



## Children, War, and the Imaginative Space of Fairy Tales

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In childhood, only the surroundings show, and nothing is explained. Children do not possess a social analysis of what is happening to them, or around them, so the landscape and the pictures it presents have to remain a background, taking on meaning later, from different circumstances.

—Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (33)

The landscape that provided the background to Carolyn Kay Steedman's 1950s South London childhood was, in her earliest years, still that of World War II. As she writes in *Landscape for a Good Woman*, her remarkable "story of two lives"—her own and that of her mother: "The War was so palpable a presence in the first five years of my life that I still find it hard to believe that I didn't live through it. There were bomb-sites everywhere, prefabs on the waste land . . ." (29). In a comparative study of Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* and German writer Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (*Patterns of Childhood*), literary critic Elizabeth W. Harries has shown how postwar women writers have used fairy tales as devices to interpret their childhoods—Steedman's against the landscape of postwar London's working-class and Wolf's against the landscape of Nazi Germany and its aftermath. As Harries demonstrates, fairy tales become "stories to think with, stories that do not necessarily determine lives but can give children (and adults) a way to read and to understand them" (124); they provide children "with a way of reading and even predicting the world" (126).<sup>1</sup> Noting the nearly irresistible "compulsions of narrative," Steedman herself relates on the basis of personal experience how a story becomes an "interpretative device" (143–44). Her own story told in *Landscape for a Good Woman* is in large

measure a demonstration of her statement that, during her postwar childhood, “[l]ong, long ago, the fairy-stories were my first devices” (143) for interpreting childhood—a childhood lived during its earliest years in a landscape scarred by violence, a postwar “waste land” of “bomb-sites.”

Following Steedman’s lead, I want to explore how children use fairy tales to interpret their landscapes and their experiences in them. I am specifically interested in how children of war—especially as adults later reflecting on their violent wartime childhoods—have had recourse to the space of fairy tales to interpret their traumatic physical environments and their emotional lives within them. Elsewhere I have suggested how the utopian structures in fairy tales have played a role in the lives of children who experienced the trauma of war, exile, and the Holocaust (Haase). Drawing on the fairy-tale theories of two figures who were themselves exiled from the Third Reich—the unlikely pair of philosopher Ernst Bloch and psychologist Bruno Bettelheim—I stressed in particular the fairy tale’s potential as an emotional survival strategy based on its “anticipation of a better world” and its “future-oriented” nature (87, 94). That approach underlined in effect the temporal dimension of the fairy tale’s utopianism, especially as a projection of a better *time*. Here, however, I shall demonstrate that *space*—or place—plays an equally important role in the child’s interpretation of the trauma caused by war. To do this, I shall (1) consider the nature of time and space in the classic fairy tale; (2) establish how the ambiguity of fairy-tale spaces creates an imaginative geography that lends itself to the representation and mapping of wartime experience; and (3) adduce examples from autobiographical accounts that show how fairy tales have been used to comprehend and to take emotional control over the war-torn landscape of childhood.<sup>2</sup>

In exploring this terrain, I shall be building on Jack Zipes’s theory of the “liberating potential of the fantastic” (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 170–92). Using Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich* (the uncanny), Ernst Bloch’s utopian philosophy of “home,” and André Favat’s interpretation of Jean Piaget’s developmental psychology, Zipes has articulated a theory that locates the fairy tale’s appeal in its recurring pattern involving “the reconstitution of home on a new plane” (176). Driven by the longing for home, “which is discomfiting *and* comforting” (177), both adults and children desire to tap into the liberating potential of the tale, to recapture home as a place free from repressive constraints and governed by the utopian imagination. Zipes, of course, is especially concerned with demonstrating how the quest for home is

implicated in the process of socialization. Here, however, I am less interested in the socializing effects of the fairy tale and its conventional cultural role than in its reception *in extremis*. The spatial implications of Zipes's theory of fairy-tale structure and reception are consistent with my hypothesis that children who have been *displaced* by violence may perceive an affinity between their traumatic experience and utopian projections, on the one hand, and the landscape of the fairy tale, on the other. In other words, Zipes's theory of the fairy-tale home—which is “discomforting *and* comforting,” defamiliarized and familiar—helps us conceptualize how the ambiguous spaces of fairy tales are used by children to map their own geographical landscape under fire and to project onto that landscape a reconstituted home. Examples will suggest how children identify both the distressing disfigurement of familiar places and dislocations such as exile and imprisonment with the landscape and physical spaces of the fairy tale, and how, within that imaginative space, they transform their physical surroundings into a hopeful, utopian space as a psychological defense and means of emotional survival.

