

ATLANTIS

Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies

42.1 (June 2020): 37-56

e-ISSN 1989-6840

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2020-42.1.03>

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The Estrangement Effect in Three Holocaust Narratives: Defamiliarising Victims, Perpetrators and the Fairy-Tale Genre

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Holocaust literature has often been described as producing disruption and estrangement. As the Holocaust challenges traditional forms of expression, writers have used alternative techniques, sometimes blurring genres and registers. This is the case with Holocaust narratives that rewrite fairy tales or use fairy-tale motifs and structures: they produce an estrangement effect in that their intertexts are defamiliarised as a strategy for opening up the possibilities of representation. This article focuses on three works of this kind, by authors Lisa Goldstein, Louise Murphy and Rachel Seiffert. Specifically, it considers how they constitute an alternative to the sanctioned metanarrative of the Holocaust, which is victim centred and facilitates the reader's empathy. Indeed, the works discussed here complicate the categories of victim and perpetrator, thus problematising our engagement with the characters in a way that furthers the abovementioned estrangement effect. Attention is paid to the role played by secrecy in each narrative, as I contend that it is the secret and its effects in the diegesis that keep the characters at a distance, "estranged" from the reader. This distance precludes easy identification and invites critical discussion on the limitations of familiar categories and binaries, such as the victim/victimiser opposition and the public/secret dichotomy.

Keywords: Holocaust; fairy tales; estrangement; Lisa Goldstein; Louise Murphy; Rachel Seiffert

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El efecto de extrañamiento en tres narrativas del Holocausto:
La desfamiliarización de víctimas, perpetradores y del género del cuento
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Con frecuencia se afirma que la literatura del Holocausto produce disrupción y extrañamiento. Dado que el Holocausto desafía formas tradicionales de expresión, las escritoras y escritores han explorado técnicas alternativas, a veces combinando distintos (meta)géneros y registros. Este es el caso de obras que tratan sobre el Holocausto a partir de la reescritura de cuentos populares. Se genera así un efecto de extrañamiento o desfamiliarización de dichas fuentes que tiene que ver con la búsqueda de nuevas posibilidades de representación. El artículo se centra en examinar el modo en que tres obras de este tipo—de Lisa Goldstein, Louise Murphy y Rachel Seiffert—formulan alternativas al metarrelato tradicional del Holocausto, que se caracteriza por centrarse en las víctimas y facilitar la empatía del lector o lectora por los personajes. En las obras aquí analizadas, por el contrario, la línea que separa víctimas y perpetradores se desdibuja, de forma que la relación del lector o lectora con los personajes participa del efecto de extrañamiento anteriormente mencionado. El artículo considera también el papel que juegan los secretos en las tres obras, al contribuir estos al extrañamiento de los personajes con respecto de la lectora o lector. Este hecho complica el proceso de identificación e invita a profundizar en el debate sobre las limitaciones de las categorías convencionales y de binarios tales como los basados en las dicotomías víctima/victimizador y secreto/público.

Palabras clave: Holocausto; cuentos populares; extrañamiento; Lisa Goldstein; Louise Murphy; Rachel Seiffert

I. INTRODUCTION

In his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel reflected on the greatest difficulty survivors faced after liberation: “And yet real despair only seized us later. Afterwards. As we emerged from the nightmare and began to search for meaning” (1997, 175). In the end, Holocaust literature comes down to this, a search for meaning that is also a search for a medium to tell the story of what happened, thus defying the view of the Holocaust as unspeakable and therefore unrepresentable. Jorge Semprún, himself a survivor, boldly asserted that the victims’ experience was “unbearable” rather than “indescribable,” although its substance could be grasped only by “those able to shape their evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation” (1997, 13). Similarly, Imre Kertész—Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize for Literature in 2002—felt compelled to write in *Gályanapló* (1992): “The concentration camp is imaginable only and exclusively as literature, never as reality” (quoted in Sanyal 2015, 56).

Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented “memory boom,” with the concomitant rise and development of a literature of trauma where the Holocaust figures as a central concern. In tune with the quotations from Semprún and Kertész, literature has emerged in the context of our so-called “wound culture” (Seltzer 1997) as a means that facilitates the indirect expression of trauma, while direct attempts at articulation more than often fail to grasp the traumatic event. Many trauma narratives tend to favour an experimental aesthetic of fragmentation aimed at reflecting formally the disruptions inherent in any traumatic experience. Other trauma literature resorts to different strategies, which tend to be similarly related to the difficulty in expressing that which resists verbalisation. This is the case, for instance, with the hybridisation of modes and genres in limit-case narratives. Thus, Jean Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega claim that the recent upsurge of hybrid forms should be understood as a manifestation of the dialogism and indirection that characterise the attempts of trauma narratives to assimilate and work through traumatic events (2014, 5). Focusing more specifically on Holocaust representation, Berel Lang also highlights the way in which Holocaust writing typically blurs (meta)genres.¹ He explains this subversion of (meta) generic conventions as an attempt “to emphasize the *unconventional* character of its subject, but also [...] to find a means adequate for representing specific features of the Nazi genocide, which stretch or breach the standard norms of representation” (2000, xi; italics in the original). All this provides a perspective from which to approach works like the ones discussed in this article—Lisa Goldstein’s “Breadcrumbs and Stones” (1993), Louise Murphy’s *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (2003) and Rachel Seiffert’s “Lore” (2001), one of the three novellas included in her *The Dark Room*—where the fairy tale is rewritten and blended with history as a result of the creative effort to deal with a traumatic past and meet the challenges of Holocaust representation.

