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## Landscapes of Trauma: a Reflection on Wonder

Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson – Arnar Árnason

### 1 Introduction: on a cold, dark night – as it were

On 23 January 1973, in the middle of the sub-Arctic night, the volcano Helgafell on Heimaey, the only inhabited island of the Vestmannaeyjar archipelago off the south coast of Iceland, suddenly erupted. The eruption came without any warning. The residents of the island were immediately and hurriedly evacuated to mainland Iceland. Making their escape in fishing boats overnighing in harbour at the time and small airplanes arriving from the capital, Reykjavík, to aid in the rescue effort, many were later to express gratitude to various protective forces, that the eruption had coincided with calm weather rather than a violent winter storm. In the January darkness of such a northerly location, albeit lit up somewhat by the spewing volcano and the rolling lava, the inhabitants watched as their familiar environment was engulfed with smoke and covered with ash.

The day of the eruption, only a few hours after the islanders had been evacuated, the newspaper *Vísir*, an afternoon rather than a morning paper, described the events of the night past and people's reactions to them. According to the paper, Constable Birgir Sigurjónsson was the first person to arrive at the scene of the eruption itself. He says, in an interview with the paper: 'I wasn't so shocked when I saw the eruption [...] although it is difficult for me to say now what I was thinking. I thought the eruption was majestic [*tignarlegur*, the dictionary form] but undeniably terrifying [*ógnvekjandi*, the dictionary form] at the same time'.<sup>1</sup> The English translation of the Icelandic terms gives a fair indication of their ordinary meaning in everyday use in Iceland. The noun *tign*, from which the adjective *tignarlegur* derives, is majesty and is, on the rare

1 *Vísir*, 23 January 1973, 8. All newspaper stories referenced were accessed on 10 September 2018. The anthropologist Gísli Pálsson, who is from the island, has written a wonderful account of the eruption and its aftermath. So far, that account only exists in Icelandic. Gísli Pálsson, *Fjallhö sem yppiti öxlum: Maður og náttúra* (Reykjavík, 2017).

occasion that this might be necessary, used to refer to royalty. *Tignarlegur* may occasionally be used to characterise a person, something like statuesque in English then, but is used much more frequently to describe landscape features, in particular mountains, waterfalls, the northern lights and maybe glaciers. The adverb *ógnvekjandi* refers to something or someone that awakens or evokes great fear or terror, *ógn* being the noun for threat in Icelandic.

The following day, 24 January, the same paper notes the changes that the eruption had already then, wrought upon the island. In language that at times evokes the poetic Edda account of the end of the world, Ragnarök, it says:

Few Vestmannaeyingar [i.e., the people of Vestmannaeyjar sometimes also referred to as Eyjamenn] would likely recognise the landscape on Heimaey where the volcano has brought the most destruction [...]. [Where] the verdant fields of the farmers' [*jögræn tún bæddanna*] were before, one can now only see the field of ash [...], the roofs of the houses and the streets are covered in this disgusting product [*viðbjóður*, the dictionary form] of the volcano.<sup>2</sup>

Another newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, in an almost unprecedented special afternoon edition, describes the town as 'dark [*drungalegur*], people had left their houses, only ambulances and police cars could be seen driving the streets'.<sup>3</sup> The same paper refers to the evacuees as refugees, and headlines its report on their reactions, by quoting one who says: 'I only hope we can go home as soon as possible'.<sup>4</sup> In another piece in the same paper, the journalist reads the mind of one evacuee and offers the reading as accompaniment to a photograph:

Although safely on the mainland, the thoughts are with Heimaey. That is clear from this photo of the old lady; head in her hands she can only think of when fortune will turn in her favour so that she may again stand in her living room at home, where, perhaps, flowers await in the window.<sup>5</sup>

The descriptions above speak of landscapes changed, homes abandoned, sometimes destroyed as it turned out, and now longed for. The flower in the

2 *Vísir*, 24 January 1973, 8.

3 *Morgunblaðið*, 23 January 1973, 11.

4 *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

5 *Ibid.*, 8.

window stands as a stark, if imaginary, contrast to the black carpet of death the volcano has unrolled over the small town. Still, the descriptions speak of the sense of awe, the wonder that overwhelming natural events can evoke too, even as they reveal in that the unexpected otherness of nature. Who would have thought, the islanders from above may have wondered, that the mountain Helgafell, that had been their beloved neighbour for so long, would suddenly erupt and bring those who loved it both destruction and mortal danger.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, we seek to describe the reactions of the islanders, particularly in the longer aftermath of the eruption, a bit more fully, drawing in the process upon the work of Ronald W. Hepburn. The conference, out of which this paper arises, made clear the rather unusual place that Hepburn occupied in British philosophy during his career. Hepburn's concerns and his general philosophy mark him out as having closer kinship with Continental philosophers than most of his British colleagues at the time. This is evident in Hepburn's best known and most enduring work. In his essays on the aesthetic appreciation of nature, on one hand, and on wonder, on the other, Hepburn appears to assume a fundamental grounding of humans, and their various identities, in the environment – in the landscapes in which they live and may call their own, their home. This grounding is of the kind, it seems to us, that British analytical philosophers of the twentieth century would generally have been sceptical of precisely because the translation of it into propositional form would betray its essential quality as Hepburn saw it. The grounding appears in Hepburn's work as something that is almost beyond words, as a necessary prior placing in landscape on the basis of which language based reflections, perhaps in propositional form, can then happen.<sup>7</sup> Illustratively, in one place Hepburn speaks of the detachment that may be the condition for contemplating nature aesthetically as an object of beauty, as something that needs to be achieved, worked at, rather than something given, such is our ordinary involvement, our immersion in the world.<sup>8</sup> What Hepburn draws our attention to here, is the kind of being

at home in the world, the kind of dwelling in pre-objective landscape, that the resurrection of Martin Heidegger's work towards the end of last century has popularised. In this, Hepburn's argument in some ways anticipates insights articulated more recently in both geography and anthropology. Speaking to the question of how collective, specifically national, identities are created and maintained, the eminent geographer Stephen Daniels writes:

