Tales from Over There: The Uses and Meanings of Fairy-Tales in Contemporary Holocaust Narrative

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In 1999, historian Tim Cole wrote that "at the end of the twentieth century, the "Holocaust" is central to modern consciousness", adding that "the Holocaust has emerged as nothing less than a ruling symbol in our culture […] a dominant icon".[1] Certainly, few events have coloured the history of the twentieth century to the same extent as the mass extermination of the European Jews (and other "undesirable" social and ethnic groups) by the Nazi regime during the years 1936-1945. Today, the Holocaust is one of the most heavily represented historical events of the modern age, depicted in novels, feature films, documentaries, memoirs, exhibits and memorials throughout Europe, Israel and North America. It is this saturation of every facet of representational media within western culture that leads Cole to claim that "the Holocaust is being bought and sold."[2] Cole's work proposes that this version of the Holocaust, readily available for consumption in easily digestible media bites, constitutes a "myth" of the Holocaust developed as a form of culture-wide "response to the sheer horror of the mass murders, to meet contemporary needs, and as an attempt to find meaning in the murder of six million Jews."[3] Cole's theorisation of the Holocaust as "myth" is concerned primarily with understanding the Holocaust as a historical event; his conception of the term "myth" is therefore primarily historiographical. Within this article, however, I will interpret the "myth" of the Holocaust in narrative terms, for as narrative "myth" has the power to make us "tremble

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by taking us to the edge of the abyss, after having forced us to face evil and all the darkness which also resides within us".[4] It is my contention that out of the multitudinous narrative accounts of the Holocaust produced in the wake of the event, there has developed a meta-narrative of the Holocaust that is now intrinsically present throughout contemporary cultural responses to the event, and which is ultimately reproduced in mythic form as a generic Holocaust "story"; a culturally constructed version of the Holocaust that perpetually seeks to return us to the edge of the abyss in search of understanding, possibly even redemption. Although manifested in a variety of forms throughout diverse narrative representations of the Holocaust, one of the most striking manners in which we encounter this Holocaust "story" is through the use of fairy-tale symbols, motifs and narrative structures that permeate contemporary fictional texts, controversially indicating that, within cultural memory of the twentieth century, the Holocaust itself may have become a form of dark fairy-tale.

The genres of Holocaust narrative and fairy-tale may superficially seem to be incongruous in the extreme, however both are informed by generic convention and dependent for their meaning upon the reader recognising the relationship between signifier and signified within narrative frames that very often mask the true content of the text. This article seeks to examine the apparently paradoxical relationship embodied by the juxtaposition of these two genres, in the hope of identifying whether, as a narrative device, this trend encodes a sophisticated attempt to target the reader's processes of cultural memory-formation, or merely provides an easy and efficient way to provoke an emotional response. It will also lead us into an exploration of the contemporary reader's

position in relation to survivor narratives of the Holocaust, as it is played out within modern fictional representations.

The links between Holocaust narratives and fairy-tales have been explored in work by Philippe Codde and Margarete Landwehr, amongst others. Both are concerned with the mythic or allegorical content of contemporary texts: Codde examines the relationship between myth and third-generation Holocaust narrative,[5] whereas Landwehr takes the reverse perspective of reading the Holocaust elements embedded within modern retellings of classic fairy-tales.[6] In both cases the locus of investigation lies with images and events drawn from specific well-known myths and tales; Codde, for example, identifies the use of existing fairy-tales and myths to provide narrative frames for the otherwise unnarratable trauma experienced by third-generation survivors through their engagement with postmemory. Allowing that one indicator of trauma is the absence of narratable memory, Codde argues that "third generation authors take the imaginative leap implied by the concept of postmemory [...]to fill in the blanks left by their absent history."[7] Under this theorisation, well-known myths and fairy-tales are used as substitute narratives which work to some extent to facilitate both the reader's and the narrator's engagement with an unknowable past by framing it within the familiar. Within this article I too will examine the manner in which the use of fairy-tales can affect engagement, however the perspective of my argument is slightly more complex. The focus of this article will be on the use of generic fairy-tale structural features embedded within contemporary Holocaust narrative, rather than the overt referencing of recognizable fairy-tale stories. This use of generic fairy-tale elements, I propose, does provide a means of enabling the reader to engage with the Holocaust narrative but also functions as a screen

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between the reader and the Holocaust, as the level of textual engagement afforded to the reader is dependent on his or her ability to read the relationships between signs encoded within the deployment of the fairy-tale structures and motifs. Extrapolating from this, I will also contend that although the popularity of the "Holocaust Story", and the frequency with which it is referenced within western culture, signals an attempt to use narrative as a means of coming to terms with the Holocaust, the development of this story has in fact created a screen between culture and the damaging effects of the Holocaust.

This article examines in detail the manifestation of fairy-tale images, themes and discourse structures within five fictional narratives of the Holocaust: David Grossman's *See Under Love* (1989), *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2002); *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels (1996); *The Final Solution* by Michael Chabon (2005) and *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne (2006). All of these texts are considered to be "Holocaust narratives", although the Holocaust may not always form the dominant event of the text. It is this approach to representing the Holocaust that has led me to examine these particular texts: each of these narratives seeks to evoke the Holocaust obliquely, relying upon the conveyance of sensation rather than historical fact in order to engage the reader with the event; this is achieved in part by the use of fairy-tale conventions. These texts are also the product of a generational gap between those who witnessed and survived the Holocaust and those who would seek to represent it today. This generational divide leads to a particular form of narrative practice within the contemporary Holocaust narrative. These texts cannot rely upon the perceived authority of the narrator in order to underpin their narrative: the authority of the text must come from within the narrative itself, and is derived to a large extent from the meta-narrative of

the Holocaust that I have identified above, and the reader's pre-existing knowledge of this "Holocaust Story". These texts appeal to this knowledge embodied by the emphasis on the relationship between signifier and signified that is played out within the narrative structure of fairy-tales.