¹ Metagenres are, in Lang’s definition, “the forms of discourse that distinguish historical and scientific discourse, for example, as these complement more standard literary genres like the novel or the short story, which themselves fall under the metagenre ‘imaginative writing’” (2000, 35).

In addition to Goldstein, Murphy and Seiffert, writers like Peter Rushford (1979), Jane Yolen (1992, 1993, 2018), Eva Figs (2003) and Eliza Granville (2014), among others, have also used the fairy tale as a template to engage with the history and memory of the Holocaust in their fictional works. For their part, scholars like Philippe Codde (2009) and Anna Clare Hunter (2013) have explored the links between Holocaust writing in general and the fairy-tale genre, while yet others have studied how specific Holocaust narratives rewrite their fairy-tale intertexts. This is the case with Margaret Landwehr (2009), Silvia Pellicer-Ortín (2011), Vandana Saxena (2015) and María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro (2016), to mention but a few. In line with this, the present article considers the use that the three Holocaust narratives under examination make of structural as well as content-related elements of fairy tales, thus producing an estrangement effect that should be understood as synonymous with the Russian Formalist notion of defamiliarisation—Viktor Shklovky's *priyom ostraneniya* or “making strange” ([1919] 2015). However, the perspective of my argument is a little more complex in that the issue here will not be to provide yet another analysis of Goldstein's, Murphy's and Seiffert's stories as fairy-tale rewritings. Rather, my aim is to take things further by considering how the defamiliarisation produced by (meta)generic blurring opens up possibilities that facilitate the development of Holocaust literature beyond the kind of narrative that has been sanctioned and has consequently become, in Christine Berberich's words, “the predominant metanarrative of the Holocaust” (2019, 4). Drawing on Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004), Berberich describes this metanarrative as one that is focused on the victims and that allows readers and viewers to unquestionably identify with their suffering; such identification is made possible, to a large extent, by the lack of critical engagement with the perpetrators as well as the complexities of a multilayered view of both innocence and guilt. In a similar vein, Raya Morag acknowledges that the development of trauma culture has been fostered by the duty to tell the story of victim trauma and bear witness to the witness, but she finds fault with the pervasiveness of the victim's perspective, the firmly established victim/perpetrator dichotomy and the near exclusion of the perpetrator from contemporary humanities-based trauma studies (2013, 12). Hunter is also critical of the “inappropriate sense of cultural redemption” facilitated by the traditional metanarrative, which she describes as nothing but an “easy' cultural frame of reference” (2019, 16). In sum, the metanarrative of the Holocaust that many see as adopted and inscribed into Western cultural memory can be regarded as a reductive oversimplification, one that must be critically approached.

At a time when it is imperative to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, a key challenge is to do so by finding perspectives that deviate from the predominant Holocaust metanarrative.² Goldstein's, Murphy's and Seiffert's texts do provide such

² Recent surveys have painted a disquieting picture of the lack of knowledge and understanding of the Nazi genocide with the passing of time. For example, a recent CNN poll in Europe revealed that about a third of the 7,000 respondents across seven countries knew “just a little or nothing at all” about the Holocaust (Wall 2019).

alternative viewpoints and can be seen, to an important extent, as a symptom that Holocaust literature is increasingly questioning approaches and definitions that have come to be perceived as simplistic. As Morag puts it, trauma literature and research and, consequently, Holocaust representation and analysis “have matured and are qualified to expand previous categorizations and binarisms” (2013, 5).

By opening a space for the perpetrator and, above all, by defying clear-cut divisions between good and evil, the works to be discussed in this article complicate the reader’s engagement with the characters and, ultimately, with the stories about them. It is my contention, then, that the estrangement effect these narratives produce works at several levels simultaneously, by dealing with the Holocaust through the fairy-tale genre *and* by doing so in a way that problematises the traditional binary view of victimhood and perpetratorhood. In this regard, the phrase *estrangement effect* as I am using it here is also intended to evoke certain aspects of Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (*V-effekt*), which has been translated as alienation, distancing or estrangement effect. Brecht first used the concept, which is itself drawn from the abovementioned Russian Formalist notion of defamiliarisation, in a 1936 essay to describe a method “directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play” (1964, 91).³ In line with this, I will show how the three works analysed in what follows challenge the reader’s easy identification with the characters in a way that links the two kinds of estrangement mentioned above: by rewriting the tropes of the formula they use to tell the story, these narratives also subvert the neat moral patterns that characterise the fairy-tale genre, which in turn complicates the reader’s empathy with the characters. In contrast with the tendency towards clear-cut dichotomies in fairy tales, and also in the traditional Holocaust metanarrative, these works engage in critical reflection on the limitations of the victim-victimiser/victim-perpetrator binary, which would be better approached as a “dipolarity” in Giorgio Agamben’s sense. This would amount to seeing it as one of those oppositions that are “not substantial, but tensional [...], as in physics, where it is impossible to draw a line clearly and separate two different substances” (Agamben 2004, 612). The dipolarity does not neutralise the distinction, though; it rather emphasises the fact that it may operate “in zones of undecidability” (Agamben 2004, 612).⁴ It is to these zones of undecidability that Goldstein’s, Murphy’s and Seiffert’s stories take the reader, facing them with ambiguities that, as I will explain, turn out to be closely related to silence and the concealment structures of private and public secrets. These secrets and silences

