

Message in a Bottle: Scenic Presentation of the Unsayable

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Linguistic studies related to trauma are primarily interested in how traumatic events can be verbalized. This article, in contrast, focusses on ways of translating a traumatic experience into forms of symbolization that do not report on what happened but rather foreground the bodily and emotional sensations linked to (re)living such experiences. In discussing such forms of scenic presentation and condensation, I will build, inter alia, on Wittgenstein's (1919/1997) distinction between *saying* and *showing* as well as on Langer's (1948) distinction between *discursive* and *presentational* forms of meaning making. The close reading of a multimodal text authored by an eight-year-old schoolgirl in the context of a creative-writing activity allows us to identify poetic and artistic means that suggest a reading of the text as a 'bottled message' about intense feelings of fear and helplessness. In concluding I argue that Bruner's (1986) dichotomous distinction between the *paradigmatic* and the *narrative* mode of meaning making needs to be extended by recognizing a third mode, which might be termed the *presentational* mode.

INTRODUCTION

At the core of this article is a child's text consisting of written and drawn elements. It was produced in a creative-writing activity in a public primary school in Vienna with a high proportion of newly arrived students, among them many refugees from war zones. The emotive–appellative character of the text immediately caught the attention of both the teacher and the researcher, provoking ambivalent feelings of fascination, irritation, and resistance. In the analysis of this text, I will develop how traumatic experience is here translated into expressive, communicative forms of symbolization. The main objective of such a kind of symbolization is not to give an account of 'what actually happened', that is, the sequential evolution of the traumatizing events, but rather to bring attention to the intense bodily and emotional sensations attached to traumatization. Devices characteristic of poetic language and artistic expression allow these sensations to be given a condensed form making them, to some extent, palpable and thus communicable.

To understand such forms of symbolization I draw on Langer's (1948) concept of presentational projections that she develops with reference to pictures:

the meanings of particular elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. As she demonstrates, presentational forms that are characteristic also of poetry or dreams lend themselves particularly to the expression of feelings, free associations or fantasies that tend to defy a linear, discursive-linguistic projection.

I will first discuss academic literature that deals with the difficulty of retrieving and recounting traumatic events from the perspectives of trauma research and linguistics. To approach condensed texts about traumatic experience like the one studied here, I will then suggest a theoretical–methodological framework based on Wittgenstein's (1919/1997) distinction between saying and showing; Langer's (1948) concept of presentational forms of symbolization; Lorenzer's (2002) concept of scenic understanding; and Pontalis's (1977) reflection on scenic projection. In the multimodal analysis of the text authored by an eight-year-old girl, I will focus on the poetic–artistic means by which feelings of overwhelming fear and helplessness are communicated to the reader. The concluding discussion deals with the mediability of traumatic experience at the limits of what is sayable and suggests that Bruner's (1986) binary distinction between the *paradigmatic* and the *narrative* mode of meaning making be extended by recognizing the existence of a third mode that I will, borrowing from Langer's terminology, call the *presentational* mode. In this way, the article aims at offering a sociolinguistic framework for dealing with potentially repressed topics and at contributing to an emerging field in applied linguistics, that is, the study of multimodal enactment of intense affect in discourse.

LITERATURE SURVEY: THE DIFFICULTY OF REPRESENTING TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

Incisive or repetitive events or ongoing states that are experienced as extremely stressful and entail a traumatizing effect are, as relevant academic literature agrees, for various reasons difficult to communicate. When it comes to traumatic experiences, one touches the limits of language, of muteness, and of what is accessible to conscious memory. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995), trauma is characterized by the fact that it is an experience that cannot easily be integrated into one's life story. They distinguish between narrative and traumatic memory. While the narrative follows the demands of the present and is socially oriented, the traumatic is solitary and fixes the traumatic experience as it were in a time capsule and is only accessible to a limited extent. Further, it is not uncommon for traumatizing events to be subject to shame, taboo, or a ban on speaking (Ferenczi 1933/1967). To recall such events can cause overwhelming intrusions and is therefore as far as possible avoided by those affected.

There are a growing number of works dealing with the question of what distinguishes trauma narratives from various disciplinary perspectives. Important

insights came and come from Holocaust research (Langer 1991; Schiffrin 2001; Betten 2016). Trauma narratives are often described as dissociated, fragmented, containing bizarre elements and ‘marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility’ (Andrews 2010: 155). Further foci of research interest are sensory/perceptual dominance in the lexicon, disrupted temporal contexts and the nature of reference to self, as discussed by O’Kearney and Perrot’s work (2006) based on nineteen empirical psychological studies with patients diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Patients’ meta-discursive comments or gestural enactments pointing to the ‘indescribability’ of certain sensations have (e.g., for anxiety disorders) become a relevant criterion for differential diagnosis (Gülich and Couper-Kuhlen 2007).

From a perspective of memory studies, Pickering and Keightley (2009: 1) distinguish between memories ‘which have become integrated into relatively easily told stories, and which then can involve rhetorical work, and those which have not become woven into a life-narrative and so are not available for such work’. From a conversation analytical perspective, Lucius-Hoene (2009) contrasts passages from two research interviews dealing with traumatic experiences. In the first case, the narrator uses a series of linguistic and narrative means of aestheticization in order to regain, through the act of narrativization, power of interpretation over what she has experienced. In the second case, Lucius-Hoene interprets the character of the fragmentary recollection, which lacks the listener-oriented arc of suspense, as an indication that the horror continues. Of particular interest is a long-term interdisciplinary project at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in which different aspects of coping with experience of trauma and loss were investigated not only from the perspective of social psychology and psychotherapy but also from the perspective of conversation analysis, narrative positioning and literary studies (Scheidt *et al.* 2015).

