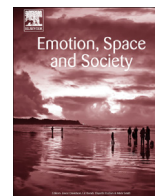




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

A tale and its tale

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 November 2014

Accepted 6 July 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Fairy tale

Silence

Trauma

Psychoanalysis

ABSTRACT

Once upon a time there was a little girl who had woken from a sleep so deep that it had lasted many moons". Drawing on first generation post-war experiences in Germany, I construct a fairy tale in which I begin to trouble silences surrounding familial and national historiographical lacunae. With such tales positioned on the threshold of conscious experiences and embodied unconscious knowledge, I reflectively draw on psychoanalytic theory to consider silences as reminders of uncanny returns of what has been suppressed.

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1

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who had woken from a sleep so deep that it had lasted many moons. She looked around her room and did not recognize it any more. And when she looked into her mirror, she did not know the girl who looked back. "Will someone know who I am?" she asked the girl in the mirror. Alas, there was no answer. So, without further ado, she took her only treasure, a golden net, and began on her journey. She asked anyone who passed her way, but try as she might, no one knew who she was. The little girl sat down and began to cry.

Now an old man had watched her from his window. "Why do you cry?" he enquired, and the girl told him her story. "Can you help me find me?" she asked. The old man looked at her, took her hand, and answered: "Little girls who are lost do not need to search on their own. I will go with you until you find what you are looking for".

And so they set off and soon came to a shore, where a boat was tethered to a post. They got in and cast themselves off. For many days and many nights they crossed a dark sea. They fought storms and high waves. The little girl would get giddy and reach for the old man's hand. "Hold me", she would say, "the shaky dark frightens me". And he would hold her until night turned into day and the little girl feared less. In this way, they continued on their voyage, until, one day, the colour of the sea turned light blue. When the little girl and the old man viewed the horizon, they saw land in the far distance. "That is where I want to go", she said. Alas, when they

reached the shore, they saw that all was wasteland. Wherever they turned, all was rubble. Every house had been burnt to cinders, and gaping holes opened to more ruins. They found not one soul. All was quiet, not even the birds sang. "I am scared of the silence", the little girl said, and the old man reached out to hold her hand. "Fear not", he said, "I am with you. You are not alone". And so they walked on. The journey took them to the tops of mountains and into valleys, where springs turned into burns and burns into rivers which fed the oceans, but still they did not encounter anyone. Silence was everywhere.

While they were walking, through valleys and fields, through rubble and ruined towns, theirs were the only sounds you could hear. Then, one day, they stopped in their tracks, for in the distance they saw a house, a proper house. It was not too big and not too small, but it stood upright amongst all the ruins. "That is where I want to go", the little girl said. And so they walked on until they could see that right in the middle of the house was an entrance. A lock hung outside. The old man took out a key; it fitted the lock perfectly. They heaved and shoved, until, finally, the door gave way with a startled groan. And my, what a sight beckoned them! As far as their eyes could see, the house was filled to the brim with every word imaginable, long and large words, teeny tiny ones were jumbled on shelves upon shelves which were bending under the heavy weight. Imagine her delight! Here, in the midst of silence, was a house filled to the brim with every word that had ever been thought, and some that had yet been unthought. "I have never seen so many words in my life", the little girl said, her eyes shining. With outstretched arms she raced along the shelves, her small fingers drawing fine lines in the settled dust. The old man looked at her kindly. "Shall we play with them?" he suggested, smilingly. "Play

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with them?" the little girl laughed out loud, but then asked shyly: "But, but how can I possibly play?" So the old man raised himself onto tiptoes, reached up to the highest shelf and carefully placed a word into her small hands. "Here", he said, "and mind that you don't drop it". In her palm the little girl held a teeny tiny word which weighed more than she had ever carried in her life. Carefully she placed it onto the floor. There it sat in its shiny blackness. "RAW" she read aloud. "Look at it upside down and back to front", the old man suggested. The little girl did a handstand and flipped sideways. "Oh my" she exclaimed "now I know why it weighs more than I have ever known. Why, such a teeny, tiny, mighty word". She sat down on her heels, her lips quivering. Gently the old man touched her shoulder. "Shall we place it in your net?" he asked.

And so the old man and the little girl began their game. They dusted the cobwebs off many words, or washed them in warm water – my, how those words shone like magic lanterns! All the while, they would carefully gather words in her golden net. Often she would climb up to the highest shelves, nimbly easing long words out of the jumble of tinsy-tiny ones, some heavy as lead, or sharp as razors, others light as feathers, or squishy as marshmallows. Imagine her joy when sunlight would appear through the walls and dust would dance like shooting stars! "Here I come" she would shout happily, sitting astride words so light that she could float down to the ground, bathed in warming sunshine. And the old man would smile at her antics. Imagine, some words were so soft that they used them as blankets, and others were round as balls, which caused no end of fun. At other times, the old man would ease heavy words from the little girl's grasp, fists opening into his old hands, and the word would land on the floor with a loud 'thump'. Such days were not filled with smiles, but with drops, which would glisten on the girl's cheeks. In this way, they would spend many, many days. And while the net grew wider and wider with more and more words, it grew lighter and lighter, and began to hover like a golden cloud.

