The Role of Symbolisation in the Shaping of Reality and Identity: Tales of Woundedness and Healing*

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1. Mimetic Cognition, Symbolisation and Dissociation

In a path-breaking study on the Origins of the Modern Mind (1991), cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald argued that the central function that distinguishes human beings from apes and hominoids is the development of “the mimetic mind”, that is, the exclusively human “ability to mime, or re-enact, events” (Donald 1991, 16) after they have taken place. First developed by Homo erectus, mimetic cognition allowed our evolutionary predecessors to share emotional knowledge by means of gestures, mime, dance, athletic and constructional skills, and to participate in reciprocal mimetic games. This skill, still evident in modern society, culminated in the development of language by Homo sapiens and, with it, of narrative thought. In a second stage, the symbolic knowledge provided by the mimetic mind would develop into ever more complex systems – from ritual, myth and religion to art and literature. While the mimetic mind allowed human beings to share vital information about past events imaginatively and to strengthen

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the cohesion of the group, the more complex systems of symbolisation evolved primarily as mechanisms for modelling reality. As Robert Nadeau explains in *Readings from the New Book on Nature*:

As the symbol-making animal fragmented his world into discreet identities, he needed mythological thinking to pull the jumble of particulars into some meaningful pattern. Myths made connections, bespoke causes and origins, and, in general imparted to the world of his creation the sense that it was his world indeed. (Nadeau 1981, 5)

Myth-making fulfils, then, the vitalising role of ordering the world and unifying particular phenomena into a contextualised situation that makes sense, thus allowing for the creation of finalised strategies and successful practices which we can understand. The symbolic knowledge and/or pseudo-knowledge thus gathered would be essential not only for the representation and transmission of useful knowledge and the strengthening of communal cohesion, but also and most importantly for the shaping of reality and identity. The key factor in this process is that the cultural reality in which each individual participates wholly depends on the acceptance by the community of the efficacy and reliability of this imaginative creation, taken for truth. The symbolic unity with nature and with the members of the social group thus created is essential for the individual and collective well-being and sense of self of the social group. As the Navajo say: “to be sick is to be fragmented. To be healed is to become whole, and to become whole one must be in harmony with family, friends, and nature”. The importance of these symbolic truths would explain the intrinsic difficulty and even traumatic effects of having to substitute them for the new truths arising from a shift of dominant paradigm.

In an article entitled “Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma: The Evolutionary Significance of the Arts”, psychoanalyst Sandra L. Bloom points to the close connection between trauma and human evolution when she argues that, for millennia, human beings were not predators but prey, so that our original trauma was “the trauma of being hunted by animals and eaten” (Bloom 2010, 200). According to Bloom, it was this fact that determined the development of some specifically human adaptive skills such as learning to fight together, to communicate information mimetically, to connect events by means of associations and, most crucially, “to alter reality by entering different states of consciousness that allow us to maintain separate – and often contradictory – bodies of knowledge” (Bloom 2010, 200). In other words, our archaic ancestors developed the capacity to dissociate knowledge as a form of resilience against the traumatic awareness of imminent death. As Bloom explains, human beings share with other mammals and birds the need to orient ourselves in the world by ordering and classifying it, but this “cognitive imperative” is constantly curtailed...
by our capacity for self-knowledge, which includes the shattering perception of our own mortality. By allowing us to take distance from ordinary experience and maintain simultaneously separate and contradictory bodies of knowledge, dissociation provides human beings with the possibility of perceiving the environment selectively and, consequently, of limiting the traumatic impact of its most threatening aspects without ignoring them. In Bloom’s own words:

Through dissociation, we can deny important aspects of reality that are too disorganizing, too threatening to our own internal stability either individually or as a group. And yet, survival demands that we keep both sides of the contradictory information available just in case we should need it. In that way we know without knowing. (Bloom 2010, 202)

Bloom’s expression, to “know without knowing” perfectly synthesises the positive and negative aspects of dissociation. The positive aspects are well known: carrying out various tasks simultaneously, such as driving or ironing while listening to music, or talking about something else are among the most common forms of dissociation. Employed as a primary response to “the overwhelming awareness of self, other, life, and death”, “dissociation allows us to reorder reality in a more palatable way, separate our emotions from our experience, and even separate our sense of self from the reality of what is happening”. Transition rituals and artistic performances aimed at creating trance states are secular forms of achieving this positive form of dissociation aimed at attenuating the traumatic impact of reality and enhance the social cohesion of the group.