In an earlier study, Deppermann and Lucius-Hoene (2005) analyzed accounts of traumatic experiences in regard to narrative structure and dynamics, communicative strategies, and prosodic, vocal, and non-verbal phenomena. In their close and detailed analysis of several case studies, they come to the conclusion that it is not possible to speak of a specific language of trauma as there is a broad spectrum of possible trauma-related representational phenomena. They show that verbalizations of traumatic experience can be seen as located somewhere along a continuum between two poles. With regard to the representability of the traumatic events, the spectrum reaches from the impossibility of representing the events (including sudden disruptions of the narration) to detailed narratives with depictions of particular events that are spatially and temporally contextualized and include scenic-dramatic elements. With regard to the representation of personal involvement and agency in the traumatic event, the spectrum ranges from narratives that abstract from the narrative self as an experiencing instance to representations formulated from the perspective of the narrated self. As the authors show, in a single narrative

different sequences can have different characteristics. For example, in a narrative that is coherent and structured in itself and aims to produce biographical relevance, sequences can be structured in such a way that they appear like a re-enactment of panic and disorientation, and of the incoherent and overwhelming nature of the traumatic experience (Deppermann and Lucius-Hoene 2005).

A common feature of the cited studies is that they are interested in how traumatic events can be verbalized, in 'how to put into words what happened'. Other elements—prosodic, poetic, vocal, and non-verbal phenomena—are first of all considered in a supplementary function as supporting the act of transforming the traumatizing events lived through into a discursive, sequentially ordered, more or less consistent account. What I want to show in this article is that there are ways of translating a traumatic experience into expressive, communicative forms of symbolization without having to tell 'what happened'. According to Brockmeier (2014), complex experiences have a specific *qualia*, that is, a quality of 'how it feels' and in trauma narratives, the feelings associated with living through an experience (helplessness, speechlessness, etc.) are often made more explicit than the event itself. Therapeutic approaches that build on creativity such as visual arts, music, dance, creative writing, or psycho-drama claim that there are forms of symbolization prior to or beyond a discursive mode of reporting that deserve attention. Powerful images and metaphors can take the place of what is not easily available for remembering and telling. They can be seen as a condensed expression of a stressful bodily emotional experience and are likely to evoke visual-sensory resonances in the reader that give an idea of the overwhelming vehemence of traumatic memory. It is precisely this kind of responsiveness that underlines the intersubjective, dialogically co-constructed dimension of affect as a social practice (Wetherell 2012). The process of condensation, a characteristic feature of literary, especially poetic language, seems to have particular relevance when it comes to depicting or coping with traumatic experience (Baer 2000 analyzing poems by Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan).

A number of projects, many of which were carried out in South Africa (Clacherty and Welvering 2006; Stein 2008), suggest that persons, in particular children who were exposed to violence, often, including spontaneously (i.e., outside of therapeutic settings), draw on presentational, multimodal, or multi-semiotic forms of symbolization as resources available to them for expressing their experiences. Stein, who has led several creative story-telling projects with children in informal settlements in the Johannesburg area, underlines in her analysis of the data the importance of pictorial means when it comes to 'drawing the unsayable' (Stein 2008: 75), especially in situations where discourse is heavily policed. An often recurring pattern used by children was that of a cannibal or cannibal-like figure, which, according to Stein, is associated in traditional South African stories with the evil present in the real world and that in the children's stories points to an environment of sexualized violence to which many of them are exposed. In his famous book *The*

Uses of Enchantment, Bettelheim (1975) draws attention to the importance of fairy tales, which provide children with characters on to which they can project in a manageable way what is going on inside them. Analyzing the children's stories, Stein (2008) notices a frequent split between the written text and the drawings, between the sayable and what she terms the unsayable: in the images, children find a certain freedom from convention, taboo, and imposed silence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PRESENTATIONAL PROJECTION AND SCENIC UNDERSTANDING

What multimodal means of expression (beyond the denotational) are available to entextualize and convey a bodily emotional experience associated with an event that, in the current situation, cannot easily be narrated? Or put differently: what makes it possible for the reader to comprehend a text as one in which traumatic experience is shared? In order to pursue this question, we need a theoretical–methodological framework that allows us to explore possibilities of symbolization at the limit of the unsayable. The term unsayable does not suggest that it is impossible to put an experience into words but that it is difficult, and that for topics such as pain, trauma, or strong emotions, it is necessary to develop strategies and techniques that enlarge the realm of the sayable. In linguistics, the limits of the sayable have so far not received sufficient attention, possibly, as Milani (2014: 13) provocatively suggests, because research at the margins questions ‘the very centre on which a whole discipline is built’.