One day, while taking a rest, the little girl looked longingly at her golden net which was by now filled with almost every word imaginable. How lightly it floated above the highest shelves! With the greatest of care, she eased it through the large entrance. And, do you know, with a gigantic swish, words upon words upon words jostled and bumped and shoved and pushed until they rose high above the house. Up and down they drifted, spreading far and further into the distance. Well, imagine the little girl's amazement! Open-mouthed she stood, watching in awe and wonder. Never had she seen such spectacle! "Come, come" she shouted excitedly, "watch our words float out." But no one answered, no one heeded her call. "Where are you? Are you playing hide-and-seek?" the little girl asked in a much smaller voice. Hurriedly she turned round and began her search. "Where are you?" she pleaded, "Answer me, please. I cannot hear you." Into the furthest and darkest corners of the house the girl ventured, alas, the old man was nowhere to be found.

The sun was beginning to set, casting a soft glow over all it touched. "Whatever have I done?" the little girl cried desperately, "Not only have I released all the words we have ever gathered together, but now my one and only friend is gone forever." She clutched her golden net, which had lain rather dishevelled in the doorway, and curled up beside it. She tossed and turned, yet sleep evaded her. Being drenched in tiredness, her body eventually succumbed. But no sooner had she closed her eyes when she felt a warm draft caressing her tired body. "Endlich," a voice breathed, "endlich haben wir dich gefunden."¹

With a frightened startle, the little girl sat up straight. Up she bolted, fearing the worst of the worst. Against the encroaching

darkness she was able to discern figures, four female figures, whose smiles set the little girl alight. Her heart skipped a few beats. For in their faces the little girl recognized a face that had looked back from her own mirror many, many moons ago. "But," she whispered, "aber ..." The eldest enrobed the little girl into her arms, cheek to cheek they held each other and did not let go.

And yet ...

2

They came relatively easy, the words. They appeared almost effortlessly, if one can ever say such thing about the process of writing. *Once upon a time*, I wrote, and waited rather impatiently for what was to follow. I wrote a tale about a girl on a quest – without doubt, a story about a character on a perilous mission and her journey toward possible redemption is similar to yarns spun across the world and across time. Traditionally, stories we tend to associate with the contemporary notion of fairy tale evolved primarily through oral traditions, "polished and perfected over centuries by generations of peasant storytellers" (Roberts).

Without doubt, the genre acts as container for a plethora of motifs which have acquired social meaning in accordance to a particular socio-cultural context, and, of course, my tale can be read in a similar fashion. Yet, rather than offering a point-by-point interpretation, an autopsy of sorts, I intentionally withhold my frame of reference in order to leave readers afloat in an engagement with their own, less consciously construed, meaning-making processes. The lack of definitive signification makes a substantial demand on the reader, including the risk of coming up against unwanted or disturbing associations, and turns the psychoanalyst Bettelheim's (1991) substantive argument on its head. He suggests that young children need the prescriptive/predictive framing of tales set *Once upon a time*, and that such tales which speak to good and evil, life and death, heroism and depravity articulate, in symbolic form, some of their unconscious struggles. By offering a means of imaginative identification, Bettelheim argues, children are afforded a system within which complex emotional entanglements can be negotiated, and to a certain extent overcome. Moreover, and more to the point, fairy tales attend to what Cavareo (2005) calls an 'embodied, contextual' relationality. At best, they should be spoken aloud, in "a valuable interpersonal event" between teller and audience (Heisig, 2009: 97).

In Germany, the brothers Grimm gathered orally transmitted tales in one eponymous volume – the *Hausmärchen*. First published at the beginning of the 19th Century, it quickly entered the canon of exemplary children's literature, and has remained there to this day. I cannot recall if I was told any fairy tales by my parents when I was young. "The prevalent parental belief is that a child must be diverted from what troubles him most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies. Many parents believe that only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child – that he should only be exposed to the sunny side of things" so Bettelheim (1991: 7), and he continues: "But such one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one sided-way, and real life is not all sunny."

What can I say about sunniness? I grew up in a country deeply traumatized by its heinous recent past, a country which sought to reinvent itself in an illusion. *Stunde Null*, or Zero Hour, in reference to the complete capitulation on 9th May 1945, contextualised the efforts made within Germany's psyche to assume a 'tabula rasa' position, and sought to avert her eyes from her own historicity. The beginnings of the *Wirtschaftswunder*² which followed the currency

¹ Finally, finally we have found you.

² Economic miracle.

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