In *Useless Knowledge*, the second of her three-volume Holocaust memoir, *Auschwitz and After* (first published in 1970), the French activist Charlotte Delbo offers a telling example of communal artistic performance to foster dissociation as a form of resilience in the teeth of terror (Delbo 1995). In 1942, Delbo and other Communist women who had been interned in the fort of Romanville, in France, before deportation to Auschwitz, decided to mitigate the suffering of the men awaiting execution in the male quarter of the prison by assuming an exaggerated carefree air, singing, dancing, and performing a theatrical piece every Sunday in the yard where the men could watch them from the other side of the barbed-wire fence separating them. Commenting on this episode, Michael Rothberg remarks that Delbo’s narrator recognises that these performances were “preposterous” but “she also notes that they succeed[ed]

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3 See Herrero & Baelo-Allué 2011 for an in-depth analysis of the literary representation of this essential aspect of dissociation in Holocaust trauma narratives in English.

4 *Ivi*, 203.

5 *Ibid*.

6 *Ivi*, 201.
at times in arousing a theatrical suspension of disbelief and a ‘liveliness [that] occasionally seemed real’” (Rothberg 2000, 147). Her description of the effect produced by their performances as “a theatrical suspension of disbelief” points to the women’s capacity to alter reality by creating a collective state of dissociation from the awful knowledge of impending death that provided both the women performers and the men watching them with an extraordinary source of resilience and communal cohesion. Delbo’s participation in these activities was fostered by her expert knowledge of the performing arts, as she had worked as an assistant to the theatre director Louis Jouvet during a theatrical tour of South America in 1939, shortly before she decided to return to occupied France in order to join the resistance. But this sort of expertise is not a prerequisite for participation in artistic activities under life-threatening conditions. On the contrary, engagement in ephemeral forms of artistic expression such as singing, drawing, or creating and transmitting from mouth to mouth a politically-charged poem or a joke are well-documented activities not only in Nazi transition camps like Romanville or Terezín but also in extermination camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau. The counterpart to this positive use of art was the Nazis’ atrocious habit of encouraging the prisoners to create, organise and participate in more elaborate performances for their own entertainment. This was part of a general strategy of random privileging and punishing, meant to secure the prisoners’ total subservience and destroy their received notions of good and evil. As these diametrically opposed examples suggest, having recourse to artistic expression in life-threatening conditions is a common form of modifying the perception of self and world both for victims and perpetrators. Yet another, more recent example that comes to mind is Mark Falkoff’s Poems from Guantánamo (2007), a book containing a selection of the verses “scratched into Styrofoam cups, shared at meals, and passed cell to cell before ending up in the trash” (Richardson 2016, 66) that had been composed by detainees held in the US prison camp on Cuba as a form of resilience against the atrocious physical and psychological tortures to which they were submitted by the Bush administration under the pretext of the “war on terror”.

The fact that, for all their cultural differences, the Guantánamo prisoners and the inmates of Nazi camps made a similar use of artistic expression in the face of excruciating fear and pain, points to the power of the creative imagination to manage the overwhelming awareness of our own vulnerability and finitude by

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7 See Peschel 2014.
8 See Rovit 2001. On the way Delbo and other women in Birkenau made their voices heard, see Rosario Arias’s “The “Other” Voice in Survivor Narratives: A Gender-Based Approach to the Holocaust” in this volume.
9 See Onega 2017a, 287; Rothberg 2000, 147.
transfiguring external reality. Still, as Bloom notes (Bloom 2010, 200), staying in a prolonged state of dissociation or negative relation with our empirical consciousness without the backing of the community has the high cost of self-fragmentation:

The main difference between culturally accepted alterations of reality commonly noted in religious ceremonies and political events, and the common forms of twisted reality noted as the symptoms of psychopathology, is that in the former people agree together to ignore and deny the distortions and contradictions that exist, while in individual pathology no one else agrees with the view of reality shared by that individual. (Bloom 2010, 202)

In other words, it seems that the positive effect of creating an alternative reality can only be sustained if this reality is accepted and shared by the social group.