The frequency of fairy-tale themes, images and structures across these texts is both intriguing and disturbing. There are elements of the fairy-tale genre that appear generally across all of the texts, and also specific instances within each. To begin with the general: all of the texts make extensive use of doubling in order to convey meaning. Doubling is a common feature of the fairy-tale genre as it highlights elements within the tale that are designed to appeal to the reader's own experience: often a particular character will act as a double for the reader, or a magical double will appear as a substitute for the protagonist. In these Holocaust texts, characters are frequently doubled, for example the pairing of Jonathan and Alex in *Everything Is Illuminated*. These two characters, apparently polar opposites at the opening of the narrative (the "preppy" young Jewish-American journalist and the Eastern-European teenage playboy) can in fact be read as two sides of the same character, or as a twin representation of the reader's position in relation to knowledge of the Holocaust: within this dialectic, Alex's well-meaning ignorance plays off against Jonathan's quest for knowledge. As the narrative progresses it becomes apparent that, disregarding the geographical accident of birth, the two characters share similar histories: they are the same age, both have a Ukrainian family history and heritage. However because of the intervention of history, Jonathan has been raised in America and has now returned to the birthplace of his grandfather, seeking a narrative account of his own heritage. By contrast Alex has lived for half of his life under Communist rule in Ukraine,

and as a result has very little knowledge of his country's history, and a slightly skewed

perspective on capitalist culture, as his misunderstanding of the nature of his father's

business reveals: "tours for Jewish people […] who have cravings to leave that ennobled

country like America and visit humble towns in Poland and Ukraine".[8] At the apex of the

narrative their personal stories become almost indistinguishable, as Alex perceptively

observes in a letter to Jonathan:

> *we are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can*
>
> *also feel it. Do you know […] that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather,*
>
> *and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me? Do you not*
>
> *comprehend that we can bring each other safety and peace?* (214)

The intermingling and confusion of the two narrative perspectives reveals to the reader

the complexity of his or her own relationship to knowledge of the Holocaust: to claim

ownership of such knowledge is to reveal oneself as ignorant of its intangibility. In this

manner the narrative doubling of Jonathan and Alex serves to act as a double for the

reader, thus exploiting the fairy-tale usage of this convention to its fullest capacity.

    A similar pairing is found in the characters of Jakob and Ben in *Fugitive Pieces*;

Jakob, the Holocaust survivor overwhelmed by fragments of memory but yearning for

factual knowledge about the fate of his sister, and Ben, the child of survivors brought up

in a memory-vacuum, drilled in factual awareness about the Holocaust but with "no

energy of narrative".[9] Slightly more problematic is the allegorical doubling of Bruno, the

young son of a concentration camp commandant and Shmuel, one of the camp prisoners

in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The pairing of these two is explicitly detailed within the narrative: "we were born on the same day",[10] and can be read as part of the novel's project of provoking emotional engagement with the reader: by inviting the comparison between the two boys the novel directs the reader towards the irony inherent in Bruno's jealousy of Shmuel and the "fun" that he believes Schmuel is having behind the barbed wire, with the intent of asking the reader to reflect upon his or her own emotional response. As an attempt at sparking an emotional investment from the reader this becomes problematic insofar as it risks reducing the significant emotional power of the Holocaust narrative to little more than a manipulative narrative device.

Doubling is also present throughout these texts in terms of their approach to Holocaust signs and symbols: as mentioned earlier, the appeal to the reader's knowledge encoded within these signs is problematic in that it simultaneously encourages and resists engagement by the reader. In this manner the Holocaust references within these texts have a double meaning: they appeal to the reader's narrative cultural memory of the Holocaust and simultaneously show how superficial our knowledge really is. This tension is realised in the gap between the signifier and what is signified: for example the image of "jutting bones" referenced within *Fugitive Pieces* immediately calls to mind the image of a camp inmate, however this is not what is signified within the narrative: the image refers instead to the branches of trees at night in the first instance (10), and later to an island rising from the sea (17). The reader makes the connection between the signifying image and its corresponding role in the Holocaust, however as soon as this connection is established the narrative places a screen between the reference and the Holocaust referent. The reader's interpretation is mediated by the double meaning of the sign; to

assume access to the Holocaust through this act of interpreting symbols is too easy, too reductive. Through the doubling of the sign, the reader's knowledge is shown to be indeed "useless knowledge".[11]

Another general occurrence of fairy-tale tropes within these texts is the use of foreshadowing. Foreshadowing is inherent within Holocaust survivor testimony, as the reader always approaches the narrative with the foreknowledge not only of the impending catastrophe, but also that the central protagonist will survive it. This is an act of foreshadowing on the part of the reader; within the fictional narratives under analysis here the author has chosen to develop foreshadowing within the narrative as a means of exercising the reader's knowledge. We find evidence of this in differing amounts across all of the texts. At the conclusion of *The Final Solution* the reader is told that the parrot owned by the mute protagonist Linus sang "in flawless mockery of the voice of a woman that none of them would meet or see again".[12] Although not explained specifically, it is understood by the reader that this woman is Linus' mother, and she has been deported to the camps. The narrative of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is characterised by foreshadowing throughout, from the moment the reader encounters the blurb with its attempt to engage the reader through mystery:

> the story of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is very difficult to describe. Usually we give some clues about the book on the jacket, but in this case we think it would spoil the reading of the book. We think it is important that you start to read this book without knowing what it is about.

