

Haunted by Humans **Traumatic reading of *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak**

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Abstract

*The following essay examines Marcus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* (2005) from the perspective of trauma studies focusing mainly on the perpetrator's trauma, however the major emphasis is on the question of objectivity of trauma narrative and the trauma resolution. By assigning the trauma narration to Death, the novel challenges our perception of death as a consolatory prospect and suggests the circulatory nature of trauma and consequently the impossibility of trauma resolution.*

Key words: perpetrator, victim, death, postmemory, trauma resolution

Introduction

Last summer I drove my husband's grandmother to a Bardejov spa. It is situated in the north east of Slovakia and except for its beautiful nature, it is known for its reasonable rates. While she was checking in, there was a German couple talking to the receptionist. A tipsy guest also present at the reception, started shouting slurs such as "Kein Deutsch, Deutsch is Hitler", when he overheard the couple speaking German. I could see how uncomfortable everybody at that moment was. The receptionist apologetically called the police, the couple looked embarrassed and the drunken guest disappeared quickly. The couple could have been in their early 60s, which means that they were born shortly after the end of the WWII, and yet they were accused of anti-Semitism in a country thousands of kilometers from their home sixty years after the war. Perhaps it is daring to speak of a transmission of trauma based on an occasional stereotypical slur but me and my husband's grandma (who is a WWII survivor) felt embarrassed for recalling the events of the history that are still sensitive to both the "winners and the losers" and also those witnessing or just "standing by". We were what Caruth suggests "listening and speaking from the site of trauma – on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know about our own traumatic past" (1995: 11). This experience made me think about trauma, its historical treatment and the spatial and geographical distance from the site of the trauma which never really disappears until it is resolved on both the victim's and the perpetrator's side. But can it ever really be resolved?

Whose Trauma is it?

"Just because I was not a Jew, it does not mean that it did not happen to me"
(J.S.Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 2002: 246).

The traditional treatment of history is based on a dichotomous categorization between the good and evil. In trauma studies this distinction is divided between a victim and

a perpetrator. Trauma theory has been so far focusing on the victim; however the recent developments in trauma studies show that it might be also the perpetrator who can unconsciously experience trauma if they become traumatized on an account of witnessing or participating in a traumatic event (Fuller 2011: 6). Perpetrator's trauma, the delayed consciousness of the crimes one's forebears have committed, "continues to haunt the perpetrator-collective until it changes sufficiently to narrate it into a new legitimating story as a constitutive part of its self-understanding" (Moses 2011: 3). Marcus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* seems to be this kind of story. Its unusual treatment of the Holocaust, German-Jewish relationships and the journey into the psyche of ordinary Germans of the Nazi Germany prior the beginning of the WWII makes it a memorable story. When published in 2005 it was classified as children's book or young adults' fiction. However, after closer reading it is more a textbook example of a trauma narrative, demonstrating the presence of all the major concepts in trauma theory such as postmemory, transgenerational transmission of trauma, PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), PITS (Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress), victim's trauma, perpetrator's trauma, instances of individual and collective trauma, survivor's guilt and the problem of artistic representation of the unspeakability of trauma.

Marcus Zusak was born in 1975 in Sydney, Australia. Obviously he did not experience any of the events portrayed in his novel as he repeatedly states in interviews and his story is based on the memories of his parents:

When I was growing up in suburban Sydney, I was told stories of cities on fire and Jews being marched to concentration camps. Both my parents grew up in Europe during World War II, and although they were extremely young at the time, in hindsight, they were able to understand many things. Two stories my mother told me about growing up in Munich always stuck with me. One was about a burning sky when the city was bombed. The other was about a boy being whipped on the street for giving a starving Jewish man a piece of bread. The man sank to his knees and thanked the boy, but the bread was stripped away and both the taker of the bread and the giver were punished. This showed me that there was another side to Nazi Germany, and it was a side I wanted to write about. At first I thought of a biography, but as a writer of fiction, I knew it wouldn't take long for the itch to imagine to climb out of me and into the story. Another problem was that Nazi Germany, Hitler and all associated topics had been written about before, so how could I make my own story original? (Interview)

Zusak's parents were the first hand survivors of the WWII which makes the traumas in the story inherited through the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Intergenerational transmission of trauma is based on an assumption that generation which has never been exposed to a traumatic event can "inherit" the trauma of their ancestors (Kolář 2010: 11). Also the relationship that subsequent generations have with the experiences of forebears who directly witnessed cultural or collective trauma is the concept of postmemory which describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own rights (Hirsch 2008: 1). However, what makes the concept of postmemory different from other novels about the Holocaust is that Zusak offers the perspective of his parents who were of German and Austrian origin (thus indirectly being on the side of the perpetrator). Furthermore, postmemory is defined by a temporal but also spatial distance from the site of trauma; however it seems that with perpetrator's postmemory the form of belatedness is even longer. Both spatial and temporal distance to see perpetrator's

side of the story is secured by Zusak being a contemporary Australian writer and a son of the WWII survivors who at the time were children themselves.