³ Complicating the audience’s feeling of empathy is but one way of accomplishing Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, an aesthetic strategy with a political dimension, since it aims at making the audience a conscious critical observer.

⁴ Authors like Michael Rothberg (2013, 2014, 2019) have fruitfully argued in favour of going beyond familiar categories such as those of victim, perpetrator and bystander. A mention must also be made of Primo Levi’s “The Grey Zone” (1989, 31-71). He describes here how the structure of concentration camps produced an ambiguous world in which the simple hero/villain binary came apart. From this specific meaning, the phrase *the grey zone* has come to describe in more general terms the blurring of the concepts of morality and immorality and the boundary between good and evil, victim and victimiser.

are illustrations of a wide-ranging trope, which Sara Horowitz terms “the trope of muteness” (1997, 1), that recurs in Holocaust literature as a means of exploring the unresolved question of the unspeakability of the Shoah. Goldstein’s, Murphy’s and Seiffert’s narratives are no exception to this.

In the following sections, then, I deal with the different ways in which the connections among the main issues discussed in this introduction are embedded in each work: 1) the estrangement effect understood as the defamiliarisation of (meta) generic traits, which in turn facilitates another estrangement, related to the reader’s complicated engagement with the characters; 2) the reader’s empathy with the characters as hindered by the effects of silence and secrets, which point to the very same struggle for expression that accounts for (meta)generic blurring; and 3) the problematisation of the neat moral patterns typical of fairy tales as opening up possibilities for departing from the sanctioned metanarrative of the Holocaust.

2. THE SURVIVOR’S FAILURE TO TELL: LISA GOLDSTEIN’S “BREADCRUMBS AND STONES” AND THE GUILT OF SILENCE

At the core of Holocaust literature there is “an essential contradiction: an impossibility to express the experience, coupled with a psychological and moral obligation to do so” (Horowitz 1997, 16). The evocation of the silenced, the lost, the untold often comes in tandem in these works with an emphasis on the relevance of narrative as inextricably connected with the duty to bear witness, and also with the need to tell in order to heal. Silence and secrecy go against working through an unresolved traumatic past, as shown in Goldstein’s “Breadcrumbs and Stones,” a rewriting of “Hansel and Gretel” that shows a survivor mother being judged by her daughter for her inability to tell.

As is the case with traditional fairy tales in general, Goldstein’s intertext “Hansel and Gretel” has a happy ending: the witch is pushed into the oven and Hansel and Gretel joyfully return to the home of the parents that have twice left them to perish in a dark forest. In the Grimms’ initial version, included in the 1810 manuscript, both (natural) parents were portrayed as equally responsible for the abandonment of their children, but in subsequent editions all evil was transferred onto an abusive stepmother, who had manipulated her husband into accepting her designs. She dies before the children return and, when they do, they have no complaint about their father. On the contrary, they give him all their love and the riches they bring from the witch’s hut. Betrayal is downplayed and eventually forgotten as a prerequisite for full happiness. By contrast, Goldstein’s rewriting foregrounds parental betrayal and the children’s incapacity to forgive and forget.

Goldstein’s title, “Breadcrumbs and Stones,” already puts the reader in mind of “Hansel and Gretel,” as does the name of one of the main characters, Margaret, the mother, since Gretel developed as a diminutive form of Margaret in Germany. The story is narrated by the adult voice of Lynne, the elder daughter of a family that has

gathered because Margaret is terminally ill with cancer. Margaret's childhood and youth as a German Jew were not easy, although her parents managed to obtain forged papers and placed her with a Christian family. She worked in a glass-blowing factory during the war and then she married an American soldier and went to the US, where their two daughters were born and where the past was never talked about.

Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On agrees that among the main reasons why survivors do not articulate their past is their attempt to shield children and grandchildren from the suffering they went through. And yet, he insists that this secrecy about the past is not a unilateral case of parental silence, but a "double wall" phenomenon: the parents erect a wall about the suffering they have witnessed or experienced and their children do the same out of self-protection (1989, 328). Thus, in "Breadcrumbs and Stones" Lynne and her sister Sarah do not know much about their mother's life before marriage, but they have never asked either, the story showing in this way how silence works through interaction. As Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok argue, this pervading secrecy may take the form of transgenerational haunting, since the secret may be silently transmitted to someone else in whom it lodges, becoming, in their terms, "a phantom" that haunts its host and that stems from the gaps left within them by the silences of their forebears (1994). Lynne and Sarah illustrate the effects that these gaps, these family secrets, can have on succeeding generations.