#### *Time and Space in the Fairy Tale*

The formulaic “once upon a time” stereotypically associated with the fairy tale would seem to suggest that the genre is largely about time—about temporal displacement from the present to the mythical past or to an imaginative time not governed by the laws of everyday life.<sup>3</sup> That is not entirely true. The folktale and fairy tale might be considered in one respect “timeless,” but certainly not in the conventional, sentimental meaning of that word. Sociohistorical criticism of fairy tales has more than adequately demonstrated the social, historical, and cultural importance—that is, the temporal aspects—of the genre's production and reception.<sup>4</sup> If the fairy tale is in fact “timeless,” that timelessness derives largely from its *structural disinterest* in time. According to Max Lüthi, the folktale's characteristic one-dimensionality and depthlessness result in part from the genre's “indifference to the passage of time” (19), and “the insignificance of the passage of time” is an “essential characteristic of the folktale” (20). “Time,” Lüthi argues, “is a function of psychological experience,” and “[s]ince the characters of the folktale are only figures who carry forward the plot and have no inner life, folktales must also lack the experience of time” (21). It is in this sense—in the sense that the fairy-tale narrative is not driven or defined by time or temporal considerations—that we can assert the genre's “timelessness.”

If the fairy-tale narrative is in that respect timeless, can we also maintain that it is indifferent to space? Lüthi seems, on the one hand, to diminish the role of space when he notes in his chapter on “Isolation and Universal Interconnection” “[t]hat the characters depicted in folktales have . . . *no environment*,” and when he observes that places such as forests, springs, castles, and cottages “do not serve to establish a setting” (37, 38; emphasis mine). On the other hand, what he frequently refers to as the *otherworldliness* of folktales involves spatial imagery suggesting the genre’s fundamental reliance on space. He notes that setting, like time, is not fully experienced and only provides a story line, and that a physical setting is only mentioned insofar as plot may depend on it (38). Yet, the crucial isolation and separation of fairy-tale heroes, Lüthi admits, is made possible precisely by spatial relationships: “Apparently the only way that folktales can express spiritual otherness is through *geographical separation*” (9; emphasis mine). He admits furthermore that the folktale “expresses inner distance through *visible separation*” (9; emphasis mine). Noting the prevalence of isolation in folktales, Lüthi observes that “[t]he characters of the folktale are thus separated from familiar people and familiar places and go out into the world as isolated individuals” (38). Clearly, then, the fundamental themes of separation and exile in fairy tales are spatially conceived and spatially driven.

Psychological readings of fairy tales generally interpret the isolation that Lüthi describes as a symbolic expression of developmental stages or as a metaphor for the hero’s inner journey. However, if the fairy tale uses space to construct its hero’s alienation and exile, it may be that under certain conditions the fairy-tale landscape has the potential to become a template for the actual experience of human displacement and the perception of a defamiliarized geography. That is, we shall ultimately want to consider whether children who have experienced the violent upheavals of war—who have been alienated from their surroundings either by physical displacement or by the perception of a violently altered landscape (“bomb-sites,” “waste land”)—sometimes map their experience with the fairy tale’s geography of displacement.

#### *The Ambiguity of Fairy-Tale Spaces*

The settings of fairy tales are polarized and valorized according to whether they offer characters familiarity and security, or threaten them with exile and danger.<sup>5</sup> Place signals the alienation and endangerment that characters experience, as it does their return to safety and security. Towers, forests, rooms, cages, ovens, huts, and enchanted castles are

typical locations that threaten characters with isolation, danger, and violence, including imprisonment and death. Even familiar locations—including home—can become defamiliarized and threatening, as in “Hansel and Gretel.” In this classic story of children in exile, home itself becomes an ambiguous location, embodying both the danger of violence and ultimate security. When violence upsets their familiar environment, the children are physically dislocated and forced into exile, into a defamiliarized perception of home. In typical fashion, their displacement is followed by relocation to a secure or familiar environment—that is, home reconstituted on a new plane.