Speaking about the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein (1919/1997), in a letter to Bertrand Russell, writes: ‘The main point is the theory of what can be expressed [*gesagt*] by propositions – i.e. by language – (and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown [*gezeigt*]; which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.’ Referring to a poem by Uhland, Wittgenstein (1917/1967) exemplifies in an earlier letter that ‘the unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered’ (emphasis in the original). Could this paradox also apply for putting into words experiences at the limit of the bearable? And how can a text into whose body an injury is inscribed be read? Analogous to the distinction between *saying* and *showing* Wittgenstein (1953/2009: 152 [§ 531]) differentiates two meanings of *understanding*: one, in which a sentence can be replaced by another saying the same, and one in which it cannot be replaced by another one (much like a musical theme cannot be replaced by another). In the latter case, meaning can only be expressed by ‘the very words in the very order’. If we follow Wittgenstein we can conclude for our purpose that verbal and other ‘techniques’ (such as poetic language, visualizations) can be used to expand the sayable in order to convey what is difficult to verbalize.

Langer (1948), whose work has had a lasting influence in particular on visual theory, has undertaken to further explore the qualities and potentialities of what Wittgenstein calls *showing* and what she conceptualizes as

presentational symbolism. She distinguishes this presentational mode of meaning making from the discursive ‘which requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other, as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on the clothes-line’ (Langer 1948: 65–66). In contrast, the presentational projection presents the components simultaneously: the meanings of particular elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. This kind of non-discursive, condensing symbolization, such as may also be characteristic of dreams or poetry, is in Langer’s understanding especially suitable for the expressions of what tends to defy linguistic projection, such as ‘the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions, memories and echoes of memories, transient fantasy, or its mere runic traces, all turned into nameless, emotional stuff’ (Langer 1948: 82–83). As Langer (1948: 155) explains, referring to the psychoanalytical notion of *condensation*, it is characteristic of the presentational projection that ‘many concepts may be telescoped into one total expression without being severally presented by its constituent parts’. According to Freud (1900) condensation [*Verdichtung*], as much as displacement [*Verschiebung*], is one of the principal modes with which unconscious processes are translated, for example, in dreamwork, into manifest presentations. Characteristic of condensation is that different ideas, memories, and thoughts associated with intense feelings merge into a single idea or a complex of ideas.

The question of how such condensed presentations can be read is raised by Lorenzer (2002)¹ who, following Langer, explores the dual character of language as logical-discursive and poetic-presentative. From a psychoanalytical perspective, he is primarily interested in the (receptive) understanding of presentational forms of symbolization, in what he calls scenic understanding [*szenisches Verstehen*], as distinguished from logical understanding and reliving forms of understanding. However, he shows that this technique can equally be applied to the understanding of any kind of text (Lorenzer 2006). By ‘scene’ Lorenzer understands a specific bodily and emotionally lived experience of interaction that is, because of its intensity, inscribed into the body as an interactional pattern and is repeatedly re-enacted. Such scenes manifest themselves through fantasies, poetic images, oneiric pictures or recurring stories. Poetic-presentational forms of symbolization allow the articulation of experiences that, because socially non-authorized, are not immediately available to discursive language but, as Lorenzer (2002: 76) claims, ‘in its scenic form, speech is able to create images, pictorial gestalten’. Lorenzer (2006) pleads for an interactional engagement with the text, approaching it, as suggested by Freud for psychoanalysis, with evenly suspended attention [*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*], a not-directed form of listening removed from theoretical presuppositions or therapeutical goals. Specific attention is paid to the emotional power of the text and (by counter-transference) one’s own reactions to it. Lorenzer emphasizes the moment of confusion or surprise, of being moved

by irritation, that signals that one is faced with a 'scene' expressed in the presentational mode. In the process of understanding, the scene is reconstructed by the listener/reader by building on his or her own lived practical [*lebenspraktische*] experiences (Lorenzer 2005) until a sequence of scenes unfolds into a plausible scenario. Lorenzer nevertheless underlines the importance of matching the first tentative impressions with other information (such as biographical background, context of text production, results of scientific inquiry).

In this context, the reflections of the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Pontalis (1977) on dream work are relevant. According to him, what cannot be said can find expression in other, image-like forms of representation, in a sort of *mise-en-scène* as it occurs, for example, in dreams. Already the process of dreaming (or projecting an image), and not only telling the dream, is a first step to keep something at a distance that threatens the subject. 'Every dream image is projected on a screen, supposes a space where the representation can be realized' (Pontalis 1977: 27, translation by the author). The prerequisite for the projection is therefore that such a space, screen or stage is established. Because such projections rely on means of condensation and displacement, they elude an unambiguous interpretation. Any interpretation is already a reduction of meaning as compared to the polyvalence of the image.

For the analysis of the text discussed in this article, the following points can therefore be applied as methodological orientations:

- 1 Readers' (sometimes ambivalent) affective reactions to the text can, in the sense of dialogic response or countertransference, be indicative of a bodily emotional experience articulated in the text. Retracing step-by-step potential ways in which readers 'look' at the text and relate to what they see (Breckner 2007) helps to make the perceptual process comprehensible and to include it into the analysis of the text. Referring to trauma narratives Hyvärinen *et al.* (2010b: 2) stipulate that '[i]n order to be able to listen to these stories it is important that researchers, as well as other listeners, suspend their preconceived narrative norms and rather treat these stories as invitation to listening in new and creative ways'.
- 2 Paying close attention to formal means of textual organization (narrative patterns, poetic language, visual arrangements) and the perceptual process of structuring and interpreting makes it possible to attribute to each verbal or pictorial element its relevance in relation to the whole.
- 3 Scenic understanding then means to understand the ensemble of these elements as a *Gestalt* (whereby the term *Gestalt* borrowed from psychology suggests that the whole has qualities that are more than the total of its parts), as a significant experience condensed into a single polysemic cipher.