National identities are co-ordinated, often largely defined, by 'legends and landscapes', by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised homelands with hallowed sites and scenery. The symbolic activation of time and space [...] gives shape to the 'imagined community' of the nation.<sup>9</sup>

While Daniels places emphasis on the relation between humans and nature, or landscape, in the constitution of identity in a way that may recall Hepburn, the relationship is for Daniels most importantly, it seems, symbolically mediated. Closer to Hepburn's work and the sense of immersion in landscape that his notion of aesthetic appreciation of nature and of wonder carry, are the ideas of another Aberdonian, the anthropologist Tim Ingold. Ingold has argued that: 'Landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them'.<sup>10</sup> The geographer John Wylie notes how many recent writings on landscape, often influenced by Ingold, have in turn been informed by phenomenology and the ideas of embodiment and performance. Recent work on the phenomenology of landscape that draws amongst other sources on Ingold's philosophy, Wylie says, 'has sought to define landscape in terms of *presence* in various forms'.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis here, Wylie continues, is on how 'self and world come close together, and touch each other, and then go beyond even that, and become part of each other'.<sup>12</sup> Such accounts, Wylie adds, that speak 'of landscape in terms of human dwelling and being-in-the-world commonly emphasise, and ground their arguments through, the evolving co-presence of self and

6 Ibid. Pálsson was at this point a graduate student in Anthropology at the University of Manchester. He recounts how he dismissed his colleagues' reports of an eruption in Heimaey as misunderstanding, the only volcano there being long extinct. See Pálsson, *Fjallið sem yppiti öxlum*, 102.

7 See Ronald W. Hepburn "Being" as a Concept of Aesthetics', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 8 (1968), 138–46, where Hepburn adopts a position somewhat at odds with his British colleagues.

8 Cf. Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' in idem, *Wonder and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighbouring Fields* (Edinburgh, 1984), 9–35, 21. See also idem, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', *Environmental Values*, 7 (1998), 267–79 and 'Landscape and the

Metaphysical Imagination', *Environmental Values*, 5 (1996), 191–204.

9 Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Cambridge, 1993), 5.

10 Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (London, 2000), 193.

11 John Wylie, 'Landscape, Absence and the Geographies of Love', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 34 (2009), 275–89, 278.

12 Ibid., emphasis removed.

landscape, with this self–landscape nexus being understood in terms of rami-fying bodily engagements, encounters and inhabitations'.<sup>13</sup>

These are insights we want to use to formulate the key question we seek to address in this paper, a paper that otherwise for us serves the purpose of articulating early thoughts on landscape and trauma. Accepting the importance of landscape in processes of identity formations, that Hepburn, Daniels, Ingold and Wylie speak of, as accurate of the feelings of the evacuated islanders,<sup>14</sup> we would like to ask about the consequences of seeing that landscape so violently changed, your home practically destroyed, in a process that while horrendous may nonetheless be recognised as spectacular. What is it like, we ask, when the environment in which you see your identity, your being both grounded and nurtured, suddenly turns majestically violent and threatening? What is it like, furthermore, when the past disruption is brought to the surface again some forty years after the fact in a process of active remembrance?

In his book, Gísli Pálsson develops the theoretical notion of *jarðsamband* (Earth relations) in itself an ordinary word which in everyday Icelandic use would be the equivalent of the English 'grounded'. In English publications, he has used the term 'geosociality' to refer to the same idea: the fundamental mutual relational constitution of humans and the Earth.<sup>15</sup> While our focus here is somewhat different, we build fundamentally on Pálsson's work. Still this paper has a particular point of origin, a reason for coming into being now. In 2014, the museum *Eldheimar* (Fire world) was opened after a long process of preparation.<sup>16</sup> The opening of the museum occasioned much reflection and discussion amongst the islanders about the experiences they had undergone all those years before. What became evident during this period of reflection, is that some islanders have come to understand their experiences in terms of trauma.<sup>17</sup> We will seek to draw links here between the idea of trauma and Hepburn's account of wonder as that helps us to articulate the experience of seeing the grounding of your being violently destroyed in a process that

despite that, may inspire awe. We want to link this account of Hepburn's to his notion of metaphysical imagination in relation to the understanding of nature. For Hepburn 'metaphysical imagination [...] [is] an element of interpretation that helps to determine the overall experience of a scene in nature. It will be construed as a "seeing as ..." or "interpreting as ..." that has metaphysical character, in the sense of relevance to the whole of experience and not only to what is experienced at the present moment'<sup>18</sup> – it is a notion that, with wonder, we bring to the idea of trauma.

## 2 Wonder

Hepburn discusses wonder in relation to the quest for knowledge, as an 'attentive, questioning, baffled but appreciative stance'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Hepburn's treatment of wonder is tied in with questions of curiosity, knowledge and understanding. He notes that while the experience of wonder can clearly spur on inquiry, the sense of wonder may consequently diminish as the object of wonder becomes ever more intelligible. Hepburn asks if this must always be so, if wonder is 'always expendable, consumable, displaceable through the very attaining of some superior cognitive viewpoint?'<sup>20</sup> He answers the question by pointing to the different ways in which knowledge and wonder relate to their object. Unlike curiosity-knowledge, wonder 'does not see its objects possessively: they remain "other" and unmastered. Wonder does dwell in its objects in rapt attentiveness.'<sup>21</sup> To dwell in objects in rapt attentiveness – such a wonderful phrase – speaks of a fundamental immersion in the other while retaining the sense of otherness that sustains wonder.