It seems evident that the fairy tale’s geography and its ambiguous landscapes lend themselves well to mapping the actual experience of physical dislocation and disorientation brought on by war. Wilhelm Grimm did as much himself when he wrote the story now known as *Liebe Mili—Dear Mili*—for a young female correspondent in 1816. Writing in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars and possibly alluding to the Thirty Years’ War,<sup>6</sup> Grimm creates a tale about a little girl whose life is threatened by war, which he suggests in the defamiliarization of the heroine’s environment and in the exile that ensues. The secure, protected life that the little girl leads with her mother in their “little house and garden” is dramatically altered when the storm of war threatens their nearly idyllic landscape:<sup>7</sup>

But it was not God’s will that the happy life they led together should continue, for a terrible war overran the whole country. One fine, clear day when mother and child were sitting together outside the house, a great cloud of smoke rose up in the distance and a little while later the heavens resounded with cannon fire. Shouts and tumult rent the air on all sides. “Great God!” cried the mother. “What a fearful storm is coming! Dear child, how shall I save you from the wicked men!”

And, in her great fear, she decided to send the child into the forest, where no enemy could follow.

In Grimm’s text, the girl’s exile in the unfamiliar forest protects her from the trauma of war, and it is followed ultimately by her return to a defamiliarized village but a still familiar home:

The child went to the village, but it looked strange and unfamiliar to her. In among the houses she knew, there were others she had never seen before; the trees looked different, and there was no trace of the damage the enemy had done. All was peaceful, the grain waved in the breeze, the meadows were green, the trees were laden with fruit. But she had no trouble recognizing her mother’s house, and when she came close, she saw an old, old, woman with bowed head, sitting on the bench outside the

door, enjoying the last rays of the evening sun that hung low over the forest.

The old woman is, of course, her mother, with whom she is reunited. That the village seems unfamiliar reflects not only that the daughter has spent thirty years in exile, but also that the once familiar space of home, disfigured by war, has been replaced by a new landscape, in which home can still be recognized. Grimm's text, then, depicts the traumatic experience of war and exile against a changing fairy-tale landscape and enables the reconstitution of home on a new plane.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between the trauma of war and the fairy-tale landscape has been elaborated in a profoundly revealing way by Maurice Sendak's illustrations for *Dear Mili*. As Hamida Bosmajian and Otilie Dinges each have shown, Sendak has incorporated visual images of war and the Holocaust into the traditional fairy-tale landscape that serves as the setting for Grimm's story.<sup>9</sup> Sendak, who was born the son of Jewish immigrants in 1928 and who lost his European relatives in the Holocaust, has acknowledged that "*Dear Mili* is a book about landscape, through which [the little girl] runs."<sup>10</sup> Auschwitz itself—the name of the place stands for the otherwise unspeakable violence of the Holocaust<sup>11</sup>—becomes the background for the fairy-tale forest, which in its own right becomes a landscape that literally embodies violence and death. Sendak defamiliarizes what might otherwise be romantic scenes, "abolishes linear time/narration," and through his allusive landscape "makes *Dear Mili* the story of a child in any war" (Bosmajian 200). His illustrations trace the transformation of the fairy-tale landscape—from the idyllic opening scene of home, which is threatened by looming storm clouds of war, through the ominous "forest of the dead" (200), and up to the final panoramic image of home and the girl's reunion with her mother. In fact, in the book's final illustration, civilization has been restored and the threatening forest has been displaced into the distance, where it regains its positive romantic aura and begins to overgrow the architectural ruins. Bosmajian interprets this final landscape as an image supporting Sendak's own claim that "the ending is not sad" (qtd. in Bosmajian 204). Indeed, the re-imagining of home against the background of ashen skies and allusive ruins suggests the utopian reconstitution of home on the previously violent postwar landscape.

