Return of the Fairy-Tale: Harry Potter, a Story of Traumatised Generations

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Fairy-tales, the way centuries have known them, seem to have disappeared after the Second World War. A curious phenomenon which sets the mind wondering. Have 'wartime' images been interfering with scenes of liveable human drama as represented in fairy-tales? Has 'tale imagery' been blown up by the excessive traumatisation in such a manner that even fragments seemed too upsetting to re-enter the mind: so they had to be silenced altogether?

Was it a defensive manoeuvre, a 'transmittance tactic' of the 'first generation' to spare the children from getting in touch with their unbearable experiences and memories they could never delete from their minds? The "bulk of… so-called 'children's literature' tries to entertain or inform, or both. But so shallow in substance" – writes Bettelheim in 1975 – that

> "… they cheat the child of what he ought to gain from the experience of literature: access to deeper meaning, and that which is meaningful to him at his stage of development… For a story truly to hold the child's attention it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination: help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions: be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations: give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems, which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality – and this without ever belittling but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future…
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> If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then the greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives."

reads Bettelheim's popular psychoanalytical manifesto, *The Use of Enchantment*. (1991, pp. 4-5)

For decades, writers, psychologists, teachers and parents were trying to unblock the passages of symbolisation and facilitate a search for more valid psychological meaning in children's literature. They have raised their voice

against the abundance of surface representations both in story line and in visual forms, including cartoons. These visual images do not allow the whole self to be involved; the somato-affective side of the experience gets mostly split off; the experience loses depth and the "readers" find themselves in a two-dimensional world.

Such books and magazines have dominated the market for decades and claimed more-and-more exclusive space not only on the bookshelves but also in the mind of the growing generations. The century was nearly over, when in 1997 a book written by a single mother appeared in London – and Harry Potter's saga began.

As of now 50 million copies of the Harry Potter books have been sold all over the world and translated into cca 40 languages. The figures speak for themselves, they prove how much the world has been craving to welcome back real magic and imagination: the experience of being lost in reading.

With Harry Potter the fairy-tale has (eventually) been reborn. What is the secret of this unbelievable success? For years, friends and relations, children and adults, newspapers and TV programmes spoke about the adventures of this teenage boy. A senior analyst in Budapest used to say: "the most important things in a town you hear about from the couch."

When a great number of my patients also started to talk about Harry Potter in their sessions weaving themes and symbols borrowed from the latest books into the text of daily associations I started to be really interested; it seemed as if a great part of the population was having the same dream.

Having my curiosity awakened this way I wondered more-and-more what deeper psychological reasons might be there behind these extraordinary phenomena. So I bought the books and sat down to read.

My first reaction was a childhood excitement of encountering familiar and original elements of tale-imagery. With dragons and goblins to scare you, an over-protective 'house-elf' testing your patience, and, if all else fails there is an invisibility cloak under which to hide. Warm–hearted silly giants come and protect you, cowardly professors of 'Defence against Dark Arts' are made ridiculous and lose credibility before your eyes. And if you don't want to miss the train taking you to the famous 'Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry' you better arrive on time to King's Cross Station and push yourself through the barrier that separates Platform 'nine and three-quarters' from the rest of the world of 'muggles'(non magical beings and creatures – for those who haven't read the books yet…)

Ferenczi was also interested in fairy tales. He concludes his Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality in 1913 with a very poetic and profound paragraph full of nostalgia and longing for a lost world of childhood safety

and basic hope that I find worthwhile quoting in its full beauty and length:

> "In fairy-tales… fantasies of omnipotence are and remain the dominant ones. Just where we have most humbly to bow before the forces of nature, the fairy tale comes to our aid with its typical motifs. In reality we are weak, hence the heroes of fairy tales are strong and unconquearable; in our activities and our knowledge we are cramped and hindered by time and space, hence in the fairy-tales one is immortal, is in a hundred places at the same time, sees into the future and knows the past. The heaviness, the solidity and the impenetrability of matter obstruct our way every moment: in the fairy-tale, however, man has wings, his eyes pierce the walls, his magic wand opens all doors. Reality is a hard fight for existence: in the fairy-tale the words 'little table, be spread' are sufficient.We may live in perpetual fear of attacks from dangerous beasts and fierce foes; in the fairy-tale a magic cap enables every transformation and makes us inaccessible. How hard it is in reality to attain love that can fulfill all our wishes! In the fairy tale the hero is irresistible, or he bewitches with a magic gesture.
> Thus the fairy-tale, through which grown-ups are so fond of relating to their children their own unfulfilled and repressed wishes, really brings the lost situation of omnipotence to an ultimate artistic representation." (Ferenczi 1913, in Ferenczi 1999, pp. 80-81).

With Harry Potter on 'Hogwarts Express' you leave behind the Suburbia of small-minded and empty people and enter an alternative world; a magic society which is ruled by strikingly familiar human forces. They live among us but usually we can't recognise them as they use all sorts of 'repelling spells' to keep the unwanted off their sites.

Harry Potter is an orphan. But not just any orphan: he is a son of martyrs, his parents lost their life in the resistance, fighting against the most evil wizard of all times, Lord Voldemort, who is hardly ever called by his name, the people of this alternative world use an allusion when referring to him: he is 'You-know-who'.

The hero grows up in 'foster care' in his cruel and stupid 'muggle' aunt-and-uncle's home. This is a sort of 'anti-family romance': Harry does not fantasise, he accepts the grim and flat reality and tries to survive. The child's real identity is sealed off by the massive and frightening family secret (i.e. that he is a son of a wizard and a witch; a wizard himself) until his eleventh birthday.