It is this quality of otherness of the objects of wonder that we draw attention to and seek to retain, later drawing links between this idea and the idea of trauma and to do so we wish to mention briefly the work of Michael Scott

13 Ibid.

14 Pálsson's book speaks to this powerfully as do the newspaper accounts we related above.

15 Gísli Pálsson & Heather Anne Swanson, 'Down to Earth: Geosocialities and Geopolitics', *Environmental Humanities*, 8 (2016), 149–71.

16 The first author of this paper has been carrying out research into *Eldheimar* since before its opening.

17 The first public reference to trauma in Vestmannaeyjar that we have been able to find is from the early 1990s. It speaks about the effects of accidents at sea, a common hazard in fishing communities, of course, but does not even mention the possible effects of the eruption twenty years before.

18 Hepburn, 'Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination', 192.

19 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Wonder' in idem, *Wonder*, 131–54, 131.

20 Ibid., 132.

21 Ibid., 134. In his 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', Hepburn says similarly: 'For instance, to project inappropriate human emotional and social life on to a non-human animal – outside the storybook. that is – is a failure of respect for the actual animal: a failure to empathise with its own proper way of being. We are failing to give it its due recognition for what it is – for its own nature. We would be using the animal, here, as a prop to our own fantasising' (271).

who recently has articulated an anthropology of wonder.<sup>22</sup> Scott notes the enduring interest in wonder in western philosophy. Beginning his account with Descartes, Scott singles out difference, unknown otherness as the source of wonder for Descartes. Scott points out that if wonder is evoked by novelty or difference, then that invites the question: difference, novelty in relation to what. It is only relative to expectations conditioned by some sense of what there is and of what is possible that something can provoke wonder. Wonder is inextricably linked not only to alterity but also to people's ontological premises,<sup>23</sup> their fundamental assumptions about the make-up and nature of reality. This Scott links to the task of the anthropologist. While Scott does not refer to Hepburn he adds, in language reminiscent of Hepburn, that philosophers who link wonder and ontology, see wonder as a response not simply to the new, or different but to the inexplicable:

The inexplicable, they emphasize, casts seemingly unquestionable axioms about the way things are into radical doubt and suggests new realities. Playing on the possible etymological relationship between English 'wonder' and 'wound', philosopher of religion Mary-Jane Rubenstein observes that wonder responds to 'a destabilizing and unassimilable interruption in the ordinary course of things, an uncanny opening, rift, or wound in the everyday'.<sup>24</sup>

Hepburn notes, in a related fashion, occasions of wonder that link distant, early childhood experiences with senses of wonder experienced later in life. He says that there are 'a broad range of cases that can plausibly be held to rise from the linking of present experience with memory-traces of very early experience'.<sup>25</sup> Hepburn defends these cases as grounds for wonder, as a source of wonder, suggesting an element of delay, a latency rather, is possibly important for certain experiences of wonder. There are qualities of wonder that Hepburn states one might associate with the sublime. Hepburn reminds us of the close association between the sublime and tragedy and the role that can be afforded to wonder in relation to both. He concludes:

22 Michael Scott, 'To be Makiran is to see like Mr Parrot: the Anthropology of Wonder in Solomon Islands'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 22 (2016), 474–95.

23 Ibid., 476.

24 Ibid., 477.

25 Hepburn, 'Wonder', 135.

It is true of many highly valued tragic dramas that we are prevented from seeing the tragic events as no more than grim, desolate and crushing. Some positive value is affirmed, even in a rare and intensified form, precisely in and through the human response to the revelation of the dysteleological side of the world. That value should be thus realized in the very shadow of its imminent annihilation – there, of course, lies the ground of wonder.<sup>26</sup>

Here we pause to set down markers for our future discussion. First, we want to use this juncture to invite reflection on the link between how Hepburn formulates the aesthetic evaluation of nature and his account of wonder as a human experience. The otherness of objects of wonder is, to some extent, in contrast to the way in which we ordinarily dwell in the world but linked to the detachment that Hepburn speaks of in relation to nature as an object of aesthetic contemplation. The otherness maybe related to the metaphysical imagination as a moment that seems to reveal in the otherness the sheer nature of being. Second, we make tentative steps here to link Hepburn's notion of wonder, with the idea of trauma as discussed in recent, largely humanities, literature. The question of otherness, the eruption of otherness into the familiar, is important here. We want to come to a point where we can wonder whether the ideas of trauma and wonder can help us speak to the events described above, and the events that followed, to be described a little later in this paper. Our tentative suggestion is, that unlike what Hepburn describes above, the people we have worked with on Heimaey, have not, at least not as yet, mobilised wonder to turn the terror of the eruption into a positive value. Rather, the recent opening of the Eldheimar Museum seems to have brought the trauma back to the surface, opened a wound that remains open, remains a wonder rather than having afforded healing as yet. However, to establish more clearly and firmly the connections we seek to make here and to give some support for our albeit tentative suggestion, we need to say something about trauma.

