

Childhood Lost and Recovered¹

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The author is trying to grasp the significance of two antagonistic concepts in order to understand life, as trauma *and* resilience-bouncing back (“orpha” in the Ferenczi-Severn sense in Ferenczi’s Clinical Diary); with references to recent research in- and out-side psychoanalysis.

Key words: trauma, orphans, reparation, creativity.

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“At first I felt hurt, but as I grew older I came to realize that I could not expect people to understand; or to comprehend the incomprehensible; to believe the unbelievable.” The speaker is Moniek Goldberg, a child survivor of the Holocaust interviewed by Churchill’s biographer, Sir Martin Gilbert, in his remarkable book *The Boys* (1). Gilbert’s reflections are based on a hundred or so stories. The book is about those survivors who lost their parents in appalling circumstances – 732 men who lived through some of the most barbarous atrocities accompanying racial persecution of the Second World War. They were then teenagers; indeed, some of them were only 12 years old. For five years they existed in the shadow of death, witnessing the massacre of members of their families and suffering incredible physical and mental torment². How did they manage to survive? What lay behind the amazing resilience of these individuals, who were, after all, only children?

Roman Halter was 14 years old. For almost a year he was unable to talk to a soul. He had lost his parents and there was no one he could venture to trust.

Arthur Poznanski was also 14, with no parents, no home, no money, and a little brother for whom he felt responsible. Both survived. Was it just luck? On arrival in the United Kingdom, they were given milk by welfare workers. In their experience, milk was reserved for the sick, and even then only in

exceptional circumstances. Arthur was therefore suspicious and told his younger brother to refuse it, in case they were seen as sick and sent back. How could they possibly understand the world in which they found themselves?

In Martin Gilbert’s book, the children speak – and their words form part of the process of healing, of acquiring the capacity to overcome, of survival, of gathering together a patchwork of fragmentary memories into a coherent, moving and terrible narrative. This process of dressing wounds – in so far as it is feasible – has lasted for years. It is a story of childhoods lost and, in the most extreme cases, not only lost but also stolen, and indeed willingly destroyed. Those boys suffered destruction, deprivation of everything that might have been regarded as childhood – but here, perhaps, they can be also seen in the process of recovering their childhoods.

The Many Sources of the Capacity to Bounce Back

Stephen Hawking is one of today’s greatest physicists, often compared to Einstein. As with late Einstein, his research aims to unify the two main systems for comprehending the universe, relativity theory and quantum physics. He has struggled in particular to gain a better understanding of so-called black holes. At the age of 21, he was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and given three years to live – but that was more than 30 years ago. His life has also become legendary among physicists – especially at the

¹ Key-note address of the Conference “Lost Childhood” organized by the Sándor Ferenczi Society, 23–25 February 2001, Budapest.

² There were some girls too, although girls were selected less frequently for work in the camps and therefore tended to be condemned to death much sooner.

European Nuclear Research Center (CERN) in Geneva.

He was born on 8 January 1942, 300 years to the day after the death of Galileo. Hawking himself does not see this as significant; after all, he says, 200000 other children were born on the same day. He was in London during the war years. When he was two years old, everyone in his house was killed; but the Hawking family happened to be away at the time and therefore survived. His father wanted to send him to one of England's top public schools³, but he missed the entrance examination owing to illness. So he found himself at the less prestigious St Albans⁴ School, where he was a brilliant student. His only problem was that he was effectively fatherless: his father, a specialist in tropical diseases, sometimes spent years away from his family (so that his children can be considered as "orphaned" through his absence). He was such a remote figure that, according to White & Gribbin (2), Stephen's little sister used to think that all fathers were like migratory birds, who would occasionally appear and spend just a few months with their families during certain seasons.

While reading astrophysics at Oxford University, Stephen suffered from depression; only his rowing seems to have provided him with a modicum of pleasure. He also took to drink, and as a result was packed off to Cambridge. There things went from bad to worse: he became even more depressed and fell ill. His father thought he might have transmitted a tropical disease to his – as I told it – virtually orphaned son, but he was wrong; as stated, it was amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. This fresh trauma triggered a new wave of depression, and he now shut himself away in a darkened room and listened to Wagner. This self-abandonment is reminiscent of what George Engel termed "giving-up/given-up" syndrome.