As children, the girls were aware of their mother's changeable, strange behaviour, but they lacked the knowledge to interpret it as indicative of her survivor syndrome. Even as the narrative opens, they reflect that she "always tried to be cheerful for us, but there was something—something she kept hidden" (Goldstein 1993, 391). What the story shows is that, in accordance with the abovementioned theory of the phantom, the girls' psychic development was influenced by their mother's past in Germany, and therefore by events outside their lived experience. These were concealed as a secret whose effects were transmitted without the daughters or their mother being aware of it happening. Just as they could not fully understand their mother's behaviour when they lived at home, they are similarly unable to understand aspects of their own lives as adult women. Thus, Sarah confesses to her sister that she lives as if something terrible were going to happen—"at the back of my mind I always think, What if I have to flee?" (392). This inexplicable fear has other consequences, from her unsociability to her never having much furniture. Similarly, Lynne admits to herself that she "had pared down [her] life as much as [her] sister had" and that she had done so in multiple different ways she is only now becoming aware of—"I had no close friends at the software company where I worked, I had never dated any man for longer than six months, and I had not lived with anyone since moving away from my family. I never discussed politics or gave my opinion about current events..." (397).

It is only when Lynne and Sarah's mother is sent home to spend her last days with her family that she at last tells them about her past. In Margaret's story, two children were abandoned by their parents, even if they did so to ensure their survival, unlike

those in “Hansel and Gretel.” It turns out that she had an older brother called Jonnah, who also worked in the glass factory. He had connections with “the Underground” (400) and secretly conspired against the Nazis, so when a German officer that was harassing Margaret to have a relationship with him found this out, he threatened her with informing on her brother if she went on rejecting him. Margaret did not give in to his blackmail and Jonnah was arrested and taken to Auschwitz, where he died. While the Grimms’ Gretel saves Hansel’s life, Goldstein’s Margaret is unwillingly responsible for her brother’s ending up in a concentration camp oven. Her parents also died in a camp, so it is only Margaret that survives in this story—her alone, with her traumas and her guilty feelings.

Interestingly, the “Hansel and Gretel” motifs in the mother’s life story also serve as metaphors that express the daughters’ feeling of abandonment, and so, the parental betrayal that is forgotten in the Grimms’ tale is what remains at the end of “Breadcrumbs and Stones.” After listening to their mother’s revelation, Lynne and Sarah feel hurt rather than compassionate, and show no sign of being moved: “Sarah and I said nothing [...]. I just wondered how my mother could have kept this story from us so many years” (405). In the Grimms’ tale, the children manage to find their way out of the wood by following a trail of stones, but when their parents abandon them for a second time they only have breadcrumbs, the birds eat them and they get lost. The connection is clear when Lynne concludes that all her life her mother “had given me the wrong story [...], had given me breadcrumbs instead of stones. That she had done this on purpose, told me the gaudiest [...] lies she knew, so that I would not ask for anything more and stumble on her secret. It was too late now—I would have to find my own way back. But the path did not look at all familiar” (406). Lynne’s thoughts highlight the harsh judgement that she passes on her mother for her inability to tell. From the girl’s perspective, Margaret comes rather close to the stepmother in later versions of the tale: by depriving her daughters of an essential part of the family’s past, she abandoned them in the forest of life with only breadcrumbs—secrets and lies—to mark the way instead of reliable stones—truth.

“Breadcrumbs and Stones” illustrates the way in which some fairy-tale retellings further the estrangement effect that comes with the combination of the fairy tale and the Holocaust by complicating the reader’s ethical engagement with the text. In Goldstein’s story, the reader sees Margaret as a Holocaust survivor, a victim that still bears the scars of the past, a dark version of Gretel. At the same time, and as the narrative is shaped by the voice and perspective of Margaret’s daughter, there is no denying that it comes close to blaming the victim. This ambivalence—Margaret is Gretel and also the stepmother—complicates the reader’s initial empathy and leaves them in two minds as to how to appraise the character’s behaviour. Similarly disturbing for the reader are some of the events in Louise Murphy’s *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (2003), another retelling of the same well-known tale that problematises any simplistic understanding of the victim/victimiser dichotomy.

3. A VICTIM'S ACTS OF VIOLENCE: THE AMBIGUITY OF THE *PHARMAKON* IN LOUISE MURPHY'S *THE TRUE STORY OF HANSEL AND GRETEL*

The story in Murphy's novel takes place in the last months of the Nazi occupation of Poland and it begins with two children separating from their father and stepmother as the Nazis are chasing them on the outskirts of a thick forest. An old woman called Magda, powerfully evocative of the tale's witch, gives them refuge in her hut in the woods. But in Murphy's retelling, the stepmother and the witch, the evil females of the classic tales, are redeemed from their traditional stereotyping and the role of evil antagonist is played by the unnamed *Oberführer*. This sinister Nazi officer travels from village to village on a mission to abduct Aryan-looking children, who will be Germanised in order to strengthen the fascist body politic. *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* in this way illustrates a recent development in the literature of memory: the so-called "turn to the perpetrator" (Cronshaw 2011, Adams and Vice 2013, Morag 2018), which has produced works that deviate from the traditional Holocaust metanarrative. In particular, Murphy adds complexity to it not only by creating space for the Nazi Other, but also by inserting in the story characters like the underanalysed Telek, a lonely woodsman slighted or, at best, ignored by most villagers. It is on him that I will centre my discussion in order to show how events place him in a grey zone that truly challenges the reader's engagement with the character and his actions.

