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HOME INITIATION OF CHILD TO READING PRACTICES
OR RATHER TO THE WORLDS OF FICTIONS (NOT ONLY LITERARY ONES)

"The child in one role addresses himself naively to another role. These roles are at first organized into a personality, the child simply passing from the one to the other as the conduct in one calls out a response in the other".

"From the standpoint of reflection, the content of mind, for the individual who is unprejudiced by doctrine varies greatly".

G. H. Mead, The Philosophy of the Act.

I shall present below some fragments of the home-life of a girl named Ela. Home is still her basic frame of reference, though she attended nursery school for three years, and has been attending school for almost two years. The parents deliberately arrange for their daughters, Ela (9) and Lucy (14) some special reading sessions. They regard them as a particularly valuable, intensive form of contact with their children, and as an activity that helps them to organize leisure time for the girls, as well as to initiate, shape and develop their literary interests.

The fact that Ela has the sister, is of great importance: a few years ago books for children were much easier to obtain than today. As a result Ela has got on her shelves the basic literary works for children and she is well-acquainted with them.

I think it is indispensable that children be able to reach books at will as their personal belongings, and that they partici-

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pate in loud common reading since the linear character of text may make the process of reading too difficult and boring for the younger readers. The loud reading, particularly when done by adults, helps children in concretizing the book characters, their actions, and -most of all- helps them to learn the subtle art of interpretation.

One of Ela's most beloved books is a series on trolls by the Swedish writer Tove Jansson. It often happens that in the evening, before taking bath, Ela asks her mother: "Will you read a little for me, mummy?"; and the mother answers: "Well, if you are quick in washing... O.K., find something about Filifionka" (Filifionka is one of the trolls). And Ela, instead of doing her evening toilet, begins to search for her favourite episodes with Filifionka, for instance this:

"Prophetic is this night,

Prophetic is this night,

Prophetic is this night..."

She often shouts these magic words into the night from the balcony. Fortunately, the balcony is on the garden side.

The fragment is significant because Emma, a rat living in a theatre who shouts these words from behind the stage during the spectacle of the play "The lion's Piances", is the stage manager Filifionek's widow. Filifionka, his lardy-dardy niece, sends him an invitation to the Saint John's night party every year, but in vain, because..., etc.

The reading, accompanied by "cheating" and looking at pictures, is getting prolonged this evening, since the readers have to check out whether this Filifionka, who appears in the last book of the series and pays a visit to Muminek's (Muminek is the main hero of the saga), has anything to do with a Filifionka, who washed her carpet in the sea, entertained Gapsa, and passed through a catastrophe. It seems that all of them belong to the Filifionka species, for they have caps of a special kind, narrow suckers, thin legs and very similar characters.

Two other persons who can also talk with Ela about Filifionka, are her sister Lucy and their aunt M. For Lucy, Filifionka is a ridiculous character. She designed for Filifionka a rather awkward cap, while Ela weaved for her a carpet with the help from the mother.

Ela knows that Filifionka is also her mother favourite. She often calls her mother "Filifionka". The girl likes the mouse so much because "Filifionka is sometimes upset and things always happen to her... and it is just interesting, not as with others who always win". I shall return to his problem later.

Although Ela can read, this book has always been for her the one which is to be looked at and listened to. She likes to look at the cover pictures, the titles of chapters, etc. She usually says: "I'd rather you read for me. You do it quicker and better, I'd rather listen". This creates some problems. Once she was not sure if she could write down the title of one of the books of the troll saga in her special notebook which serves to note her readings, and which is checked by her school-teacher. "I know it, but I've never read it myself, have I?" - she said. Yet, after some encouragement, she eventually wrote it down in the notebook.

The adventures of the protagonists are known to Ela from loud readings and narratives of others. She is, of course, aware that the characters are products of the author's imagination. But, when they are the objects of conversation, they become friends. They exist in the forms seen in pictures, as persons to whom things described in the narrative, have happened. By some accident, Filifionka's cap and the carpet to wash in the sea have recently "materialized" at home and so has a figure of Muminek, bought in a shop. The cap and the carpet have come to serve as things that belong to a real object, a mouse, which is Ela's toy, and to which some unpredictable things may happen. Filifionka's unreal existence is proved by the fact that she can not be lost. Toys are real, for they can.