On New Year's Eve, he met a young woman who was later to become his wife. This was the point at which he bounced back. It may sound like a cheap novel, but it actually happened. He embarked on the study of relativity and theoretical physics, including cosmology, which was split at the time between the steady-state and big-bang theories. Incredibly, at a scientific meeting, the

young Hawking got up and demolished the ideas of Fred Hoyle, then considered to be one of the greatest physicists in the most rarefied of British academic circles. After this sensation, Hawking began to make a name for himself. As stated, he worked on "black holes" and was elected member of the Royal Society while still in his thirties. Owing to his progressively aggravated paralysis, this was the last time he would ever be able to sign his name in a book – the Charter Book of that noble Royal Society. His scientific ambition was to produce a "unitary" system combining the two then prevailing theories, as mentioned earlier.

What was the source of his capacity to bounce back? Was it his intelligence and quick-wittedness, which perhaps added to his "narcissistic endowment"? His intensity and curiosity, as exceptional voyeuristic satisfactions? Or did he simply feel sure of himself, partly owing to the support of his young wife, and formerly of his sister? What did this significant meeting mobilize in him? He had made up for his father's absence by inner stories that he told himself. However, he too travelled a great deal, on impulse, and perhaps his theory could also be seen as a journey – into the universe in this instance. Gradually, partly because of his neurological condition, his thoughts became his only avenue of sublimation. Did his depression, when he fell ill, lead him to a state of "acceptance" (as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross might say) and so to a new equilibrium? By his own account, he "drugged" himself with science. Having, (as told in Kleinian parlance) lost his "good objects", he may, in mourning for them, have tried to re-create a "good object", namely the universe – an understood universe. The "black holes" in this universe were, so to speak, intellectual challenges, enigmas to which he held fast and which he felt he had to resolve at all costs in order to conquer the "bad", the "disturbing".

A Californian university sent him a 3000-word special-purpose computer, a gift that enabled him to communicate, in particular with his wife Jane, now that he became confined to bed and deprived of movement.

Illustrious Orphans

One day, my friend Pierre Rentchnick and myself noticed that orphans were overrepresented in the population of creative people. Joining up with a

³ [Nota bene: A "public school" in the UK is a fee-paying private school.]

⁴ Almost a suburb of London (30 km away)

Table 1.

Separated from 2 parents between 0 and 7 yrs.	Death or Separation from 1 parent between 0 and 7 yrs	
	Father	Mother
Balzac (brought up by nurse)	Hugo (sep. from F. up to 9–10)	Constant (at 3 wks, death of M.)
Nerval (M. deceased when he was 2, F. in military & absent)	Renan (at 5, loss of F.)	Stendhal (at 7, death of M.)
	Rimbaud (at 6, separated from F)	
	Sainte-Beuve (death of F. before his birth)	
	Sand (at 4, death of F)	
	Zola (at 6, death of F)	
	Baudelaire (at 6, death of F)	
	Dumas senior (at 3, death of F)	
	Dumas junior (separated from F. until 7)	

After J. M. Porret (1977): *Orphelinage et Créativité* (Orphanhood and Creativity). Geneva, dissertation, p. 3.

historian, Pierre de Senarclens, we therefore embarked on our first study of this subject, the results of which were presented in a book whose title translates as "Do orphans run the world? A psychohistorical problem" (3). Our starting point was a list of great nineteenth-century authors featuring in a textbook of French literature in common use at the time in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Table 1). This table, drawn up in 1977 by J. M. Porret (4), a doctoral student of mine, shows that 17 of the 35 writers concerned had lost one or both parents (through death or separation).

We then discovered Marc Kanzer who in 1953 (5) had already published a list of writers orphaned during childhood; it included Baudelaire, the Brontë sisters, Byron, Coleridge, Dante, Dostoyevsky, Drinkwater, Dumas, Gibbon, Keats, Poe, Rousseau, George Sand, Swift, Tolstoy, Voltaire, and Wordsworth. Martindale (6) later noted that 30% of a sample of famous English and French poets came from homes with absent fathers. Again, Goertzel, Goertzel & Goertzel (7) state that, of a number of eminent "modern" personalities, 18% had lost their fathers and 10% their mothers before age 21.

In the book we subsequently published in the United States with Marvin Eisenstadt (8), in which we examined 699 prominent individuals of different nationalities to whom the Encyclopaedia

Britannica devoted more than one column, we reported that a quarter had lost one parent before the age of 10, more than two thirds before age 15, and half before they were 21.