This irony pervades the novel, replete with moments such as Bruno commenting on Shmuel's weight loss: "Bruno found that he was starting to worry about his friend because he seemed to be getting even thinner by the day" (161). *Fugitive Pieces* uses foreshadowing to highlight the historicity of experience, the idea that "history stalks before it strikes" (159). Michaels brings foreshadowing and doubling together in an appeal to the reader's knowledge: "I thought of Houdini, astonishing audiences by stuffing himself into boxes and trunks, then escaping, unaware that a few years later other Jews would be crawling into bins and boxes and cupboards, in order to escape" (130). The use of doubling as substitution here is highly reminiscent of its use in fairy-tales: Houdini here doubles and substitutes for the Jew seeking to escape the Nazis, the effect being to highlight the fact that unlike Houdini, very few of the Jews who sought escape in this fashion actually succeeded.

   Everything Is Illuminated is permeated throughout by a sense of foreshadowing, due largely to the temporal differences between the narrative strands. Jonathan's fictional narrative of Trachimbrod is particularly coloured by this sense of predestination: "The final time they made love, seven months before she killed herself and he married someone else, the Gypsy girl asked my grandfather how he arranged his books" (229). As it is known from the outset that the shtetl will be destroyed, everything within this narrative strand exists under the shadow of a future history. As the end approaches, even Jonathan as the narrator cannot bear the "foreknowledge clearly and reflectively marked out"[13] and invites the reader to join him in turning away from the inevitable: "Here it is impossible to go on, because we know what happens, and wonder why they don't. Or it's impossible because we fear that they do" (270). Foer here captures the effect on the

reader of unconscious foreshadowing in survivor testimony: knowing leads to a barrier in reading, our own knowledge of what *will* happen overrides the author-survivor's account of what *does* happen, again suggesting that the reader's knowledge of the Holocaust acts as a barrier to understanding. In all of the contemporary narratives under discussion, foreshadowing serves to highlight the tension between knowledge and understanding that is inherent in any response to the Holocaust. As within fairy-tales, foreshadowing is used as a means of accessing the reader's existing knowledge in order to create specific meanings. In the case of fairy-tales, the reader's knowledge derives from the fact that these stories are so completely standardised; does this however necessarily imply that Holocaust narratives are also somewhat standardised? And what does this mean for the reader's relationship to Holocaust survivor testimony?

I have argued elsewhere for the existence of a generic Holocaust metanarrative[14] constructed by Western culture in the years following the end of the Second World War. This metanarrative is essentially one of suffering and redemption which enables the reader to 'work through' the traumatic impact of the Holocaust on the modern Western psyche, thus facilitating the integration of the Holocaust into cultural memory, creating a 'space' for it within the narrative of the Twentieth Century. As will be discussed at a later point, this is inherently problematic, not least due to the reductivist stance with regard to a) the trauma of the individual survivor and b) the individuality of each survivor narrative. It is precisely the existence of this metanarrative, revealed in part through the incorporation of familiar signs and symbols of survivor testimony into contemporary fictional narratives, that enables the reader to engage in the acts of foreshadowing cited above. It also places the reader of survivor testimony in an untenable position, one of

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unbearable knowledge, that creates an ambiguous relationship with both the author and the protagonists. Essentially, the reader of a testimony is in possession of knowledge that is not, and never will be, available to the protagonists. This places the reader in a position of some power, and in some cases moral superiority, casting judgement on the actions of the protagonists from a viewpoint that is temporally inaccessible to those within the narrative. If the reader feels the burden of this knowledge and recognises the inequality of his/her relationship with the text, this unresolvable tension may go some way towards unsettling the reader's self-equilibrium in the way that a traumatic testimony arguably should. If the reader is not aware of this, however, the assumption of this position furthers the impossibility of understanding and engagement, as explored above in reference to *Everything Is Illuminated*. To some extent this is unavoidable due to the inherent tendency of the reader to approach Holocaust survivor testimony from within the framework of a culturally constructed metanarrative. That this metanarrative exists at all is attributable in part to the similarity of narrative elements across survivor testimonies, in terms of chronological structure, signs, images and tropes. In this respect we fine another similarity with fairy-tales, which also feature a widely recognisable set of common narrative elements. In fact, it is not unusual for modern fictional Holocaust narratives to draw on these fairy-tale conventions, as we shall now see.

