TRANSMITTED HOLOCAUST TRAUMA: A MATTER OF MYTH AND FAIRY TALES?

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Abstract

This essay will examine the concept of third-generation trauma after the Holocaust and the ways in which Jewish American novelists seek to access, recreate and artistically represent (or ‘re-present’) such a traumatic past that is by definition inaccessible. A striking feature in the novels by the latest generation of Jewish American writers – notably the work of Jonathan Safran Foer and Judy Budnitz – is the almost obsessive return to mythology and fairy tales in the literary recreation of their grandparents’ era. My essay will argue that this is due to a commonality of purpose that characterizes and drives both mythology and fairy tales on the one hand, and the third generation’s imaginative, postmemorial approach to the past on the other hand.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

Before looking at these literary representations, I would like briefly to consider the socio-psychological position of the third generation, which is commonly said to suffer from secondary traumatization or inherited, transmitted, intergenerational or transgenerational trauma. This terminology itself is rather deceptive, as it suggests somewhat gratuitously that trauma can simply be transmitted, in its totality, from one generation to the next. Granted, these notions are to a certain extent validated by the experiences of the second generation, called the ‘hinge generation’ (198) by Eva Hoffman, as one can roughly identify three mechanisms that account for the inheritance or transmission of trauma. First, the mere act of listening to witness testimony about devastating events can make the secondary witness (he or she who witnesses the act of bearing witness) take over some of the traumatic burden, as Dori Laub’s articles on Holocaust testimony have convincingly argued (Laub 1992 and 1995). Dominick LaCapra talks about ‘empathic unsettlement’ in this context, a ‘virtual’ experience of trauma occasioned by the empathy one

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inevitably feels for the victims. In an extreme and pathological form, this empathy can lead to what LaCapra calls a ‘vicarious’ experience of trauma: the listener’s pathological illusion that the trauma is really one’s own, due to a total identification with the victim – think, for example, of the infamous Binjamin Wilkomirski case (LaCapra 2004, 132). This kind of secondary traumatization implies, of course, that testimony takes place, that the victims are capable of telling their stories to their children.

Yet even if no such testimonial transfer occurs, even if traumatized parents fail to find a voice, the second generation can still suffer the symptoms of trauma. The children of Holocaust survivors, the so-called ‘memorial candles’ in Dina Wardi’s terms (1992), can, in a second mechanism accounting for the transmission of trauma, be affected by living in what are commonly called ‘dysfunctional families’. Needless to say, traumatized parents who suffer from a variety of symptoms – like panic attacks, depression, outbursts of temper evoked by insignificant events (often related to food) – will not be able to provide their children with the reassuring sense of safety or stability needed for their wholesome psychological development. Accordingly, the children do not inherit their parents’ traumas as such, but they are re-traumatized by the malfunction of the parental roles. The memoirs and analyses by second-generation victims such as Helen Epstein, Dina Wardi, Art Spiegelman and Jessica Durlacher provide convincing illustrations of the transmission of trauma – albeit in a mitigated form – from traumatized parent to angst-ridden child.

Third, a number of geneticists now claim that extremely traumatic experiences during one’s lifetime can actually change the genetic material that is passed on to the following generations (on the so-called epigenetic level), which means that children and grandchildren of survivors can be shown to bear the genetic imprint of the traumas of the preceding generations. These ideas are quite revolutionary as they imply that the genetic material that is transmitted is not merely an exact copy of the genetic code we are endowed with at conception, but that it also includes our experiences which have been inscribed into our genes. Here, the inheritance of trauma would acquire its most literal meaning. One should immediately add, however, that this is still a highly controversial view that is currently not endorsed by all geneticists.1

The Imaginative Leap of Postmemory

While the second generation, due to the three mechanisms outlined before, can still be viewed as traumatized, and despite the fact that the theory of epigenetics does not limit the impact of a traumatic event to only one
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subsequent generation, the term ‘trauma’ becomes increasingly problematic if applied to later generations. The danger lies in an unwarranted equation of radically divergent experiences: survival in a concentration camp and the experiences of third-generation American Jews, which are clearly situated on an entirely different level. More productive in this respect is Marianne Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’, a term originally designed to describe the mnemonic activity of the second generation, but which is even more germane to the emotional and intellectual project of the third generation. Postmemory is an obsession with the opaque and inaccessible past of one’s parents or grandparents.