THE FORBIDDEN BIRD

The text I am discussing in this article was produced in the framework of a creative writing activity in a public primary school in Vienna, located in a

neighborhood with a high proportion of recent migrants to Austria, among them many who are refugees from war zones. The free creative writing activity introduced to the children by Christian Schreger, one of the teachers, has proven to be a fruitful approach as it allows school children from diverse linguistic and social backgrounds to express their concerns and develop their own voice (Busch 2014; Schreger and Pernes 2014). A prerequisite for such a project is that it creates a space that is experienced as safe and provides a protected public sphere that allows for sharing one's own experiences with others without being urged to do so. Such spaces that allow for tentative positionings can be considered as *transitional spaces*—a term that refers to the concept developed by Winnicott (1971/1991) who proposes that it is in such intermediate spaces that children learn to negotiate between the inner and the outer world through play.

The text I will discuss is part of the *Little Books Library*, a collection of booklets written and illustrated by the school children. Every book consists of ten pages, five for written text and five for pictures, plus a cardboard cover, is printed in a few copies and has the visual and haptic qualities of a 'real' book. The booklets are easy to produce, the equipment is available at any moment in a special corner of the classroom, as is the *Little Books Library* containing all the books produced since 2005. The children are free to choose if and when they want to create a booklet, they are also free to choose topics and means of composition and design. The teacher, Christian, does not intervene in a prescriptive way but considers his role as that of a first reader and offers a helping hand if requested.

A survey of the corpus consisting now of more than a thousand little books in several different languages reveals that the authors address everyday life concerns or special events as well as, often through fictional and fantasy stories, all kinds of desires or fears. Whether in a non-fictional or a fictional genre, a certain number of books also deal with experiences of migration, displacement, loss, war, or other forms of violence (Busch 2017). It is important to emphasize in the context of this article that these texts are not elicited but are produced when the authors take the initiative. Our department at the University of Vienna has been a partner to the little books project for many years. In this context, regular meetings with the teacher take place in which we occasionally also discuss particular books that attract our attention.

One of these books that we found particularly striking was authored by Amina,² at the time an eight-year-old girl whose family had fled from the war in their home country. The booklet carries the title 'Der verbotene Vogel' (The Forbidden Bird): the front page shows a drawing of a green-eyed bird wearing a bandolier that holds a quiver with arrows, which gives the bird a martial appearance. The main text recounts that the forbidden bird killed all the other birds flying in the sky, one after the other.

The emotive–appellative character of the book—its compelling intensity, meticulous drawings, laconic language, and dramatic plot—immediately catches the reader's attention, and when one engages with the text, it gives

simultaneously rise to contradicting feelings of fascination, irritation, and resistance. The teacher recalls that this is why he encouraged the author to explain more about the story, but she answered that there was nothing more to say. It is through our own emotional response to the book that we first understood that in this text, the author is dealing with highly loaded emotional and significant matter, most probably related to traumatic experience. This first assumption was reinforced by the knowledge about the family's experience of war and of displacement under dramatic circumstances, which Amina never spoke of in school, but which was revealed to the teacher by her mother. Another indication were scenes of horror, fear, and helplessness that were recurrent topoi in other little books authored by Amina during her first year at school. The story of the forbidden bird, however, cannot be considered as an account of 'what has happened', but—in deploying a rich literary and artistic imagery—as an extremely condensed articulation of intense feelings linked to a traumatic experience. In the following, I will develop this perspective and analyze different creative means on the level of narrative patterns, linguistic choices, and pictorial elements that the author draws on to express an emotive state in ways that spontaneously draw the reader into the text.

Linguistic and narrative means

We will first take a closer look at the written text that, in the main body, consists of only 10 lines organized in five stanzas:

Title	Der verbotene Vogel	The Forbidden Bird
Motto	Der verbotene Vogel hatte Pfeile.	The forbidden bird had arrows.
1	Der verbotene Vogel ist da. Er hat einen Vogel getötet.	The forbidden bird is here. He killed a bird.
2	Der verbotene Vogel ist nicht weggegangen.	The forbidden bird did not go away.
3	Der verbotene Vogel hat noch einen Vogel getötet.	The forbidden bird killed one more bird.
4	Der verbotene Vogel hat 3 Vögel getötet.	The forbidden bird killed 3 birds.
5	Der verbotene Vogel hat alle Vögel getötet.	The forbidden bird killed all the birds.

Here the line breaks are reproduced as in the original handwritten text, the lines mark page breaks. As [Hymes \(1982: 122\)](#) observes with regard to the transcription of oral narratives, it makes a difference for readers not to display such texts in blocks of prose but in lines and verses. 'It slows down the eye. One reads for form as well as for information.' The stanza analysis approach as developed further for narratives told by children by [Gee \(1990/2008\)](#) reveals

particularities of the text structure and intratextual relations on the level of the formal as well as of the thematic organization of the text:

The line and stanza structure of a text (what we called above its discourse organization) works together with the other aspects of the discourse system (prosody, cohesion, contextualization signals, thematics) to generate the sense of the text, a sense with many (and not completely determinate) layers of meaning. (Gee 1990/2008: 142)

Amina's text shows a clear patterning. Every stanza begins with the line 'Der verbotene Vogel' (The forbidden bird) as the unique acting subject. Four out of the five stanzas (1, 3, 4, 5) end with the perfect participle 'getötet' (killed). The beginning and ending of each of these four stanzas—'Der verbotene Vogel/hat ... getötet' (The forbidden bird/killed ...) forms—according to the word order in German—a sentence bracket filled with increasing numbers of birds as objects of the clauses: 'a bird', 'one more bird', '3 birds', 'all birds'. The repetitive character of the stanza organization as well as the enumeration function as 'intensifiers' (Labov 1984), thus demonstrating the inescapability of the scene.