The extent to which each of these narratives incorporates elements of the fairy-tale genre varies greatly, however there is no doubt that evidence of fairy-tale influences can be identified in each. In some cases this is overt, as in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* which is characterised on its title page as "a fable". Within the hierarchy of folk-tale prose narratives that includes myth, legend, fairy-tale and fable, this indicates that the

narrative has a specifically didactic purpose, although what Boyne is trying to teach the reader is unclear, owing to the ambiguous implications of the novel's ending: both Bruno and Shmuel are mistakenly rounded up and killed in the gas chamber, but it is unclear whether the intended effect is to shock the reader into realising the arbitrary nature of life in the camps, or to generate emotional response through the "unfair" death of the protagonist (which conversely implies that the deaths of the other people in the gas chamber are somehow "correct"). In *The Final Solution* the fairy-tale references are more covert. A key device in fairy-tale is for the protagonist to be aided in his or her quest by a "magic helper" who not only has access to information or resources essential to the quest, but also serves to enact the magical or "fairy" element within the story:

> The magical dimension is presented earnestly and figures prominently in
> the protagonist's experiences. Whether it is a talking mirror, a talking
> horse, a magic cloak, or a magic lamp, the story must include the
> protagonist's interaction with something magical, an interaction that
> serves to validate the existence of things magical in this world.[15]

Within *The Final Solution*, the role of the magic helper is fulfilled by Linus' parrot: a talking animal. Whilst the parrot does not appear to interact with the other characters in the sense of offering advice and help (which would be incrongruous in Chabon's predominantly realist narrative), he does hold the key to the mystery of what has happened to Linus' parents. Further, as Linus is mute, the parrot can be seen to speak on the boy's behalf. The denouement of the narrative occurs in a section narrated entirely by

the parrot, with his "bird's eye" perspective of events. Chabon's construction of the parrot's voice in this section is not dissimilar to the mistranslated voice of Alex in *Everything Is Illuminated*, in that the parrot, Bruno, interprets the world through his own experiences, thus lending a completely different perspective:

> He had seen madmen: the man who smelled of boiled bird-flesh was
> going mad.
> He knew the smell of boiled bird-flesh, for they ate it. They ate
> anything. The knowledge that the men of his home forests would burn
> and eat with relish the flesh of his own kind was a stark feature of his
> ancestral lore…By now he was long accustomed to the horror of their
> appetites, and he had lost the fear of being eaten; in so far as he had
> observed them, these men, pale creatures, though they devoured birds in
> cruel abundance and variety, arbitrarily exempted his own kind from
> slaughter. The bird they ate most often was the kurcze Hahne poulet
> chicken kip, and it was this odour, of a chicken slaughtered and boiled in
> water with carrots and onions, that, for some reason, the man who was
> going mad exuded. (109)

The construction of the parrot's narrative voice here introduces a magical element into a realist narrative, bringing it close in tone to magic realism. This is not the first time that Chabon has incorporated a magical or fantasy element into a narrative about the Holocaust: his 2001 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* uses the genre

of superhero comics as a means of engaging with contemporary Jewish-American responses to the Holocaust, and in doing so "explores the use of fantasy not as a means of giving shape to the documentary facticity of the Holocaust, not as set of stage properties surrounding the real, but as a potential means of "escape" from the past".[16]

The implied magic realist element of Chabon's narrative brings us to the extensive use of the fantastical in *Everything Is Illuminated*. It is important to note that *Everything Is Illuminated* is not in itself a magic realist novel: both narrative strands narrated by Alex are completely realist. Codde challenges the reading of *Everything Is Illuminated* as magic realist, claiming that "this story is steeped in what some critics consider magical realism, but which is really closer to mythology."[17] Codde's interpretation is dependent upon the reader recognising the narrative elements that, he argues, Foer borrows from ancient Greek mythology as "a valid alternative to illuminate one's origins."[18] This argument does not, however, seek to identify the differences between what can be considered "magic realism" and what can be considered "myth"; do not all myths contain an element of the magical? I would argue in response that not only are both elements present within the narrative, they work to affect the reader in different ways (as discussed above). The "fictional" story of Trachimbrod (I use quotation marks here because technically the whole narrative is fiction, with this particular strand being a fiction within a fiction) as narrated by Jonathan is permeated by the fantastic. Everything about Trachimbrod is magical, except its fate at the hands of an all too real programme of ethnic cleansing: in fact it is the intrusion of reality, in the form of history, upon the magical that leads to the destruction of the shtetl. The use of the magical as counterpoint to the real within this "fictional" narrative also serves to highlight the transience of

memory. The narrative opens with an apparently magical event: the "birth" of Jonathan's great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Brod from the river that bears the same name:

> In the middle of the string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked
> matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like jelly-fish, was a
> baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum.
> The twins hid their bodies under their father's tallis, like ghosts. The horse
> at the bottom of the river, shrouded by the sunken night sky, closed its
> heavy eyes. The prehistoric ant in Yankel's ring, which had lain
> motionless in the honey-coloured amber since long before Noah
> hammered the first plank, hid its head between its many legs, in shame.
> (13)

This event is framed, however, by the possibility that it never occurred: "It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River" (8). From the outset of this narrative, therefore, the impossibility of the magical works in tandem with the impossibility of memory in order to produce a history that is pure fantasy.

In addition to this, the tale of the Wisps of Ardisht forms a mini-fable all of its own:

> The Wisps of Ardisht – that clan of artisan smokers in Rovno who smoked
> so much they smoked even when they were not smoking, and were

condemned by shtetl proclamation to a life of rooftops as shingle layers
and chimney sweeps (16).