The unresolved question in the treatment of perpetrator's trauma seems to be the question related to the time span and place of when, where and how it is appropriate to tell "the other" side of the story. Perhaps if *The Book Thief* had been published 10 years ago it would not have been such a discussed story, or it could not have been published at all.

The story is set in the Nazi Germany prior to the beginning of the WWII and it portrays the lives of ordinary Germans in a fictitious town called Molching near Munich. The central character is Liesel Meminger, a nine year old girl abandoned by her biological mother and taken to a foster family of Hans and Rosa Hubermann. Liesel gradually builds a strong relationship with her stepfather and later on also with a Jew Max Vandenburg whom Habermans hide in their cellar.

Hiding a Jew becomes one of the central themes in the novel as Zusak touches upon German-Jewish relationship before the emergence of National Socialism and indicates how the politics and the propaganda had shaped the fact that "German Jews were a highly integrated minority before National Socialism, with a hybridized subculture, retaining elements of both Jewishness and Germaneness, that was very much their own" (Moses 2011: 16). Hiding a Jew in the centre of Hitler's Germany sounds as a contradiction but also means of romanticizing realities in the midst of the WWII. Nevertheless, Zusak elevates the relationship between a German and a Jew from a political, historical and social category to a humanistic level since Hans Hubermann does not save Vandenburg for being or not being a Jew but because he is morally obliged to pay back for his own life being saved by Max's father in the WWI. Having experienced the war before, Hans Huberman becomes less enthusiastic about the mission of the National Socialism as opposed to his own son who becomes the member of the Nazi party and is a great advocate of Hitler's propaganda. Generational difference creates a major clash between the father and the son, a rift which is never resolved in the novel as it represents the universal generational dilemmas between the old ideals versus modernity or an experience versus enthusiasm or the traumatic loss of the WWI which Hans Hubermann seems to represent.

Another level of German-Jewish relationship is portrayed in the character of Alex Steiner whose son Rudy is Liesel's best friend. Alex Steiner is a father of a large family and his sense of survival and strong preservation of his family is reflected in the following inner monologue:

...The Contradictory Politics of Alex Steiner...

Point One: He was a member of the Nazi Party, but he did not hate the Jews, or anyone else for that matter.

Point Two: Secretly, though, he couldn't help feeling a percentage of relief(or worse-gladness!) when Jewish shop owners were put out of their business - propaganda informed him that it was only a matter of time before a plague of Jewish tailors showed up and stole his customers.

Point Three: But did that mean they should be driven out completely?

Point Four: His family. Surely, he had to do whatever he could to support them. If that meant being in the party, it meant being in the party.

Point Five: Somewhere, far down, there was an itch in his heart, but he made it a point not to scratch it. He was afraid of what might come leaking out (2005: 59-60).

Alex Steiner represents many Steiners of the Nazi Germany who suffered from the moral and ethical dilemmas between the social, historical and economic circumstances and the sense of preservation and survival. Fuller emphasizes that “in spite of their socialization, the Nazi perpetrators were not immune to trauma. As agents of destruction, they witnessed mortality and unconsciously feared their own annihilation; however, they remained functioning subjects via the effects of trauma” (2011: 42). Trauma is a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, it is born out of destruction; however, on the other, it implies survival and life (Ibid.). Zusak is not apologetic about such characters however he puts a humanizing element to them which makes their story if not believable at least heard. “The history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (Caruth 1995: 11, Introduction). Ethical dimension of Steiner’s (a) morality is challenged by the circumstances of the environment, as Fuller suggests:

The *Shoah* perpetrators were interpellated and socialised by a number of political, ideological, and environmental factors; nevertheless, many of them still suffered the effects of traumatisation. Most of these individuals were not psychopaths or sociopaths prior to committing acts of perpetration; therefore, trauma was a predictable human response. Also, whereas many of the perpetrators were deeply antisemitic, many were not. In the end, however, even those perpetrators who were not antisemitic most likely still relied on antisemitic stereotypes[...] (2011: 19).