We now turn from Ela's perfect sense of the time and place of the literary symbols' existence to the historical time of her own life and affairs, i.e., to the description of her plays with the mouse. Nobody knows how Ela got the special taste for little mice and rats as mascots which are treated equal with kitten and doggies. Be that as it might, there are at home, among other toys, a few stylized mice. Ela plays with them in an uninhibited way, and much more ingeniously than with her dolls. Moreover, the mice do not need to be put back in their place after play. Anywhere they are they seem to be in their right place "because they just went there": on the floor, on a table, in the wardrobe, under the bed or pillow, etc. "I co-exist with them, and they do not disturb me" - says Ela. The

word "co-exist" sounds oddly in her mouth, but it means adequately, in the literal sense of the term, the situations of their interactions.

It is easy to argue, that the pedagogical advice to mark off a special play-nook for children at home can not be taken without reservations. To feel well at home, a child needs to mark all places in his own way, independently of his having the special play-nook. What Ela gains from her plays with mice, is a familiarization of the home space, and a homely feeling. The space outside home is similarly "domesticated", when she takes the mouse to school, to her grandmother's home, to the church, etc. The mouse is something to talk to, something to play with, or - at least - a close thing which is little beloved and easy to hide. It helps overcome loneliness, uncertainty and indefiniteness of any situation.

The mouse becomes a handy, concrete and easily manipulated (I mean gestures by which it can be animated), imagined other. For instance: at breakfast the mouse sits on the table near the plate, in front of it a piece of cheese snapped off by Ela, or a droplet of honey. Ela: "Eat, my Mouse". Mother: "She may not like it...". Ela: "She will, she will eat, I'll do it for her". These plays are accompanied by gestures and words. Still, they do not create a puppet-play. A puppet, animated from a hidden place, presents itself as an autonomous actor. It speaks and interacts in his own name. The mouse is clearly and visibly a manipulated object. It is motionless, it must be picked up, thrown, laid aside by Ela's own child's hands. It does not speak: "Lizzie, I want...", or "I am Mouse". Things happen to it as a result of Ela's actions, and it is Ela, who has to tell the mouse: "Mouse, you are going to the garden", or about the mouse: "Mouse is going to the garden". One can say that in the same way as Ela is controlled by others, she controls and masters her Mouse, creating a world by means of "props", gestures and words, as well as by her own words which she formulates in her own name, and which announce the actions of this quasi-other (being in fact performed by Ela herself), and which form the comments and narratives addressed to the real others who witness the play, but even more to herself, for she is heard by herself. This world of play is created by the child with a deep sense of creative freedom, with the feeling of being a centre of

this world. The adults contribute to the objectification of this world, accepting the situations and semantic conventions that the child creates.

Let us try to describe the function of the mouse in the terms of G. H. Mead's conceptions.

The mouse is a mediator imagined by the child for the purposes of her active relations with the environment, a catalyzer of her development and creativity. Being a kind of partner and at the same time an object of action, it facilitates acting and naming the acts. Speaking to the mouse: "Look, Mouse, you see, Mouse... I'll tell you what you see there", the child undoubtedly speaks to herself. It is her dialogue with the self, loud, externalized, mediated by the quasi-partner. It is the child herself, who is the distant recipient of her own symbols and thoughts. Through self-stimulation by her own actions, incessantly and willingly renewed, the child provides herself with more and more new experiences with the self. It takes place during lonely or witnessed plays, when the verbal comments on her own actions are clearly addressed to others as well as herself. "She is cold. Look, mummy, how I've dressed her. Does she look nice?". We should note that the social world is an indispensable context, and that it is always present within the play. Although it is often out of sight in the background of the play, this world surfaces unexpectedly, e.g., in the following formula of dependence: "Mouse is mine, and I am hers. I've gotten her on the Children's Day and she is my daughter, so the Children's Day is also for her, because she's gotten me".