This consideration brings to mind Freud’s move from individual to mass psychology in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). As is well known, at the beginning of this essay, Freud rounded off his conceptualisation of psychic trauma by arguing that there is usually a chronological gap, or period of “latency”\textsuperscript{10}, separating the traumatic event from the appearance of the first symptoms. He then extended this notion to how new paradigmatic ideas are accepted by the community, giving as examples Darwin’s theory of evolution\textsuperscript{11} and Jewish monotheism\textsuperscript{12}. Though he acknowledged the huge difference between individual traumatic neurosis and the collective acceptance of a new scientific or religious paradigm, Freud saw the process of rejection and denial preceding the definitive acceptance of the new collective truth as evidence of “a special psychological situation” provoked by “affective resistances”\textsuperscript{13}. As Freud argued, these affective resistances would explain the difficulty of Jewish historians to write their accounts of monotheism according to “an ideal of objective truth”\textsuperscript{14}, observable in the difference between the versions of the past created by the historians and those recorded in the popular oral tradition. In Freud’s own words:

> At first they [the historians] shaped their accounts according to their needs and tendencies of the moment, as if they had not yet understood what falsification signified. In consequence, a difference began to develop between the written version and the oral report, i.e., the tradition of the same subject-matter\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{10} Freud 1939, 107 ff.

\textsuperscript{11} *Ivi*, 108.

\textsuperscript{12} *Ivi*, 109.

\textsuperscript{13} *Ivi*, 108.

\textsuperscript{14} *Ivi*, 111.

\textsuperscript{15} *Ibid.*
According to this, the affective resistances to the new religious truth conveyed by Moses’ monotheism had a direct influence on the historians’ written reports, while the oral tradition was “less subject to distorting influences […] and therefore might be more truthful than the account set down in writing”\(^{16}\). At the same time, however, as Freud himself admitted, “[i]ts truthfulness […] was impaired by being vaguer and more fluid than the written text, being exposed to many changes and distortions as it was passed on from one generation to the other by word of mouth”\(^{17}\). Freud’s thought-provoking conclusion was that the shocking facts that official history had purportedly tried to suppress were kept alive in the oral tradition of the Jewish people\(^{18}\), and that these facts resurfaced in the myths and legends of the Greeks, “which Homer and the great Attic dramatists transformed into immortal works of art”\(^{19}\). Leaving aside the question of the verifiability of this intercultural and transgenerational transmission, it seems evident that, to Freud, the main difference between the historian’s and the poet’s response to a problematic truth was that, while the former, compelled by affective resistance, chose to provide a univocal version of the past that would meet the needs and tendencies of the moment, the latter was “free to fill in the gaps in the memories according to the behests of his imagination and to form after his own purpose the image of the time he has undertaken to reproduce”\(^{20}\).

Translating this into Bloom’s terms, it may be stated that the popular art forms succeeded in transmitting the new traumatic but necessary knowledge through a technique of generalisation and distortion that allowed the Jewish community “to know without knowing”.

Freud’s interesting suggestion that imaginative freedom allowed the popular tradition to convey problematic truths in a way the historian could not, justifies Bloom’s contention that ritual, myth, religion and art in all its manifestations, together with their primary function of ordering the world, have always had the vital function of attenuating the traumatic encounter with the intractable real. As I argued elsewhere (Onega 2017b, 369), J. Hillis Miller reaches a similar conclusion when, discussing Nietzsche’s mistrust of world literature, he explains the opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian in *The Birth of Tragedy*

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, 111.

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 112.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 114.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 116. Freud’s contention is echoed by Zygmunt Bauman in *Hermeneutics and Social Science*, when he argues that, in the case of the Christian world, the proliferation of different and often contradictory and sloppy versions of the New Testament written by a chain of anonymous copyists, led to the Catholic-Protestant debate on the question of authority that “propelled hermeneutics into a central position in the humanities” in the sixteenth century (Bauman 1978, 7).
in the following terms: “‘Man’ cannot face the Dionysian directly and go on living. It has to be covered over with a veil of beautiful illusion. [...] As T. S. Eliot put this, ‘Humankind cannot bear very much reality’” (Ghosh & Miller 2016, 146).