Not long after their exile to the rooftops, the Wisps of Ardisht realised that
they would soon run out of matches to light their beloved cigarettes […]
And then, in the moment of deepest desperation, a grand idea emerged,
devised by a child no less: simply make sure there is always someone
smoking. Each cigarette can be lit from the previous one. As long as there
is a lit cigarette, there is the promise of another. The glowing ash is the
seed of continuity! (136-7)

The tale of the Kolker, and of his maimed marriage to Brod after he is forced to live with
a saw blade lodged in his skull following an accident, of his death and the communal
desire to memorialise him as a tribute to Brod, is all told from a magical perspective:

The men at the flour mill, who wanted so desperately to do something
kind for Brod, something that might make her love them as they loved her,
chipped in to have the Kolker's body bronzed, and they petitioned the
governing council to stand the statue in the centre of the shtetl square as a
symbol of strength and vigilance, which, because of the perfectly
perpendicular saw blade, could also be used to tell more or less accurate
time by the sun. (139)

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The concept of love is introduced as a magical force that produces sparks of light, in contrast and resistance to the darkness of history into which Jonathan and Alex must travel in their quest to find modern-day Trachimbrod:

> From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light, exactly, but a glow that could be mistaken for light – a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut's eyes…Some nights, some places are a little brighter. It's difficult to stare at New York City on Valentine's Day, or Dublin on St. Patrick's. The old walled city of Jerusalem lights up like a candle on each of Chanukah's eight nights. Trachimday is the only time all year when the tiny village of Trachimbrod can be seen from space, when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukranian skies electric. *We're here*, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. *We're here, and we're alive*. (95-6)

In addition to these, and many other, magical moments within the "fictional" story of Trachimbrod, there are also more covert fairy-tale references throughout all of the narrative strands. Alex's repeated referral to Jonathan as "the hero" casts him as the fairy-tale hero of Alex's quest narrative; the shtetl landmarks connected by string on Trachimday, "butcher to matchmaker…from carpenter to wax modeller to midwife" (92) call to mind the incantatory "butcher, baker, candlestick maker".

Lee Behlman identifies the fairy-tale elements and reliance upon magic realism within *Everything Is Illuminated* as part of a trend amongst young Jewish American authors, "in order to manage the issue of their own distance from the Holocaust".[19] Behlman proposes that the use of fantasy and folklore in narratives by Foer, Chabon and Nathan Englander acts as a means of negotiating the complex restrictions imposed upon representation by an event as extreme as the Holocaust:

> In their use of folklore, fantasy, and magical-realist devices, Englander
> and Foer both address the problem that Lawrence Langer describes – that
> "Holocaust facts enclose the fictions" – by making fictions that announce
> their fictiveness, fictions that intimately surround historical experience but
> do not present that experience directly.[20]

Under Behlman's formulation, authors such as Foer and Chabon incorporate the magical and fantastical into their narratives as a means of getting around the strict aesthetic restriction generated by "the moral privilege that must be accorded to historical fact."[21] Behlman makes a valid argument, insofar as the production of a narrative that is self-consciously fictional provides a shield from accusations of insensitivity or inappropriateness that may be engendered by a realistic attempt to portray the camps; However, it is worth asking how far this position can be taken. At what point does the narrative technique that Behlman labels "escapism" become "avoidance"? If we deliberately steer Holocaust narrative away from representation, do we run the risk of losing all sense of engagement with the past (as the Wisps of Ardisht would argue, you

have to make sure that someone is always smoking)? In addition to these problems, Behlman's analysis does not account for another significant implication of fairy-tale elements within Holocaust narrative, which can be seen by their incorporation into *Fugitive Pieces.*

Within the narrative of second-generation survivor Ben, *Fugitive Pieces* develops direct comparisons between the Holocaust and fairy-tales: "Instead of hearing about ogres, trolls, witches, I heard disjointed references to kapos, haftlings, "Ess Ess," dark woods; a pyre of dark words" (217). Ben claims that there is "no energy of a narrative in my family" (204), as instead of the usual fairy-tales told to children the only childhood story he hears is that of his parents' experience of the Holocaust; a story that has no narrative but is told through oblique referents, "a pyre of dark words". Ben's experience of constructing his own version of the Holocaust within a fairy-tale framework is almost an exact replica of that of the character Momik in Grossman's *See Under Love*. Momik is locked in a one-sided battle with his own interpretation of something he has heard referred to as "the Nazi Beast". Momik's parents never discuss the Holocaust with him, however like Ben he is able to construct his own version of events out of various "imaginary things and hints and hunches and the talking that stops the minute he walks into the room".[22] Momik is aware that his parents and their friends come from a mysterious land known only as "Over There, a place you weren't supposed to talk about too much, only think about in your heart and sigh with a drawn out krechtz, oyyyy, the way they always do" (13). He also knows that they are afraid of "the Nazi Beast", but other than this he has very little to go on; again there is "no energy of a narrative".