Talking and making gestures towards Mouse, Ela incessantly confirms herself in the routine of everyday home and school activities. However, the play has yet another important element. Unlike an imagined partner, Mouse is often mislaid, and has to be found again. Filifionka, let us remind, is not a partner indeed, because she can not get lost on her own. When Mouse gets lost, the everyday routine of the home is broken and suspended until Mouse is found again. The importance of such observations for the child's knowledge about the social world is obvious. The quest after Mouse, the repeated hurried searches in all customary hiding places, e.g., before going out, clearly show that child is familiarized with the home space, and that the home order, notwithstanding unpredictable events, is stable. When the mother suggests: "Keep her

in one place so that she can't get lost", Ela answers: "Do I stay in one place?" The girl creates something which resembles experimental situations that make her to react in no commonplace manner: "Let her! Let her get lost a bit, let her romp in grass", or "Let her! She'll get cold, at worst. I like when she is not well a little, I'll have to worry a bit and take care of her, if, suppose, her tail is hurt".

Growing up is at the same time outgrowing the illusions of world harmony. The child's self-exposure to stresses and worries by means of her favourite toy reveals an interesting aspect of play and game. When Ela was told that Mouse would be taken for demonstration at the conference, she shouted out: "Mouse, what a wonderful trip for you!" This personal arrangement of plays and games reflects the dynamics of life and the real dangers. Such plays may serve as a training for the life-drama in which the experience of fear brings pleasure inasmuch as the fear is overcome.

Despite the difficulties in evaluating the ways in which fiction in child's life exists, is created and experienced, the observations imply that the reading practices, even if the books are of potentially high imaginative force, seem to be of lesser personality-building value than the fiction created by the child in her plays with toys and in her real-life situations. It may be explained by the fact, that in experiencing books the child feels the conveyed messages to be socially objectified. Therefore, they get incorporated into her mental world in a more "cultural" way. On the other hand, the toy is felt to be intimate and idiosyncratically private. "I like Filifionka, but she isn't mine. She belongs to anyone who will have read the books on her. Mouse is mine. I can take her in my hands, caress, show to people, play with her anyway I want".

The mouse is a "living" character, a catalyzer of the cognitive and expressive activity, and the commitments of the child. It accompanies Ela in her real time and demands of her to take care of it. The imagined stories about Mouse are embedded in her everyday routine and open to its ongoing course. They constitute a real factor in her personality development. A child comes into the real world by means of its own spontaneous actions in which it be-

comes the main actor, and it tests the world against its self. Nevertheless, how much poorer these actions would be without reading as one of their resources.

The verbal and gestural performance of Ela towards her toys, is, in some sense, a continuation of the world that has been read and listened to. The literary fictions which she gets to know, legitimize her to produce her own narratives, pointing to what can happen unexpectedly - and at the same time "as truly as in a fairy-tale" - to her toys, or, as a matter of fact, to herself. A further result of such reception of literature is that her readiness to create and contact fiction makes her feel familiar with the world of words, imagination and meaning. It triggers off in the child a will and competence to form and formulate her own self, character and events. It occurs through the means of expression and cognitive categories which the child arbitrarily derives from the cultural repertoire of dramatical situations, and their solving and interpretation patterns. This repertoire, durable in time, contains also the types of characters which may serve for modelling the self and others. At the same time it provides the patterns of roles and lines that may be assigned to characters as their performance resource. In this way reading provides the child with a symbolically persistent substitute of social experience.

Apart from the function filled by contacts with fictions in the personality development of the child, the forms of these contacts, i.e., reading and playing with toys, may create in it, when adult, a permanent and willing interest in art and cultural participation, and in the role of a sensitive recipient. The parents of Ela stimulate her reading activity, hoping to realize these expectations. However, the future directions of her personality development remain unknown to them. The girl still feels more comfortable in the theatre of everyday life than in a dramatic one, and she experiences real events with a considerable higher intensity than those taken from books.

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**DOMOWE WPROWADZANIE DZIECI W PRAKTYKĘ CZYTELNICZĄ
LUB ŚWIAT FIKCJI (NIE TYLKO LITERACKIEJ)**

Autorka rekonstruuje interakcyjne zjawiska towarzyszące wprowadzaniu dzieci przez rodziców w świat symboli literackich. Teoretycznej podstawy rozważaniom autorki dostarczają wczesne prace symbolicznych interakcjonistów, w tym zwłaszcza G. H. Mead.