[It is] a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. […] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (22)

The concept of postmemory, in other words, transmogrifies the alleged psychopathological condition of transgenerational trauma into a creative interest in the traumatic histories of the previous generations. Needless to say, postmemory thus becomes a healthy response to the exigencies of the past that allows one to embrace the later generations’ ethical imperative of memory and commemoration. The question remains, however, how one can retrieve a traumatic past that is commonly considered inaccessible. Almost 65 years after the Shoah, the primary witnesses are disappearing, and historical documents provide only narrative interpretations of the past. In order to bridge the epistemological abyss that separates them from this inaccessible era, third-generation authors take the imaginative leap implied by the concept of postmemory – Hirsch’s ‘imaginative investment and creation’ – to fill in the blanks left by their absent history. This imaginative, postmemorial approach to the traumatic past, I would like to argue, explains the appearance of myths and fairy tales in the novels of Foer and Budnitz.

Mythology and History in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated

Illustrative in this respect is Jonathan Safran Foer’s critically acclaimed and autobiographically inspired first novel Everything Is Illuminated (2002). In the summer after his junior year at Princeton, Foer left for the Ukraine in a meek attempt to check a story that had been circulating in his family, armed with
only a picture of the woman who had presumably saved his grandfather from the Nazis in a village called Trachimbrod. Foer spent merely three days in the Ukraine, and though he did discover the site of Trachimbrod, nothing was left of this former Jewish shtetl but a memorial stone. So Foer went to a hotel room in Prague and started inventing a family history for himself, which became the basis for Everything Is Illuminated. In an interview, Foer has stated: ‘that journey was really one hole: nothing was left. For me, writing this book was like filling this hole with lots of words. So not creation, but replacement: replacing the emptiness with words’ (Bouman, my translation). What Foer describes here, is really the essence of postmemory: his imaginative recreation of a past that has become an inaccessible void. In his desire to conjure up a family history and to go back to his origins, Foer, not surprisingly, turns to the literary form that has always served the purpose of imaginatively elucidating one’s origins: mythology.

The structure of the novel is too intricate to explain here; suffice it to say that in a novel written within the novel (by a Jewish American writer who happens to be called Jonathan Safran Foer), the story is told of Foer’s great-great-great-great-grandmother, and this story is steeped in what some critics consider magical realism, but which is really closer to mythology. On 18 March 1791, the wagon of a man who is perhaps called Trachim B goes into the river Brod, perhaps pinning Trachim B to the bottom of the river, perhaps in the company of his wife, who was perhaps pregnant at the time – the accident defies all factual knowledge. Even though there are three witnesses to the event, they really fail to witness the catastrophe, and their testimonies are contradictory and unreliable (the only thing the third witness has seen, really, is that the other two witnesses haven’t seen anything). The bodies of Trachim and his wife – the possible material evidence – are never recovered. Yet amongst the rubble that floats to the river’s surface, they discover a newborn baby, as if by magic born from the river. What especially confounds the villagers is the absence of an umbilical cord. While they fail to explain this birth, its only rationale lies in the story’s mythological background: Foer inventively reiterates the myth of Aphrodite, the goddess born from the ocean, and used by the ancient Greeks equally to explain the genesis of an entirely new lineage. So, in the absence of historical ‘facts’, myth becomes a valid alternative to illuminate one’s origins. This is also what happens on the collective level, when the residents of the shtetl turn the accident into folklore and myth – the foundational accident becomes the subject of a yearly Trachimday festival, and memories about the event are also preserved and transmitted via a mythological play. By means of the villagers’ imaginative and unreliable historiography, Foer metafictionally stages his own project as the creator of his own originary myth.
I will not go into the analogies between Aphrodite and this foundling, a girl named Brod, much further, except to point out that, like the Greek goddess of love, Brod becomes the object of all men’s sexual cravings (she even gets raped twice on the same day), and the sight of her beautiful body finally results, as with Aphrodite, in a collective orgy that involves the entire village. The release of this sexual energy illuminates the shtetl to such an extent that, more than 150 years later, the glow is still visible to the first man on the moon. I mention all of this just to point out that those events that critics have easily dubbed magical realism are really mythological in nature. Near the end of the shtetl’s tragic story, when it is about to be destroyed by the Nazi Einsatzgruppen, Foer self-consciously undercuts the acceptability of his own foundational myth when Foer’s grandfather dives into the river with his pregnant wife to escape the fire bombing. History seems about to repeat itself, as a healthy baby is indeed born from the river while the mother’s body sinks to the bottom. But then the baby is finally dragged down and killed by the umbilical cord, which in reality can only be absent in myths. As such, Foer couches his imaginative and imagined ancestral history in a cyclical mythological pattern encompassing both birth and death by immersion.

