TRAUMA AND THE PAST

Lunch with Jonathan Greenberg today – Stanford Law School.

He specializes in conflict resolution and has a particular interest in national partition in the wake of the withdrawal of imperial powers and decolonisation – Korea, India, Palestine, Vietnam, and, of course, Iran and Iraq. He sees partition and the narratives and feelings it generates as trauma of the body politic.

Trauma – wound (here dismemberment), but also in psychoanalysis – psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed; an internal injury, esp. to the brain, which may result in a behavioural disorder of organic origin. Also, the state or condition so caused.

More than a metaphor I think. Trauma applies to many different kinds of relationship with the past, not least archaeology. It is now a truism that archaeology is a standard accompaniment of nationalist interest, delivering intense and materially immediate narratives of national origins. Archaeology so often deals with pasts radically separated from the present returning uncannily in the excavation of their ruined remains, and associated with a desire to reunite and make whole the story of a national past to the psychic benefit of contemporary sense of identity.

Modernist myths and emplotment. Archaeology at the heart of many disputes over contemporary identity.

[Link to more discussion of trauma]