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Affective Knowledge, Self-awareness and the Function of Myth in
the Representation and Transmission of Trauma. The Case of Eva
Figes' Konek Landing

The article begins by endorsing Sigmund Freud's and Josef Breuer's (1893) definition of trauma as a malfunctioning of the conscious memory triggered off by the subject's incapacity to react adequately to a shocking event, and their contention that putting the traumatic event or experience into words offers a healing alternative to such actions as taking revenge or mourning the loss of a loved one. From this, it goes on to argue that the fact that the ›talking cure‹ cannot be achieved in isolation, as it requires the establishment of an analysand-psychoanalyst relationship, is comparable to the I-you relationship of narrator-narratee in testimonial writings, and that this need of an adequate addressee to abreact trauma points to the double function of trauma narratives both as cathartic instruments of individual healing and as transmitters of trauma to those who have not directly experienced it.

This leads to a discussion of the mechanisms at work in the transmission of knowledge. From a biological perspective, the gathering and transmission of knowledge has an intrinsic life value: sharing knowledge about such matters as which plants are edible and which poisonous is crucial for the survival of all species. However, in the case of human beings this vital cognitive imperative is complicated by our capacity for self-awareness, which involves the perception of our own

mortality. Thus, the intrinsic life value of knowledge is counteracted by its potential traumatising effects. This dilemma is confronted through the innate human capacity to alter reality by entering »different states of consciousness that allow us to maintain separate – and often contradictory – bodies of knowledge« (Bloom 2010, 200), that is, through dissociation. In its most habitual form, the process of dissociation, or separation of the verbal and non-verbal knowledge respectively stored in the dominant and nondominant hemispheres of the brain, is a perfectly normal and rather useful mechanism, as it allows individuals to carry out routinary activities while the conscious mind is simultaneously engaged in a more attractive intellectual task (ibid., 200). It is only in its most exceptional form that dissociation becomes a defence mechanism that allows individuals not only to come to terms in the short-run with a traumatic situation but also to incorporate the first-hand knowledge of the direct witness/survivor to the collective unconscious of the community. However, these two operations can only be carried out at the cost of cognitive cohesion, as survival demands that we keep both sides of the contradictory information available just in case we should need it. In that way we know without knowing (ibid., 202). As Hal Foster suggests, the same essential paradox lies at the heart of trauma art, as it struggles to represent a traumatic event or experience in an unmediated affective way, while simultaneously evincing a resistance to cognitive knowledge, so that: »many artists seem driven to inhabit a place of total affect and to be drained of affect altogether. [...] Pure affect, no affect: It hurts, I can't feel anything« (Foster 1996, 166, italics in the original).

The essay argues that this essential paradox also rules the reception of traumatic knowledge by secondary witnesses/the social group, so that, to the intrinsic difficulty of verbalising dissociated or repressed traumatic knowledge another difficulty is added: that of finding a form of representation capable of attenuating its impact and making it fit for transmission and assimilation into the cultural reality of the group without distorting or completely occluding the traumatic nature of the event. This task of transmission and integration of fearful and shocking knowledge into the collective unconscious, which is the function of ritual, religion and all forms of art (Bloom 2010, 210), may be said to provide the triggering force for the formal innovations in trauma art. Thus, in the case of Holocaust literature, the challenge of representation is so formidable that, as Michael Rothberg forcibly argues, it has triggered off the need to rethink the categories of realism, modernism and postmodernism simultaneously rather than sequentially, in order to create a »complex system of understanding« aimed at substituting montage for the linearity of teleological world history (2000).

Finally, the article sets to prove the explanatory power of the theoretical notions discussed through the analysis of the representation and transmission of trauma in Eva Fíges' *Konek Landing* (1969). The analysis shows that the resistance of the narration to express the traumatic events in linguistic terms is compensated for

by the sustained use of archetypal symbols and the imposition of an all-encompassing mythical pattern that facilitates the transmission of trauma sensorially and empathically instead of logically. It concludes that the affective knowledge thus transmitted to the readers has a consolatory function that attenuates the true horror of Stefan Konek's life experience but at the cost of indirection and ambiguity, without truly contributing to the working through of the collective trauma of the Holocaust.

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