Myth clearly serves as one of the central means for the later generations to come to terms with an inexplicable past. Foer’s second novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005) subtly uses classical mythology for related but different purposes: not so much to go back to his own imagined origins, but to go back to the origins of trauma narratives. The novel tells the story of a nine-year-old boy, Oskar Schell, who has lost his father in the 9/11 attacks and who sets out on a quest through New York City to find out more about his father’s last days. Interwoven with this plot line is the story of Oskar’s grandparents who barely survived the bombing of Dresden during the Second World War. These three characters are unable to testify about the historical crises that have wrecked their lives, and they therefore seek other, non-verbal forms of communication. In his insistence on alternative forms of communication to try to fill the void left by traumatic experiences, Foer consciously rewrites the classical myth of Philomela, as I have argued elsewhere (Codde 2007).

Not surprisingly, Jewish American authors of the second and third generation also employ specific Jewish myths and folklore in their attempts to represent the Holocaust, as is evidenced by the appearance of golems in novels such as Michael Chabon’s The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay (2000) or Steve Stern’s The Angel of Forgetfulness (2005); dybbuks in Thane Rosenbaum’s The Golems of Gotham (2002) or Joseph Skibell’s A Blessing on the Moon (1997); or the emergence of lamed vovnik figures in Nicole Krauss’s The History of Love (2005).
Fairy Tales and History in Judy Budnitz’s *If I Told You Once*

There is a second remarkable way, related to the use of mythology, for later generations to represent the horrors of history, involving the use of fairy tale motifs. Judy Budnitz’s debut novel *If I Told You Once* (1999) provides an excellent illustration of this device, as the novel interestingly combines mythology with fairy tales. Not unlike Foer’s first novel, Budnitz’s work creates an imagined Jewish family history spanning four generations of women. The four female protagonists alternately narrate the stories of their troubled lives, and each first-person narrative takes the form of a witness testimony, but with a number of extraordinary, unrealistic elements.