For Sendak, the fairy tale becomes an "interpretative device" for understanding the child's journey through the landscape of war, exile, and the Holocaust. His landscapes—simultaneously familiar and defamiliarized—project not only the images of dislocation and violence but also the desire to reestablish the familiar, to relocate the undisturbed home of

the past. Bosmajian perceptively invokes Lawrence Langer's observation that, in the stories of Holocaust survivors, "a defamiliarized event is drawn by a familiar vocabulary back within the perimeters of heroic memory, with its dependence on the idea of a controllable future" (Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* 179; qtd. in Bosmajian 207). This constitutes a "psychological defense" that explains and justifies Sendak's placing "the memory of catastrophe and the desire for transformation in the overlay of landscapes" (Bosmajian 208). This insight will prove useful in examining how some adults who have experienced the violence of war, exile, and the Holocaust as children map those experiences with the overlay of the fairy-tale landscape, attempting to transform trauma through desire for the reconstituted safety of home.

*Fairy-Tale Landscapes in Recollections of Childhood Trauma*

While Sendak "acknowledges and grieves over the Holocaust" in his illustrations (Bosmajian 187), he does not do so as an actual child survivor. Still, there is suggestive evidence in autobiographical accounts that the imaginative space of the fairy tale may become an interpretative device and psychological strategy for those who directly experienced the Holocaust or the trauma of war and exile. My previous work introduced evidence that children living through these profoundly stressful conditions were able to appropriate fairy tales as a psychological strategy in order to create meaning in the midst of violent conflict. Storytelling itself could become a space of refuge—familiarity—linked to protection, security, and the return to meaningful life (see Haase 90–93). I noted, for example, that psychotherapist Ingrid Riedel recalled how telling fairy tales was a psychological defense mechanism during bombings and created a space for overcoming anxiety:

. . . I experienced [fairy tales] as protective powers that were allied with me against chaos. They helped me to overcome fear, to remain undisturbed, even when the external danger and the panic of the people around me persisted. It was as if they showed me a meaningful structure of events and relationships that were superior to and more powerful than chaos—a structure in which evil did have its place and time, but not the last word. (Jacoby, Knast, and Riedel 7–8; qtd. in Haase 92; translation mine).

Subsequent testimony bears out these earlier findings. British artist and illustrator Corinna Sargood (b. 1941), for example, has reported that "during the [Second World W]ar, my father used to read the *Grimms' Fairy Tales* out loud. It was wonderful."<sup>12</sup> In subsequent reflections on the role of fairy tales in her English childhood during the war, Sargood elaborates on this remark:

I loved my rather remote father's occasional bedtime stories, always one I had chosen from my brown covered edition of Grimm. I once asked him to promise that no bombs would fall that night (a request I knew was impossible) but I was still deeply shocked and frightened when he refused. Many years later I reminded him of this—he replied he didn't want to lose credibility. But this didn't stop him from reading Grimm's [*sic*] Fairy Tales to me.

However, in addition to the familiarity of storytelling and the imaginative refuge that it provided during the bombings, the fairy tale also offers Sargood, in her adult recollections of the wartime childhood, an interpretative device for understanding the disruption of her environment. Like many children at the time, Sargood was occasionally displaced. She recalls that she and her brother “just before a major bombardment . . . were taken by mother to the country, but only for the time of acute danger.” The safety of the country was only temporary, for they “were always soon back in the blitz, crouching over the broken glass with more views of the insides of peoples' homes open to the elements.” The description of this experience suggests how the bombings literally reconstructed space for Sargood as a child. War physically changed the familiar landscape, altered the vista, and dissolved the lines between private and public space by opening up private homes both to the forces of nature and to public view. Research on trauma has shown how the reality of traumatic experience fundamentally alters the victim's “personal mythologies” through “the violation of psychological and social boundaries” (Tal 234, discussing Des Pres). In the experience described by Sargood, the destruction of the physical boundaries between outside and inside, between public and private, is simultaneously a violation of psychological and social boundaries that alters the everyday mythology of space. It seems to be not simply the emptiness of the homes that created a lasting visual image for Sargood, but more emphatically their unfamiliar openness and vulnerability to invasion and violation. Significantly, after the war, that perspective shifts. The bombed-out urban landscape becomes a fantasy landscape, and space takes on the optimism of the fairy tale:

I remember the war as a time of continuous fear. Low key maybe, but its repression exhausting. (I was 4 1/2 when it was over.)