Before the *Oberführer* arrives, news of what he has done in nearby villages reaches the inhabitants of Piaski. Confused and alarmed, the men organise a meeting and conclude that, as Aryan-looking children will be taken away, one man will have to injure those who are likely to be kidnapped so that they do not meet the Nazi "perfect Aryan" standards. They draw lots and are relieved when Telek takes the shortest straw because he is different, not one of them: after all, he withdrew into the woods as a child when his father left for good after his wife's suicide, he does not know the children as well as the rest and he is not a father himself. On reflecting on his task, Telek understands that "they will dislike me even more when I have done it. He knew the village would have no place for him once the war was over. The heart of the village would be closed to him" (Murphy 2003, 98).⁵

Telek fits the role of the scapegoat in classical antiquity. At times of disaster—famine, invasion or plague—a human scapegoat or *pharmakos* was chosen and led out of the city. He could be executed, though on some occasions he was beaten and expelled but not killed. This was done in order to purify the city. The *pharmakos* was an outsider, someone that belonged to the margins or the lower strata of society—prisoners of war, slaves, cripples, criminals, orphans, etc.—and he had to bear on his shoulders the evil that threatened the community, which was projected onto him. The *pharmakos* was considered a poison, an evil, but he was also beneficial, like a medicine that "cured" the impurity of the city. Jacques Derrida draws on this in "La Pharmacie de Platon," where

⁵ The change from first to third person comes from the original text.

he deconstructs several texts by Plato. Insisting on the fact that *pharmakon* means *both* a poison *and* its exact opposite—a healing remedy, a medicine—Derrida concludes that none of its various meanings can be silenced without violating the term’s ambiguity and reversibility ([1968] 1972, 128). In Telek’s case, such ambiguity and reversibility complicate the victim/victimiser distinction. They similarly problematise the public/secret opposition to the point that the events in this episode of the novel can be said to constitute an example of a paradoxical category of secrecy: the “public secret,” something that is “widely and publicly known, and yet is the object of a collaborative act of secrecy” (Eaglestone 2017, 16).

Unlike the sacrifice of the *pharmakos* as a victim of external aggression, Telek’s sacrifice demands of him to turn into the agent of aggression on others and to bear a burden that will weigh heavily on him all his life. He is both victimiser and victim. Just as the principle of substitution marks the dynamics of the *pharmakos*’s sacrifice—he incarnates the impurity of others so that this evil can be thrown away by throwing him away—Telek takes the place of the fathers who refuse to hurt their children arguing that “it should be one person doing it. Then it would be [...] on one soul only” (Murphy 2003, 97). Telek’s task is, like his own position, inherently ambiguous—it is both poison and medicine. He has to maim the children in order to save them—some children have parts of their bodies burned, one is given a blow with an axe that severely injures his arm, another’s index finger is amputated with a butcher’s knife, another’s arm is broken and his shoulder dislocated. Understandably, all this must be kept secret from the Nazis and, at the same time, it is a secret that the villagers know. It thus fits what Robert Eaglestone explains about the public secret: “Stating the public secret openly can result in legal or social punishment because the secret is both information [...] and more than information: it is a process or *structure of complicity* that draws people, wittingly or not, into collusion and, in so doing, shapes and implicates them. [...] Because of this shaping power, the public secret is highly powerful and dangerous” (2017, 16; italics in the original). In implementing the plan made by the village men, Telek takes upon himself all their hate on top of his own remorse. As he advances in carrying out the plan, the already-existing divide between him and the villagers widens. He understandably feels bad about himself and thinks he will now have no chance with the woman he loves, Nelka, as she is also a mother and Telek is expected to hurt her baby too.

How to evaluate this madness within madness, this small-scale violence caused by large-scale violence where some victims turn victimisers and other victims are further victimised? The plight of Telek and the other men is reminiscent to some extent of that of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Even though Morrison’s novel is far more complex in that it centres on Sethe’s choice and the careful unravelling of information, both stories leave the reader wondering how to engage ethically with what they have read. The ambiguity and reversibility of the *pharmakon* can be said to invade the two works because, despite all that separates them, both face us with a deed that can neither

