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The Affective Nature of Metafictional Trauma Narratives

Representing trauma through Affect theory

in Agota Kristof's Trilogy and Ian McEwan's Atonement

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"I am no longer a shuddering speck of existence, alone in the darkness;--I belong to them and they to me; we all share the same fear and the same life...I could bury my face in them, in these voices, these words that have saved me and will stand by me."

- Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Introduction

The following thesis takes into consideration two of the best-known literary achievements of Hungarian author and playwright Agota Kristof, and one of the greatest contemporary British writers, Ian McEwan: Kristof's trilogy, composed of *The Notebook* (1986)*, The Proof* (1991), and *The Third Lie* (1996), and McEwan's *Atonement* (2001).

To begin with, the first unusual aspect of the present dissertation precisely lies in bringing together under the same analytical attempt two authors that have never been coupled and explored together. As a matter of fact, in the latest decades, the majority of scholars and critics having approached both authors distinctly, have done so by focusing on a set of specific themes and issues which, it turns out, both authors apparently share. When going through the critical literature having been written about Kristof's Trilogy, readers may come across a redundancy of articles minutely discussing the metafictional features of the three novels, most of them attempting at casting light on the labyrinthic and enigmatic writing and plot. The narrating voices in the Trilogy are unstable and confusing and the metanarrative features whereby the plot is continually separated onto different levels of fictionality challenge the reader's suspension of disbelief at every page. In addition to this, the entirety of this formal and stylistic apparatus is deeply and compromisingly interwoven with a highly traumatic universe, that of war, and with what a similar historical event forces people to: abuses, violence, survival, misery, abandonment, and exile. Ultimately, the effects of all this are dramatically reinforced by the fact that precisely two children are both the narrators recounting of and the main characters accomplishing and undergoing traumatic experiences. As such, readers follow the development and creation of a trauma narrative, emerging from the experience of the protagonists themselves who spend most of their life attempting at making sense of the trauma they witnessed as children and desperately looking for the truth. Metafiction here becomes a writing laboratory to represent and, eventually, come to term with trauma.

When diving into the critical apparatus surrounding an apparently far and different text such as *Atonement*, the number of keywords and key-concepts being identical to the Trilogy is astonishing. Once again, a novel-within-a-novel, that is to say, a purely metafictional narrative. Once again, such narrative is offered through the perspective of a young child, Briony Tallis, out of what appears to be, at first, a personal, deeply felt and innocent passion for writing and inventing alternative worlds, a typical child-like game of imagination, only to acquire, across the span of a lifetime, the role of a survival strategy to respond to a personal trauma. Once again, a trauma that is specifically Briony's, yet it is grounded in the midst of the chaos and pain of World War II. Finally, the two works share a very similar understanding of the role and consequences implied in the act of imagining and writing.

Namely, it has been pointed out that in the Trilogy the twin's active and concrete grasp on the instrument of writing enables them to alter their reality to the point of chaotically merging it with fiction and, more importantly, with lies. Similarly, Briony is eventually forced to recognize that a frenzied and unwary creative spirit eager to modify reality to conform it with the expectations of her childish imagination may damage other people's lives in a way that only a more empathic, realistic, experience-based narrative has the potential to atone, regenerate and make up for, although if only in the realm of fiction. Thus, what comes to the fore as determining the true nature and essence of both narratives is precisely the way how they both exploit stylistic features (i.e., metafictional devices and tropes) to render with the aid of language the complicated, uncertain, painful and, at times, unspeakable experience of trauma. On the one hand, through what can be defined a first-level narration, that of the fictional events, readers witness how a trauma occurs; on the other hand, through a second-level narration, that of the fictional characters writing about such trauma, readers are given access behind the curtains of a narrative creation in order to see the ways in which a device like writing can be used to cope with trauma. The ethical implications are pressing: readers must be able to decide what to believe in and, consequently, how they should respond to the traumatic representations within the fictional world of the novels but also, in some cases, to the possibility that such representations may awake deeper and more personal reflections about our own mechanism of survival when facing past traumas. From this perspective, this thesis finally hopes to demonstrate that literature is not a self-contained world, its communication channel with real lives is always active, and it expects readers to feel involved at an emotional and ethical level. For the present purpose, the final question that will hopefully be answered is whether trauma narratives such as the Trilogy or *Atonement* may trigger some new perspectives about how it might be possible to find an alternative language and voice to our own traumas.

Last but not least, having presented both the content and the purpose of the present literary analysis, it remains to be disclosed the theoretical apparatus or method through which most of the questions are to be answered to. Tons of ink have been consumed not only to write about the history of human trauma, but also to discuss and analyze all the existing trauma-related literature. With this in mind, the aim of this study wouldn't cast any new light to the field unless the very theories and methods that for centuries have informed it changed. Hence, literary representations of trauma are to be considered and analyzed here under the lens of a very specific current of studies and theories, namely the Affect Theory. Such theory, emerging from the intersection of various disciplines, will be the constant guiding light and *fil rouge* underlying the following study and it will serve the purpose of feeding and nourishing the literary analysis of both novels in the attempt at casting new light upon the ways in which we can retell trauma and revise our response to it, emotionally and ethically. The

choice of presenting and applying Affect theory to the analysis of trauma narratives such as those of McEwan and Kristof is not casual, since as readers will be guided to discover, the theory of affects has proved to be illuminating in the field of literary critique over the last decades, owing to its essential features making the enigmatic concept of "affect" well suited for the understanding of formal aspects of narrative. In the present case, it is to be demonstrated that the narrative device of metafiction can be originally and newly explained by borrowing from the field of affects. Moreover, and perhaps, most importantly, it is gradually more evident today that affect, as a philosophical and psychological entity, shares interesting features with the physiological and emotional ways determining the occurrence of a trauma.

This considered, the following thesis will first extensively introduce readers to the challenging and intriguing concept of affect, by mainly focusing on its historical and conceptual developments and the various fields of study where this theory has predominantly made room for itself. Once affects' main features are carefully outlined and presented, they will be firstly applied to the analysis of the formal content of Kristof's and McEwan's texts – as above-mentioned, the metafictional trope— willfully demonstrating that the metanarrative apparatus can be defined as one of the forms of affect. Such analysis will be preparatory to better explore the central content of the study, in other words, understanding the affective nature of a formal structure such as metafiction will hopefully highlight the equally affective nature of the thematic content, that is to say, trauma representations. From "Where does affect lie in a metanarrative structure?" to "Why is a similar structure suitable to represent a trauma?" and, finally, "Where does affect lie in a traumatic experience?", will be some of the questions that the second chapter will dwell on in order to show that trauma can be the "content" of affect. In conclusion, since affects can be identified as forces, intensities, vibrations putting bodies into motion and connection with one another, thus creating a web of encounters (these notions will be adequately explained further in the text), it is absolutely necessary that the present thesis considered not only the "bodies" from which affects arise and emerge, but also those bodies being affected. Hence, before drawing any conclusion, the final chapter will explore the importance of the relationship between affect and empathy, a concept that has always been a pillar of most literary studies and debates, and with regards to which affect studies have recently provided interesting and new insights that were not available before. This will present the opportunity to briefly discuss the role of the reader facing deeply affective trauma narratives, both from an emotional and ethical perspective, concluding thus the literary journey within the Trilogy and *Atonement* with a final reflection on a possible ethics of affect.

Chapter One

The form of Affect:
the Trilogy and Atonement as metafictional narratives

1. What is affect?

In the name of the peculiar indeterminacy of affect, retracing and defining the history and evolution of its theory turns out to be a challenging and binding task. It is nonetheless important for the purpose of this dissertation that some dots are connected in order to pave the way for a better understanding of how Affect theory might support and empower the field of Trauma Studies and narratives.