All art forms have, then, the capacity to aestheticise reality and so to provide mechanisms of resilience against the self-awareness of the precariousness and vulnerability of existence. But some forms of art, particularly narrative fiction, also have the capacity to help wounded individuals and groups to work through their traumas and recover from self-fragmentation.

2. The Role of Storytelling in the Assimilation, Transmission and Working through of Trauma

As is well known, in “Remembering, Repeating and Working-through”, Freud defined psychic trauma as a memory malfunction caused by the repression of affects, and argued that the symptoms of trauma are made manifest in two stages (Freud 1950). The first stage of “acting out” or “repetition-compulsion” is characterised by total or partial amnesia, temporal disorientation and the compulsion to repeat the traumatic event in the form of intrusive thoughts, nightmarish dreams and hallucinations. The second or healing stage of “working through” begins when the subject manages to fill in the gaps in the traumatic memory of the shocking event by abreacting the repressed affects either in deeds or words. It was this idea that verbalising trauma can act as a substitute for action that had led Freud and Breuer to devise the “talking cure” on which psychoanalysis is based (Freud & Breuer 2001). Its working hypothesis is that the imposition of a coherent narrative pattern on the fragmentary and incomprehensible traumatic memories of the shocking event – or in Bloom’s terms, the filling in of the gaps in the “black hole of trauma” – has a healing effect. Still, the efficacy of the process of healing varies with each individual. For example, two children who have undergone the same type of familial and social deprivations and misfortunes will develop into adults in striking different ways according to their different degree of resilience. As Boris Cyrulnik forcefully argues, the difference does not lie in their capacity to address the traumatic event or situation objectively and rationally, but rather in their respective capacity to imagine positive alternatives to it. Thus, while verbalisation is a mechanism for overcoming trauma, creativity and the self-addressed telling of stories are intrinsic mechanisms of resilience that human beings have used from the dawn of civilisation in order to avoid the disruptive effects of traumatisation, since, as Cyrulnik argues, “as soon as we put sadness into a story, we give a meaning to our sufferings” (Cyrulnik 2011, 4).
One of the earliest and best-known popular art forms that developed out of this protective function of storytelling is the wondertale. As Anatoly Lieberman, drawing on Vladimir Propp, has pointed out, wondertales in general are stories about initiation and death (Lieberman 1999, Ixvii). Given that their original aim was to teach and instruct, not to entertain, the child figures in the earlier eighteenth-century stories behaved like small adults. It was only in the first half of the nineteenth century that children started to be depicted in what was believed to be their natural state, as innocent and perfect. The knowledge acquired by the children in tales such as those of Charles Perrault or the Brothers Grimm, plays a fundamental role in the identity formation and integration of new members into the social group. This would explain why, for all their awfulness, we continue to pass them on generation after generation; and also why, for all their apparent thematic differences, these classical wondertales tell the same awe-inspiring story of a purblind child or youth being mistreated by inadequate custodians and/or being placed in atrocious situations involving the imminent danger of violent death. For example, being forced to marry a serial killer (“Bluebeard”), or a beast ("Beauty and the Beast") in order to save the family from starvation or death; being sent to the forest to be eaten by a wolf (“Little Red Riding Hood”), by an ogre (“Little Thumb”), or by a witch (“Hansel and Gretel”); being enslaved (“Cinderella”), poisoned and sentenced to death (“Snow White”), or even murdered and turned into a mince pie (“The Juniper Tree”) by a jealous stepmother. Still, these blood-curdling tales entrance listeners and are kept in the collective memory of successive generations because of their reassuring happy endings: the evil characters are eventually punished or killed while the resourceful children or youths round off their life quests and bring wealth and happiness to their inadequate custodians, even sometimes, as happens to the protagonist of “The Juniper Tree”, after being murdered by his stepmother and unwittily eaten by his father. In Germany, the tradition of representing children as pure and innocent was broken by Eta Hoffmann’s tales depicting typical child missteps – thumb-sucking, fidgeting, playing with fire, teasing, not eating one’s dinner – and suffering the natural consequences of their misbehaviour. In these tales, the wildest and most rebellious children endure gruesome punishments for their relentless flaunting of social norms: “The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches” ends with Pauline burning herself to death; in “The Story of Cruel Frederick”, the animal torturer protagonist is bitten by a dog; in “Augustus who refuses to eat his dinner”, the child dies of starvation, while Conrad, the naughty protagonist of “Little Suck-a-Thumb”, has his two thumbs chopped off by a dreadful big tailor after dismissing her mother’s warning.