The first testimony is a tale told by Ilana to her great-granddaughter, Naomie. Ilana emigrated from an unspecified country in Eastern Europe to the USA, and her story is ridden with fairy-tale elements. Witness testimony, Dori Laub has argued, tends to be extremely circuitous, avoiding those elements that are too painful to tell. I would like to argue that Ilana’s story is such a testimonial account of trauma that uses fairy tales to dress up its painful content. One should bear in mind, of course, that fairy tales were originally tales of violence and horror, and in that sense, this specific use of fairy tales implies another return to origins. Budnitz’s creative account, in fact, bears a striking resemblance to second generation author Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* (1992), a wrenching, sinister fairy tale about Chelmno. The plot of Ilana’s phantasmagorical account is deceptively simple. At the age of 12, when Ilana is rambling alone in the forest, she chances on a handsome bandit who attracts and frightens her at the same time. He clearly makes sexual advances – ‘Aren’t you a pretty girl?’ (11), he presents her with a Fabergé egg (an unequivocal fertility symbol) with a miniature city inside, and when he prepares to grab her, wanting something in return for his precious gift, she runs from him in a panic, which is the end of it – which is of course what you would tell your own great-grandchild. She keeps the egg safely hidden in her pocket at all times, almost as if she were hatching it. When she tells her mother about what happened, the mother promises ‘she would take care of it’ (12), and one week later, Ilana discovers the bandit’s corpse in the woods with a severed throat, presumably killed by a wolf sent by the mother as an instrument for revenge. Even though we are to believe that nothing violent has happened, Ilana’s mother then forces her daughter to witness her agony as she gives birth to yet another child, and this is quite a traumatic experience for Ilana – later in life, she recalls: ‘I remembered the time I had seen her give birth. I remembered it too clearly; I wished I had forgotten that. It was one of the many memories I wished I could pluck out’ (93).
Then, literally ‘once upon a time’ (24), Ilana leaves her parental house, puts on ‘boots, which would have fit half the people in the village’ (like the seven-league boots), takes the egg from under her mattress and finally happens to stumble upon a house in a clearing in the forest, whose owner is a woman specialized in clandestine abortions – a quite convenient coincidence. Ilana explains that she is not pregnant, of course, so once this misunderstanding is cleared up, the old woman, Baba (who is based on the witch in Eastern European folktales about Baba Yaga) sets Ilana to work, and for some reason, Ilana stays there for a while – the suggestion is, of course, that she needs to recuperate from – and remunerate Baba for – her abortion. In Baba’s house, Ilana discovers hidden in a room a beautiful girl with golden hair, Anya, bedbound because she has no feet, who is kept locked up by Baba so the men of the village can come and look at her for a small fee. More likely, Baba is running a small-scale brothel: as a medicine woman, she gives the women in the nearby village herbs to prevent their pregnancies, and in that sense, she pays these families a similar service via her brothel. Anya ends up with Baba ‘in trouble’ (35) because a man had raped her in the woods and she lost her feet to frostbite. As such, the girl seems to be a psychological double, a projection of Ilana’s own traumatized mind. Ilana, one could argue, creates a doppelganger who is capable of bearing that which she herself cannot cope with, a stronger alter ego who does not suffer from her humiliating treatment by men, while Ilana is in complete denial about her rape. Ilana literally and psychologically keeps running away from the horrors of her existence; her dissociated double is a feetless girl who can – and must – bear the full brunt of what happens to her. Not coincidentally, after Ilana has fled to the USA, Anya pops up there as well as a matchmaker in control of men, and she admonishes Ilana: ‘You know, inside we are not so different, you and I’ (104).

When Ilana finally returns to her home, her village has vanished completely, having been razed in a pogrom. Her description of the scene she discovers there is particularly relevant in the context of the third generation, as it is highly reminiscent of Foer’s description of Trachimbrod:

The village was gone, there was only a burnt scar in the snow. Peaceful now; smoke no longer rose from the ruins. For a long time I sifted the ashes through my fingers. I wanted to find evidence, a bowl, a pipe, a needle, a ring. Any proof that would show that people had been here. But I found nothing. The place was picked clean, as if vultures and maggots had swept through and done their work and left. Not a bone, not a shoelace. Only charred bricks and ashes. […] Could a thing exist without witnesses? Without proof? It occurred to me that there was not much difference between a real thing that existed in memory, and something that was born in the mind from the start. (56–57)
Like Foer, Budnitz stages the problems of historical reconstruction and the role of the imagination, of postmemory, in this process. When Ilana later returns to her village, literally revisiting the site/sight of trauma, she does find evidence of the pogrom, as she discovers the bodies ‘stacked in a mound, piled high as a haystack’ (57). Among these bodies, she detects her parents, and again she immediately goes into denial, pretending they are just playing dead:

‘I don’t want to hear a sound out of you,’ I ordered them. ‘Not a peep.’
No one stirred.
‘Don’t move, don’t even breathe,’ I told them. ‘Play dead.’
I crouched near them and said: ‘They’ll never find you now. They’re stupid that way. As long as you all stay quiet like this, they’ll never find you.’ (58)

Not surprisingly, Ilana’s entire narrative is ridden with references to fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard’s Castle, Sleeping Beauty, Hansel and Gretel, the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and so forth. It would take too long to construe all of these references, but the gist of my argument should be clear by now: the great-grandmother is indeed telling her great-granddaughter a fairy tale, but at the same time she is testifying about the traumas that have stained her life, as can only be read between the lines. She has experienced blow after blow, trauma after trauma in Eastern Europe (including a double rape, an abortion, prostitution and a pogrom), and she is unable to give a rational voice to her suffering. It is, in other words, an extreme feat of circumlocution, of an oblique but shattering testimony.