Comparing these proportions with information from population censuses and studies of juvenile delinquents in psychiatric treatment, Eisenstadt found that orphans were much more strongly represented among the eminent people than in the reference groups. The only group that came near were the juvenile delinquents, and, within this group, the subgroups of severely depressed or suicidal subjects, among whom the incidence of orphanhood was similar to that found in the group of eminent personalities.

Of course, these comparisons present difficult methodological problems. So far as we know, the only author who has attempted to tackle them is D. K. Simonton (9), in a book subtitled 'Historiometric inquiries'. The objection that life expectancy in the past was much shorter than it is today, so that orphanhood was more frequent, can be countered by adducing comparisons between creative people and the population at large in the same period. For instance, Lucille Iremonger (10) shows that, out of twenty-four British prime ministers from Wellington to Chamberlain, fifteen (62.5%) were orphans; this is manifestly a much higher proportion than the incidence of orphanhood in the population at large. Same for the Nobel

Death or Separation from 1 parent between 7 and 12 yrs	Death or Separation from 1 parent between 12 and 20 yrs	Parents present from 0 to 20 yrs
Father	Father	
Huysmans (at 8, death of F.) Maupassant (at 10, separated from F.)	Loti (at 20, death of F.) Vigny (at 19, death of F.)	Barthélémy Comte Daudet Flaubert France Gautier La Rochefoucault Lamartine Maeterlinck Maine de Biran Michelet Mistral Musset Rostand Mme de Staël Verlaine

Prize winners (11). Now when Suetonius points out that ten out of the twelve Caesars were orphans, comparison with the rate of orphanhood in the population at large is of course more hazardous. Nevertheless, these figures too appear much greater than the expected level in a general population at that time.

A particularly striking aspect of the table of creative individuals is the frequency of losses during adolescence. The same is true, as it happens, in the political field – for example, Lenin lost his father while in his teens; Napoleon became head of his family at 15 when his father died; Julius Caesar lost his father at about the same age; and so on.

All these studies cast new light on what we call adverse or traumatic events, which, far from always crushing an individual, may stimulate him or her. The psychopathological adverse effects of rejection and loss are familiar to us from the

pioneering and now classical studies of John Bowlby and René Spitz – namely, depression, with the risk of suicide, or delinquency. May be it were these two categories that inspired Ficino as long ago as in 1489 to distinguish between “black melancholy”, which destroys the personality, and “white melancholy”, which encourages creativity (12).⁵

From Vulnerability to Resilience

Let us confess that we are relatively ignorant of what causes the negative effects evidently seen in the majority of cases and the positive effects observed in others. Why should such stresses and strains either make for breakdown or stimulate the individual concerned to be creative? This question suggests that two factors are involved here: first, vulnerability, and second, its opposite, resilience⁶, and hence the individual’s elasticity, or capacity to bounce back, as well as the related notion of coping. Admittedly, what determines the robustness and vigour of a survivor’s personality is still relatively unknown, notwithstanding the plethora of published literature on the subject (15, p. 160). The meaning assigned by the individual victim to the traumatic event clearly plays an important part. Other determinants suggested are the resources represented by parent substitutes, the possession of special talents, and a stubborn capacity to experi-

⁵ A study by Sara McLanahan, a sociologist at Princeton University, indicates that children of divorced parents drop out of high school more often than those brought up in two-parent families. This fall in living standards is less evident, if at all, in families where the parent responsible for the child’s education has remarried, yet children of such reconstituted families apparently suffer just as much academic impairment as those raised in single-parent families; the economic factor thus seems not to be decisive. Interestingly, McLanahan also finds that the death of a parent harms children less, seems a lesser trauma than a parental divorce.

⁶ Originally a measure of impact resistance in physics. In a psychological sense, see (13, 14).

ence frustrations and traumas as challenges. Be that as it may, the lack of early support seems to be relevant to the genesis both of mood disorders (whether immediate or delayed) and, in other subjects, of a sometimes exceptional creative potential.