To begin with, it is interesting to notice that when coming across the concept of "affect", whether it appears in a psychology manual, a political treaty or sentimental literature, it is commonly accompanied by the well-known concept of "emotion". However, while we might easily fall prey to a contemporary and Western tendency of simplification and approximation by considering the two terms as rather interchangeable, the wide variety of theoretical and critical texts written within the spectrum of the Affect theory all agree on one stance for the least: affects are different from emotions. The subtle difference can actually be reduced to a question of measurement, since emotions can be named, seen, described and categorized while affects appear to act at more pre-conscious and pre-emotional level. To an extent, it might be suggested that the first symptoms concerning the existence of affects emerged as a consequence of intellectual and philosophical attempts to define the nature of emotions. To put it simply, the more philosophers, scholars, writers eagerly tried to pin emotions with precision on a categorizing grid (i.e., anger manifests itself differently from happiness and this is due to specific bodily and emotional reactions), the more they gradually realised that a range of similar but not identical feelings or experiences concerning human bodies remained hovering. From here began the centuries-old effort to identify whatever was lying in that mysterious unknown, an effort which became more pressing especially within the historical and cultural frame of the debate concerning the mind/soul-body dualism.[1] As a way to explain any possible relation between the two

[1] In contemporary philosophy, dualism implies that the mind and the body, more precisely the brain, are two ontologically separate entities with no causal relation whatsoever. Originally, the debate concerned the opposition between soul and body, and Plato was the first to passionately describe the soul as independent from the body and

entities that from Plato to Descartes had carefully been intended as separate, Baruch Spinoza compellingly introduced affects as a third and bridging factor. Indeed, Spinoza contradicted Descartes' opposition between 'res cogitans' and 'res extensa', arguing, instead, that both are God's attributes, qualities. Through them, the divine essence manifests itself as the ensemble of all material and non-material phenomena. As a consequence, things and ideas (mind-body) are modes, ways of being of respectively the "extensa" and the "cogitans". This concept implies in itself the idea of a possibility, a potentiality and virtuality which are qualities typical of Affect. As a matter of fact, Spinoza's "modes" are also labelled "affections" and, when explaining the nature of human beings, the philosopher claims that each person, with his or her mind and body, belongs to Nature and, thus, is a finite particle of a potentially infinite entity (God). Such finite particle of potentiality is what Spinoza defines "conatus", a sort of self-preservation impulse representing each person's effort to resist any element that might increase or diminish someone's potential for action. What determines any possible variation to humans' potentiality is, precisely, "affects". More precisely, he would use the term "affection", from Latin *affectus*, which indicates a change, a variation or modification[2]. Thus, according to Spinoza, affects are the affections of the body which can be diminished or increased, or the capacity of a body "to act and be acted upon"[3]. These affects are nor ideas or passions, they are the visceral forces guiding our bodies to modify their state before an idea is clearly envisioned and a passion is deeply felt and recognized, this is why affects are generally understood as pre-conscious. Most importantly, such forces constantly move within and around us, creating thus a perpetual connection of bodies, a web of encounters which determine the impingements affecting bodies' potential and capacity. Spinoza's ideas about affects and affections certainly were innovative and even challenging for his time; yet, they somehow went unnoticed to his contemporaries. It was not

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immortal. Aristotle later refuted such perspective, considering the soul as part of the human body: a human faculty or function, indeed. The debate kept animating the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as well, during which a more unitary understanding of the concept of the soul arose so as to include the idea of Nature itself. Yet, 17th-century modern science, under the predominant guidance of Descartes, gradually dismantled the possibility of an animated and lively Nature, reducing it to a purely mechanical entity. The French philosopher's theory represented a watershed after which two main fields of studies emerged: that of the English empiricism, studying the processes and effects of the mind rather than its essence, and that of the French school, embodied by Buffon, and considering the human body as an integral part of Nature, like animals. This represents the philosophical and cultural background nourishing the contemporary debate about the mind-body dualism which the Affect theorists aimed at overcoming and solving.

[2] Schmitter, Amy M."17th and 18th Century Theories of Emotions", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [Online] Available at < https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/emotions-17th18th/LD5Spinoza.html>

[3] Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J. (ed.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 1.

until the 19th and 20th century that his thoughts fueled the curiosity of intellectuals and philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. To some of their theories—a couple of which will be briefly considered over the following lines—we owe some of the first concrete attempts at overcoming and solving the old mind-body/reason-emotions divide, which would eventually prove fundamental in paving the way for the field of contemporary studies that determined the so-called "Affective Turn," a label coined by Patricia Ticineto Clough.

The first official appearance of such expression lies among the pages that animate the outstanding work of Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, whose endeavor at recruiting and gathering the multiple intellectual domains concerning the cryptic nature of affect gave life, in 2009, to *The Affect Theory Reader.* The book appears as a sort of handbook for any person being interested in understanding how affect can represent a new way to conceive of our reality as something deprived of borders and categories but, rather, as a space for continuous potential change. Affect is here identified as a vector—the "forces" mentioned above—rather than an object of knowledge. As a consequence, the emergence of the so-called "affect studies" represented the creation of a new field of knowledge whose very essence is indeterminacy, instability and heterogeneity:

> There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds. [4]

When entering the varied world of affect studies, it is possible to notice that, across time, such studies have predominantly developed within two main currents: one, mainly exposed by Brian Massumi[5]'s works and emerging from the deleuzian concept of becoming and spinozian *affectus*, that is, one exploring the possibilities and capacities for bodies to change; the other, firstly inaugurated by Silvan Tomkins, concerning a more "Freudian," psychological and biological perspective conceiving of affect as a biological component preceding the conscious formation of emotions.

As far as the first domain is concerned, an interesting point of departure for a better understanding of affect comes from the theories of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, which are deeply informed by the already-mentioned contribution of Spinoza. For the present dissertation, one of the pivotal thoughts elaborated by Deleuze is the so-called "Real-But-Abstract", one of the first

[4] Gregg, Seigworth, 3-4.

definitions for the concept of Affect which certainly inspired later thinkers such as Brian Massumi. As above-mentioned, affect theory came to be seen as a real challenge to the typical western *Weltanschauung* whereby the world is understood as strictly categorized and divided into a sort of binary grid. We conceptualize reality by framing and codifying it, we have set specific standards and traits that allow us to define people, objects, animals, ideas, feelings accordingly. However, such rigid system of categorization inevitably ignores one of the most deeply human features: change. By pinning reality onto a grid, we remove change, potentiality, movement from the picture. We have been accustomed to categorizing the body as well: the female body as opposed to the male body, a sick body versus a healthy one, a young or an old body and so on. As a consequence, the grid would also strictly separate the mind from the body, conceiving of the latter as nothing but a recipient for the former. However, when accurately reflecting upon it, if we take the brain, an organic thus bodily entity, to be the house of the mind, understood as the abstract site of thoughts, ideas, language, opinions and other human functions, how can we state so firmly and imperatively that the mind is not a bodily matter? Yet, if we only understand realities and bodies as existing in separate, specific states, we miss the possibility of seeing what happens in-between: as Massumi wonders, "Where has the potential for change gone? How does a body perform its way out of a definitional framework […]?"[6] To borrow from Deleuze, how could we get accustomed to perceiving the body as "real-but-abstract"? With this expression, the French philosopher achieved a first philosophical attempt at envisioning our experience in a space of possibility, of virtuality, where the real world and the abstract ideas concerning it are to be understood as a unique, a continuum, rather than separate. By applying this to the body, it is possible, for instance, to consider the potential of a hand, a potential contained in its movement: a hand can move, yet it can move according to a wide range of movements and trajectories before ultimately sticking to a position. The space between a position and another, it's the space for the potential, or the affect. Similarly, a hand can be used to hold or grab something but, also, as a surface to write on. A hand is one real thing, but it can *potentially* be multiple things. Finally, this potential of "being" can be affected (increased or diminished), and it can affect the surrounding environment.

Moving onto the second current of affect studies, this one was amply introduced by psychologist Silvan Tomkins who firstly presented his definition of affect as a counterresponse to Freud's theory of "drives" which would lead the psychology of the time. Considering such drives as too contingent and body-place specific to account for the wide varieties of humans' desire, Tomkins posited affects as a more flexible and abstract solution. It is in this current of studies that the theory

[6] Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.* Durham NC: Duke University Press, 13.

of affects takes on a more psychological essence and becomes a key factor in the exploration and understanding of human emotions and this is precisely because, as mentioned above, affects differ from emotions. Tomkins identified nine specific affects which are to be considered as universal, bio-chemical, neuro-physiological mechanisms of the body which amplify triggering information and it is this very process of amplification that makes affect the primary system for human motivation rather than the drives[7]. These affects are: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy (the positive ones); surprise-startle (the neutral one); fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage (the negative ones with an amplifying function); disgust, dissmell, shame-humiliation (the negative ones with an attenuating effect). To illustrate this, hunger certainly is a deeply innate human drive, yet it is not hunger that motivates us to act, rather, it is a specific affect that, by triggering our hunger, pushes us to do something to satisfy that drive. It might be anger or distress, for instance. From this perspective, affects can be identified as a variety of autonomic vibrations echoing within the sensory walls of our body and producing sensations, perceptions, intensities that arise from a pre-conscious and pre-emotional condition which, eventually, trigger a potential and unexpected change in the body. If we think of goosebumps, they can be considered an affective manifestation of an emotional response to an object or a situation which we acknowledge as emotional only once our body has already activated itself to manifest a change starting from within: in most cases, goosebumps take us by surprise.