The second stanza (The forbidden bird/did not go away) interrupts this pattern of stepwise intensification and refers to the first clause of the first stanza: 'Der verbotene Vogel/ist da.' (The forbidden bird/is here.) This first clause introduces the acting subject in a thematic, almost dramatic, manner, without orientation as to place or time or as to the stance of the author vis-à-vis the narrative. The forbidden bird is 'here', there is no indication as to when, from where, and why he came. In contrast to the rest of the text told in the narrative perfect tense (unmarked in Austrian German), this first clause is written in present tense that, in connection with the second stanza (The forbidden bird/did not go away), suggests a sort of ongoing threatening presence. This effect is reinforced by the ending of the story (or the lack of an ending): in the last stanza, the forbidden bird is still here. No evaluation, no coda. In this sense, Amina's text does not follow classical narrative patterns but can rather be understood as the (re)presentation of a scene that tells in extremely condensed poetic form about still strong feelings of fear and powerlessness, of being at the mercy of an omnipresent threat.

On the level of lexicon, no affect markers (Ochs and Schieffelin 1989) in the strict sense are to be found but at least some words can be considered to bear an emotionalizing potential: 'verboten' (forbidden), 'Pfeil' (arrow—in the sense of weapon), and 'töten' (kill). Striking is the unusual syntagmatic pairing of 'verboten' (forbidden) and 'Vogel' (bird) to 'der verbotene Vogel' (the forbidden bird) that opens a range of possibilities of interpretation: is the bird outlawed? Is the deed forbidden? Is it forbidden to speak about it? This ambiguity that remains regarding the central actor of the story is certainly not accidental and the reiteration of the initial sound in 'der verbotene Vogel' [dɐr'fɛrbo:tənə'fo:gl'] constitutes a powerful poetic device. In his discussion of poetic language, Jakobson (1960: 26) gives the example of a similar use of

paronomasia as an intensifying device by a girl who used to talk about ‘the horrible Harry’.

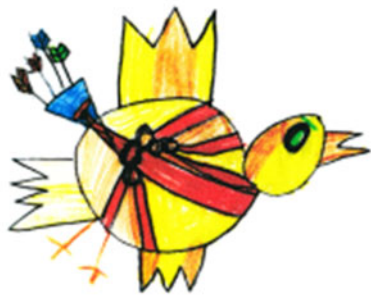
Amina’s text draws on the genre of animal tales and shows a stringent structuring that is often to be found in fairy tales. It is the emphasis on form that seems to be helpful in translating a personal experience that otherwise is difficult to be put into words. As Hymes (1982: 121) observes, narrative patterning may embody ‘an implicit logic of experience, a rhetoric of action’ and contribute to organizing it.

Pictorial means

We will now look at the visual narrative that, together with the written text, forms the story. For the visual analysis, I have chosen an approach that focusses on formal elements in the composition as well as on possible modes of reception (Arnheim 1984; Breckner 2007; Lefèvre 2016). The focus is less on the picture as an artifact than on ways in which viewers are looking at it, as we are interested as to why this booklet provokes particular attention. As Lefèvre (2016: 69) states, the viewer thus must deal with the dual nature of figurative pictures, ‘since he or she will both recognize a somewhat analogous representation of something and experience a particular sensation related to the formal properties of the picture’. In the case of *The Forbidden Bird*, it is fairly straight forward to describe the story on the level of the analogous representation, but more difficult to grasp in which ways sensations are expressed and transferred to the reader. Drawing on Langer’s (1948) concept of presentational forms of symbolization, Breckner (2007) suggests a phenomenologically inspired method, the segment analysis, that aims at retracing step by step potential ways in which viewers ‘look’ at the picture and relate to what they see—thus making transparent the perceptual process of structuring and interpreting in which each element acquires its relevance by taking its place in the whole, a process that usually remains below the level of consciousness.

Besides the picture on the cover page, the visual narrative consists of five pictures (Figure 1) that correspond to the five stanzas of the written text. The forbidden bird appears in a close up on the front page wearing a bright red bandolier that carries a quiver with four arrows in different colors. The bandolier and the quiver as well as a slight orange tint in the yellow plumage are what distinguish the forbidden bird from the other birds in the following pictures. The martial equipment is emphasized by its proportional oversize, the amount of details (feathers), and the loud coloring (red, green, blue) of the arrows.

In parallel to the written text, the action unfolds in pictures 1, 3, 4, and 5: in each of these pictures a bird is hit by an arrow and bleeds, and there is one arrow less left in the quiver. The killed birds lie on the ground, lose their color, and change into skeletons. The last picture shows the killed birds all lying on the ground, the quiver is empty and the forbidden bird imperturbably keeps on flying straight forward.