Similarly, the loss of a significant person during adulthood may occasion what Didier Anzieu (16) calls the “liftoff of creativity”. Two of the best known examples are Freud, after his father’s death, and Max Weber, the German economist. Weber’s biography shows that he wrote his greatest works, including *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05) after the death of his father in 1897 and after a period during which he was unable to work between 1898 and 1903. Anzieu (17, p. 28) points out, too, that Joyce, Pascal, and Proust became creative only after the deaths of their fathers. What other reason can there be than separation – the need to become autonomous, to make a break? The mourning work initiated by the significant death is surely the engine that impels the individual to “become independent” and stand on his own two feet. For some this constitutes a powerful stimulus; whereas in others it outstrips their capacity to “bounce back” – as, for example, Pollock has shown in a series of publications (18–20). In our day, the “midlife crisis” occurs when one’s children leave home and at the same time one loses one’s own parents. From this point of view, the time of orphanhood for the population at large is when creativity “lifts off”, resulting in a positive outcome to the midlife crisis.⁷

The notion that suffering hardships underlies creativity has featured prominently in our culture since Antiquity, as witness the sayings *per aspera ad astra*⁸ or *sub pondera crescit palma*⁹. This idea may also be connected with the – mainly Protestant – traditional Christian view that “exceptional gifts” must be “merited”. During the nineteenth century, the scientific literature sought to link the suffering of “madness” with creative genius – the assump-

tion, however, being that it is mainly suffering overcome that underlies creativity.

Our study indicates that, in creativity defined as an interactional concept – i.e. the individual’s capacity to make an impact on those around him or her through scientific, artistic or political creations – a lack, as experienced in a population of orphans, plays an important part.

All our ideas here are bounded by the triangle of loss, the concomitant or accompanying affect, and the various outcomes – that is, the eventual results of this constellation, including in particular the different forms of creativity.

Life, after all, is punctuated by losses. An infant loses its mother and certain aspects of being cared for as it progressively acquires independence; and every day we lose the present moment, its joys and pains, but regain them in the form of memories. Each of us is indeed, as Freud noted (22, p. 29), “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes”. If we did not have abandoned objects, what might we be? Loss, the gain supplied by the loss of the present moment, whether happy or unhappy, is actually what we are – the constitutive elements of our personality and of our person.

In Freud’s language, the word ‘*traurig*’ (sad) is etymologically related to ‘*Trauer*’ (mourning). In German, in Yiddish, and in Freud’s Austrian dialect of German, ‘*traurig*’ – ‘*tra uerig*’ in Old German – ultimately signifies a person in mourning. A depressive is a ‘*trau rig*’ subject, the sad subject who believes that he or she can never emerge from depression and is ‘*hilflo s*’ (helpless). Loss, as eternal flux and change, is accompanied by the gain inherent in change, and by the concomitant affect; the outcome then is “introjection”¹⁰ – that is, the process of keeping the moment, or, in everyday language, a memory.

In the Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, gave birth to the nine Muses, daughters of Zeus, who in turn embody the Arts: Calliope, eloquence; Clio, history; Erato, elegiac poetry; Euterpe, music; Melpomene, tragedy; Thalia, comedy; Terpsichore, dancing; Polymnia, lyric poetry; and Urania, astronomy. From Mnemosyne, filling the void by taking in the object and restoring it, the Arts were born – as the offspring or elaboration of memory, of the memory of our losses, of what we lack, a creation stemming from something we have introjected, and perhaps at the same time a transformation of that introject.

⁷ Freud called this capacity to transform suffering into a creation acknowledged by others “sublimation”, but made the following resigned comment about it: “Since artistic talent and capacity are intimately connected with sublimation we must admit that the nature of the artistic function is also inaccessible to us along psycho-analytic lines” (21, p. 136).

⁸ Through difficulties, or hardship, to the stars – i.e. to success.

⁹ A palm grows when burdened by a weight.

¹⁰ A concept introduced by Ferenczi (23).

If this depressive feeling is ubiquitous in the process of change, so too must art be ubiquitous. Death surely lies at the root of human culture, from the Neanderthal painting the bones of his dead to the statuary of the Greek tombs and Ancient Greek tragedy. "What released the spirit of enquiry in man was not the intellectual enigma, and not every death, but the conflict of feeling at the death of loved yet alien and hated persons. Of this conflict of feeling psychology was the first offspring" (24, p. 293f). Might the coincidence of opposites to which Freud draws attention here not also be the coincidence of the knowledge of two things: of the fact that the dead person is gone, and of his or her survival in the object of creation, present in the ancestor cult? Creativity brings about a coincidence between the consciousness of death and the hope of survival and immortality, loss and restoration, destruction and reparation – the two fundamental phases of human existence. At one and the same time, these two phases create the duality – symbolization of what is absent, creation of its presence and hence also of the double (Rank), creation of the intermediate space, and re-creation of the transitional object on the cultural level (Winnicott), conscious as we are of the threat of death. As Thomas Mann says in *Death in Venice*, death is the birth of the image.

We can now identify ourselves with the following passage from Graham Greene: "Writing is a form of therapy. Sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic and fear inherent in the human situation!"