Momik's response in the face of silence and half-truth is to develop a fairy-tale version of events to account for his parents' fears and idiosyncrasies:

> His father, who was still the Emperor and a commando fighter in those
> days, summoned the royal hunter and, with tear-choked voice, ordered
> him to take this infant deep into the forest and leave him there, prey to the
> birds of the sky, as they say. It was a kind of curse they had on children in
> those days. Momik didn't quite understand it yet. But anyway, luckily the
> royal hunter took pity on him and raised him secretly as his own, and
> many years later Momik returned to the castle as an unknown youth and
> became secret advisor to the Emperor and Empress, and that way,
> unbeknownst to anyone, he protected the poor Emperor and Empress who
> had banished him from their kingdom, and of course this is all imaginary.
> (23-4)

Momik has no access to either knowledge or understanding of the Holocaust, therefore he turns to fairy-tale to provide a narrative framework that can account for his parents' sadness. This appears to be a common experience for the children of survivors, as Anne Karpf recounts:

> The Holocaust was our fairy-tale. Other children were presumably told
> stories about goblins, monsters, and wicked witches; we learned about the
> Nazis. And while their heroes and heroines (I realise now) must have fled

from castles and dungeons, the few I remember had escaped from

ghettoes, concentration camps, and forced labour camps. Not that our

parents' war recollections excluded other stories: we also had our Noddy,

Hans Christian Andersen, La Fontaine, Hansel and Gretel, and the rest of

the junior canon…But no fictional evil could possibly have rivalled the

documentary version so often recounted to us and our visitors.[23]

Searching for a frame of reference within which to situate her parents' description of their

experiences, Karpf turns to the other dominant narrative of her childhood: the fairy-tale.[24]

Seeing this practice replicated within contemporary fictional responses to the Holocaust,

one begins to wonder: does the extremity of the Holocaust, coupled with the inability to

understand the survivor experience, make both seem to the non-survivor like something

from a fairy-tale? Or alternatively, in our effort to explain the inexplicable and ascribe

some sort of meaning to the Holocaust, have we inadvertently turned it into a fairy-tale?

This is an extreme proposition, which can only be addressed if we examine the nature and

cultural significance of the fairy-tale genre.

It is a common theory within both psychoanalytical and cultural analysis of fairy-

tales that they exist as a means of understanding the world and how it works. According

to Bruno Bettelheim (himself a former concentration camp prisoner), the struggle to find

meaning is one of the primary human drives: "If we hope to live not just from moment to

moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most

difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives".[25] Given the unknowability of the

Holocaust, it is understandable that such an event destabilises meaning both for the

individual and culturally. According to Bettelheim, the fairy-tale enables a child to discover meaning in the world, through a combination of the act of telling and providing access to the child's cultural heritage:

> to endow life in general with more meaning…nothing is more important that the impact of parents and others who take care of the child; second in importance is our cultural heritage, when transmitted in the right manner. When children are young, it is literature that carries such information best.[26]

The fairy-tale is successful in enabling the child to develop within society as it gives "full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him".[27] The fairy-tale thus presents an exemplary form of meaning: a universal solution to the questions that challenge a child as it comes to know both itself and the world around it. Jack Zipes describes fairy-tales as "a civilising discourse",[28] in other words, a narrative structure that brings some sort of uniform order to chaos. For Zipes, the fairy-tale is not a fixed entity but constantly shifts to reflect the cultural values, concerns and norms of the teller and his audience: "literary fairy-tales appropriated oral folk tales and created new ones to reflect upon rituals, customs, habits and ethics and simultaneously to serve as a civilising agent".[29] Although Zipes claims to resist the term, he describes the fairy-tale in terms of a "cultural institution", which shapes cultural identity:

The fairy tale becomes a broad arena for presenting and representing our wishes and desires. It frequently takes the form of a mammoth discourse in which we carry on struggles over family, sexuality, gender roles, rituals, values, and socio-political power. Writers stake out their ideological positions through fairy tales.[30]

In his preface to an edited collection of essays entitled (tellingly, for this study) *Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing*, Michael M. Metzger claims that

The fairy tale is the best model we have of the way in which the psyche integrates the experiential world with its own needs and desires and explicates its being in the world to itself. Through *identification and catharsis, the vicarious sharing of terror and triumph* […] the genius of the tale offers us a way of perceiving and knowing ourselves which is uniquely and complexly human.[31]

In the titular essay of this collection, Bettelheim goes on to claim that the fairy-tale makes us "tremble by taking us to the edge of the abyss, after having forced us to face evil and all the darkness which also resides within us"[32]. This confrontation is necessary in order that we are able to discover "our true self".[33]

Given all of these claims with regard to the function of the fairy-tale, it is perhaps not surprising that in searching for a narrative frame of reference for the Holocaust we alight on fairy-tales: as Eaglestone has noted,[34] when attempting to engage with the

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Holocaust through the more "direct" medium of eye-witness testimony, the non-survivor approaches Holocaust survivor narratives in the hope of achieving some form of identification with the protagonist, aiming to restore some meaning to a cultural identity shattered in the aftershock. The fairy-tale would provide exactly this; as Bettelheim comments, "myths and fairy-tales were derived from, or give symbolic expression to, initiation rites or other *rites de passage* – such as a metaphoric death of an old, inadequate self in order to be reborn on a higher plane of existence".[35] In light of the alleged death and rebirth of culture in the wake of the Holocaust, the fairy-tale would appear to supply the ideal form within which to narrate the trauma of the event.