Cover page



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5

Figure 1: The drawings encompass the 'forbidden bird' on the cover page and a sequence of five pictures

As in stanza 2 of the written text ('The forbidden bird/did not go away'), so in picture 2 the action of killing is brought to a momentary standstill, signaling a key moment in the narrative. The salience of picture 2 becomes apparent when set in relation to picture 1. The two pictures are placed side by side as [Figure 2](#) (=picture 1) and [Figure 3](#) (=picture 2) and the elements discussed in the following are graphically highlighted. [Figure 2](#) represents a scene located in the world (framed by meadow, sky, and tree). The viewer's eye is first attracted by the triangle in the center of the page formed by the forbidden bird on the left as main actor, the wounded bird on the right as victim, and the fluttering up bird in the upper corner of the triangle. The gaze of both the forbidden bird and the bird soaring upward is directed toward the falling bird, thus also orienting the beholder's attention to the victim. On the margins, a fourth bird is visible flying skywards.

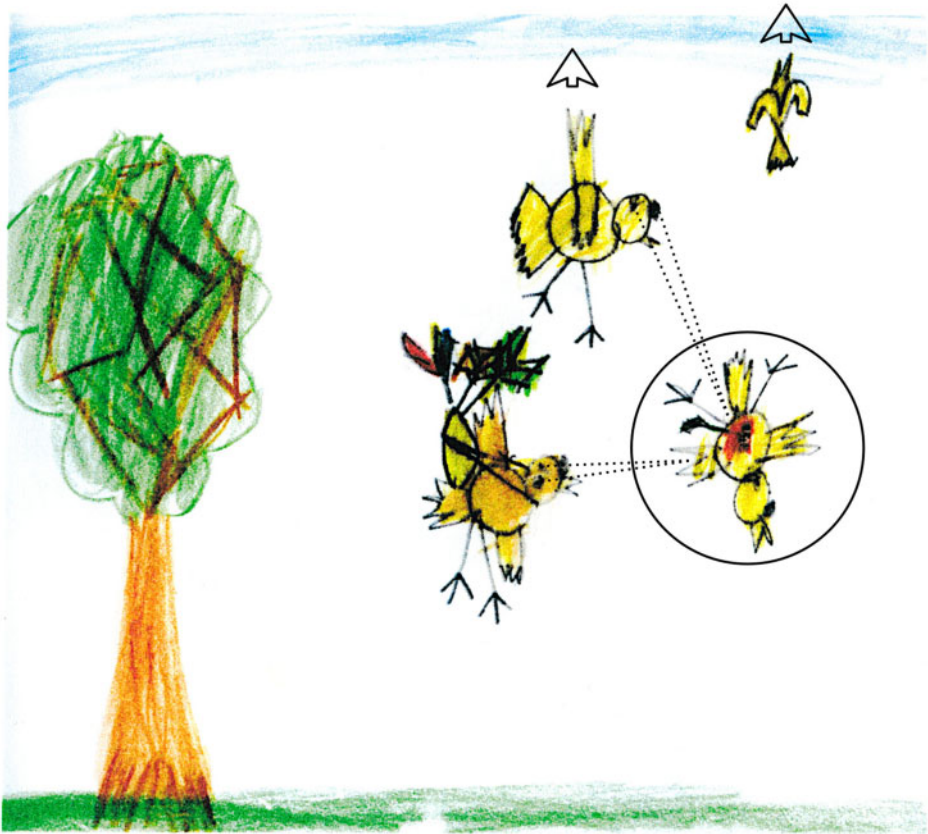


Figure 2: While one bird is killed by the 'forbidden bird', two others try to escape