However, some orphans and trauma victims set store by their past. As Jean-Paul Sartre declares in *Words* (25), if he had not lost his father, his childhood would have been different: "I would not write, as I would be someone else"! He plainly felt that his father's death was relevant to his career as a writer. How true this is!

My Polish-born Zurich colleague Alice Miller, awarded the Janusz Korczak Prize in New York, knew perfectly well that in the "drama of the gifted child" (26, 27) who is also sensitive and alert, a major role is played by that child's keen awareness of his or her parents' needs and troubles. In learning to understand these, the child thus becomes their doctor, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst. As Ferenczi writes:

Not only emotionally, but also intellectually, can the trauma bring to maturity a part of the person. I wish to remind you of the typical 'dream of the wise baby' described by me several years ago in which a newly-born child or an infant begins to talk, in fact teaches wisdom to the entire family. The fear of the uninhibited, almost mad adult changes the child, so to speak, into a psychiatrist and, in order to become one and to defend himself against dangers coming from people without self-control, he must know how to identify himself completely with them (28, p. 165).

At the same time this child ceases to take account of his or her own needs, wishes, and feelings, so as not to "disturb" the parents in their suffering, and learns to conceal feelings of anger, indignation, jealousy, or despair, which will therefore not be integrated within the personality. Hence the most vital part, the source of the true self, will not be experienced. In very intelligent and talented individuals, this often gives rise to emotional insecurity reflected in a certain kind of "borderline" personality, depression (loss of self), grandiosity or mania – as a defence against depression – or a mixture of all of these manifestations. As Ferenczi already knew, "all child prodigies may have developed and broken down in this way" (29, p. 271).

Many orphaned children perhaps become resilient and creative "wise babies" after a period of mourning, which may constitute a liberation (Pollock) also enabling them to "bounce back".

Through these macroscopic facts, these subjects are surely demonstrating to us something that we observe every day in our psychoanalyses – that is, that a childhood seemingly lost and destroyed without trace may be resuscitated by a process of reconciliation and become a source of positive energy. One of my analysands who had no recollection of the traumatic period of his childhood when his parents divorced had first of all to rediscover this suffering, the depression he had hitherto disavowed, and confront his exasperation, before he could regain his true history and past, as well as his inhibited creativity, which was until then seemingly lost. The story of orphans and other creative trauma victims may remind us that nothing is ever over and done with and that analysis too is always conducted in the shadow of this hope. In the spirit of the Wise Baby that Ferenczi was, it seemed to me to be both pleasant and important to introduce the ideas on Trauma

and Lost Childhood by bearing witness to this aspect of recovery and creativity.

“Not too seldom patients tell dreams in which the newly born, quite young children, or babies in the cradle, appear, who are able to talk or write fluently, treat us to deep sayings, carry on intelligent conversations, deliver harangues, give learned explanations, and so on” (29, p. 349). These dreams sometimes come true. Ferenczi, after all, ultimately said of himself that “the Wise Baby could only have been written by a wise baby”. A wise baby who experienced himself a traumatised child – Ferenczi said so about himself – and lived under a creative spell during all his adult life. A childhood lost – and through analysis and creativity recovered, refund. It may be appropriate, to illustrate this paradox situation with the words of a poet from Budapest, Attila Jozsef:

You wanted a father when you were fallen,
you wanted a man if there is no god
These sinful little brats – you have found them
in the psychoanalyst’s cot¹¹

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¹¹ TUDOD, HOGY NINCS BOCSÁNAT: Atyát hivatást elesten, embert, ha nincsen isten S romlott kölkökre leltél/psichoanalizisben. (Hungarian original).

Summaries in German and Spanish

Haynal A. Die verlorene und wiedergefundene Kindheit.

Es geht um den Versuch, die Bedeutung antagonistischer Konzepte für das Verständnis des Lebens auszuloten wie Trauma *und* Widerstandsfähigkeit ("orpha" im Sinne von Ferenczi-Severn in Ferenczis klinischem Tagebuch) mit Bezug auf neuere Forschung innerhalb und außerhalb der Psychoanalyse.

Haynal A. La niñez perdida y recobrada.

Intentando comprender el significado de dos conceptos antagonicos para entender la vida, como trauma *and* flexibilidad-fortaleza ("orpha" en el sentido de Ferenczi-Severn del Diario Clinico de Ferenczi; con referencias a la reciente investigació de lo interno-externo en psicoanalysis.