**Narrative Fetishism**

What Budnitz offers here is a perfect example of metonymical writing and of what Eric Santer calls ‘narrative fetishism’, the creation of a discourse to deny the impact of traumatic events:

the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place […]; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere. Narrative fetishism releases one from the burden of having to reconstitute one’s self-identity under ‘posttraumatic’ conditions (Santner 1992, 144).

Interestingly enough, Foer’s debut novel also features a striking example of narrative fetishism: When the protagonists discover Lista, an old woman who lives near the site of Trachimbrod, they assume that she is the Augustine they
have been looking for. Lista delivers a posttraumatic testimony, describing how she witnessed the shooting of her parents and her older sister – the pregnant sister was shot in the belly, but she survived. When she concludes her appalling story with the assertion that she must go in to take care of her baby, it is clear that she too, like Ilana, testified obliquely about the horrors that in reality befell her instead of her sister.

As a result, both novels present the readers with extremely unreliable narrators whose traumatic reality has to be gleaned from what is left unsaid. Although Budnitz’s novel hardly talks about the Holocaust, she explained in an interview that the Shoah was always lurking somewhere in the background of her account. One of the concerns that drove the novel, she points out, was the idea of bearing witness – I was thinking about Holocaust survivors … about how in ten or twenty years anyone who lived through the Holocaust is going to be dead, and there won’t be any more eyewitnesses. The only evidence is going to be documents and photographs and the like. And those are things that Holocaust deniers can just claim are forged. I started thinking about what’s the most reliable source of history, and it’s a human witness. But at the same time, a human witness is the most unreliable source. It’s so subjective by definition – a person’s account of something is subjective. So with this novel I was trying to explore how you get to the truth. I have these different women narrating the story so you get all these different points of view. Sometimes they contradict each other, and I wanted to try to force the reader to decide whom he or she wanted to trust.

(Coppedge)

The after-effects of the Holocaust do appear quite explicitly in the novel, however, in the presence in Ilana’s tenement of a woman who survived the camps. Via this plotline, Budnitz inserts an interesting reversal of Ilana’s use of fairy tales, for when the Holocaust survivor testifies explicitly about the horror of the concentration camps, her American audience refuses to listen to her, claiming that her stories must be ‘fairy tales told to frighten children’ (109). They prefer not to believe her, ‘as if to acknowledge these things would make them real’ (112). In that sense, Ilana’s is perhaps not an illogical attempt to bear witness to trauma, as she would otherwise, with a more explicit account, find no empathic listener at all. Budnitz’s point is that Ilana’s behaviour is far from erratic; after the war, Americans clung to the same protective measures that Ilana uses quite effectively to ward off the after-effects of trauma. When Schmuel, Ilana’s husband, is informed that his relatives have died in Europe, he refuses to hear more about it, and he literally goes deaf, thereby subscribing to the novel’s overarching theme of denial.

Like Jonathan Foer, Budnitz unmistakably includes mythological references when she describes the three crones in her village, representing the three spinning goddesses of Fate, the Greek Moirai, who ‘sewed in unison, as if one
brain led their six hands. One would unspool the thread, the second would measure it, the third would cut it’ (15) – a literal rendition of the activity of the fate goddesses. The old women, Ilana says, ‘spoke of things too terrible to bear. Like a mother who needs to forget the pain of childbirth so that she can go on to bear more children, the people I lived among needed to forget so they could go on’ (16). This is, of course, part of what Ilana is trying to achieve through her testimony: On the one hand, she needs to forget and go on; on the other hand she desperately needs to bear witness to her loss. In this novel, Budnitz provides a pretty bleak view on the issue of inheritance by suggesting a continuity across the generations of the traumatic after-effects: Throughout the novel, all of Ilana’s descendents give oblique testimonies to hide the horror of the personal crises that ruin their lives. This is suggested in the motif, which keeps popping up in every individual account, of a line of women stepping in each other’s footprints in the snow: ‘I walked behind my mother, stepping in the footprints that my grandmother had made and my mother had deepened’ (20; see also p. 197). Biological and socio-emotional heredity, the novel will suggest, renders the past truly inescapable.