Finally, even though the more philosophical and the more psychological fields of affect studies were the first sparking the debate and interest around this notion, in the last decades, the purely versatile and flexible nature of affects has made it possible for several intellectuals and scholars to explore the potential of affect studies in new areas:

- Research on the concept of *embodiment* both in human and non-human nature;
- Studies on cybernetics, neuro-science, bio-engineering and robotics;
- Approaches to the feminist discourse, Cultural Studies and bio-politics;
- Political stances concerning feminist and queer exponents together with activists fighting for disabilities.

Having generally presented what Affect theory mainly consists in, it is now possible to venture into the core of the present study. As a matter of fact, to further explore the points briefly introduced in the final lines of the introduction to this thesis, Affect theory will be both the form and the content,

[7] Adam, Frank J. and Wilson, Elizabeth A. *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook Foundations for Affect Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 26. [Online] Available at: https://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/vgvtq

the structure and substance of the analysis. As far as the form of affect is concerned, this thesis aims at exploring and analysing the most intrinsic narrative implications of Metafiction. As mentioned in the introduction, the metafictional structure joins both Agota Kristof's trilogy and Ian Mc Ewan's novel and represents the form as well as the content of the books to the extent that any piece of literature using metafictional devices and techniques inevitably tells the story of literature itself, of writing, of narrative aspirations and difficulties. This considered, it can be suggested that metafiction here represents a formal manifestation of affect in that it is essentially a narrative and technical device resting on two different levels—a novel-within-a-novel, a story-within-a-story—and this doubleness which is so embedded in the metafictional discourse may narratively represent the sensory surfaces, or walls, of the body that Massumi refers to in the attempt of explaining affect as an intensity arising from the constant movement of feelings and experiences which bounce back and forth within the emptiness that exists between one wall and the other[8]. With regards to what is here going to be referred to as the "content" of affect, to distinguish it from the application of affect theory to the concept of metafiction at a formal level, it is the domain of Trauma narratives and literary representations of traumatic experiences that is to be analysed. Once again, Kristof's trilogy is a deeply and thickly trauma-related story, dense in episodes concerning sexual abuses, childhood violence, paedophilia, abandonment, exile and the horrors of war. Most of the traumatic experience is narrated, endured and even accomplished by the two main characters who are, precisely, children at the beginning of the trilogy, that is to say when the actual cruelties take place. The rest of the narrative is, consequently, about the entire process of coping with childhood trauma and, to this extent, the issue of metafiction becomes crucial for the trauma recovery since both twins are profoundly dedicated to the act of writing as a mechanism to come to terms with and make sense of their past. Similarly, *Atonement* is a novel about war, rape and family struggles mostly experienced by the perspective of young Briony, once again, a child and, once again, a character discovering solace and relief in the controversial act of novelistic and highly imaginative writing. Thus, trauma stands out as the thematic manifestation of affect, intended as a phenomenon with highly affective resonance. It will be possible to demonstrate this by analysing the similarities that affect and trauma share and how these adequately emerge from the pages of the studied novels. By merging affect theory with the study of metafictional devices and traumatic narratives, this thesis hopefully aims at providing a detailed study of how such theory can endow us with new perspectives on the ways trauma can be literally represented.

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[8] Massumi, 24.

Finally, affect theory will not only be applied to the study of metafiction and trauma, but it will also serve as a sort of emotional metronome to explore readers' reactions to affective narratives of trauma. As a matter of fact, affect arises from within spaces, it is felt as an intensity, an echo, a resonance and, by applying this to literature, certain narratives can both technically and thematically provoke affect, as a vibration that moves from the words on the pages and it reaches the sensory surface of human bodies where, by resonating, specific feelings unconsciously emerge and might provoke various kinds of bodily reactions and manifestations. As a consequence, once having studied the relationship between affect and metafiction and the one between affect and trauma, the text will explore the implications that such relationships may have on the overall affective reception of both stories on the part of the reader. Be it the highly disturbing empathic response provoked by the twins' narratives which may, in some cases, force the reader to pause and even close the book for a few moments before proceeding, or the deeply emotional empathic reaction called forth by the touching war narrative of *Atonement*, both the Trilogy and McEwan's text present a strong affective stance with more or less unpredictable responses. Sometimes, not a single and clear emotional response exists. Sometimes, readers feel but without knowing how to act according to their feelings. From this perspective, affect also entails a spectrum of (un)ethical reactions. This is why when our bodies are affected at some level, something takes place within ourselves that might lead us to activate before we acquire full awareness of the ethical and moral value of our response. In some cases, once our conscience has recognized the feelings that an affect has provoked, we might accept them and act accordingly, in other cases, we might find ourselves at war with them and this conflict between affects and morality may ultimately generate a deep state of ambiguity and paralysis, or even, suspension. This considered, before drawing some final considerations, the present text will analyse the ethical or unethical stances attached to the range of possible emotional reactions that the affective nature of the Trilogy and *Atonement* may incite in their readers, with special attention to the moral implications of a very specific response, that is to say suspension and this is mainly due to the fact that this state entails a hidden powerful potential for action which makes it extremely similar to affect itself. Finally, Affect theory will be, to some extent, the guiding light of the present dissertation, illuminating certain narrative features in a new and challenging way, with the hope to reinforce and deepen rather recent intersection between Affect Studies and Literary theory.

2. The affective forms of metafiction

"Metafiction" is a sort of umbrella term which can include devices belonging to fictional works in general, whether it is a novel, a theatrical piece or a film and, for the purpose of this thesis, the term is used with specific reference to literary works. The concept of metafiction can be regarded

by now as a rather 'old' notion referring to a literary form that has been majorly successful during the Modernist and Post-modernist age of the 20th century. Its origins are not certain; however, most literary scholars date the first manifestations of a self-reflective sort of fiction back to Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605). The *Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* defines such device as "fiction […] which reflects on or refers to itself as a work of fiction"[9]. As such, a metafictional text generally aims at disrupting the reader's suspension of disbelief, which characterizes the readership's intentional choice of getting along with the idea that a story and its characters are real when they are evidently not so, since they belong to a fictional work. In a self-conscious narrative, the author willingly exploits and manipulates the narration so as to constantly remind the reader that what he or she is reading is an invented world. This can be achieved in several ways: the author might directly intervene in the narrated content, either as a voice addressing the reader, judging or commenting the content itself, such as in the case of Henry Fielding's strong and, for his times, innovative authorial voice, or even as a character, as John Fowles masterly accomplishes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Moreover, the story may represent characters dealing with the world of literature themselves. For instance, they can be writers and, thus, allow the reader to follow them throughout the process of fictional creation as it generally happens when watching a 'Behind the Scenes' tape of a film. This 'story-within-the-story' pattern, also known as embedded narrative, can be better understood and visualized with the term 'mise en abyme', a term borrowed from the domain of heraldic art and eventually adopted within a more meta-picturesque context between the Middle Age and the Renaissance, as demonstrated by the emblematic work by Jan van Eyck, "The Arnolfini Portrait" (1434). The painting is not limited to a simple frontal representation of the setting, its details and the two dominant standing figures in the centre, but thanks to the presence of a mirror at the back of the canvas, the painter found an interesting expedient so as to replicate the content of the painting itself but seen from a different perspective, meaning, from the back, by thus making it possible for the creator himself to appear in his own illustration. This device, according to its uses, eventually produces a double-mirror effect, whereby an image is infinitely replicated within a single frame by force of reflections[10]. Moreover, as van Eyck's portrait demonstrates, from an artistic perspective this effect also achieves the challenging role of breaking the so-called "fourth wall", the wall that, at theatre, separates the actors from the audience[11]. In other words, this imaginary wall can be regarded as the very confine between fiction and reality in the realm of visual and

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[9] Bran, Nicol. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 36

[10] Iannizzi, Ilaria and Saporiti, Marco. "Mise en abyme a colazione", in *La Tigre di Carta, Arte,* N. 20, May 2019.

[11] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "fourth wall". Encyclopedia Britannica, 22 Jun. 2022. [Online] Available at: https://www.britannica.com/art/fourth-wall

narrative arts, too. By breaking it, thus, by creating a metafictional, self-referential work of art, its creator can unveil the sources and devices applied to the fictional content. One of the most famous and earliest literary examples of a similar narrative composition is André Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs*[12], where the main character, Edouard, offers an alternative to the narrator's voice and main plot by writing a journal about a novel he would like to compose which happens to share many similarities with the story line Edouard belongs to. Finally, one last distinction should be drawn since, when it comes to literary theory, the term 'metafiction' is often interchanged with 'metanarrative'. Although this interchangeability is partly accepted, it is however important to specify that the term 'metafiction' specifically refers to "comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative"[13], whereas 'metanarration' implies the narrator's direct revealing of and reflections about the process of creation and narration itself. All this considered, it is easy to understand the way in which both self-reflexive utterances evidently entail a broader discourse verging on the ethics of fiction, namely the debated relationship between falsehood and reality, and on a more conscious approach to the techniques and structures underlying creation.