Antisemitic stereotypes are also present in the character of Alexander Steiner’s son Rudy who innocently disgraces his family when he paints his face black at the children’s athletic competition in Molching by attempting to copy the running skills of Jesse Owens (African American winner of the 1936 German Olympics). Rudy’s innocent adoration of a black runner is ridiculing the anti-Semitic stereotypes of a white supremacy. Even though the son of a member of the Nazi party, Rudy is not comfortable with the rules of the Hitler’s Youth organization where he refuses to go or later he is almost caught for leaving the bread on the road for the Jews marched off to Dachau.

Zusak creates a complex characterization of Molching inhabitants whose lives are somehow connected to Liesel’s life and vice versa. By linking Liesel’s individual traumas to the collective traumas of Molching inhabitants, it is possible to get a more profound and extended picture of the life in the Nazi Germany or the lives of ‘ordinary’ Germans. In order to understand the trauma from a more complex perspective, the following paragraphs focus on an individual trauma of Liesel Meminger and are later connected to more collective traumas of Molching inhabitants.

Healing in Stealing

Liesel Meminger is an extremely traumatized child character whose survivor’s story starts with the death of her brother on a train journey on their way to a foster family. Liesel’s mother is too poor to provide for her children and therefore places them for an adoption. The real intentions of the reasons why is Liesel along with her brother Werner put for an adoption are not expanded on, however it is suggested that they might be either Jewish or their father is communist and their prospects before the war are not favorable. Not being aware of the fact that her biological mother is soon to abandon her for her own sake, she witnesses the death and the quick burial of her brother in the snow on their train journey, which later on becomes a recurring memory indicating one of the many signs of PTSD. In the memories about the

death of her brother, Liesel pictures herself digging her brother out of the frozen snow until her fingers bleed. Inability to come to terms with the death of her brother results in the creation of a compulsive obsessive need to steal books. Incidentally at the burial of her brother she steals her first book from the gravediggers titled *The Grave Digger's Handbook, A Twelve-Step Guide to Grave-Digging Success*, Published by Bayern Cemetery Association. An obsession to steal books is not only the traumatic syndrome but is also related to Liesel's inability to read. Paradoxically the guide to digging a grave eventually serves as an acting out of her trauma as by learning to read from this book she does not only become more literate but is metaphorically returning the site of her trauma, the grave of her brother by "literally digging her trauma/dead brother out". The trauma of illiteracy expressed by compulsive stealing is also present in Liesel's beating of other kids at school for laughing at her attempts to read aloud. Another sign of PTSD is her wetting the bed when she arrives to her foster family which is gradually resolved by Hans Hubermann playing the accordion until Liesel falls asleep. It is her foster father Hans Hubermann who helps her to learn to read and also helps her come to terms with the loss of her biological parents and her little brother. Hans Hubermann becomes Liesel's real father and pretends not to notice her compulsion to steal books. Furthermore, she experiences the bombing of Molching as well as she indirectly witnesses the Holocaust by seeing Jews being marched off to Dachau but also by befriending a Jew which Hubermanns hide in their cellar. Coming to terms with all the traumas Liesel experiences is resolved by her addiction to steal books. Stealing books becomes her favorite activity not only because by adding a new book to her collection she can spend time reading with her foster father but reading also saves her life after one of the air raids of Molching when everybody else dies.

From My Trauma to Our Trauma and back

Intimate knowledge of the psyche of ordinary Germans points to a collective trauma as Erikson posits: "The spiritual affinity of a traumatized community as characterized by an intimate knowledge of one another can also have contradictory effects. On the one hand, shared experience may (but more often does not) strengthen communal life, but on the other "a gathering of the wounded" (Erikson 1995: 187) often experiences estrangement from the others, resulting in the community's isolation, and what is worse, becomes the subjects of its own disruption. Gradual disruption of Molching community when the bombing is intensified is demonstrated in the character of Frau Holtzapfel who is a great Nazi sympathizer proud of her both sons fighting in Stalingrad. However when her older son returns with the news of his other brother being killed and he himself commits suicide over his survivor's guilt, Frau Holtzapfel's life is shattered. Erikson summarizes that an individual trauma is a "blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (Ibid.). Yet individual (personal) and collective trauma do not act in opposition to each other, and their interaction creates a close level of interconnection (Kolář 2010: 11). Bombing of Molching becomes what Erikson calls the "gathering of the wounded" which 'unites' the community as they are forced to be together in the air raid shelters and Liesel soothes everybody down by reading aloud. Thus individual and collective trauma is connected and the killing becomes a part of both the victims' and the perpetrators' trauma. Traumatic violence and suffering is shifted to the equal level.