be condemned—seen as poison—nor approved of—seen as medicine. In both cases, we are confronted with actions that are beyond the reach of standard judgement, actions that are so contradictory—motivated by love, but cruel and unnatural—that perhaps the response that is most ethically responsible is to admit that no clear or fixed judgement can be reached. As James Phelan points out with regard to *Beloved* (2001, 106), readers perceive how an individual pushed beyond the limits of human endurance reacts in an extraordinary way, which in turn leads us to turn our judgement to the institution that pushes that individual beyond the limits in the first place—slavery in the case of Sethe, Nazism in that of Telek. This undeniably helps us to understand the effects of Nazism on individual lives, all the more so when we bear in mind that the threat the villagers feel in Murphy's novel—that of having their children taken away—represents real-life events, related to the so-called *Lebensborn* program in Nazi Germany. Under this program, women who were deemed to be racially pure were encouraged to become pregnant by SS officers and high-ranking Nazis in order to breed a “master race” (Kelly 2017). The resulting children were then given to state care. But *Lebensborn* also involved the kidnapping of Aryan-looking children in occupied countries to bring them up in Germany. These children were abducted, robbed of their identity and forcibly Germanised, often never knowing or forgetting about their true roots. Some were sent to camps and did not survive. Others eventually found out the truth and returned to their countries, but had problems integrating, and many chose to hide their past. This is another instance of the public secrets of Nazism, shaping and deforming the lives of individuals and communities.

The notion of public secret inevitably connects with the murder of the European Jews during the Third Reich. The question of “how much the Germans knew” has become more and more relevant to understanding the Holocaust, and it is precisely en route to answering this question that the public secret as an odd and seemingly paradoxical idea has emerged (Eaglestone 2017, 14-15). As more research has been carried out, the consensus maintained for some decades after the war that very little was known by “ordinary Germans” has been challenged, and this has made for a rethinking of categories, how we understand perpetrators and the plausibility of being simply a “bystander” (11). Literature also provides an opportunity to explore these issues, and so I will turn now for this purpose to Rachel Seiffert's “Lore,” one of the stories in *The Dark Room* (2001).

4. THE LIMINAL POSITION OF PERPETRATORS' OFFSPRING IN RACHEL SEIFFERT'S “LORE”

Connected with the already-mentioned turn to the perpetrator, *The Dark Room* is included by Froma I. Zeitlin in a category she calls “imaginary tales in the land of the perpetrators,” in an article of the same title (2006). These narratives shift point of view and frame of reference and address the Nazi era from within its own territory, blending

history and fiction, memory and imagination “in order to probe the all-consuming question that seems to haunt us still: how could it have happened? What did ordinary Germans think and do during this period, when certain classes of persons, especially, but not only, Jews, were [...] disenfranchised, stigmatized and finally outlawed? [...] What did these ordinary folk know? And what did they care?” (216).

The Dark Room can be described as a novella triptych consisting of three independent though thematically connected narratives, “Helmut,” “Lore” and “Micha.” Their protagonists represent successive generations of Germans, whose stories take place during the Second World War, immediately after it and in the late 1990s respectively. The book’s middle section centres on Lore’s journey as the war ends: first, her father, a member of the SS, is arrested, and then her mother is taken away after telling Lore to travel with her four younger siblings from their home in Bavaria to Hamburg, where their grandmother lives. Like Hansel and Gretel, these children are forced to leave home and fight for survival, overcoming dangers in the forest and other hostile territory. As in “Little Red Riding Hood,” a girl who has just begun to leave childhood behind is entrusted with the task of reaching “granny’s home,” a grandmother that turns out to be not a tender elder but a rather wolfish woman. Thus, the story follows Lore’s precarious advance through a defeated Germany in something that is not a retelling of a specific tale, but which relies on fairy-tale motifs and structures—parental abandonment and departure from home, a journey that includes interaction with helpers and opponents and, finally, a safe arrival at a domestic space at the end of an adventure that hastens the protagonist’s transition to adulthood. This process is marked by the girl’s encounter with the public secret and therefore with an uncomfortable truth about the involvement of her (Nazi) parents and her country in the extermination of Jews.

While still at home, Lore and her mother burn all incriminating evidence, photographs, insignias and other symbols that associate them with the Nazi party. If the family’s commitment to Nazi ideology had, previously, to be exhibited and was a source of pride, now it should be kept secret. Similarly, as they travel, the reality the children face contradicts everything they knew and believed. Such confusion and ambivalence is best represented by Thomas, a resourceful youth who helps Lore and her siblings to reach their destination. His papers identify him as a Jewish survivor of Buchenwald, so Lore is divided between accepting his much needed help or rejecting someone she has been raised to see as vermin. To complicate things further, Thomas is also keeping his true identity secret, as he is travelling with the papers stolen from a dead Jew and the question is left open whether he is indeed Jewish.