### 3 Trauma

Pálsson notes that in the eruption the geosociality between the island and the Eyjamenn was disrupted.<sup>27</sup> He reports that some Eyjamenn say that the

26 Ibid., 152.

27 Pálsson, *Ejallid sem yppiti öxlum*, 165. 'Rofnuðu jarðsambönd Eyjamanna' as he says

eruption ruined their lives. That is not an overstatement. Many experienced trauma although it was not referred to as trauma until later. Some people heard the roar of the eruption whenever they went to sleep, even many months after it stopped. They knew this was their imagination, but that did not matter. There are reports of grown men, who had not shed a tear for decades, crying uncontrollably as they watched their houses being consumed by the lava. Watching the eruption people often did not understand what they saw, it was as if they were watching incomprehensible events at odds with the laws of nature as they knew them. Something, of course, had to break within people watching this, as Pálsson concludes.<sup>28</sup>

The experiences described above, fit well with symptoms of trauma as it has been often characterised. Pálsson uses the word ‘*tráma*’ here, an Icelandic version of the English trauma, rather than an established Icelandic word in itself. The word currently in vogue in Icelandic is *áfall*. That word appears, for example, in the Icelandic for PTSD (post-traumatic-stress-disorder), *áfallastreituröskun*, a singularly ugly word. Still *áfall* is a word than can be used to describe relatively minor mishaps, whereas *tráma* very clearly is intended to spell the gravity of the experience it covers. In a powerful, critical account, Roger Luckhurst traces the history of the idea of trauma and the extent to and the ways in which trauma has emerged as prism through which people find themselves increasingly interpreting and acting upon their and other people’s experiences.<sup>29</sup> Ruth Leys similarly opens her genealogy of the notion of trauma, by drawing attention to the very serious and sometimes seemingly quite inconsequential experiences the idea of trauma is now applied to. Leys notes that trauma ‘was originally the term for a surgical wound, conceived on the model of a rupture of the skin or protective envelope of the body resulting in a catastrophic global reaction in the entire organism’.<sup>30</sup> Luckhurst notes that trauma is a ‘piercing or a breach of a border’, a wound, we might add following Scott following Rubinstein, that provokes wonder. Luckhurst adds that trauma as now understood not only signals a breach of boundaries but rather ‘puts inside and outside into a strange communication. Trauma violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete’<sup>31</sup>, reminiscent of the ways in which a volcanic eruption simultaneously consumes the previously

evocatively in Icelandic.

28 Ibid., 165–6.

29 Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London, 2008).

30 Ruth Leys, *Trauma: a Genealogy* (Chicago, 2000), 19.

31 We want to highlight this description for its aptness in relation to the turning inside out that both a volcanic eruption and indeed the excavation we speak of later.

stable surface of the Earth while replacing it with the Earth’s insides. Trauma, Luckhurst concludes, ‘leaks between mental and physical symptoms [...], between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victimhood.’<sup>32</sup>

Leys reminds us helpfully that:

Post-traumatic stress disorder is fundamentally a disorder of memory. The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present. All the symptoms characteristic of PTSD—flashbacks, nightmares and other reexperiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, autonomic arousal, explosive violence or tendency to hypervigilance—are thought to be the result of this fundamental mental dissociation.<sup>33</sup>

Leys formulation here is standard and would, we believe, be accepted as accurate by most scholars in the field of trauma studies. Still, the formulation hides quite fundamental differences about the precise nature, causes and consequences of trauma. Before addressing those differences allow us to make two observations here: Leys description, it would seem, clearly applies to the account given by Pálsson of the experiences of Eyjamenn related above. The perpetual reexperience of the roar of the eruption, for example, is a case in point. Second, this characterisation of trauma echoes the sense of otherness in which one may be rapt, that Hepburn speaks of in relation to wonder. A constitutive element of the experience of trauma is the inability to master that experience, to overcome its otherness by making it part of ordinary narrative memory.

That said, we now want to draw on Luckhurst and Leys and make a distinction between some different approaches to trauma. In a moment we will go to theories that suggest that cultures, societies, maybe ethnic groups, generations

32 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 3.

33 Leys, *Trauma: a Genealogy*, 2.

or genders can suffer trauma as collectives and not simply as collections of individuals. Staying for now with individual trauma, Leys' account, which we follow closely, stresses an ongoing tension between mimetic and anti-mimetic approaches to trauma. According to mimetic explanations of trauma, the victim of trauma, the self or the subject identifies with and fixates on the scene of the trauma. Because of this identification the trauma is beyond representation, that is to say, the victim cannot distinguish between itself and the traumatic experience as such, to bring that experience into its narrative past. Anti-mimetic accounts, on the other hand, assume that the trauma comes to the victim, the self, the subject from outside, shattering the boundaries the self, before the traumatic experience, was able to maintain between itself and the outside world.<sup>34</sup>

Leys notes that the current neurobiological definition of PTSD (for many the contemporary manifestation of trauma) draws explicitly on 'a physiological-causal theory of shock'.<sup>35</sup> This current neurobiological definition of PTSD is then a manifestation of a class of ideas that locates the origin of trauma firmly in an external event that, in turn, leaves an imprint on the psyche or the brain of the affected individual. These are ideas that in their firm anti-mimetic stance are what Leys characterises as 'literalist'.<sup>36</sup> She takes the very influential work of Bessel van der Kolk as the key current example of these ideas. His 'central claim [is] that traumatic memory involves a literal imprint of an external trauma that, lodged in the brain in a special traumatic memory system, defies all possibility of representation'.<sup>37</sup> Leys finds this 'literalist view of trauma' theoretically simplistic and 'poorly supported by the scientific evidence.' The basic problem with van Kolk's approach, and the class of ideas it represents, is that it suggests 'a causal analysis of trauma as fundamentally external to the subject', says Leys, a subject that is furthermore 'poorly formulated'.<sup>38</sup> Leys, effectively places the influential work of Cathy Caruth, one of the key figures in the humanities' study of trauma, in the same category as van Kolk's. Leys does this on the basis of Caruth's theorisation of the link between trauma and the victim. Thus Caruth draws 'an absolute opposition

between external trauma and victim' suggesting a literalist understanding of the origin of trauma as outside and independent of the victim.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to this literalist view, Leys evokes the complex history of Sigmund Freud's engagement with trauma. Freud stressed the importance of 'latency' in relation to trauma; that trauma should not in fact be understood to be caused as such by the original event of 'trauma' but its later recall as memory.<sup>40</sup> For Freud, trauma is brought about through the dialectic between two events, two experiences, 'a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child's development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that also was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning'.<sup>41</sup> Trauma, for Freud, was fundamentally linked to a 'temporal delay or latency through which the past was available only by a deferred act of understanding and interpretation'.<sup>42</sup> This brings to mind Hepburn's suggestion of the dialogue between early childhood experiences and later experiences in the generation of a sense of 'wonder'.<sup>43</sup> Here a certain undoing of time is suggested, even required in a way that Freud hints at with the importance of latency in the history of trauma.