As these examples suggest, the original function of wondertales was to channel the children’s drives and transmit key forms of socialisation through a process
of metaphorisation that allowed for the integration of a skilful acquaintance with awful situations and threatening contexts indirectly, in terms that could be assimilated and kept in the collective memory of the cultural group. The traditional figure of the old crone telling a fairy tale to a group of thrilled children provides an accurate image of their initiatory function. The telling of these tales contributes to the identity formation of the children either by casting a veil of beautiful illusion on the necessary but potentially traumatic truths that grant cohesion to the cultural group, or by enhancing the frightening consequences of unrestrained behaviour, thus making them “know without knowing”. This cautionary role of wondertales would explain their rigid formulaic nature and their normative and prescriptive ideology as well as their psychological appeal and power of suggestion across the centuries. In the case of Perrault’s, the Brothers Grimm’s and Hoffman’s tales, the atrocious yet necessary truths transmitted by them indirectly are those that configure the cultural reality of Western patriarchy. It is for this reason that feminist writers like Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood or Jeanette Winterson consider fairy tales “as repository of sexist and patriarchal ideologies” begging for deconstruction and subversion21.

The original function of wondertales is, then, to strengthen the resilience of healthy children and youths before their actual encounter with the traumas of adult life. However, their capacity to transmit traumatic events or situations wrapped up in the beautiful and illusory veil of literature also makes them excellent vehicles for verbalising and working through traumas. As María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro has pointed out, a significant number of contemporary writers has “adapted the traditional fairy tale in order to deal with social class, ideological conflicts, politics, war, violence, illness and trauma, among other issues” (Martínez-Alfaro 2016, 65). Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the work of writers like Lisa Goldstein, Louise Murphy, Edgar Hilsenrath, Peter Rushford, Jane Yolen, Eliza Granville and Eva Figes, who “have resorted to the fairy tale in order to revisit the Holocaust and its aftermath” (Martínez-Alfaro 2016, 65).

This phenomenon forms part of the plethora of literary, testimonial, theatrical, and filmic works on the Holocaust and other individual and collective traumas of the twentieth century that emerged in what Andrew Gross and Susanne Rohr have termed “the long 1990s – the period extending from the fall of the Berlin Wall on 11–9–1989 to the attack on the World Trade Centre on 7–11–2001” (Gross & Rohr 2010, 12). The appearance of this “art of trauma”22, together with the emergence of the “memory boom of unprecedented proportions” that

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21 Carpi 2016, 12. See also Onega 2019.
22 See Laub & Podell 1995.
took place simultaneously (Huyssen 1995, 5), provides ample evidence that trauma has become the new dominant cultural paradigm (Luckhurst 2008, 5). In this context, the fact that Holocaust writings are characterised by dialogism, generic hybridity, the montage of realist, modernist and postmodernist elements (Rothberg 2000, 10), and/or the excessiveness of the romance as a mode, points to the difficulty of putting the Holocaust into words, while the fact that this boom of Holocaust fictions took place four decades after the end of the Second World War may be interpreted as evidence that the symptoms of this atrocious event has reached the phase of working though after a period of latency and acting out characterised by mutism and denial. In an earlier essay, I addressed the question of the intrinsic difficulty and problematic ethicality of representing the Holocaust by comparing Enzo Cormann’s Storm Still (Toujours l’orage, 1997) and Roberto Benigni’s Life Is Beautiful (La vita è bella, 1997), a French play and a Hollywood film released the same year, as representatives of two diametrically opposed forms of assimilating and transmitting the traumatic memory of the Shoah by secondary witnesses. A brief glimpse at the evolution of Eva Figes’s writing career can help us understand the complexity of this process in the case of direct survivors of the Nazi genocide.