Key points in the story are Lore’s encounters with the photographs used as pedagogic displays to show the horrors of the camps. The first time she sees these pictures, they have been glued on a tree in the village square and people crowd around them only to see “hundreds of skeletons; hips and arms and skulls in tangles. Some lying in an open railway carriage, others in a shallow hollow in the ground” (Seiffert [2001] 2002, 103). Photographs of this type were part of the Allied poster campaigns in real life:

From summer 1945 onwards, the Western occupation powers had started their *re-education for democracy* programme, which included a poster campaign of pictures taken from concentration camps that were underpinned with taglines such as “Your guilt!”. Instead of a collective remorse or a contrition effect, however, the Allied shock therapy triggered the people to look away. (Engert 2016, 34; italics in the original)

At first, Lore “wants to ask about the photos on the tree,” but the woman she talks to “puts her finger to her lips” (108). Then, like others, Lore convinces herself that the photographs are Allied propaganda and the people in them just actors, and tries to forget. Once in Hamburg, though, two women reading a newspaper that contains other similar pictures bluntly tell Lore that this is what the Nazis did—“Look at them, they’re not acting, they’re dead [...]. They killed them. With gas and guns” (202)—and this makes her think of what her own father may have done. Disbelief is then replaced by something different, but which never takes a definite shape as Lore’s attempts to understand always clash with the silence of those close to her. The effect of the public secret extends from what was known about what was happening during the war to the knowledge of what had happened once it was publicly exposed—the German population erected “a wall of intentional silence, accompanied also by the quiet but highly effective reintegration of National Socialist perpetrators as well as collaborators” (Söllner 2005, 195). This wall did not begin to crumble until the 1960s.

Lore, the daughter of a perpetrator, has to reconcile two contradictory views of reality referred to by Silke Horstkotte as “the dictionary” and “the album” (2007, 152).⁶ Her painful efforts to make compatible these two sources of knowledge—one more factual and the other more emotional—are unsuccessful, marred to an important extent by the fact that, even after being revealed, the public secret continues to distort Lore as an individual and her relations with her family. Secrecy is so ingrained that nobody in her grandmother’s home is willing or able to discuss Germany’s defeat, the fate of Lore’s parents or the reasons for them being punished. “You mustn’t feel ashamed. You mustn’t feel ashamed of them,” her grandmother says, shutting down the exchange with a sharp “It is all over now. Finished” (Seiffert [2001] 2002, 189). Lore craves words but, as nobody seems willing to tell, she ends up internalising the secrecy and silence that surrounds her: the story closes with the girl crying as she “looks forward to when [...] she can’t remember any more how it was before” (217). Her wish to know gives way to a wish to forget.

⁶ Horstkotte draws on a research project on the familial transmission of historical consciousness conducted in 2002 by Harald Welzer and his colleagues at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen. Focused on how memory works in families that include three generations—Nazi perpetrators, children and grandchildren—Welzer’s study revealed that their knowledge of the Nazi past derives from two sources: “the dictionary of the Nazi past,” based on cognitive knowledge about history, and a second reference system with a more emotional basis, “the album,” which is made up of concrete people—parents, grandparents and other relatives—as well as letters, photographs and personal documents.

As in a fairy tale, the protagonist has completed her quest—she has travelled through villages and forests, defeated dangers and eventually reached her grandma's home. She has matured in the process but, far from being happy, she feels physically and psychologically alienated as she “tries to unravel Thomas and prisons and skeleton people; lies and photographs; Jews and graves; tattoos and newspapers” (210). Lore suffers from an emotional paralysis that stems from her lack of understanding and the silence over crimes that are known but remain unspoken. Through Lore and those around her, the story throws light on the public secret as a “deforming of life,” a pernicious force that remains operative “even after its power and context have decayed, because generally people choose to deny they have been shaped by it” (Eaglestone 2017, 16). Characters are victims of the public secret's effects while they also contribute to expanding its influence through time.

Caught in the middle of all these conflicting forces, Lore can be said to destabilise the victim/perpetrator binary, since any analysis of the character cannot but confront the inappropriateness of either/or dichotomies. In this sense, Seiffert's story would fit within what Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger have identified as “recent literary texts concerned with German suffering” where narrative tension derives from “the question of the extent to which empathy with individuals can be reconciled with a more detached contextualization of their suffering within the over-arching reality of German perpetration” (2009a, 6). Lore is on the perpetrator side of the conflict, and yet her circumstances invite empathy on the reader's part. This empathy is probably fostered by the fact that she is a child and therefore has a limited understanding of things, but the narrative is not apologetic. Lore burns the photos of her father and gets rid of incriminating documents and insignia. She is made uncomfortable by Thomas's Jewishness. When she finds out about his fake identity, she destroys the traces of the dead Jewish man whose photos and papers Thomas had left behind, watching them burn until “the charred edges fold over the thin face in the photo, and when they fall away again the dead man is gone” (Seiffert [2001] 2002, 210). To Suzanne Baackmann, this amounts to murdering the victim a second time and doing it in sync with widespread postwar denial; after all this, Lore “may no longer be called an innocent bystander” (2016, 5; see also Baackman 2017). Her final submission to silence and secrecy and her reasons for doing so also align her with the perpetrators. On the other hand, the fact that she abruptly loses her parents and the world of childhood as was known to her, her plight when travelling through the country with four children and her suffering, above all when one of them is killed, all configure her as a victim. In contrast with the simplicity of the fairy tale, when it comes to identifying good and evil characters, “Lore” challenges binaries and stereotypical roles.