But at last, like a fairy tale, it had (for me at least) a happy ending. And I could begin to see the bombed out houses which with their swiftly growing weeds and buddleia became ruined castles in enchanted forests as I searched for broken treasures. Once through the war, I felt anything was possible.

As does Sendak in the final illustration for *Dear Mili*, Sargood interprets the postwar landscape as one in which ruined castles are overgrown by fairy-tale forests, signaling a positive reclamation—a transformation—of the space once overrun by war. Echoing the liberating nature of the fantastic, Sargood seems to reconstitute home on a new plane, to reconfigure space in the imagination so as to enable the possibility of hope by association with the fairy tale and its happy endings. From this perspective, bombed-out houses now become ruined castles in an enchanted forest where one can find “broken treasures.”

Interestingly, the image of “broken treasures” recalls the Grimms’ own view of fairy tales as shards of ancient gems, a metaphor for fragments of integral myths that had lost their coherence in the course of history and which the brothers, through their collection, were attempting to reconstruct (J. and W. Grimm 3:409 [421]). For Sargood, collecting the “broken treasures” does not simply reflect a desire to reconstruct the familiar past and its childhood spaces; it seems to constitute a confident attempt to reclaim them as part of a world where “anything was possible.” That is, the search for broken treasures among ruined castles in the enchanted forest is driven by a fairy-tale trope that suggests transformative and utopian impulses—a fairy-tale quest in search of home on a new plane. This new, postwar view of the damaged urban landscape is a private, imaginative transformation of home and society, as Sargood confirms when she explicitly identifies the fairy tale as her memory’s intertext:

It was the happy ending that was important. Maybe it was the fairy tales read to me during the war (after all even one fairy tale goes a long way), that helped me live with my fear. It seemed possible, in the teeth of injustice, willful misunderstanding, corruption and gratuitous violence, that everything will turn out well in the end. (This of course only works on a very personal level.) So it did, luckily for me, The Happy Ending came True.

Of course, this projection of the individual happy end, characterized by the utopian belief that “anything was possible,” does not correspond fully to Sendak’s remark about the conclusion of *Dear Mili*—namely, the subdued affirmation that “the ending is not sad.” Understandably, moreover, the autumnal images of the final illustration in Sendak’s Holocaust work convey more ambiguity and grief than the “swiftly growing weeds and buddleia” of Sargood’s recollections of postwar England. Still, the illustrated version of *Dear Mili* was to be “the story of a child in any war” (Bosmajian 200). Sendak and Sargood—both of them visual artists—use the fairy-tale landscapes in similar ways—one graphically, the other verbally—to map and interpret the child’s experience of wartime trauma.

In her 1997 book *Castles Burning: A Child's Life in War*, psychoanalyst Magda Denes (b. 1934) recounts her experiences as a Jewish child in wartime Hungary and postwar Europe, and she too adopts the fairy tale as a device to frame and interpret her experience. Initially, however, she deconstructs the act of storytelling, and—in contrast to the examples above—she casts doubt on the order and utopian outcome that fairy tales seem to promise. She begins the memoir of her journey toward survival with a sobering reevaluation of the fairy tale and the announcement of childhood's end, at age five:

I begged, and often my brother obliged. In the dark when I couldn't sleep, Ivan told me fairy tales in a whisper. All the stories began, in the traditional Hungarian manner, "Once there was / where there wasn't / there was once a Castle / that twirled on the foot of a duck." The tales were always intrinsically just. They progressed from peril to joy; they spoke of an orderly, predictable world, where the virtuous were rewarded and the wicked were punished. The prince rescued the princess. Losses were restored, and the near dead revived. Lack of caution was not a fatal error.

Over the years of these whispered fables, I realized that my brother loved to tell them as much as I loved to listen to him. I also realized, with a thorn, that as the years passed, I believed the substance of these stories less and less. And then, less yet. (11)

The world this five-year-old was about to experience, of course, seemed quite the opposite of the fairy tale, whose ambiguous reality would be exposed. She would experience a world in which justice did not always prevail, where order was not always evident, and where events were not always predictable. She would suffer through a world where the virtuous were not always rewarded, nor the wicked punished—where the happy end was not always assured.