Indeed, following our analysis of the structural dependence of fictional Holocaust narratives on the conventions of the fairy-tale, it is also possible to argue that there are definite identifiable similarities between the narrative structure of survivor testimony and that of fairy-tales: most notably the concept of the quest. Almost all fairy-tales are structured as quest narratives, either a quest for knowledge or a physical quest to retrieve a mystical object. This is mirrored in both the fictional narratives examined above and in survivor testimonies via the physical journey from home to the camp and back again. Intrinsic to the quest within fairy-tale is the concept of threshold crossing:

> a pattern of separation (call to adventure, threshold crossing), initiation
> (confrontation with antagonist, divinity), and return (return crossing and
> reincorporation into the community)…the threshold crossing involves a
> crossing into another realm, a realm of magic and fantasy.[36]

Aside from the parallels that can be drawn between the pattern of the fairy-tale quest identified here and the journey of the Holocaust survivor, we can also recognise the "crossing into another realm" as symbolic of the protagonist's entrance into the concentrationary universe, within which all previous meanings are undermined. I am not the first to comment on these similarities: in an analysis of katabatic[37] patterns of descent and return in narratives written post-1945, Rachel Falconer identifies the moment of threshold crossing as a key chronotope within the narrative of Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man*:

> The chronotope of the threshold governs the first four chapters of *If This Is A Man*, which describes Levi's deportation from the outskirts of Turin to Auschwitz. The chronotopic representation of Auschwitz offers us a series of absolute contrasts, between "up here" and "down there", between the rational and the insane, human and infernal, historical and mythic. The descent protagonist, Levi's former self, is constrained within the particular spatio-temporality of the threshold chronotope…All thresholds crossed thereafter are experienced not as a deepening of the experience, but as an absurd repetition of this singular, absolutely definitive crossing into Hell.[38]

Following Falconer's analysis, we can also observe that the cultural position of Holocaust narrative currently lies somewhere in between the historical and the mythic – inhabiting the dichotomy cited by Charlotte Delbo between what is truthful and what is true.[39]

William Bascom, in an essay entitled "The Forms of Folklore", provides a comparison table of the elements of different types of folk tale, using which as a framework it becomes apparent that the likely cultural significance of Holocaust survivor testimony currently lies somewhere between legend and myth.[40] To what extent this is acceptable, and how far this positioning is informed by the imposition of 'mythic' fairy-tale discourses upon the historical "fact" of the Holocaust, is a complex question that leads us towards the conclusion of this article.

Structurally, then, the fairy-tale and the Holocaust narrative have their similarities. And yet it is apparent to anyone who has any engagement with the Holocaust that the two are vastly different: even identifying similarities between the two for the purposes of this study feels highly inappropriate. There are many points of incongruity between the fairy-tale genre and Holocaust survivor testimony: firstly, and most importantly, the question of fictionality. Although some theorists, such as Berel Lang, have argued that the use of figurative language to convey experience instantly renders that experience fictional,[41] it is understood by the reader that survivor testimony is based on fact, or at least on actual experience as the survivor remembers it. Conversely, fairy-tales are understood to be fictional, presenting a largely allegorical version of the world in order to achieve a didactic or moralistic purpose. This question of didacticism is in itself problematic, as to ascribe a didactic purpose to survivor testimony would be to implicitly assign meaning to the survivor's experience. The second point of contrast between fairy-tales and testimony lies in the issue of identification. A key element of the fairy-tale is that the reader must be able to identify with the protagonist in order to gain the full benefit of the didactic message: "the audience is encouraged to identify strongly with the central protagonist,

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who is presented in an unambiguous way".[42] This is in direct conflict with the survivor testimony, which actively resists such an identification. However, the fact that the reader is urgently seeking to identify with the survivor does suggest that, unconsciously at least, we read survivor testimony within the narrative framework of the fairy-tale. Thirdly, the fairy-tale exists in order to bestow meaning upon the life of the reader. In modern renditions, the fairy-tale always ends happily, with all issues (either social or internal) resolved.[43] To assume that survivor testimony provides any sort of resolution, either for the reader or the survivor, is reductive and short-sighted; to read the return home at the end of testimony as a happy ending (as is a common interpretation) is again evidence that we impose the structure of the fairy-tale upon the actual experience of the survivor. Fourth, we must address the issue of escapism in fairy-tale. As we have already seen, Behlman identifies escapism as a key purpose of the fantasy element in contemporary Holocaust narratives. This escapism is not only effective for the author: reading *Everything Is Illuminated* is in itself an exercise in escapism. The novel is overwhelmingly enjoyable to read, but is this appropriate for a Holocaust narrative? Does the reader's enjoyment of such texts return us to Adorno's concern that "the so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it"?[44] Escapism is not necessarily a positive effect of the fairy-tale narrative; as Zipes notes of the rise in popularity of the fairy-tale during the 1930s:

> Depression was shaking most of the world and fascism of all kinds was on
> the rise. The fairy tale was to speak for happiness and utopia in the face of

conditions that were devastating people's lives all over the globe. Perhaps

this utopian message was why Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

was such as success in 1937.[45]

In other words, the escapism offered by the fairy-tale in the 1930s enabled the Western

world to turn away from the unpleasant, complicated political situation in Nazi Germany

and instead dream of a utopian future. Bettelheim is right that fairy-tales introduce us to

the dark side of human nature, but we are not forced into confrontation with it; over the

course of the fairy-tale narrative we are indeed led to the edge of the abyss, but there is

nothing in the fairy-tale to push us over the edge: the fairy-tale "after having acquainted

us with what we rather wish to avoid, serenely rescues us".[46] Examining the facts of

fairy-tale in this manner, it is apparent that the links between the fairy-tale genre and

Holocaust narrative, although clearly identifiable, do not justify the use of fairy-tale as a

narrative frame for the Holocaust. It also seems, however, that in our desire to identify

with the survivor-protagonist and to ascribe a meaningful solution to the narrative pattern

of a testimony, that this is exactly what our cultural response to the Holocaust has been.