Leys emphasises the complex and often contradictory history of Freud's treatment of and engagement with trauma – his is a case where mimetic and the anti-mimetic approaches both figures. Still, Leys stresses the central role of the idea of imitation, identification and mimesis in the constitution of the idea of trauma and in much of Freud's work on the topic. Imitation played a key role in the initial conceptualisation of trauma 'because the tendency of hypnotized persons to imitate or repeat whatever they were told to say or do provided a basic model for the traumatic experience'.<sup>44</sup> In this way trauma was understood as a situation of 'dissociation or "absence" from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance'.<sup>45</sup> This approach does away with any clear distinction between the outside and the inside, between an event that is the

34 Patricia Ticineto Clough, 'Introduction' in Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (eds), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (London, 2007), 30.

35 Leys, *Trauma: a Genealogy*, 19.

36 Ibid., 16.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 17.

40 Ibid., 20.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Cf. Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox: Critical Studies in Twentieth-Century Theology* (New York, 1968), 46–7.

44 Leys, *Trauma: a Genealogy*, 8.

45 Ibid.

cause of trauma and trauma as the experience thereof. Further, this approach places the subject itself, ego if you prefer, in doubt. As Leys argues: '[t]rauma is thus imagined as involving not the shattering of a pre-given ego by the loss of an identifiable object or event but a dislocation or dissociation of the "subject" prior to any identity [...] the traumatic "event" [...] strictly speaking cannot be described as an event since it does not occur on the basis of a subject-object distinction.'<sup>46</sup>

Again, we want tentatively to draw links with Hepburn's formulation of wonder. Hepburn stresses how the object of wonder remains 'other', how wonder 'dwells' in the object of wonder. This does not, of course, amount to the dissociation of the subject, as Leys speaks of in relation to trauma. Still, the similarities and the differences here will become important to our discussion about the aftermath of the eruption. To mine them for the insight we are after, we need to turn to collective trauma.

#### 4 Collective trauma

Luckhurst writes a history of the idea of trauma, Leys a genealogy. Pálsson notes that the idea of trauma was not common in Iceland at the time of the eruption, it was not readily available to people to understand their experiences in its terms. Do we not need to take this history into account, recognise trauma not only as a universal, (un)natural psychological process but rather a cultural, social and political one? Such is indeed the argument made by Luckhurst and Leys. Above we have discussed briefly theories of trauma as an experience affecting the individual. These ideas can be contrasted with notions of collective trauma. Jeffrey Alexander has offered a useful definition of cultural trauma: '[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.'<sup>47</sup> Alexander's formulation of cultural trauma forms part of an effort to articulate an approach to

collective trauma as distinct from individual trauma. In this, Alexander draws approvingly, if not without reservations, on the celebrated work of Kai Eriksen. He famously drew a distinction between individual and collective trauma:

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively [...]. By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with 'trauma'. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared...<sup>48</sup>

Alexander suggests that Eriksen's approach is somewhat diminished in what he calls its 'naturalistic fallacy'.<sup>49</sup> This is largely the same 'fallacy' as Leys refers to as literalist, one that locates trauma naturally in external events. Alexander continues: 'First and foremost, we maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution.'<sup>50</sup> Here Alexander then draws a distinction between social crises and cultural, collective trauma. He says:

For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of these events quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go.<sup>51</sup>

46 Ibid., 33. Leys notes in relation to this: 'Hence the ambiguity of the term "trauma", which is often used to describe an event that assaults the subject from outside, but which according to the theme of mimetic identification is an experience or "situation" of identification that strictly speaking does not occur to an autonomous or fully coherent subject.' (Ibid.)

47 Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma' in Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (eds), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (London, 2004), 1.

48 Ibid., 4.

49 We might point to how Eriksen here assumes a self that might be compromised through the unravelling of community ties signalling an anti-mimetic stance, a self whose boundaries are breached by an external event, in turn suggesting a literalist stance in Leys terms.

50 Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', 8.

51 Ibid., 10.



A volcanic eruption of the kind we speak of here, is a social crisis, in Alexander's terms, but it only becomes trauma if it becomes part of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. As Pálsson notes above, the idea of trauma was not readily available to people in Vestmannaeyjar, or indeed Iceland more generally, in 1973. Still, the experiences that some people relate individually echo clearly those now regarded as symptomatic of trauma. This was not least the case, as the example from Pálsson above attests to, when people's familiar surroundings suddenly appeared both alien and dangerous, when the being at home in one's environment that Hepburn speaks about was so radically undermined. This formulation brings the notion of the 'uncanny' immediately to mind, the home that suddenly becomes unheimely, the safe haven that is suddenly threatening was central to Freud's formulation of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*). We would of course not be the first to draw attention to a certain correspondence between the idea of trauma and that of the uncanny. Freud famously, or infamously depending on one's point of view, spoke of the uncanny as the return of the repressed, either that which humanity in its evolutionary history has ordinarily surmounted, or that which the individual has consigned to their unconscious. It is the return of this repressed that echoes the notion of trauma and indeed the idea of wonder as formulated by Hepburn.