5. CONCLUSION

As Marissa Meyer puts it, fairy tales “are a living thing. They are meant to be adapted for each new generation. They are meant to grow and morph along with their tellers

and their listeners” (2018, 2). The “new” stories are familiar, but also defamiliarised, strange. They have been “chiselled and polished to once again reveal universal truths,” but they have also been, “ultimately, fractured” (2018, 3). In some cases, this fracture stems from the intertextual use of the fairy-tale genre in Holocaust literature. Jean-François Lyotard famously likened the Holocaust to an earthquake that destroyed the very instruments by which it could have been measured (1988, 56). Geoffrey Hartman refined the comparison by adding that the aftershocks are measurable, even if new instruments have to be created to record what happened and express its consequences (2002, 1). It is in this light that we should approach some contemporary fairy-tale rewritings as resulting from the attempt to find ways of dealing with the Holocaust and its aftermath. As illustrated by the works analysed here, fairy-tale strictures still leave plenty of room for the kind of experimentation and rewriting that is required not only to cope with the paradoxes inherent in Holocaust representation, but also to renew the traditional Holocaust metanarrative.

Just as fairy-tale intertexts are defamiliarised or made strange, the same goes for the characters in the works discussed in this article. They are caught between innocence and different types of guilt, and the resulting tensions place them in a liminal position that mirrors the hybridity of the narratives that contain them. This in-betweenness creates a fruitful space from which to approach certain oppositions—reality/fiction, good/evil, victim/perpetrator or victimiser, public/secret—as dipolarities. Agamben’s term accurately reflects the way in which oscillation and uncertainty replace clear-cut distinctions in a process that also makes the reader’s empathy problematic. Erik Leake admits that there is an “easy empathy”—activated by the reader’s engagement with characters that “are seen as most deserving our empathy”—along with a whole range of possibilities that fall outside this category and within what he terms “difficult empathy” (2014, 175, 177). In line with this, the stories discussed here not only exploit undecidability as regards (meta)generic definitions and blurring, but they also project that undecidability onto the reader’s engagement with the characters. They elicit the reader’s empathy and make it difficult, in Leake’s sense, since we are asked to align in various ways with perspectives that are contradictory or that make us feel uncomfortable, divided, hesitant. All this is part of the estrangement effect I refer to in my title and have discussed throughout the article.

The reader’s experience of difficult empathy is closely connected in these works with the secret, the hidden, the untold—that is, with silence in different guises. Case study research on victims and perpetrators of the Nazi regime led sociologist and psychologist Gabriele Rosenthal to conclude that silence and secrecy institutionalised themselves within perpetrator families but they equally affected the families of those that suffered persecution (1998a, 8). Goldstein’s, Murphy’s and Seiffert’s narratives illustrate this, as well as the importance of silence as a trope in Holocaust literature. These three texts throw light on different aspects of the dynamics and effects of silence and secrets. Goldstein’s short story shows how survivor silence can result in a victim

being perceived in contradictory terms. The plot is simple but the message is powerful: denial and the attempt to forget do not work. Memory needs words to break the walls of silence erected between individuals and to prevent trauma and suffering from surviving beyond a single generation, as Seiffert's novella also suggests is the case on the part of the perpetrators. In order to keep the legacy of the Holocaust alive, words, texts and other forms of memorialisation are of vital importance, but they are not enough. Analysis is required, and also the formulation of new or renewed concepts, as shown by Eaglestone's work on the public secret. As explained above, the emergence of this category of secrecy bears witness to an increasingly felt need to consider different shades of guilt in the study of the Nazi genocide and those involved. As in Goldstein's short story, in Murphy's novel and Seiffert's novella meta(generic) blurring facilitates the inclusion of characters that inhabit a grey zone where what becomes blurred is the boundary separating innocence and guilt. In the novella, in contrast with the short story, the grey zone results from the ties of denial and complicity that accompany the public secret, itself defined by the blurring of the distinction between the hiding that comes with secrecy and the showing or sharing of what is public. All this blurring is connected and works to the same effect: the questioning of clear-cut divisions and definitions makes for an understanding of innocence and guilt as multilayered and escaping conventional categories, which must therefore be redefined as part of the attempt to better understand our post-Holocaust world. This is ultimately related to my contention here that the cultural memory of the Holocaust should be nurtured through perspectives that can offer different and often more complex forms of commemoration than those provided by the sanctioned Holocaust metanarrative. Departing from it also means departing from a comforting reductionism and a false sense of closure in order to welcome disruption and unease as productive.

It is in this light that we should view the questioning of traditional dichotomies as worthwhile and indeed crucial in exploring "various modes of historical relation that do not necessarily fall under the more direct forms of participation associated with traumatic events, such as victimisation and perpetration" (Rothberg 2013, 40). This is, in sum, what I have tried to do by delving into three narratives that problematise these categories and their conceptualisation as a binary opposition. After all, this uncertain terrain, one in which the distinction between guilt and innocence is far from clear-cut, is where we live most of the time.⁷

⁷ The research underpinning this article was part of the project "Literatura en la era transmoderna: celebración, límites y transgresión," financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO) in collaboration with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (FFI2017-84258-P). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the ERDF 2014-2020 programme "Building Europe from Aragón" (H03_17R).

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Received 28 June 2019

Revised version accepted 21 November 2019

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