Why should this be the case? Bettleheim makes a crucial point in noting that:

the fairy tale proceeds in a manner which conforms to the way a child thinks and

experiences the world; this is why the fairy tale is so convincing to him…Whatever

our age, only a story conforming to the principles underlying our thought processes

carries conviction for us.[47]

The Holocaust narrative, in particular the eyewitness account of a survivor testimony, is the opposite of this: it provides a direct challenge not only to our thought processes but to our understanding of the world and how it works, our cultural identity and the relationship of the individual to society. Under Bettelheim's analysis, a narrative that espouses these qualities cannot be processed within our cultural imagination. It is entirely possible that in our drive to engage with the Holocaust, to come to terms with catastrophe, we overlook the challenges posed by survivor testimony and instead read the Holocaust within a narrative frame that fits with our mode of understanding. The resulting interpretation of the Holocaust through such an ill-fitting frame produces what Eaglestone describes as "allegories of failed understanding"; "that it is impossible to "know and have not seen".[48]Approaching the Holocaust through the mediatory frame of fairy-tale narrative, we can comfort ourselves that we have looked into the abyss, and we have come to know ourselves again. In reality we have not even come close.

Notes

[11] Tim Cole, *Images of the Holocaust: The Myth of the "Shoah Business"* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 12; 18.

[2] Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, 1.

[3] Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, 5.

[4] Bruno Bettelheim, "Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing", in *Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing: Essays on Märchen in Psychology, Society and Literature*, ed. Michael M. Metzger and Katherina Mommsen (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981), 11-20, (12).

[5] Philippe Codde, "Transmitted Holocaust Trauma: A Matter of Myth and Fairy Tales?" *European Judaism* 42, no. 1, (2009): 62-75.

[6] Margarete Landwehr, "The Fairy-Tale as Allegory for the Holocaust: Representing the Unrepresentable in Yolen's *Briar Rose* and Murphy's *Hansel and Gretel*", in *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*, ed. Susan Redington Bobby (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 153-167.

[7] Codde, "Transmitted Holocaust Trauma", 64.

[8] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 3.

[9] Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 204.

[10] John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (London: QPD, 2004), 109.

[11] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 115

[12] Michael Chabon, *The Final Solution* (London and New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 127.

[13] Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and The Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 129.

[14] Anna Richardson, *'To Tell the Story': Tracing the Development of Holocaust Narrative from Personal Trauma to Popular Fiction* (University of Manchester: PhD Thesis, 2008)

[15] Steven Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

[16] Lee Behlman, "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction", *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22, no.3 (2004), 56-71 (62).

[17] Codde, "Transmitted Holocaust Trauma", 65.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Behlman, "The Escapist", 56.

[20] Ibid, 60.

[21] Ibid, 57.

[22] David Grossman, *See Under Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), 23-4.

[23] Anne Karpf, *The War After: Living With the Holocaust* (London: Minerva, 1997), 94.

[24] The use of fairy tale as a means of addressing issues raised by the Holocaust has also been identified as a trend within German literature post-1945. For a full discussion of this, see Peter Arnds, "On the Awful German Fairy Tale: Breaking Taboos in Representations of Nazi Euthanasia and the Holocaust in Günther Grass's 'Die Blechtrommel' , Edgar Hilsenrath's 'Der Nazi & der Friseur;, and Anselm Kiefer's Visual Art", *The German Quarterly*, 75 no. 4 (Autumn 2002), 422-439.

[25] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 3.

[26] Ibid, 4.

[27] Ibid, 5.

[28] Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) , 15.

[29] Ibid, 3-4.

[30] Ibid, 9.

[31] Michael M. Metzger and Katherina Mommsen, eds. *Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing: Essays on Märchen in Psychology, Society and Literature* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981), 8.

[32] Bruno Bettelheim, "FairyTales as Ways of Knowing", in *Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing,* ed. Metzger and Mommsen, 11-21 (12).

[33] Ibid, 18.

[34] Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and The Postmodern*, 22.

[35] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 35.

[36] Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale*, 15.

[37] "Katabasis" is the Ancient Greek term to describe a hero's journey to the underworld; Falconer uses this to suggest that much of twentieth century literature is governed by what she describes as "the katabatic imagination." Rachel Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives since 1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 2.

[38] Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature,* 68.

[39] Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*.

[40] William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives." *The Journal of American Folklore* , Vol. 78, No. 307 (Jan. - Mar., 1965), 3-20

[41] Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 144.

[42] Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale*, 17.

[43] Although this is not always the case in older versions of fairy-tales. The "Disneyfication" of popular fairy-tale narratives speaks of a modern desire for narrative resolution that threatens to undermine the experience of Holocaust survivors as encountered through their testimonies.

[44] Theodor Adorno, "Commitment", in *Notes to Literature,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991-92), vol. 2, 88.

[45] Zipes, *Happily Ever After*, 2-3.

[46] Bruno Bettelheim, "FairyTales as Ways of Knowing", 12.

[47] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 45.

[48] Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and The Postmodern*, 51.