Nonetheless, even in the form of a negative image, it is the fairy tale that Denes projects onto the visible landscape of war. As the title of her memoir suggests, the fairy-tale castles—once the child's symbol of order and security—are identified with the castles literally burning around her in war-torn Europe, signaling the violent death of childhood and a questioning of the fairy tale's easy truths and innocent world view. The defamiliarization of the fairy tale and the spatial disorientation caused by war is directly associated with the castle—both literally and symbolically—burning in Buda. As the girl's mother reports after venturing from their hiding place out into the city: "Buildings are on fire all around. The castle in Buda is burning. Other buildings are spilled on the ground in broken bricks. There are barbed-wire checkpoints everywhere. And no street signs. I got lost several times. Here in my own Budapest" (166). In

recollecting her own childhood impressions of displacement and disorientation, Denes notes that a once familiar room, darkened because of bombing raids, appears as “a bewitched kingdom” (119). And when they leave their home to begin their dangerous flight from persecution and certain death, the familiar city seems transformed into an alien fairy-tale landscape under an evil spell:

Seated on the tramcar, I felt that overnight the city had changed. As in a fairy tale turned wicked, the world had revealed its layers of menace. The well-known streets through which we traveled had turned alien. There was no more Budapest. We were in a bewitched city of evil populated by hidden monsters. One accusing word, one pointing finger, could get us instantly killed. (75)

Denes can map the violent reality of war on a fairy-tale landscape “turned wicked” because the world’s “layers of menace” have their counterpart in the moral geography of the fairy tale, a genre that deals not only with “joy” (11) but also with unquestionable evil. But Denes also uses the fairy tale to chart a route toward a new home. She makes clear that the resourceful heroine of her memoir—her childhood self—had listened to the genre’s strategies for survival and struggled to maintain a sense of hope (275). For example, while hiding in a basement annex, the girl is cramped by the many people seeking refuge there. “Bodies” fill the limited space, erasing the familiar lines between public and private, and giving her “even less room than before.” She copes, however, by projecting a renewed fairy-tale home: “No matter. By morning I would be gone, to a fabled country of magical castles that twirled perpetually” (156). Indeed, the tale of her journey toward survival, which had begun by announcing disillusionment in the fairy tales of her childhood, ends with a revalidation of the utopian genre and its imaginative space as she sails into the safe haven of Havana to begin a new life in the new world:

We crowded onto the railing with everyone else.  
Gradually the city, Habana, came into view. It was light, bright gleaming. It looked like a fairy-tale city. Nothing like Europe, nothing at all. In the distance, under the blazing sun, Morro Castle emerged. I imagined it to be on fire, twirling on the foot of a duck. (384)

The image of this new place, this new “fairy-tale city,” establishes home on a new plane. Displaced to a new location, Denes faces literally a new home, onto which she projects the fairy-tale landscape known to her so well. Whereas Sargood uses the fairy tale to imaginatively transform the defamiliarized landscape of her childhood home, Denes imagines her gleaming new home—which is “[n]othing like Europe”—in terms of the familiar fairy tales from her childhood.

