and family dysfunction

Cruelty – and oppression and prejudice

Shock – ruin, death, suicide

Each category will be accompanied by one in-depth story of a life that illustrates it well, plus a range of further life stories told more briefly. The many examples I shall set before you represent only the tip of the iceberg of the evidence available.

One other thing. Plenty of examples of great women will follow on these pages, but there are not as many women as men. The likely reason will be immediately clear to you. For women, and until relatively recently, there's been such a ceiling to achievement outside hearth and home that the number who could break through has been limited. It's notable that among my female examples many who lived before the 19th century got their start in life by accident of birth, for instance to royal lineage, and only thereafter could shine brightly in their era.

I must add as an embarrassed footnote that virtually all the men we've invited onto *Great Lives* have until quite recently chosen to champion other men. By contrast our women guests have chosen women and men in roughly equal numbers. In response to this we've in recent years actively sought great women as our subjects, and guests who want to champion them. I make no apology for this.

An attack of The Morbids

Where genius has been buried you have to dig harder to find it.