Sashie, Ilana’s daughter, indulges in her mother’s narrative fetishism to deny traumatic events by means of stories: her two brothers fall in love with the camp survivor who lives in their building, and their idealism prompts them to leave for Europe and fight the Nazis. Yet when the Holocaust survivor commits suicide, Sashie invents her own melioristic, fairy-tale reality, as she writes to her brothers ‘saying that it had turned out her missing husband was not dead after all, he had reappeared and taken her away with him to a house in the countryside. I wrote that she had gotten fat from all that sugar’ (126). Sashie’s account also provides another brilliant example of circumlocution and a void within the text that turns out to be more significant than the words that are actually on the page. Sashie gets married to a man named Joe, but soon the marriage turns stale. Sashie, however, refuses to face this painful truth. She instead transfers her dissatisfaction and frustration with her marriage to an obsession with cleanliness – their apartment must be immaculate, and she is delighted when a private cleaning firm starts collecting the garbage on a daily basis to make the neighbourhood as sterile as their apartment. Then, there is a strange, surrealistic passage, when Ilana and Sashie forget to warn Joe about the garbage men, and when Joe tries to return home late at night, he disappears, presumably taken by the garbage men. No more is said about this remarkable disappearance, so Joe’s fate literally becomes a void or an aporia in the account; he literally vanishes from the text as he does from their lives. As such, the scene is somewhat comparable to the absent scene of the bombing of Trachimbrod in Everything is Illuminated. It is probably no coincidence, though, that Joe disappears shortly after Sashie and Ilana found out that he was
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cheating on his wife. Only indirectly does Sashie suggest what might have happened to Joe: she dreams about a butcher hacking up a chicken with ‘enormous sad eyes like a man’s’ (185). This becomes relevant in light of an assertion made earlier in the novel by Anya, that she can always rely on the butcher to solve her problems with men: ‘If they [the men in her tenement] are disagreeable, I have a special arrangement with the butcher downstairs. She cocked her head, shared a glance with my mother’ (155). Ilana and Sashie, this equivocal passage suggests, had Joe killed for his adulterous trespasses. Only much later does Ilana confess: ‘I had placed this man in her hands, and when he offended us we had thrown him away. We had brushed him out of our lives like a speck of dust. It was the first time Sashie and I had united our efforts in anything. Sharing the guilt certainly did not bring us closer together’ (186).

The streak of violence is inherited by Mara, Sashie’s daughter, who becomes jealous of her brother’s fiancée and sets the girl on fire because she is supposedly an evil mixture of woman and water snake. The girl’s agonized screams are to Mara no more than ‘a sound you may have heard yourself, if you are familiar with seafood. If you have ever cooked a lobster’ (219). She also dishes up a fairy tale to conceal what might be her brother’s drug addiction: At night several children are lured away against their will – as in the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin – by the music of the ice cream vendor, and they climb up a ladder into the sky to the floating ice cream van – they literally get high.

Before she dies, a healthy baby is removed from the water snake woman’s charred body, and the life of this daughter, Naomie, provides perhaps the novel’s most outspoken and painful instance of determinism by heredity. Naomie’s story strikingly parallels that of her great-grandmother, Ilana. Remember that Ilana travelled to Baba’s forest shack to have an abortion, carrying a Fabergé egg with a miniature city inside. Noamie finds herself pregnant as well, and she sets out to an abortion clinic, carrying a glass globe with snow inside descending on a forest and a little house. She is literally ‘setting out just as Ilana had at my age’ (276). Like Ilana, she is incapable of facing the reality of her abortion: As she is waiting for her appointment at the clinic, a doctor is shot by a protester right in front of her eyes. Naomie flees from the clinic, bleeding between the legs, and she tells both her boyfriend and the reader that she was not pregnant after all – conveniently, her period just started. Needless to say, it becomes impossible to trust either the tale or the teller, and as such, Noamie’s life indeed demonstrates ‘[t]he pattern repeating. An endless procession of women following a single set of footprints in the snow’ (251). Naomie is fully aware of her inevitable ties to the preceding generations: ‘That is heredity, I suppose: passing along the same eyes and hair, the same tenacity, same style of speaking. The same voices. … It is Ilana’s
voice, passed down and diluted. Our conversations must seem like a person arguing with herself’ (257). This final testimony unites some of the important motifs that surfaced throughout the novel, making the book come full circle when Naomie, the final descendant, feverishly travels around after her abortion, riding a bus next to old women (the Moirai), walking through snow and sailing on water (like Ilana), meeting ‘a woman who had cut off her own foot’ (Anya) and seeing ‘a man shot and killed, this time for a tiny bit of white powder that everyone wanted because it could give them magical visions and the power to forget everything’ (284; plausibly a reference to the drug addiction). What every account in this novel demonstrates, in other words, is that witness testimony inevitably becomes so warped and adjusted to the teller’s needs that it can tell us much about the victims, but it can never illuminate, with absolute certainty, the reality of the past.