Such discourse is certainly predominant for both Kristof and McEwan's works. In other words, what emerges as determining and challenging from their novels, is not simply the plot as such, with its beginning, twists, complications, climaxes and solutions, but it is the very way in which the narrating voices, the episodes, the themes and the techniques chosen by both authors constantly remind readers that what they are reading is pure fiction and, in doing so, they compel readers to approach such texts at two different levels: that of reading and that of interpretation. On the one hand, the reader goes through the text and reacts to its plot, its characters and its themes at face value – for instance, one may get particularly attached and affectionate to Robbie and Cecilia's love story in *Atonement*. On the other hand, on closing the books, no reader can actually avoid a re-reading and a revaluation of everything that took place at the plot-level throughout the novel. This occurs because it is only at the end that the metafictional hints scattered throughout both narratives come to be charged of a real function forcing the reader, firstly, to reflect upon the new meaning that the novels acquire if considered from the metafictional perspective and, secondly, to extract such reflections about fiction, reality, the ethics of writing and the likes and to adapt them to broader considerations

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[12] Calabrò, Paolo. "*Mise en Abyme.* Un romanzo filosofico di Daniel Baron", in *Filosofia e Nuovi Sentieri,* December 2019. [Online] Available at: https://filosofiaenuovisentieri.com/2019/12/18/mise-en-abyme-un-romanzo-filosofico-di-daniele-baron/

[13] Neumann, Birgit and Nünning, Ansgar. "Metanarration and Metafiction", In: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *The Living Handbook of Narratology.* Hamburg: Hamburg University. [Online] Available at: https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/50.html.

in our everyday life, such as in the way we personally approach writing, reading and the world of fiction itself. To illustrate this, at a first reading, readers can accept the fact that both Lucas and Claus, the trilogy's twins, enjoy keeping a secret notebook where they can note down their adventures as most children often do, without the need for this to imply anything deeper. However, once having turned the last page of the last of the three novels, *The Third Lie,* one might feel that the entire trilogy's purpose and meaning wouldn't perhaps be complete unless one returned to the first novel and approached its pages with a more critical and conscious attitude: why do the twins actually write? What do their reflections about writing, lying, using certain words imply within and outside the plot itself? What moral, if there is any, can be grasped and absorbed?

Thus, the following sections will analyse the formal and stylistic features making both novels metafictional texts, together with a reflection on the thematic implications of these types of narratives, by concluding with the application of affect theory to what will emerge from analysis, hoping to demonstrate the highly affective nature of a formal device such as metafiction.

3. The Trilogy

3.1 Metafiction in The Notebook

Kristof's trilogy, composed of *The Notebook* (1986), *The Proof* (1988) and *The Third Lie* (1991), follows the complex, labyrinthic and enigmatic story of two twins, referred to as a single "We" in the first novel and as Lucas and Claus/Klaus from the second one, as they grow up and grow apart in the midst of private and collective trauma of abandonment and war.

To begin with, from a purely metafictional perspective, the titles themselves of the three novels are definitely revealing of the self-reflective status of Kristof's writing. Indeed, the twins' story is, among other things, also about writing. *The Notebook* is essentially a puzzle of exercises and experiments: on the one hand, there are the physical and emotional exercises of resilience and apathy that the twins accomplish in their everyday life as a way to survive a harsh and cruel reality, to toughen up their body and soul; on the other, such exercises are consequently transcribed in their *grand cahier* as short narrative fragments, episodes. In the first part of the Trilogy, nothing is left to chance. The author carefully highlights the way in which the twins consciously decide to approach writing, in other words, they do not start by keeping records of their experience from scratch. Actually, a "big dictionary"[14] is the only other (unusual) item the twins carry in their small suitcase besides some clothes when arriving at their grandmother's house. In this way, the author immediately forces the

[14] Kristof, Agota. 'The Notebook', 'The Proof', 'The Third Lie'. *Three novels by Agota Kristof.* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 3.

reader to put more or less consciously attention to the role that the act of writing, and more in general, language is meant to have across the upcoming narrative. With a similar intent, the emblematic object of this story, the notebook, is introduced no further than chapter two and the reader immediately discovers its enigmatic role since it is kept hidden by the twins in the attic[15]. The interesting metanarrative element to consider, is that the twins present the notebook as a real writing laboratory. They start keeping records of what happens to them in order to modify the burden that their daily life implies, they believe that by exploiting the potential of an essential, simple, dry, objective language, one can reduce the actual psychological and emotional value of real-life events, a dynamic that is already anticipatory of interesting reflections about the relationship between narrative and trauma that will come later in the text. As children, they soon familiarize with the weight that words can have, by thus positing an assumption which may pertain to the metanarrative trope, since it forces readers to take a moment to ponder and consider the hidden potential of words and writing. The twins are evidently unable to remain indifferent when being insulted by their grandmother or by other people in the village[16] and, as a consequence, they "[…]don't want to blush or tremble anymore", a declaration suggesting that they have experienced feelings of shame and fear, and to avoid this, they "[…] want to get used to abuse, to hurtful words."[17] This is the spirit guiding their secret writing experience, which the reader is actually given the chance to access from the first page of the first book of the Trilogy, corresponding, certainly enough, to the twins' notebook itself. As such, not only can readers read the content of the *cahier,* but they can also see it.

Indeed, with regards to the graphic perspective, the pages catch one's attention with lots of blank spaces and margins, the written content being extremely essential, much is left to silence and absence. This is a clear consequence of style itself, since the twins obsessively train themselves so as to write in a sober, aseptic and minimal manner. The paragraphs are a composition of short descriptive sentences ("We are lying on the corner seat in the kitchen. Our heads are touching"[18]), some of them being glued to one another so as to form a small paragraph, others being isolated. In general, the style is dry, presenting very few subordinated constructions. With regards to the massive presence of statements, Garcìa Cela has interestingly pointed out that this particular syntactic structure tends to have a reinforcing effect, allowing repetitions and aiming at a sort of linguistic purge of the narrated

[15] Kristof, 7.

[16] Kristof, 20.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Kristof, 18.

content[19]. By stating, rather than narrating reality, the twins can realize their project of a true writing: one deprived of adjectives with subjective traces, aspiring to a solid morphology, exploiting repetitions that can get them accustomed to the real meaning of hurtful and bad words, briefly, a kind of writing being far from an extra-ordinary act crafted by the soul and mind of a lyrical I, but rather an autonomic habit, an exercise implying no emotional engagement whatsoever, much similar to the mechanical act of riding a bike. Thus, the more the narrative turns into a "masse compacte"[20], a cement-like structure, the more it can bear the inexplicable burden of the twins' intolerable sufferance.

What further contributes to the satisfaction of the twins' emotional needs of silencing the sources of pain in their life, is the formal objectivity which, besides being obtained through the synthetic and meagre syntax, marked by frequent repetitions and a slow but rigid rhythm, is also conveyed through an overall aseptic style and the linguistic register. As a matter of fact, one can hardly believe that the fragmented and short episodes composing the puzzling notebook are written by two children. At the level of the narration, identified in a never-too recognizable "We", the register predominantly reflects a very standard language, by locating this book far from the literary categories of the realist tradition or war literature, where, in both cases and to different extents, part of the grandeur has been sometimes the adherence to and borrowing from popular, dialectal linguistic shades. For instance, one can hardly forget the way Zola's characters strongly emerge from the pages as realistic portraits of the Parisian suburbs' life conditions, by carefully adopting a low, popular and vulgar language. Or, as far as war literature is concerned, novels such as Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* illustrate how, on the one hand, language became a powerful tool to picture the cruelty and violence experienced in the trenches by sticking to a very precise, faithful and suggestive vocabulary. On the other, these novels also represented a realistic portrait of cultural and linguistic crossovers, since war would bring people from different countries to undergo the same experience, and, thus, war narratives often present linguistic influences and borrowings. Insults and curses, vulgar and violent words are only reproduced through reported speech, enabling the narrating "We" to take ample distance from what is told.