When "You-know-who" killed his parents, he tried to kill the baby as well but his fatal curse has been reversed by Harry's mother sacrificing herself to save her son. The most magical protection of all! The child lives, marked by a lightning shaped scar on his forehead – and the dark sorcerer's power crumbles. Legend says that he might still be alive, hiding somewhere far away (in Albania…) in an unrecognisable, shrunk and cursed shape waiting for his followers to come, rescue him and help resurrect the state of terror. The motif of having to exist in a

metamorphosed state until someone comes whose love (or in this case sadism, political interest and ambition soaked in fear) is strong enough to restore the character into their original shape is a recurring image in tales of different lands.

It is small wonder that Harry Potter is regarded as a messianic force who moves into centre stage once the secret is revealed and he is introduced to the world where he belongs. Step by step he learns how to fly and play Quidditch (a magical version of football – having been invented and 'repaired' by a woman; a hundred times more captivating than the original…): how to enjoy childhood and creativity. While he learns about the past (both the individual and the collective story) and restores some sense of continuity into his being (memories of the extreme trauma gradually flash back) he also understands he has a mission: he'll have to be the one who stands up to the dark force when it strikes again.

Beyond this point the path of the 'millennial hero' does not follow the traditional line: this tale is a story of broken omnipotence. J.K. Rowling depicts a frightening vision: evil can not be defeated in a world that has not worked through the collective and individual trauma, losses, persecution and torture. It gets stronger and stronger. In such a world the only hope for a child is to be strong-and-brave enough to face the forces of destruction and survive.

Like names of historical figures (e.g. Stalin – meaning: steel – chosen by J.V. Djugashvili to impress with an image of stainless strength and power) Lord Voldemort is also an adopted name to keep everybody in awe. His 'real name' is Tom Riddle, suggesting a multiple identity that has to be decoded through creating linkages by connecting feelings to verbal and visual associations.

Mentalising the sense of danger and excitement adds the thrill to the storyline according to the best English traditions, where some linguistic bravura (like the task of deciphering the name through an anagram) often plays an integral part.

A search for some insight into the developmental phases and 'life-cycles'of evil (in our case the youth of the Dark Lord) seems to be an end-of-XXth century 'cult' preoccupation: let's just think of the Star War sequels and the shattering success of the Mummy films all over the world. The tale of Harry Potter joins in the universally shared visions of destruction. Concretised images of elementary terror encapsulate unconscious phantasies of annihilation: Lord Voldemort, like other dark masters, consumes faltering and innocent others to reconstruct a new and functioning body which enables him to regain unlimited power and control.

Through recurring challenges Harry learns important lessons of trauma and survival: how to recognise signs of danger, and what sort of mechanisms of defence one might try to mobilise if one can act in time.

In Harry Potter's world Good and Evil bear striking similarities and are closely linked. Harry's and Voldemort's wand have the same magic essence. He reacts in body and mind: his scar always hurts, 'abnormal dreams' and visions torture him whenever the Lord is nearby and enters a new stage of rebuilding himself. All these factors create a frightening sense of connectedness: having incorporated a part of the aggressor (but also the saviour!) through the traumatic experience make them exist eternally bound. This is a malignant bondage: the contained split-off parts make mutuality and sharing impossible. Sharing belongs to the domain of the 'Language of Tenderness'. Ferenczi was the first to realise that mutuality is an experiential mode of relatedness: a basic function, an opposite of 'basic fault', the 'magic component' of primary love (Ferenczi, 1933).

Working with trauma sufferers – like in our 'Personal Narrative Groups' organised at this stage for colleagues having gone through the unrecognised trauma of emigration; 'the people of Lost Childhood'- one comes to understand that mutuality has a transforming effect in itself. I strongly believe that Ferenczi's groundbreaking technical and methodological ideas have to be rethought in this light.

J.K. Rowling seems to have the knowledge: sharing makes the trauma bearable – even for the 'magic folk'. Though Harry (like any hero in fairy-tales) can find friends and helpers, the overall picture presents a world of disorientation and confusion. Children can not rely on adults for help and protection. The 'first generation', who lived through the time of terror is severely damaged, they need protection themselves. (One is turned bitter and cruel, the other has been broken by injustice; imprisoned and tortured by 'Dementors', these creatures of ultimate horror – magic prison guards, who could suck out parts of one's soul when they come close, and the whole of it when they perform the Capital Punishment.)

There are no safe boundaries, they have become unstable and unreliable. It is hard to know what are the functions of an adult and what can be expected from children. Identification is extremely difficult. Harry's image of the parental couple takes the form of a protecting 'Patronus', an idealised (totemistic) image of his killed father accompanied by the recurring memory of a mother sacrificing herself for her child.

Individual identity can easily be replaced by group identity. In Harry's environment the only safe and secure person is an ancient 'grandfather figure': Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts. He is the only one to have real authority whose integrity has not been destroyed or compromised. Unfortunately his hands are also tied by the Magic Institutions and socio-political directives – until the final confrontation which brings 'peaceful co-existence' to an end.

After Harry's last test when he nearly dies in the hands of the ritually reborn Dark Master he does not hesitate: he is ready to lead against the fundamentalist 'Death Eaters' who are crying for 'nothing but pure blood". Harry potter is a story of traumatised generations. The contemporary fairy-tale opens up to external reality and history where ideology, power-manipulations and politics invade everybody's life. It is a symbolic picture of the external and internal reality of our world: that's why, I believe, it appeals to children and grownups all around the globe.

The fourth Harry Potter book ends with Dumbledore mobilising all forces he can trust against fundamentalism. It was published in 2000. The next year, the world witnessed the attack on the Twin Towers. J.K. Rowling was silent for years she has not come out with the promised, much awaited fifth book.

'Those who don't remember their history are condemned to repeat it' quotes Hanna Segal George Santayanás saying. Can it be that even the 'Wizarding World' does not know how the next chapter will be written?

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