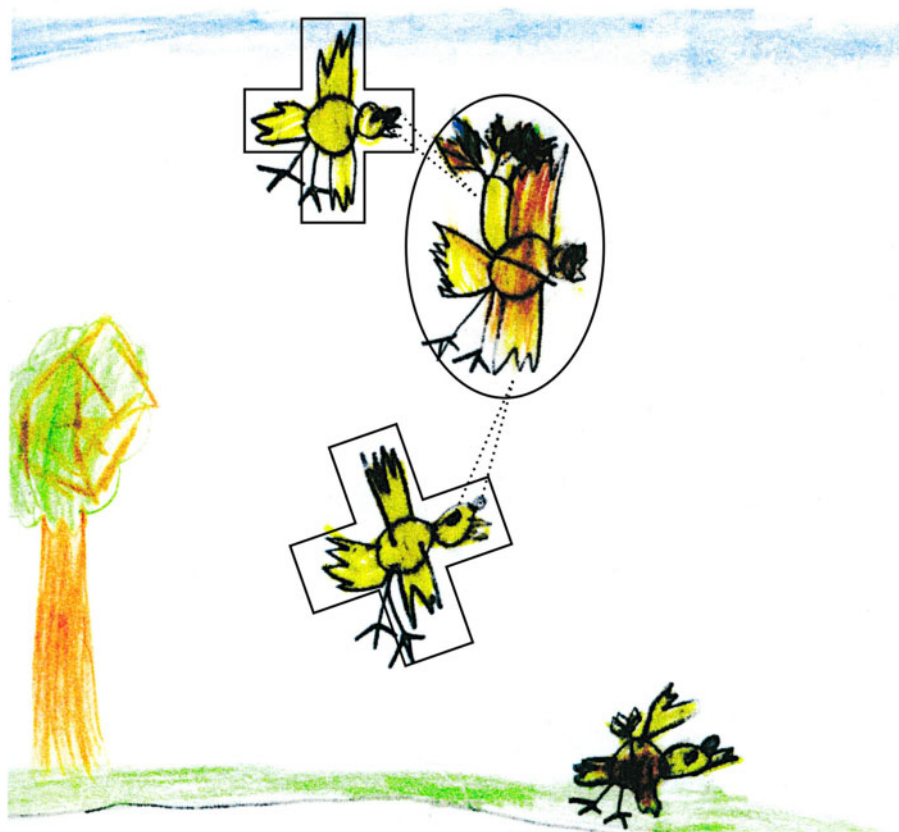


Figure 3: In the following sequence, the birds are depicted in a rigid position in the form of a cross, apparently unable to react

In Figure 3, the forbidden bird is the first element that attracts the viewer's eye due to its relative size and its leading position. As well, the gaze of the two birds flying behind is directed toward the forbidden bird with his arrows and not toward the wounded bird lying on the ground. From this picture onwards the forbidden bird keeps his dominant, centerstage position flying unstoppably forward (not in the position of a hunter searching for his prey). In contrast to the previous picture, where the remaining birds tried to escape, they are now depicted in a rigid position in the form of a cross, apparently unable to react.

Levine and Frederick (1997) consider traumatization as the experience of a situation in which neither fight nor flight is possible, a state in which the body is as it were frozen in an unaccomplished reaction to extreme stress. In art therapy, the depiction of bodies in a rigid or crucified position is understood as indicating such a frozen state.³ Following art therapy in resource-oriented

trauma therapy (Reddemann and Lücke 2016), other pictorial elements in Amina's drawings can be interpreted as having specific relevance. The tree, which in picture 1 has a framing and protecting function, loses its rootedness and shrinks in picture 2 and is absent in the following pictures. The green and the blue lines representing the ground and the sky, however, remain in place throughout the visual narrative, thus constituting a frame that—in a similar manner as the rigorous narrative structure of the written text—can function as containment for the threatening content presented in the pictures. Finally, picture 3 shows a particular pictorial element that is absent in all the others: a sorrowful sun witnessing the scene from a distance and showing empathy.

DISCUSSION

In the text discussed here, both modes, the written and the visual, equally contribute to meaning making. In both, formal aspects such as the rhythmic structuring and the poetic and artistic elaboration have an obvious importance, investing the text with intensity and urgency. The evocative and appellative power of the text might be a key to exploring its meaning potential more fully. The strong feelings provoked by the text can be understood in line with Bakhtin (1986: 75) as a particular form of 'active responsive understanding' or, in the terminology of psychoanalysis, as 'counter-transference'. As developed above, Lorenzer (2006) claims that acknowledging and understanding such processes of identification that manifest themselves through the transference of feelings are the starting point for what he calls scenic understanding: an understanding that is less about a particular factual incident than a repeatedly reenacted interactional constellation. Van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995: 179) remind us that affects are communicative and contagious, so that other people are involved in the affective repetition, and unassimilated traumatic memories are activated in transference.

With its sequences of what happened and what happened next, Amina's text indeed is a temporally ordered narrative but it lacks elements that Labov has found in personal narratives told by children and that he considers to be salient for the transformation of experience in what he calls a 'fully formed' (Labov 1972: 363) narrative. Even when one rejects the idea that narratives should comply to certain structural patterns (Hyvärinen *et al.* 2010a), it seems useful to tentatively look at what, from Labov's point of view, is 'missing': there is no orientation that serves to establish the temporal and spatial context. The forbidden bird is 'here', no indication where he came from, when the story happened, etc. What happens can happen everywhere and at every moment.

Also, and this is particularly striking, there is practically no evaluation that indicates the 'raison d'être' (Labov 1972: 366) of the narrative, why it was told and how the narrator positions herself. The only appraisal that can be found throughout the text is the compassionate, sorrowful facial expression of the sun in one picture only. And, although there is an ending ('The forbidden

bird killed all the birds'), there is no resolution that brings relief from the suspension (e.g., no indication about the forbidden bird flying away). The story cannot offer resolution because it is not over yet. Although the text borrows from the genre of fairy tales, which according to Bettelheim (1975) address fears and desires that can overwhelm the child, it lacks two elements identified by Bettelheim as central for the fairy tale: the beginning that moves the action away from the here and now and the end that comfortably brings the reader back to reality.

The absence of an introduction and a resolving ending are indications that the text is about an event that penetrates the here and now. Referring to Langer's (1991) work with Holocaust survivors, van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995: 177) write that trauma 'stops the chronological clock and fixes the moment permanently in memory and imagination, immune to the vicissitude of time'. The survivor reports not a *sequence* but a *simultaneity*; the traumatic experience/memory is, in a sense, timeless. 'It is not transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end (which is characteristic of narrative memory). If it can be told at all, it is still a (re)experience.' Writing about trauma testimonies Andrews (2010: 163) argues that such texts are often characterized by what is not there: 'There are no lessons. All of this suffering did not resolve itself in a better world.'