As far as the twins' thoughts or experiences are concerned, the two carefully conceal them behind a style and register which has an evidently numbing and anesthetizing effect. They avoid exposing themselves because this would put them into a vulnerable position where they might

[19] Garcìa Cela, Maria del Campo, "Pour une didactique de la cruautè. Le savoir-faire de l'écriture chez Agota Kristof." Salamanca: University of Salamanca, 2013, in *Thélème*, Vol. 28., p. 8. [Online] DOI: https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_THEL.2013.v28.40267

[20] Id., 7.

undergo even more sufferance than that they are already exposed to on a daily basis. To illustrate this, when going to a bookseller to buy paper and pencils for their writing project, the twins' dialogue with the local man is highly contrastive and dissimilar and, moreover, the bookseller himself makes a point concerning the young boys' language by almost voicing any possible doubt or perplexity shared by the reader, too:

> "You can't buy anything without money."
> We don't say anything else, we just look at him. He looks at us too. His forehead is damp with sweat. After a while he shouts:
> "Don't look at me like that! Get out!"
> We say:
> "We are quite prepared to effect certain tasks for you in exchange for these things. We could water or weed your garden, for example, carry parcels…"
> He shouts again:
> "I don't have a garden! I don't need you! And in the first place, can't you talk normally?"
> "We do talk normally."
> "Is it normal, at your age, to say 'quite prepared to effect'?"
> "We speak correctly."[21]

As a way to remove all readers' doubts, it is the very following chapter ("Our Studies", chapter 12), the one in charge of unveiling what the two are actually up to, by thus allowing readers not only to look back on the just narrated content, but also to watch out on the to the upcoming written content with the awareness of what their writing aims to. What follows, is a cited list of what can hence be regarded as *the* emblematic narrative declaration informing *The Notebook*:

1) "For our studies, we have Father's dictionary and the Bible […]"
2) "We have lessons in spelling, composition, reading, mental arithmetic, mathematics, and memorization."
3) "We use the dictionary […] to learn new words, synonyms and antonyms."
4) "We have two hours to deal with the subject and two sheets of paper at our disposal."
5) "Each of us correct the other's spelling mistakes."
6) "If it's "Good," we can copy the composition into the notebook."

[21] Kristof, 26.

7) "To decide whether it's "Good" or "Not good", we have a very simple rule: the composition must be true. We must describe what is, what we see, what we hear, what we do."
8) "Words that define feelings are very vague. It is better to avoid using them and stick to the description of objects, human beings, and oneself, that is to say, to the faithful description of facts."[22]

Everything in these lines betrays the highly metanarrative nature of the text, together with the deeply conscious attitude of the two protagonists. Point 1 finally explains the importance of those two specific items that readers first met in the very first pages of the novel. Point 2 pursues the leitmotiv of the twins' exercises that are presented in the previous chapters, that is to say, the exercises to toughen the body ("We start by slapping and then punching one another. […] We hit harder, harder and harder. […] After a while, we really don't feel anything anymore"[23]) and the exercises to toughen the mind ("We don't want to blush or tremble anymore, we want to get used to abuse, to hurtful words. We sit down at the kitchen table face to face, and looking each other in the eyes, we say more and more terrible words. […] By force of repetition, these words gradually lose their meaning […]"[24]). It is now possible to understand the preparatory stages to what is presented in the chapter "Our Studies" as the ultimate test, namely, the exercises to refine and purge their language and their writing. Thus, they first got used to physical sufferance, then they got familiar with depriving subjective words of their emotional sphere and, finally, they are able to use an objective language to write about an objective reality (Point 7). One might suggest that to any passionate or expert of linguistics, the twins' reflections about words and their meaning and employment is highly fascinating, going as far as to even echo field-related theories going from anthropologist Malinowski and his idea that before any communicative role, language has a concrete and pragmatic function, meaning it can concretely impact our reality[25] or his colleague Benjamin Whorf, the American linguist who contributed to the so-called "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis"[26], who has eagerly supported the

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[22] Id., 29.

[23] Id., 17.

[24] Id., 21.

[25] Malinowski, Bronisław . *Coral Gardens and their Magic. A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands.* London: George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1935, Volume II, p. 52.

[26] A theory that can be summed up by borrowing directly from Edward Sapir's words: "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone […] but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection."

stance whereby the language we speak can shape the way we see reality and, thus, our behaviours in that reality. Or, to the attentive bookworm, the twin's understanding of language apparently winks at another great literary endeavour at dissecting the darker sides of language, namely, Orwell's *1984.* In this dystopic novel, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been embodied in and applied to the way in which the English language has been reduced to an extreme linguistic restriction aiming to parallel an equal intellectual restriction of individuals' free thinking in a totalitarian regime, following the view according to which, if words lack, our mind will no longer conceive meanings associated with those words. The very same belief seems to animate the twins, who convincingly argue that saying "Grandmother is like a witch" is forbidden, since it would betray their personal opinion about the woman; similarly, writing "The orderly is nice" is an exaggeration based on a single nice act that the orderly may have accomplished for the twins; yet, they are completely unaware of the overall conduct of the man. Finally, they come to be represented as two scientists in a laboratory, with their reliable tools (the dictionary, the Bible, pencils and paper), their attentively elaborated process (establishing a subject, attributing each subject to one another, setting a limit of time and space to deal with it), their carefully tested method and parameters (narrating only what is true, realistic and faithful). This results in the kind of sober, standardised, anesthetized, detached style that characterizes the entire first novel.

Before concluding the present stylistic and linguistic analysis of the first part of the Trilogy, it is equally worthy to mention the structure of the novel itself, especially if considering that the remaining two narratives, *The Proof* and *The Third Lie*, present a very different composition. As already hinted at, *The Notebook* that the reader browse through is the very same notebook that he or she reads about and which represents the writing experimentation undergone by the twins in order to demonstrate how a tough, horrid, cruel reality can be anesthetised through a specific kind of language and style. The result, once again, are the actual pages accessible to anyone. Thus, the first novel is the sum of 62 short chapters and each chapter basically corresponds to a more or less specific episode taking place in the small urban area where the twins live, where people's lives are daily marked by the necessities implied by war. These compositions are a perfect representation of how and what the twins reduce a complex reality to, and they are the visual demonstration of a metafictional attempt at manipulating the narrative matter: the twins basically illustrate the concrete realization of their narrative assumptions, that is to say, the fact that by consciously affecting and modifying writing, we can affect and modify the content we want to write about. For instance, after going through the 62 portraits composing *The Notebook*, readers hardly get a sense of the typical and traditional plot, the

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(Mandelbaum, D.G. [ed]. 1963. *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality.* University of California Press, p. 162).

chapters and the narrated episodes seem but juxtaposed one after the other with no real temporal and logical connection and fluidity. The reality of war, of trauma, of sexual perversion and paedophilia, of abandonment and misery, is returned to the reader as distorted and excessively simplified. Once again, a process of subtraction is here applied, not only to the linguistic and stylistic level as previously mentioned, but also to the overall quantity of the content: the twins erode, polish, refine, lighten their narrative so that, ultimately, those events which may trigger exaggerated emotional reactions and which would normally require pages and pages of description and explanation, become nothing more than a two-page, matter-of-fact report. Finally, the structure itself eventually contributes to the overall discourse on Affect that is at stake in the present thesis. If, by means of subtracting, more space is left for an unknown dimension where our empathic responses are heightened and emphasised, this works both for the style and the composition. In other words, the reader is forced to consume and digest one episode after the other within a more or less confusing and puzzling context, since new characters emerge out of nowhere and disappear with no explanations and actions taking place in one chapter seldom have consequences upon actions occurring in following chapters. Overall, the structure is full of gaps which leave the reader's expectation for knowledge and logic unmet. Consequently, either one ignores such narrative voids and pursues this sort of suspended reading experience, or one necessarily makes a few reflecting pauses between one chapter and the other in order to solve the suspension between one page and the other by imagining in what way the dots may be connected and how and most importantly, why something has happened. It is this very imaginative experience the one allowing readers to increase the level of empathic connection with the narrative content by thus compensating for the emotional anaesthesia that the twins wish to achieve through their writing. Once our imagination has suggested some possible explanations, an increased empathic, affective and emotional reaction is likely to occur, yet these dynamics will be further explored. Briefly and lastly, the metafictional apparatus and system sustaining the twins' project ultimately ensures the opposite effect than the one they hoped for, that is, a higher and deeper emotional involvement and engagement on behalf of anyone reading their notebook.

3.2 Affect in The Notebook's narrative

While the previous section has mainly focused on the analysis of the general features that characterize a metafictional text, from its structure to its lexical traits, what remains to be more extensively discussed is the stylistic dimension itself and, together with it, the overall affective nature of the first novel. As a matter of fact, it is from the very style of the text that the affective qualities of this metafictional apparatus arguably originate, and, as a result, it is time to turn to Affect theory and its narrative embodiment.