With these thoughts in mind, we now turn to the aftermath of the eruption, particularly the recent opening of the Eldheimar Museum that revolves around the eruption. It seems clear, for example from Pálsson's book, that remembering of the eruption has become fundamental to the local identity in Heimaey. Much of the public remembrance that takes place emphasises the resilience and the heroism of the people locally in overcoming such an event and rebuilding a vibrant community. Still, that leaves some people who express a sense of trauma, a thorough unmaking of their being, made all the more acute, arguably, because of the public emphasis on resilience. This a sense of trauma that has come to them belatedly, specifically in relation to the establishment of the Eldheimar Museum and the excavation work related to the museum. As such, we are not here discussing a situation like the one Alexander speaks of, where a community comes collectively to a sense of trauma. Rather we are speaking of a more complex situation marked by some people understanding their experience in terms of trauma, doing so belatedly and in the face of public emphasis on resilience and heroism. They feel this in a landscape that is simultaneously their ground of being and one of absolutely otherness, an otherness they are again now, as consequence of the excavation

work and the opening of the museum, utterly rapt in. This is what we seek to explore now.

## 5 The eruption and its (long) aftermath

In the days and weeks following the beginning of the eruption on Heimaey, it became clear that numerous residents had lost their home, buried under the glowing stream of lava and the black sandy pumice. Other residents, while their homes still stood, had lost many of their personal belongings. The impact of the eruption was more widespread still. Vestmannaeyjar are – and became again – home to one of the most important fishing harbours in Iceland, its closure was a significant if temporary hit for the country's economy. The eruption, moreover, required the relocation of nearly 5000 people, not a small task for a nation of only about 250,000 at that time.

The eruption on Heimaey lasted five months, coming to an end on 3 July 1973. Comprehensive operations began quickly after that with the aim of rebuilding infrastructure on the island and cleaning the thick layers of volcanic ash and pumice that covered the town. No effort was to be spared in allowing the evacuated residents to return home. The cleaning-up effort was aided by personnel from the US military. The US military, at this time, had a station in Keflavík not far from the island of Heimaey, the town Keflavík in fact having been the temporary home to many of evacuated islanders. Various volunteers from around the world joined the American soldiers and residents.

Many evacuees moved back to the island after the eruption had ended while others were incapable of returning for a variety of reasons, and still others refused to return and live where such a catastrophe had taken place. Individuals whose property had been damaged in the eruption received compensations. Many of the houses were cleaned and repaired soon after, however, the clean-up work was abandoned for buildings that had been deemed not worth salvaging. A great housing shortage emerged which deterred many from moving back to the island. A year after the eruption had ended, in the autumn of 1974, a local newspaper wrote that while many people had returned to the island, the social life in the town had been 'rather quiet'.

Decades have passed since the eruption came to an end. How do people now recall the events? One of our informants noted that the eruption was 'a sensitive topic for many and very few of those that experienced the event have come to terms with it. It is simply set to one side and life goes on. [...] I have heard that a visit to the island will stir up strong emotions in those who were

there.’ The Eldheimar Museum seems to have dramatized these reactions. It has given rise to mixed emotions in those residents who experienced the eruption. There are those who have decided against visiting the museum, and then those who have visited but have sworn never to go again.

Ever since the eruption ended in 1973, the inhabitants of Vestmannaeyjar have made various efforts to keep the memory of the event alive. On 3 July 1974, a specific commemorative programme was advertised which called for people to gather around the foot of the volcano where the mayor delivered a talk, followed by a parade leading to the local sports field. From that day onwards, a festival called *Goslokabátíð* (the End of Eruption Festival) has been held annually. In 1993, the Westman Islands Folk Museum opened an exhibition marking the twentieth anniversary of the end of the eruption. And during a local festival, held every year to coincide with a general national holiday at the beginning of August, the eruption is remembered. Monuments have been erected: in 1993, for example, the mayor of Vestmannaeyjar unveiled a glass sculpture titled *Máttur Jarðar* (The Power of Earth) by the celebrated Icelandic artist Leifur Breiðfjörð. This process of remembrance is for the islanders usually framed in terms of relief and joy over the eruption’s end. The current mayor captured this point perfectly in an interview, where he claimed that: ‘The eruption literally came up under people’s feet. [...] This was not seen as a cause for celebration, being forced to leave your home not knowing when or whether you would be able to return. However, witnessing the end of the eruption brought much joy.’ The joy, evoked here, can be construed as simply the version a town official is required to express. At the same time, we are of course not suggesting the end of the eruption was not an occasion for joy. Rather, what we are suggesting is that more recently there has been a change, as expressed by our interviewee above, and that remembering the eruption has become more problematic for islanders. This change, we think, is linked to the establishment of the Eldheimar Museum.

## 6 The village of memory

While there has been a great deal of continuity in how islanders have remembered the eruption, a shift occurred in the collective remembrance of the event when, in 2005, a project was commissioned which involved digging up a section of the town that was still buried under lava and pumice. First, voluminous layers of pumice were dug from above seven to ten houses that had been

submerged soon after the eruption began. The clean-up project began by the house of Suðurvegur 25 and the plan was to move from house to house on the same street, where the houses would be steadily revealed until they were fit to be displayed, standing under the open sky as an example of the impact molten volcanic lava has on buildings. The idea was that ‘in time there would arise a kind of village of memory that would create a powerful impression of how nature swept through people’s homes.’ The project was dubbed ‘Pompeii of the North’, referring to the fact that the town shared a similar fate to that ancient city in Italy.