In Amina's text, it is precisely the absence of orientation, evaluation, and resolution that leaves the reader in a state of irritation and confusion. It refuses to meet narrative expectations (irritating) and then provokes a poetic response (engaging, fascinating, mesmerizing as a terrible scene can be mesmerizing to watch). Rather than being a story in the proper sense, it is the presentation of a single scene in five sequences, not an account of what happened but the expression of an emotional state of overwhelming feelings of absolute defenselessness and helplessness, of being exposed to unescapable, life threatening violence, a situation where neither fight nor flight is possible. It is precisely this 'feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis', that is fundamental to making an experience traumatic, as van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995: 175) explain. According to Brockmeier (2014), complex experiences have a specific *qualia*, that is, a quality of 'how it feels', and in trauma narratives, the feelings associated with living through an experience (of helplessness, speechlessness, etc.) are often made more explicit than the event itself. In this sense, the text under discussion is less about an (accomplished) experience as an object than about experiencing as a process. That it makes sense to distinguish between experiencing and experience is a thought that Husserl (1913/1982) suggests in his phenomenological approach by differentiating the pre-reflexive experience from reflexive knowledge of such an experience.

The text discussed in this article conveys to the reader ambiguous feelings of both paralyzing horror and attracting fascination. The main character, the forbidden bird, not only arouses fear and horror but also, as invested with power, agency, and beauty, exerts fascination or even attracts a kind of admiration.

Such ambiguities with regard to perpetrators are widely discussed in the literature on man-made trauma in childhood. Already [Ferenczi \(1933/1967\)](#) had pointed out that overwhelming fear can oblige the child to subordinate itself to or even to identify with the perpetrator. He speaks in this context of an introjection of the aggressor, meaning that an external reality becomes an intrapsychic phenomenon that he compares with a dream-like state.

The Forbidden Bird, neither contextualized in time and space, nor in line with the narrative mode with a clear beginning and an end, can be understood as the condensation of an experience that was lived as traumatizing into a scene, an image-like *gestalt*. As a *gestalt* must primarily be understood as a whole that is more than the sum of its elements, it resists a one-to-one translation of its particular elements. In a similar way, the figure of the forbidden bird does not only stand for the persona of a perpetrator but rather forms a poetic cipher in which fears and desires crystallize, condensing what, at a given moment, defies discursive verbalization. Such projection supposes, as developed by [Pontalis \(1977\)](#) a screen onto which the projection is possible. The importance of such a mediating screen is already reflected in folk tales like that from the Brothers Grimm collection of the Goose Girl, who, in order not to break her promise of silence, speaks to the iron stove. Paul [Celan \(1958/2000\)](#), whose poetry is imbued with the trauma of the Holocaust, understands the post-Holocaust poem in its essence as dialogic, as a message in a bottle. 'The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it' ([Celan 1960/2003](#): 49). The poem functions, so to speak, as a screen for the condensed image in which the spatiotemporally situated traumatic event to which it refers remains inscribed. 'But the poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. True, it speaks only on its own, its very own behalf' ([Celan 1960/2003](#): 48).

Making injury and pain a topic can be a first step toward coping with the trauma. In the four years in which Amina attended the primary school, she authored or co-authored more than 30 little books. Whereas at first extremely disturbing and irritating images prevailed, later texts increasingly explore ways of overcoming despair and fear and sketch out desires for a good life in the future. This can be understood as an indication that the space that is opened up by creative writing projects such as the *Little Books Library* not only makes room for articulating stressful experience but also for identifying possible resources—provided that it is experienced as a safe space and a resonance chamber in which what is articulated meets an attentive and respectful ear that listens but does not pry.

CONCLUSIONS

The starting point for my contribution was the difficulty of putting traumatic experiences into words. The reasons why something is unsayable or even unthinkable in a particular moment can be manifold: in order to avoid flashbacks and re-traumatization, or because socially inadmissible, banned by

interdiction or taboo, or because it is not yet available to a narrative form of memory. A key question that arises in this context is how to escape the either-or of remaining silent or speaking. Engaging with poetic language, artistic creation, and dream, philosophy of language provides devices that help explore the liminal zone of the sayable/unsayable: showing as distinguished from saying (Wittgenstein 1919/1997); presentational projections as distinguished from discursive projections (Langer 1948); scenic understanding as distinguished from logical understanding (Lorenzer 2002). What is conveyed in such a way is less the traumatic event itself (or a chain of events that led to traumatization) than an emotionally loaded scene that has inscribed itself into the body. Going back to Bruner's (1986) distinction between the *paradigmatic* and the *narrative* mode of thinking or meaning-making one can argue that the text analyzed in this article corresponds to neither of these binaries. It is conceived in another, a third way that one could call, borrowing from Langer's terminology, the *presentational* mode of meaning making. It seems that this presentational mode lends itself particularly to articulating extremely stressful experiences of trauma, loss, and pain. Such presentation is not addressed directly at a counterpart, but indirectly, it presupposes a screen (Pontalis) on to which a projection is possible. With regard to the discussed text, the screen is provided by the possibility of free creative writing and designing in a space that ensures at the same time protection and attentive reception.

NOTES

- 1 Only very few of Lorenzer's texts that in the German-speaking area remain influential in social and life sciences were translated into English. The translation of specific terminology—as far as not already introduced in a paper by Salling Olesen and Weber (2012)—as well as of quotes into English are by the author.
- 2 The name is changed.
- 3 I would like to thank Isabelle Rentsch, art therapist in Zurich, for her valuable comments.

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