Eva Figes (born Unger, 1932–2012) is a British writer of German-Jewish origin, often placed under the epigraph of “Feminist British Writers” or “Women Writers”, together with Iris Murdoch, A. S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble, Fay Weldon and Anita Brookner (Pellicer-Ortín 2015, 69). She escaped with her parents and younger brother from Nazi Germany in 1939, at the age of six, leaving behind her grandparents and other members of her family. She thus developed a complex sense of deracination and survivor guilt, which she attempted to deal with through dissociation and denial. She began her writing career as a form of sustaining herself and her two children after her divorce from John George Figes in 1962. But she did not attempt to write about the traumatic effects of war and the Holocaust until the late sixties, when she wrote two, heavily experimental novels: Winter Journey (1967) and Konek Landing (1969). Winter Journey is an excellent example of trauma narrative reflecting the acting-out phase of trauma. The reader is granted direct access to the stream of thoughts of Janus, a war veteran suffering from shell shock who is constantly re-enacting his traumatic war memories in the ever-present dimension of trauma time. In this novel, there is no indication

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23 Ibid.
25 See Ganteau & Onega 2013.
26 See Onega 2017a, 292–305.
27 See Pellicer-Ortín 2011a.
of the specific war in which Janus fought. It is in only in her third novel, *Konek Landing*, that Figes addressed the horrors of the Holocaust for the first time. Considered by the critics as too complex and experimental, this novel constitutes a prototypical example of “limit-case” Holocaust narrative in Leigh Gilmore’s sense of the term, as it combines fictional, historical and autobiographical elements. The protagonist, Stefan Konek, is a German-Jewish man born, like Eva Figes, in 1932. But, unlike her, he was unable to escape from Nazi Germany, witnessed the disappearance first of his father and then of his mother, and survived in atrocious conditions in various hide-outs and institutions for orphaned children during the pre-war period. The narration of this period is followed by an enigmatic blank, covering the war years that, as I suggested elsewhere, may be said to reproduce formally the black hole left by the war in Konek’s conscious memory (Onega 2012, 100). The third section shows Konek leading an ever-more brutalised errant life ruled by basic physical drives that culminates in the rape of a teenage orphan in the presence of her sickly little bother (Figes 1972, 99-100). After his release from prison he enrols as a seaman on board the *Christina* (Figes 1972, 107), a ship full of crippled and demented war survivors, which, like the medieval Ship of Fools, cruises around the world in a journey that leads nowhere (Onega 2012, 91). He eventually rounds off his life quest by finding a sacrificial death by water at the hands of a prehistoric tribe, thus performing in succession the roles of victim, perpetrator and redeemer in a world of endemic violence. The fact that Figes set the ordeals of her abject protagonist against the pattern of the mythical hero’s quest points both to the writer’s need to cast an aesthetic veil on the horrors of the Holocaust and to her refusal to accept the widely spread view of the uniqueness and exceptionality of this atrocious historical event. In Figes’s chilling view, Konek’s life quest as victim, perpetrator and scapegoat is representative of the human condition at large, while the horrors of the Holocaust form part of the endemic violence that has accompanied human beings from the dawn of civilisation (Figes 1972, 99-100).