Firstly, it is possible to notice that the style chosen by the twins tends to provide the narrative with a very marked rhythm, constantly verging on a possibility of continuity which is, however, abruptly interrupted by frequent full stops, those gasps mentioned in the final paragraph of the previous section which eventually provide the reading with an overall effect of paralysis or suspension. To an extent, it is possible to claim that the narrative of *The Notebook* is motivated by certain specific reasons (the twin's desire to cancel any trace of emotion and feeling from reality by eliminating them from language, too) and accomplished in such a manner (an objective, descriptive, minimal, aseptic style) which, together, ultimately produce a very different and contrastive effect: readers are far from feeling devoid or detached from the written content, on the contrary, the less is told, the more is left to be felt intensely. As the narrating voice claims, "By force of repetition, these words gradually lose their meaning, and the pain they carry in them is assuaged"[27], however, the content being subtracted, going lost, inevitably leaves a virtual space, the space where once something existed, a space of suspension where the reader is forced to pause and let his or her mind wonder about what might have originally filled that void. The reader may not read what has been removed, but he or she can certainly imagine it and, thus, feel it. It is imagination, then, that comes in aid to bridge the cognitive and emotional gaps created by the narrative and it is imagination, as well, that ensures a profound degree of empathy and engagement on behalf of readers which may find themselves struggling with the moral, besides emotional, burden potentially carried by the events narrated. The implication of empathy and affect is to be better explored in the final chapter of the thesis, what is important to outline at the present moment is that *The Notebook* has been defined as as a metanarrative composition, rich in in-text references to the act of manipulating reality through writing and to how this can be achieved by applying specific stylistic rules to the writing process in order to reduce its content to the minimal and most essential value. In addition, this very process eventually creates a contrast between the form and the traumatic and violent content that, given the empathic relationships entrapping readers, may provoke contrasting and intense reactions which are, indeed, affective, in the sense that they are first experienced at the level of the body before activating any cognitive and emotional awareness. To this extent, the effect produced by such narrative, of a suspended unsaid meant to be overcome by reader's imagination shares the same virtual, potential, unstable features of the in-betweenness and intensity of Affect, regarded as something both emotional and intellectual, both corporeal and abstract, both existing and virtual, both pre-conscious and conscious. Finally, there are reasons to ultimately consider what has been said so far as a first example showing why a metafictional narrative is, inevitably, an affective narrative, as well.

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[27] Kristof, 20.

However, the intrinsically unstable and undefined nature of affects also implies that anything being related or depending on these forces must inevitably suffer from similar issues of controversiality and apparent contradictions. Indeed, the twins' obsessive experimentation concerning the use of writing as an anaesthetizing tool is not as simple as they make it appear. Hints of humanity and emotionality are scattered here and there in their compositions, thus highlighting once again the way in which this metafictional narrative merges with Affect theory. For instance, although the twins might purge words like "love" of any unreliable meaning[28], they witness on their own skin (literally) the fact that those very meanings that they eagerly try to remove from language may actually acquire an autonomy of their own and travel through other forces, such as those provoked by a simple gesture. A woman offering the twins apples, biscuits and chocolate while they beg in the streets, becomes a source of huge distress when they realise that, although they might get rid of the objects that she has given them, they won't be able to literally take off of their bodies the touch of her hand stroking their hair. This act, a very mother-like gesture, *affects* the orphan twins at a very deep level, by thus piercing the unemotional shield that the two brothers have been carefully holding on to[29]. On the one hand, the language the twins have attentively sewed for themselves still enables them to deal with events having both a highly traumatic and affective potential, however, as it will become clearer once having analysed the traumatic manifestations characterizing the novel, the very style itself may sometimes present weaknesses. The narrative voice which, as a rule of thumb, is often regarded as a reliable and trustworthy embodiment and expression of readers' feelings in literary narratives, suddenly hides behind a detached narration which, like the barriers of a dam containing the pressure and force of the water, if cracked, would let the content ultimately explode with almost a breath-taking intensity. In-between the actual words written on the page and the actual event taking place and being narrated, there is a space, and in that space, there is the potential affective burden of that event with the consequent potential affective response provoked according to how that very event is to be reported. The present study will exhaustively return to such response and its ethical implications later on. What is important here, is to notice that even dry and sober writing can actually be more effective in determining highly emotional responses from readers than those that would be provoked by typically lyrical and sentimental writing, one being sometimes too "wordy", leaving no space at all for affect.

[28] Kristof, 29.

[29] "It is impossible to throw away the stroking on our hair." Id., 34.

3.3 Metafiction in The Proof and The Third Lie

If *The Notebook* presents a more metanarrative perspective allowing the reader to reflect on the role of writing as a pragmatic tool to numb a painful existence, *The Proof* and *The Third Lie,* the remaining two books of the trilogy, introduce and explore a predominant metafictional aspect that deeply challenges the reader's ability to successfully grasp the unraveling of the events. While the style embraces a more traditional narrative voice, although surrounded by the uncertainty of whose voice that is, the content becomes defiantly puzzling since the parallelism between what the reader reads as a result of the author's writing and what he or she reads as a result of the twins' writing, is from now on divided onto several levels of narration and, thus, metanarration into a sort of concentric multi-layered pattern. As a side note, while the first novel has here been considered and analyzed separately, the remaining two are to be approached in the same section since it is suggested that they present more similarities and points in common in relation to the narrative and formal core of *The Notebook,* thus, they can be seen as a literary unison.

Firstly, the previous book ends with the actual separation of the twins, with one leaving the City of K. and the other remaining. As a consequence, what evidently and immediately strikes the reader on opening the first chapter of the second book, is the abrupt shift of the narrative voice, moving from a confusing and symbiotic "We" to an impersonal third person voice which will tell the story of the remaining twin, Lucas. What the reader gradually discovers about him, is that he has lost a twin brother and the attempt at both reconstructing the memory of this other half and desperately looking for evidence of him still being alive becomes the core content of the plot. Yet, the context is deeply chaotic from the very start, the overall feeling being that of a huge gap or blank space dividing the end of *The Notebook* and the beginning of *The Proof*, and the conversations that Lucas holds with characters who already appeared in the previous book provide various hints suggesting the possibility that Lucas may not remember everything correctly. He appears in a state of evident confusion and mental instability[30]. This becomes the reason why, due to the external omniscient narrator, Lucas's version of the story gradually emerges as contrasting in relation to the reality that people around him remember. Briefly, while in *The Notebook* readers could do nothing but adhere to the belief of the reality the twins' narrated, in *The Proof* Lucas' voice becomes highly unreliable, and the reader is given but elusive and confusing elements to actually understand what is real and what is invented by Lucas' mind. Briefly, there is no certainty as to whether Lucas truly has a brother and, as a consequence, readers inevitably begin to reconsider the entire story of the first novel: that mass of

[30] Kristof, p. 197 ("I completely forgot about you. I also forgot about my garden, the market, the milk, the cheese. I even forgot to eat." / "I don't know how to go on living").

highly objective, realistic, truthful narrative content may be the farthest from reality and the most invented story that one may imagine. From a plot-related perspective, Lucas returns to the house where he used to live as a child with his Grandmother and the presumed brother and, there, he meets a young woman, Yasmine, and the son, Mathias, she had from an incestuous relationship with her father. For most of the novel, Lucas decides to join the two and take care of them as a husband and father while simultaneously pursuing the search for his brother and exploiting writing as a predominant tool to recollect evidence and reconstruct a sense of past and unity that he no longer has. At this point, the metafictional apparatus already discussed comes to the fore once again, representing a strong element of continuity with the previous novel, with but one subtle difference. In other words, whereas in *The Notebook* writing is seen as a tool to control, manipulate and affect a violent reality, thus, a coping and survival mechanism or a protective shield, in *The Proof* writing is entrusted with the controversial task of testifying someone's existence[31]. However, metafiction plays here a determining role assuming the status of predominant theme around which the entire plot develops. Since this narrative device is meant not only to display the tricks and secrets of the fictional mechanism by granting readers access to what typically happens behind the stage of an invented story, but also to encourage and entice deep reflections concerning the reasons and roles of the act of writing itself, one might suggest that in *The Proof,* Kristof definitely provided readers with a lot of food for thoughts.