It is fair to conclude, then, that the third generation uses myth and fairy tales in both traditional and innovative ways. In both of the novels I discussed, there is a return to origins: the imagined origins of one’s own family tree (which is the traditional function of mythology), and the origins of the fairy tale itself, which was originally steeped in suffering and pain. Myth and fairy tales provide the third generation with a means to imaginatively approach and represent an otherwise unknowable and/or irrepresentable past. It is surely no coincidence that the position of the third generation with respect to the Shoah also results quite often in the adoption of a closely related child’s perspective to emphasize our limited understanding of historical processes: think of Oskar in Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Alma in Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love* (2005), Linus in Michael Chabon’s *The Final Solution* (2005) or even – in a different context – Bruno in John Boyne’s imaginative approach to the Holocaust, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2006). Even though some critics might balk at any deviation from documentary realism in such representations of the Holocaust, one has to acknowledge that these authors have found a new way to represent – and to commemorate – a painful past that is commonly considered beyond representation.

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of the impact of epigenetics, see the BBC Horizon documentary ‘The Ghost in Your Genes’ (2005).
2. *Everything is Illuminated* obviously fictionalizes this autobiographical element, but even in interviews, Foer seems to play around with the reality of those events, claiming at times that nothing was left of Trachimbrod, at other times claiming that he
discovered the said memorial stone. This obviously takes the fictionalization and the creation of epistemological doubt to a higher level.

3. Additionally, the entire accident scene is not only a fairly literal staging of Freud’s accident model – in Freud’s case a train collision – which problematizes the act of witnessing, but the scene is also a beautiful metaphor of Holocaust historiography: after the crisis, the scattered evidence, the fragmented material remnants, slowly float to the river’s surface, which people desperately try to collect and make sense of via a host of narrative emplotments. Many of the problems of witnessing traumatic crisis moments, historiography and the third generation’s postmemorial activity are condensed into this highly symbolical scene.

4. Ilana actually gets raped twice. Later in the novel, she is convinced that she can exert the same kind of power over men as is wielded by Anya – that she can drive them crazy by just looking at them – but this results in another disillusioning experience of rape.

5. This is not to suggest that Anya is fully invented by Ilana; Anya’s presence as a matchmaker is confirmed by the later account of Sashie, Ilana’s daughter. My argument is that Ilana wrote the real matchmaker she met in New York into her magical, imaginative story about Eastern Europe, letting her suffer, vicariously, the fate she presumably escaped in her fairy tale world.

6. Interestingly enough, Joseph Skibell explains the strange elements in his *A Blessing on the Moon* as follows: ‘Well, for years I’ve been a great lover of fairy tales and folk tales. Yiddish folk tales, especially, speak to me. It’s my culture, after all. And I guess I had been soaking my consciousness in them for so long that a story with talking animals and Rabbis turning into birds and Jews unable to get into the World to Come didn’t seem that strange to me. Also, it always struck me how much the Holocaust (which, to some extent, is the invisible backdrop to my childhood) seemed foreshadowed in the tales of the Brothers Grimm: the oven in Hansel and Gretel becomes the ovens of Auschwitz; the Pied Piper leading away the rats and then the children of Hamelin is, to me, the story of World War II’ (Skibell).

**Works Cited**