*Konek Landing* represents Figes’ most sustained attempt to put the collective trauma of the Holocaust into words, but she did not broach her own Holocaust trauma until 1978, with the publication of *Little Eden: A Child at War*. To do so, she significantly moved from the genre of the novel to the memoir. She wrote in her own adult voice about her childhood experience as a German-Jewish exile in England and cast a veil of normalcy and objectivity on her troubled childhood memories by discussing at length the history of Cirencester, the small country town where she attended boarding school during the Blitz. It was not until 2003, twenty five years after the publication of *Little Eden* and sixty four years after her enforced exile from Germany, that Figes eventually published *Tales of Innocence and Experience: An Exploration*. This is her last-but-one book and the only one
in which she attempted to confront directly the most intractable aspects of her own Holocaust trauma: her sense of deracination and the survivor guilt she felt for the loss of her grandparents, particularly her beloved maternal grandmother. As the allusion in the title to William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* makes clear, the starting point for the working through of her Holocaust trauma is the conviction, reached at the end of *Konek Landing*, that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not monsters, but human beings like the rest of us, and that we all have the capacity for good and evil. Her conclusion brings to mind Hannah Arendt’s consideration, after attending Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem, of “the banality of evil”, an expression she used to explain her shocked discovery that: “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth” (Arendt 1963, 135), that his only exceptionality lay in his “incapacity to realise what he was doing” through sheer “lack of imagination” (Arendt 1963, 135). Arendt attributed “the strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil” displayed by Eichmann to the fact that the Nazi genocide was an “administrative massacre”, that is, “a sort of killing [that] can be directed against any given group, [because] the principle of selection is dependent only upon circumstantial factors” (Arendt 1963, 135). This argumentation, employed by the defence to exonerate Eichmann, has the ethical shortcoming of reducing the responsibility for the atrocities committed by dehumanising the perpetrator: “Eichmann was after all only a ‘tiny cog’ in the machinery of the Final Solution” (Arendt 1963, 135). This dehumanisation is compounded, as Simon Critchley notes, by the application of technological efficiency to mass murder: “What is unique about the Holocaust is the attempt to depersonalize and take the passion out of death and turn it into this industrial process” (Critchely 2012, 102).

In striking contrast to this, Figes moves from the perception of evil in the world to the universalization of evil, that is, to the shattering recognition that good and evil form part of the human condition, what Blake referred to metaphorically as the dialectics between prelapsarian innocence and experience. Her position echoes Primo Levi’s view, expressed in *The Drowned and the Saved*, that the Nazi camps made the survivors ashamed of being human (Levi 1988). This is the awful truth that Figes had been denying all her life and that, now that she has become a grandmother, she feels compelled to transmit to her granddaughter in the attenuated form of aesthetic indirection. In accord with this, the book takes the form of the authorial narrator’s internal monologue triggered by her telling of a Brothers Grimm’s tale to her granddaughter every night, constantly interrupted by the memories of her childhood trauma of deracination and exile prompted by the telling of the tale. Thus, the whole memoir develops around the difference between the “sanitize[d]” tales of innocence she tells her granddaughter, which she compares to “old stories” and “history” (Figes 2003, 22), and the awful “tales
of experience" she can only tell herself. As the narrator reflects, all her life she had tried to come to terms with her traumatic past by rationalising it, reading books, doing research about the Holocaust in order to gain a sense of control over the past and over her life. She had even managed to lead an apparently pleasant life by having recourse to long-term dissociation: “To know, but not to know. Separating the private from the public knowledge. The mind is very clever about knowing everything, and knowing nothing, both at the same time”\textsuperscript{28}. However, for all her attempts at rationalisation, she was unable to suppress the ghostly visitations of her beloved dead during the night, as she herself recognises: “reason loses its grip in sleep, and history repeats itself, helplessly. The dead are waving goodbye but will not let go” (Figes 2003, 133). Still, by setting to rewrite the fairy tales she had herself listened to as a child, Figes eventually manages to move from the nightmarish re-enactment of her childhood trauma to the healing phase of verbalisation and temporal relocation of the traumatic events in the past where they belong. Thus, at the end of \textit{Tales of Innocence and Experience}, Figes recognises that, although her life journey has not left her unscathed, she is no longer afraid of being accompanied by her beloved ghosts, “as they so often do in Grimms’ stories” (Figes 2003, 182), and she is also ready to break her mutism and tell her granddaughter about them. In her own words: “I have come through the forest, faced its terrors, real and imaginary, and reached the fringe, where sunlight glows on the meadows” (Figes 2003, 183). Though it took her a whole life to work through her survivor trauma, it seems evident that with \textit{Tales of Innocence and Experience} Eva Figes managed at last to heal her wounds and learnt to live with the scar of the awful knowledge and survivor guilt of the Holocaust, thanks to storytelling and the power of her creative and fertile imagination.
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