There is, of course, ambiguity and irony in Denes's conclusion, for her final image recalls her memoir's opening passage, where she confesses that she "believed the substance of these stories less and less. And then less yet"—a reminder of the traumatized child's lost innocence. Although Havana "looked like a fairy-tale city" and although Morro Castle evokes the fairy-tale landscape, the child imagines the castle she sees "to be on fire," an image that conflates the landscape of the war she has left behind with the landscape of the new home before her. This undermining of the concluding utopian vision is consistent with Kali Tal's observation that "[t]rauma is a transforming experience, and those who are transformed can never entirely return to a state of innocence" (229). The geographical journey from war and persecution to the gleaming city of Havana is not necessarily a return to undisturbed normalcy, where cultural and personal myths are fully restored. As Lawrence Langer has observed, "The survivor does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre back to the normal, but from the normal to the bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again. The two worlds haunt each other . . ." (*Versions of Survival* 88; qtd. in Tal 229). So Denes's final image of the new home is truly *unheimlich*, an uncanny utopian vision haunted by trauma. Even as the memoirist tries to restore the long-lost child, who now overlays her destination with the positive image of the fairy tale as an act of hope and restoration, and as an affirmation of the new home, that very image is haunted by the memory of "castles burning"—precluding a return to the state of innocence.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I have explored the connection between the fairy tale's spatial dimension and the trauma of children *in extremis* by focusing on adult representations and recollections of childhood experience. Driven by grief over the loss of relatives in the Holocaust, Maurice Sendak represents a child's experience of war against an ambiguous fairy-tale landscape in his illustrations for Wilhelm Grimm's *Dear Mili*. Sendak, who is not representing his own direct experience, projects war and the Holocaust onto the fairy-tale text and onto the fairy-tale landscape. Conversely, in recounting their own experiences as children of war, artist Corinna Sargood and psychoanalyst Magda Denes project fairy-tale landscapes onto their physical environments, which had been disfigured and defamiliarized by the violence of military conflict and, in the case of Denes, by persecution. Kali Tal's observation about the literature of

trauma—namely, “that literature written about the trauma of others is qualitatively different from literature by trauma survivors” (217)—is useful in understanding the different perspectives represented by Sendak’s art, on the one hand, and the written recollections of Sargood and Denes, on the other. Despite these distinctions, in each case the fairy-tale is adopted as an “interpretative device” to understand, even if retrospectively, the child’s physical displacement and emotional trauma.

Because these are adult representations and recollections, questions remain about the actual manner in which children in violent circumstances might have used the fairy tale as a device to interpret their surroundings and as a psychological survival tool to transform their environment into a hopeful utopian space, a reconstituted home. In fact, some intriguing evidence supports the hypothesis, especially in the story of Dinah Babbitt Gottlieb, a survivor of Auschwitz. A Czech artist who arrived in Auschwitz in 1943, when she was twenty years old (Blatter and Milton), Gottlieb took to painting on barrack walls. In an interview from 1999, she gave the following account of what occurred while she was painting a natural landscape:

One morning, I started painting the view of a Swiss alpine meadow. Then I noticed I was surrounded. There were kids all over behind me. And I asked them what would you like me to paint for you now? Several of them said, “We want Snow White and the seven dwarfs.” . . . I saw that movie [which had appeared in 1937] seven times. And I was enthralled. So I was doing the stuff on the wall, and the kids loved it.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequently destroyed, these fairy-tale murals in the children’s barracks offer compelling confirmation of the psychological strategies evident in the recollections of Sargood and Denes. Here, at the urging of the children, scenes from Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* were physically applied to the landscape of Auschwitz, producing an imaginative transformation of space and, apparently, of human emotion.<sup>14</sup> We should not see this event simplistically, of course, as a *triumph* of the imagination over atrocity. The children certainly did not survive. What the overlay of the fairy-tale provides is a psychological defense.

In discussing fairy tales and children in Holocaust literature, Lawrence Langer has noted “the nostalgia of the modern imagination,” which only reluctantly acknowledges the reality “that fairy tales may deny but the history of the Holocaust confirms” (*The Holocaust* 164–66). Employed by children, the psychological strategies discussed here are no more and no less than that—apparently reflexive survival strategies with which children *in extremis* attempt to order their new reality. In the visual and written memory work of adults discussed here, the fairy tale functions as

a device to represent and interpret the landscapes of a violent childhood.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, we see the liberating potential of the imagination at work, based on the fairy tale's utopian appeal. Whether, in these extreme circumstances, the genre's appeal and the imaginative work it generates amount to denial depends ultimately on the value we give to hope.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harries is especially interested in how adult female writers use fairy tales in their autobiographical writings to project "the multiplicity of ways fairy tales can mirror and form versions of the female self" (124).

<sup>2</sup> See Barchilon for a much more general and preliminary survey of "Children and War in the Fairy Tale."

<sup>3</sup> Diverse approaches to the question of time in the fairy tale can be found in Heindrichs and Heindrichs.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bottigheimer, "Fairy Tales"; Röhrich; Tatar, *Hard Facts*; Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*.