It became clear soon after the 2005 excavation project had begun, that Suðurvegur 25 was not well suited for preservation, given that the house was badly damaged from heat exposure and was near collapse. However, the excavation had revealed another house, Gerðisbraut 10, located not far from Suðurvegur 25. The house on Gerðisbraut was in a better condition, there was still paint on the walls, inside and outside, and part of the roof was still in place. A decision was made to preserve this house, which would become the central piece in the new museum. In spring 2014, Eldheimar opened its doors to the first visitors, promoting itself as ‘a museum of remembrance.’ On the top floor, there is an exhibition dedicated to the eruption on Surtsey, which took place not far from the Vestmannaeyjar and lasted from 1963 to 1967. There is also a cafeteria on the same floor where guests can enjoy refreshments after viewing the exhibition and take in the view which looks over the town through an expansive window.

From its founding, Eldheimar has aimed to preserve the memory of the eruption, present the geological history of southern Iceland, educate visitors about the dangers of natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, and attract and promote tourism. The museum received funding from various sources, such as the Icelandic government, the town of Vestmannaeyjar, the Icelandic Tourist Board and the cargo transport company Eimskip. The project had received two awards before it was formally completed: the 2006 Scandinavian Travel Award, for one of the ten most interesting innovations in Scandinavian tourism, and the 2007 Icelandair Pioneer Award Winner, awarded for innovation with regard to positively promoting the country’s image and creating appeal for tourists.

## 7 Remembering trauma: covering and opening the wound

Before going on to describe the issues that have arisen in relation to the museum, we want to acknowledge how the difficulties of remembering the eruption and its consequences have manifested themselves outside of the museum. A key example here is the documentary film *Útlendingur heima* (Foreigner at Home) which tells the story of a man who grew up in the part of town that was entirely buried under the lava. He explains how he feels like he cannot return to his childhood home, because it is ‘just lava that I have to clamber over and look at some signs where the streets are marked.’ Another interlocutor in the film describes how she was incapable of visiting the lava field even after she had moved back to the island. ‘I did not even want to walk over the lava field, for a long, long time. My childhood was buried under there. All the beautiful green and the hill below. So much was taken away from me. And from all of us.’

Husband and wife Arnór and Helga, who both experienced the eruption, opened a café in 2010 which they named Vinaminni in honour of one of the 400 houses that were consumed in the flow of lava. The café was, according to promotion material, intended as a ‘collection of information about the neighbourhood that was buried under lava during the eruption.’ Inside the café there were photographs on display, the stories of the people who had lived in the area were exhibited, as well as tableware from the houses buried under the lava and other connected souvenirs produced for the café and sold there. The couple based the project on data which Helga began gathering in 1999. Helga’s motivation for the project came about as a result of being haunted by memories of the ‘neighbourhood under the lava’, in relation to which she claimed that not ‘a day went by without a memory carrying [her] through the lava wall and in her mind’s eye looking [...] over east side of town.’ The description that Helga offers recalls elements from the definition of trauma provided by Leys as we have discussed. There is the sense here of repetition, almost compulsive revisiting. The café appeared like a memorial to the vanished houses, streets and people that thrived there before the volcano erupted. As such, we might say, the café can be seen as an effort to move beyond the repetition that the trauma entails.

The café was closed in 2015 and all the the material that they had accumulated was posted on a website that collects information concerning the islands. The organisers of the ‘Pompeii of the North’ project were aware of the feelings that were associated with the establishment of the café, how those

feelings were echoed by many in the community, and knew from the onset that they would have to tread carefully. Irrespective of the fact that the individuals who had lost their homes in the eruption had received financial compensation, the consensus was that they should be consulted about the excavation project and the project organisers sought permission from the former homeowners, even if their ownership had come to an end.

What was the unease that the museum project provoked? We have reiterated above the words of one of the interlocutors in the documentary *Útlendingur heima*, referring to ‘all the green’ vanquished by the lava. Why is this significant? Clean-up operations on the island began almost immediately after the eruption ended. The inhabitants of Vestmannaeyjar made considerable effort to conserve the soil of the new land that had formed in the process of the eruption, and not least, to create green areas everywhere they could as if in response to the blackness of the ash and the cooling lava. However, the ‘Pompeii of the North’ project entailed digging up some of the green spaces that had been created, which revealed the pumice underneath, turning inside out as Luckhurst had it in relation to trauma. This process proved difficult for some. For example, one of the individuals involved in the work told us:

It felt great when everything had become so green and the soil was flourishing again. It was on the verge of becoming what it used to be like [...]. It was very frustrating to see all that black stuff come back to the surface. I just wanted to forget all about that time. We were digging up the past. It was terrible to reveal all that ash and then to see all that grass that we had planted disappear. It’s frustrating.

Another person we interviewed claimed that this experience was the most difficult time in the whole process that led to the opening of Eldheimar. She added that she was relieved when she saw the houses that had peered out of the black pumice buried once again.

During the formal opening ceremony of Eldheimar in spring 2014, the former owner of the house that is now on display in the museum, was invited to address the guests. In the talk, she described:

[how] thirty-eight years later [she was invited] to see the first remains of the house and [crawled] in through the window with a small flashlight. The desire to go in and explore outweighed reason and fear. When I entered the house, in complete darkness, flashlight in hand, I was

overcome by emotions. Various objects were still in their places. I was overwhelmed. It was a difficult moment.

Overwhelming emotions and memories washed over her, an experience she struggles with. However, in the talk she emphasized the pedagogic aspect of the story that Eldheimar tells, which she hopes will become useful for coming generations. ‘We are gathered here today, and I am proud to witness this milestone for Vestmannaeyjar, and I sincerely hope that our house will tell a fantastic tale and offer a vision that will live on for years to come.’

## 8 The Experience of Eldheimar

Eldheimar underlines the importance of documenting memories of those who experienced the eruption first hand. On the photograph below, you can see the space that is set to preserve these memories. Here, visitors at Eldheimar will be offered the opportunity to document their memories of the event. In this space, Eldheimar will work with people’s histories. The space is still undecorated at this stage and awaits the time when visitors are ready to bring their own memories. This moment will perhaps have to wait indefinitely, since many islanders are not prepared to take that step, to document their experience in public and thereby making it accessible to others.