Firstly, metafiction here occurs on three levels, rather than two as in *The Notebook*: the first level is Kristof's fictional matter, that of the plot composing what the author wrote as *The Proof* itself, the story of Lucas, Mathias, Yasmine, Victor, Clara, the search of a lost brother, the trauma of an identity disunity and disjunction together with the attempt at reconstruction. The second level is the same as in the previous novel, namely, the level including the fact that the main character dwells with writing and fiction-writing. In this case, Lucas is not a character but an author, too, and this metanarrative level is concerned with the attitude and reasons motivating Lucas' desire to write; in other words, Lucas' writing about his past here replaces the twin's creative laboratory. However, as readers eagerly browse through the pages of the novel, they might be surprised by the fact that Lucas is one of the few present characters who is actually never caught busy with the act of writing. How can one, thus, state that he still engages in reporting facts and stories? The possible answer, suggesting that he has actually been the author of some content, is strikingly revealed at the very end of the novel, when, in the last chapter, an official report seems to testify that "[t]he entire text was written in one

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[31] Amieiro, M. Alfaro. (2011). "Gémellité, dédoublement et changement de perspectives dans la trilogie d'Agota Kristof: *Le Grand cahier, La Preuve, Le Troisème mensonge.*" In *Monografias de Çédille 2*, Autonomous University of Madrid, pp. 283-306. [Online] Available at: https://cedille.webs.ull.es/M2/12alfaro.pdf p.12.

sequence, by the same person, over a period of time not exceeding six months, that is, by Claus T," whom readers may have reasons to believe he is the Lucas of *The Proof*, confusingly speaking of himself through a third person narration, and that the second novel "[…] can only be a fiction, since neither the events described nor the characters portrayed ever existed in the town of K […]"[32]. As a consequence, this final puzzling revelation is "the proof" that although Lucas never writes anything in the precedent 337 pages, he (actually Lucas-Claus T.) is the very author of the text itself; therefore, it can be suggested that just as he used to do as a child with his twin brother, he remained faithful to writing. However, with regards to this, a change has occurred, since it appears obvious that Lucas-Claus no longer writes to anaesthetize reality, but he writes in order to prove that his brother existed.

Moving forward and deeper into this concentric metafictional substratum, readers encounter the third level of metanarrative content and reflections, represented by two poles of the same spectrum. The first is illustrated by young Mathias' journal, and it seems that the young child is somehow taught and guided by Lucas towards seeing writing as a positive instrument and coping mechanism. Lucas, conscious of what writing used to mean to him as he would keep his notebook with his twin brother, explains to Mathias that, "When you feel too much pain, too much sorrow, and you don't want to talk to anyone, write it down."[33] However, while this metafictional suggestion posits a positive understanding of how writing can help us to improve reality, at the other pole of the spectrum stands Victor, one of the characters introduced in *The Proof,* a librarian selling both his house and library to Lucas, whose existence within the novel ultimately demonstrates the possible downsides and risks implied in the act of creation and writing[34]. As a matter of fact, Victor is portrayed for most of the novel as a man desperately trying to find a plot, something to write about, because he believes that "every human being is born to write a book, and for no other reason. A work of genius or mediocrity, it doesn't matter, but he who writes nothing is lost, he has merely passed through life without leaving a trace."[35] Victor's story comes to illustrate a gradual and tragic fall into the abyss of imagination and obsession, whereby the confines between reality and fiction are dangerously merged so as to lose touch with a sense of truthfulness. The fatal outcome of this process sees Victor willingly manipulating reality so as to turn it into a concrete fictional content. Namely, while the twins used to witness specific experiences first and, secondly, would alter the meaning of

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[32] Kristof, 338.

[33] Id., 292.

[34] Wiese, Annjeanette. "Narrative Palimpsest: The Representation of Identity in Agota Kristof's *The Notebook*, *The Proof*, and *The Third Lie*." Journal of Narrative Theory, 2013, Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 137-159. [Online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24484800, 13.

[35] Id., 271.

these through the use of writing, Victor acts the other way round: he ends up killing the sister he used to love so as to have something to write about for the novel he desperately wanted to write ("He just kept on repeating, 'I had to do it, I had to do kill her. It was the only way I could write my book'"[36]).

Moving forward in the formal analysis of the second novel, it can be noticed that the narration maintains a present simple which, however, produces a different effect than the present tense guiding the narration of the previous book. It might be suggested that the twin's notebook truly seemed suspended in an a-temporal and a-spatial dimension. In spite of, or precisely owing to, the style aiming at obsessive realism, objectivity and truthfulness, the reported events are ultimately invested of a nature which distances them from reality, seeming nothing more than a succession of extra-ordinary episodes taking place in a land and in a time that is other. On the contrary, in *The Proof* it is presumably the narrative shift that transforms the ultimate effect provoked by the same tense, providing an overall sense of plot development and continuity, thus, realism. Secondly, what contributes to this modification in the reader's perception is additionally the sudden fracture of the narrative identity, too. Besides the anesthetic style of *The Notebook,* an element that readers certainly feel as strange and confusing is the identity of the narrator itself. The formal and thematic implications of the plural first-person pronoun "We" are to be majorly analyzed in the chapter exploring the trauma-related content of these narratives, however it is interesting to anticipate that most of the defamiliarizing effect experienced by the reader in relation to how the story is told is also due to the more or less conscious awareness that every action that the twins accomplish or withstand seems to be accomplished or withstood by one single individual. On the contrary, in the second book of the trilogy, the narration is entrusted to a more traditional third-person omniscient narrator remaining, however, faithful to the overall *fil rouge* of emotiveness and objectivity. Yet, the puzzling feeling mentioned few lines above, experienced while approaching the first pages of *The Proof,* concerning the idea that a void, a gap seems to separate the two novels, almost suggesting a loss of memory on behalf of Lucas, may actually be understood in relation to this abrupt fracture of the narrating identity. Such disjunction, embodied in the estranging and alienating shift from the narrating "We" to a third person narration, is likely to symbolize Lucas-Claus' pain and sufferance at having undergone the experience of separation, of the dismantling of the idea of twinship. This element is to be added to the overall final realization on the part of the reader that what they have just read is a fictional creation by Lucas-author, considering that the very reason justifying this "mosaic of truths and lies"[37] might

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[36] Id., 308/309.

[37] Amieiro, 7.

be his aspiration to reconstruct a sense of unity and identity, of personal and existential harmony[38]—this discourse will be reconsidered later from another interesting perspective.

Finally, once the reader is no longer capable of discerning what is true from what is invented and he or she is thus willing to trust anything being said in the final novel, *The Third Lie* actually takes the metafictional confusion to a further level. The third novel is built upon a narrative structure of alternating first person voices establishing a quasi-dialogic pattern bouncing back and forth between Lucas and Klaus as they reciprocally look for one another. A "story-within-the-story" pattern is still present and closes somehow the circle which began with the twins' reflections about writing in *The Notebook*. In this case, Lucas/Claus is still a writer and the reader witnesses a sort of third re-writing of his past, which temporally coincides with the twins' fragments of the first novel, yet, this time, he willingly presents himself as a liar and manipulator. Not only does he admit that "I embellish everything and describe things not as they happened but the way I wish they had happened"[39], but when a border guard asks him documents to prove his relation to Maria Z., Lucas possesses nothing official and, as evidence of his existence, he only has "the sheets" he bought "at the bookseller's"[40], that is to say, literary and fictional stuff. This seems to replicate a situation which readers already encountered at the beginning of *The Proof*, when Lucas goes to the bureau to obtain an identity card and he realizes that he has no official document proving his existence[41]. With hindsight, especially once having finished the second novel, this episode is explicitly revealing of the fact that Lucas is likely to be a fictional character whose existence can only be found in fictional papers, not in official, real ones. Moreover, in the third book, Klaus himself is actually a pressman, yet, once again, the relationship between truth and falsehood is severely questioned since the newspapers he prints tell lies and he feels uncomfortable with this.[42] In spite of his apparent reluctance to lying, he eventually turns to falsehood when it comes to giving Lucas explanations about their past. However, since he "lie[s] very badly"[43], Lucas is always very suspicious about Klaus' version of the story[44].

In addition, while *The Notebook* is characterized by a present tense narration of contingent episodes and *The Proof* is guided by an omniscient third person voice reporting the way Lucas's life is developing, *The Third Lie* returns to a first-person narration focused on the present, however,

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[38] Id., 19.

[39] Kristof, 345.

[40] Id., 378.

[41] Id., 204.

[42] Id., 469.

[43] Id., 459.