Individual trauma of Liesel	Collective trauma of Molching
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Meminger	
Death of her brother Abandonment Foster family Bombing and war Hiding a Jew Illiteracy Death of Hubermanns and Rudy Survivor's guilt	German-Jewish relationships Compulsory army Death of German soldiers Compulsory joining of the Nazi party Poverty Bombing and war

Irene Kacandes uses the image of a circuit to explain how trauma should be narrated effectively in order for the process of healing to be present:

A story may be written in isolation, but to be considered “told” it must be received through the act of reading. Like circuits, reading and witnessing only flow when all elements are connected. An additional advantage of using here a model of communicative circuits is that it accommodates the multiple levels of witnessing that occur in both psychoanalytic and literary level (1999: 56).

In reading Zusak's novel, the elements of the perpetrator and victim, the individual and collective trauma need to be connected like the circuits which Kacandes proposes. Initially the perpetrator who haunts the victim becomes the victim and the one who was a victim becomes a perpetrator and they are both united by the trauma waiting to be sufficiently narrated into a new story that would lead to what Moses calls a self-understanding.

Perpetrator → Victim → Perpetrator → Victim = TRAUMA

Such journey takes us back to the introduction of this paper and the story about the German couple being ‘perpetrated’ about the historical event they had not even physically taken part in. However, even by ‘uniting’ the trauma into one circuit-like event does it make the trauma be resolved? Before attempting to answer this question, the following paragraph looks at the role of Death as a narrator of the trauma.

Till the Death does Trauma Part

Artistic representation of trauma in literature is one of the most challenging aspects of trauma narratives. How can the trauma be articulated artistically as well as objectively? What makes Zusak's novel different from other trauma narratives is his employment of the Death as a narrator. Unbiased and objective point of view is secured by assigning the narration to Death. The Death as a narrator has a memory of the traumatic events it sees and by fragmentary storytelling it is attempting to be the witness, the storyteller and the healer of the trauma. Zusak achieves the circuit which Kacandes proposes above. The multiple levels of witnessing are ensured as the Death is omnipresent and omniscient and it sees both the victim's and the perpetrator's side of the story. By placing Death as the main narrator of the story, Zusak succeeds in several ways of articulating trauma objectively. Firstly, he unites both individual and collective trauma as well as victim's and perpetrator's trauma as Death becomes the resolution to both. Therefore, he solves the problem of truth or objectivity of

trauma representation. Death becomes the most objective witness to trauma of both victims and perpetrators since it does not distinguish between the two and consequently it becomes the ultimate resolution of all. It shifts the level of suffering to the most universal perspective pointing out the insignificance of our binary view of the world (good/bad, individual/collective, victim/perpetrator etc.). Its other function is the confirmation of the inter(trans)generational transmission of trauma which is surpassed even by death.

First the colors.

Then the humans.

That's usually how I see things.

Or at least, how I try.

...HERE IS A SMALL FACT...

You are going to die (2005: 3).

The certainty of death which foreshadows even the reader's destiny as the moment of reading the story suggests that trauma can finally be resolved in death itself. Generally, western perception of death is connected with the idea of salvation therefore; trauma resolved by death suggests its consolatory prospect. The concept of death elevates the human existence to a philosophical ethical and religious dimension and works as a healing element since the inevitability of death functions as the last hope for trauma resolution.

Returning back to the image of circuit in trauma narration, Kacandes explains the essential components of such a circuit: In other words, psychoanalytic accounts suggest that to effect healing, a circuit of communication must come into being, the components of which are an enunciator (the trauma victim patient), a story (the narrative of the traumatic events) and an enabler for that story (the listener-analyst) (1999: 56). Death in Zusak's story fulfills all of the components in a circuit as it is the narrator and the listener of the story. Unfortunately it is also the victim of the trauma and thus the consolatory prospect of death being the resolution to all is obscured by Death itself being traumatized:

I wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality. But what could I tell her about those things that she didn't already know? I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race – that rarely do I ever simply estimate it ...[...]...None of those things, however, came out of my mouth. All I was able to do was turn to Liesel Meminger and tell her the only truth I truly know. I said it to the book thief and I say it now to you....A LAST NOTE FROM YOUR NARRATOR...

I am haunted by humans (2005: 550).

In one of the interviews Zusak explains his choice for assigning the narration to Death by making the usual connection between the war and death being the best friends. However, he then changes this perspective imagining the war being "the boss" and the Death being an overworked, weary and fatigued servant or in other words the victim of the traumas it witnesses and participates in at the same time. If Death becomes the victim of trauma as Zusak's story suggests, what does it say about the prospects of resolving and healing trauma? If trauma is impossible to be resolved or healed even by the death then *The Book Thief* challenges our perception of it and asks the essential question: can trauma ever be resolved? If trauma cannot be resolved even in death and by Death, does it mean that there is no paradise? Does it mean that we are alive only through listening and speaking each other's trauma?

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