The intended memory space at Eldheimar Museum. A photograph by Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson.

We recently talked to a woman who stated that:

I think it is very important that our countrymen are aware of what we went through. [...] I have been there twice, and I do not want to return. It’s a lot to take in and I have heard people talk about how overwhelming it is. You leave your house, and all the doors and all the shelves and all the lights are shaking. We were close to the volcano. It’s a bit of a nightmare, so I think that people are not very willing to discuss it.

These are the conditions in which Edheimar arose. The eruption and its consequences left a number of wounds; in the community and in the individuals, who were forced to live with the experience. It is interesting to wonder now that the museum has been properly established, how it is for people who harbour difficult memories of the disaster to walk through the museum.

Many of the numerous individuals that we interviewed agree with the sentiments communicated to us shortly after the ‘Pompeii of the North’ idea had surfaced, and later, at the onset of the Eldheimar project, namely, that it was ‘complete nonsense.’ Another individual, who experienced the eruption and lost his home and personal belongings, told us that they ‘just want to forget.’ It is no surprise therefore that visiting Eldheimar is for these individuals an ambivalent undertaking. A woman in her sixties for example described that she had made three attempts to walk through the museum. After she first walked through the museum doors, she felt a stir of ‘emotions, a sense of loss, and so on. [The third time] I started looking at it and [felt] that the museum was well designed. At first you enter the shock, which is the house and the story about the eruption.’ In another interview, we asked why the memories in Eldheimar were so difficult, and our respondent said it had to do with the kind of memories that the museum chooses to recollect. The people, he claimed:

[have] their entire life under there. And all their belongings and all their memories and everything. The family photos and god knows what. Everything they owned. [My friend] lost his house and everything was buried underneath. It was a newly-built house, he had lived there only for a short time. I can easily understand that people feel a pain in their stomach when they go to the museum and experience this.

In Vestmannaeyjar, the residents generally talk about life ‘before and after the eruption’, which underlines the extent to which the disaster impacted on the

local society. There is a sense in which Eldheimar stands as a monument to the changes that took place, a point noted in a few of the interviews carried out for this project. These same individuals are however not convinced that this monument was useful for their own process of recollection, and for residents in Vestmannaeyjar in general. As one of them put it: ‘These events would not be forgotten regardless of whether Eldheimar had been built or not. This is probably more for outsiders who want to know what happened. While the rest of us, who know deep down and remember everything, have no need for this monument. Not at all.’ These thoughts were echoed by another person we interviewed, who said that it was good that people knew what the inhabitants of Vestmannaeyjar were forced to go through, however, at the same time he told us that he had twice visited the museum but had no desire to return. For him, the eruption was a ‘horror’ and his visit to the museum was so overwhelming that leaving the premises had brought him immense relief.

## 9 Conclusion

In Hepburn’s work on the relationships that people have with nature, with their environment, we find an interesting and fruitful tension. Hepburn on the one hand seems to emphasise the human immersion in landscape, the way in which our being is grounded by our relations with the world around us. Such an account suggests an ordinary, relatively unreflecting stance towards nature. At the same time Hepburn suggests the utter otherness of nature, or indeed simply utter otherness, irreducible otherness, as a fundamental source of wonder as experience, often enough thrilling and terrifying at the same time. We have, tentatively and sketchily, sought to link these ideas with the understanding of trauma, in particular as formulated by Leys. The traumatic experience, as Leys notes, suggests the simultaneous overcoming of the self by the event to such an extent that the distinction between self and other becomes meaningless, and the separation of the self from the environment that has become other because of the self’s inability to master the experience itself. This can happen powerfully through latency, through the meeting of an initial experience and its later recall, its triggering by later events. This is precisely what has happened, we have sought to document, with the excavation work in preparation for and later the opening of the Eldheimar Museum. What we have here, then, is not cultural, collective trauma as Alexander formulates it. Rather, what we have is a more complex, and we would like to

think more interesting, scenario where some individuals have belatedly come to understand their experience as trauma, as the grounds of those experiences have literally been dug up. Moreover, they have come to understand their experiences as trauma in face of the public celebration of the stoicism and heroism, the resilience of the local people that the public remembrance of the eruption plays on.

Many residents locally were at first opposed to the idea of building Eldheimar. For those who seem to struggle the most with memories of the eruption, Eldheimar summons a myriad of difficult emotions. It might seem paradoxical but despite these emotions and experiences, the islanders, even those that suffered the most, seem to agree that Eldheimar is a step in the right direction. The events should be remembered and publically discussed, by inhabitants of the island, Icelanders in general and others, such as tourists. It is a well-known idea that museums are sometimes intended to heal wounds, create collective memories and transmit them to others. To what extent does this hold in the context of Eldheimar, and in the minds of those asked to share these memories with the museum? We should ask, what kind of significance does the process of sharing these memories carry for both current residents and the islanders who evacuated during the disaster and never resettled? People in Vestmannaeyjar have long stressed a strong self-image based on resilience, hard work, stoicism. The arrival of Eldheimar, however, frames the self-image in a slightly different manner, a frame that captures difficult memories that have previously lain dormant and ultimately unveils the collective trauma rooted in the disastrous eruption of 1973. Hepburn, as noted above, suggested that a sense of wonder might be the mechanism through which tragedy can become positive. We suggest that this has not happened yet in Heimaey. For that trauma has too recently been brought to the surface. At the same time, we wonder if Eldheimar Museum may in time foster such sense of wonder that the tragedy will produce something more positive still.

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