<sup>5</sup> Working in the context of gender studies, Ruth B. Bottigheimer has used Lüthi's observations about isolation in fairy tales as a starting point to analyze "social isolation" and its particularly "female face" in Grimms' tales (*Grimms' Bad Girls* 101–11). Her research presents a convincing analysis of the way in which "Wilhelm Grimm . . . edited specifically female isolation into many of the tales whose previous versions had reflected a different and far more sociable ethic for women" (111). While my study of fairy-tale reception by children *in extremis* differs from her study of fairy-tale production, it is nonetheless interesting that the recipients whose autobiographical accounts of wartime trauma I discuss below and who have responded to the spatial dimensions of the fairy tale are female. The question of whether fairy-tale reception in war, exile, and Holocaust is in any way affected by gender is raised in my discussion of Nelly Toll's comments on visual art produced by children during the Holocaust (Haase 95, 98). Much of the recent scholarship on trauma itself, of course, has emerged from work on women and female psychology. See, for example, Judith Lewis Herman's acknowledgment that her study of *Trauma and Recovery* "owes its existence to the women's liberation movement" (ix). The fairy tale and a woman's recovery from the trauma of rape come together in Patricia Weaver Francisco's *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery*, where the author uses the

fairy tale—especially Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Snow Queen”—as a central device in telling her traumatic story.

<sup>6</sup> See, respectively, Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth* 145; and McGlathery 192.

<sup>7</sup> In his preface to the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Wilhelm Grimm uses a similar metaphor—the destruction of a crop by a “storm or some other disaster”—to describe the danger of extinction facing the folktale. See J. and W. Grimm 1:15.

<sup>8</sup> Grimm gives a problematic, pathetic twist to the reunion of mother and daughter at the end of the story by having them die together in their sleep. As McGlathery notes, “[W]e understand . . . that the girl’s premature death the following morning is a gift from heaven, because it means that the daughter will not have to be separated again from the mother, who having not been protected against aging has presumably grown quite old” (192). However Grimm might idealize death, the general observations I have made about his use of the fairy-tale landscape to depict war, exile, and the reconstitution of home still hold.

<sup>9</sup> Readings of *Dear Mili* that do not take Sendak’s visual Holocaust allusions into account produce very different interpretations and judgments of the illustrated text. See McGlathery 191–93; Tatar, “Wilhelm Grimm/Maurice Sendak”; Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth* 144–46. My brief discussion here takes its lead from Bosmajian’s very helpful analysis of Sendak’s illustrations.

<sup>10</sup> Qtd. in Bosmajian 186. On Sendak’s life, see Lanes.

<sup>11</sup> The violence of war is often expressed by the metonymy of place names—Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, Terezin, Stalingrad, Dresden, London during the Blitz—just as its dislocating effects are conveyed by terms referring to place and spatial relationships—concentration camp, exile, displaced person, Anne Frank’s secret annex.

<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in Bacchilega, “In the Eye” 219. Corinna Sargood is especially well known for having illustrated two fairy-tale collections edited by Angela Carter. See Bacchilega, “Sargood.”

<sup>13</sup> Gottlieb 12. Gottlieb’s televised interview was occasioned by her dispute with the Auschwitz Museum and Polish government over seven portraits, still in the museum’s possession, that she had painted of Gypsies who were to be Josef Mengele’s victims. See “Auschwitz Museum” and “Dinah’s Story” for partisan accounts.

<sup>14</sup> Improbably, Disney and his *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* were present in still other forms in concentration camps. Hanna Hoffmann-Fischel has described a subversive performance of the Snow White story by children in

Birkenau, which was inspired by paintings an inmate had made based on Disney's film (see Deutschkron 52–53). Providing a much different example, Andy Marino has noted that in the camp at Argelès, “[t]he entrepreneurial commandant kept his prisoners occupied making dolls: Micky Mouses, Little Red Riding Hoods, Snow Whites and the Seven Dwarfs” (165).

<sup>15</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the problems in using fairy tales and the techniques of children's literature in Holocaust representations by adults, see Kertzer, “Like a Fable.” See also Kertzer, “Do You Know?”

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