[44] This specifically refers to Klaus and Lucas' conversation at Klaus' house as they see each other again (Id., p. 424-430)

frequently looking back on past memories. In the second novel, Lucas remembered little or nothing ("I don't know anything. I'm just guessing")[45], in the third, Klaus is obsessed by his memories.[46] This final story, or re-writing of the same story, is one of remembering and nostalgia which ultimately adds episodes from the past, some being already familiar to the reader, so as to compromisingly confuse readers' understanding and reconstruction of the overall story of the trilogy. However, if on the one hand Klaus refers to episodes that the reader has already encountered in *The Proof*[47] by thus reinforcing the authenticity of such episodes, other situations which he mentions seem more puzzling, to the point that, once again, readers may wonder whether Klaus is another unreliable narrator, "confusing reality with fiction. Your [his] fiction."[48]

Finally, for a better understanding of the presence of metafictional structures and devices in the trilogy, Mariangela Cascavilla [49] provides an interesting separation of three different narrative levels:

1) I level: autobiographic. In this case, Cascavilla specifically refers to Agota Kristof's autobiographic *récit*, *L'Analphabète,* providing facts and anecdotes that can be retraced scattered throughout the trilogy.
2) II level: literary (or fictional). This is the space where fiction and, as such, lies emerge. In other words, at this level Kristof starts inventing *The Third Lie*, which represents the fictional creation of the "real" life of the twins.
3) III level: metafictional. Kristof's invented characters turn to lies and fiction themselves by producing thus what the reader reads as *The Notebook* and *The Proof.* At this level, fictional characters somehow come to life autonomously by, apparently, fleeing the author's control. It is "fiction within fiction."[50]

Before drawing towards the conclusion of this analysis of the Trilogy, it remains to be understood, as it already happened for *The Notebook*, whether the style and the metafictional apparatus sustaining *The Proof* and *The Third Lie* present any hint of affective potential.

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[45] Id., 206.

[46] Id., 357.

[47] Klaus mentions characters from the previous version, such as the bookseller, Peter, his wife Clara, moreover, at page 393 he mentions having fallen into debts and the reader already met this piece of information at page 343, in *The Proof.*

[48] Id., 399.

[49] Cascavilla, Mariangela. "Agota Kristof e il Segreto della Scrittura." *Publifarum,* 2020 (13). [Online] Available at: https://www.publifarum.farum.it/index.php/publifarum/article/view/381 p. 9

[50] Id., 10.

3.4 Affect in The Proof and The Third Lie's narratives

Firstly, it can be initially clarified that if affect is mainly manifested and conveyed in the first novel through the formal and technical choices concerning the style and register that sustain the metafictional narrative, it is possible to notice that in the second and third part, affect seems to be majorly embodied in the narrative structure itself. However, the style, the rhythm and the general written composition of both texts do not differ much from one another. As far as the style is concerned, although the perspective changes in relation to the first novel, few pages are sufficient to realize that there still is a relevant emotional and subjective detachment from the form of the narrated content and the content itself. The style remains faithful to the principle of simplicity, sobriety and matter-of-factness and readers are enabled to grasp any hint or trace of subjectivity and feeling on behalf of the characters only through what is reported in their dialogues. As a matter of fact, although far from the syncopated, marked, interrupted sentence construction of *The Notebook,* the overall composition of both *The Proof* and *The Third Lie* appears more discursive and fluid, while still maintaining a register that verges on a rather basic use of the language, not aspiring to any high rhetoric and formal virtuosity. As already explained while analyzing the affective nature of *The Notebook,* a fundamental feature of affect that has to be considered and retraced within any narrative for it to be regarded as "affective", is the feature of suspension and/or interruption. Namely, the idea that the written content is built in such a way so as to force readers to follow an unstable rhythm provoking an equally destabilizing effect on the reader's emotional status, an effect which, ultimately, has resonances within the more cognitive level too, by forcing ethical or moral reflections concerning the content itself. Hence, attempting to retrace this affective suspension, some passages of the two analyzed books actually come to the fore as more affect-related than others. For instance, a passage such as that at page 198 ("They eat in silence. They drink wine. Lucas doesn't vomit. After the meal he does the washing up. The priest goes back into his room. Lucas joins him."[51]) well illustrates the stylistic and formal choice meant to provide a marked, compact and rapid rhythm forcing the reader to continuous pauses. The effect, almost replicating a hiccup, provokes an overall sense of interruption efficiently penetrating the sensory walls of the reader. Even more so, the same deeply resonating and intense effect is equally achieved when the formal interruptions are used to mediate a rather disturbing, thus affective, content: for instance, "Lucas gets up, remove the blanket which is still wrapped round Yasmine. He strokes her long, shiny black hair. He strokes her breasts, which are swollen with milk. He unfastens her blouse, bends forward, and drinks her milk."[52]Had it been

[51] Id., 198.

[52] Id., 210.

described through a more illustrative, detailed, discursive manner, the act of drinking a woman's milk may have passed slightly more unnoticed, however, the stylistic step-by-step development of the scene unveils the disturbing, quasi-erotic act in a highly impressive way. The reader is forced to take their own time before understanding, or even envisioning, what is happening between Lucas and Yasmine, and in every pause a space is created. In that space, affect takes place, so that, at the end, the reader is firstly paralyzed at the emotional level and, secondly, at the ethical one, caught in the attempt at figuring out whether the act is acceptable or not.

In addition to this, it is interesting to notice that *The Proof* doesn't present one single third person narrative, but readers are given access to a different perspective, too, that of Victor's book. The pages dedicated to his writing emerge as strikingly different from the rest of the narrative, with a first-person narration apparently conforming to a more traditional use of the language: the past tense, together with a more structured and rich composition of sentences and paragraphs and explicit references to emotional states ("I looked around anxiously.", "I was afraid of my sister"[53]). To an extent, it might be suggested that the presence of Victor's narrative within the principal narrative might serve two different purposes to the present analysis: firstly, it reinforces the reader's awareness that the predominant narrative following Lucas' plot is not written by an external author, stranger to the facts, but rather, that the whole content is likely to have been composed by one of the twins themselves; a suggestion eventually reconfirmed with the revelation concerning Claus' return in the last pages. Secondly, as far as the relationship between narratives and affects is concerned, it is possible to consciously reflect on the different effects perceived while reading either Lucas-Claus' pieces and Victor's ones, and, perhaps, one would easily recognize which composition resounds as more affective than the other. Therefore, Lucas drinking milk from Yasmine's breast is an act which, narrated as it is, might disturb the reader to a major extent than Victor's ejaculating after killing his sister.[54] Lastly, this contrasting effect might even be further reinforced by the fact that Lucas-Claus' detached, objective, neutral style, to which the reader is accustomed, creates a major, intense, disturbing contrast when it is used to relate obscene acts, since the gap between form and content produces a space very fitting for the appearance of affect. On the contrary, Victor's form, being more explicit and revealing of his interior state of obsessions and instabilities, is way more in tune with the episodes he narrates about, by thus bridging the aforementioned gap, providing less space for affect.

As far as *The Third Lie* is concerned, some passages may be closer to the typical impersonal and sober style of the whole trilogy. However, this final part seems to conform to a more traditional understanding of literary narratives, partly owing to the first-person narration previously analyzed

[53] Id., 300.

[54] Id., 307.

which contributes to a more intimate perspective, ultimately piercing through the wall of objectivity and detachment achieved in the previous pages. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that readers may recognize hints of that rather disinterested and ruthless attitude which both motivated the acts accomplished by *The Notebook*'s twins and characterized their writing manner. Indeed, in looking back on his memories from his past, the author-narrator Klaus doesn't hesitate when remembering that, as a child, he once slept with one of the teachers of the hospital he spent his childhood in[55], or when describing his habit of telling other children's parents that their sons were dead so as to disturb them[56]. To an extent, it might be argued that readers are constantly expected to judge, positively or negatively, the morality pertaining to the acts that are accomplished in the story; yet, such judgment is always "affected" by the narrative itself. Briefly, the overall formal composition of the novel transmits and mediates a rate of neutrality which deeply and inevitably affects reader's ability to intelligently discern whether the acts being narrated are morally acceptable or not. Some readers may indeed get to a final judgment, others may ultimately abstain from taking any position[57]. Finally, it is possible to venture as far as to claim that the overall metafictional apparatus sustaining *The Third Lie*, and the previous novels to different extents, ultimately assumes a meaning and a value which can be explained in affective terms, too. To illustrate this, it is useful to return to the previously anticipated discussion about the issue of narrative disunity and the defamiliarizing effect provoked by the abrupt fracture of the symbiotic "We", the perfect epitome of twinship harmony. First of all, still borrowing from Annjeanette Wiese's analysis, the "palimpsestic structure […] aims to reconcile to whatever extent possible the seeming paradox of the unrepresentability of experience"[58]. As a matter of fact, throughout her article, Wiese argues that all narrative attempts, be them inventions, retellings, revisions and the likes, are all to be regarded as individuals' struggles towards shaping one's identity in the middle of the chaotic experiences of life.

This effort is apparently shared by the trilogy's twins too, whose obsessive creation, destruction, manipulation and retelling of what they consider as "the truth", eventually takes on a highly and deeply existential meaning which may fit Gérard Genette's understanding of "hypertextuality"[59]: "By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in

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[55] Id., 360.

[56] Id., 362.

[57] The implication and role of this suspension of judgment will be discussed later in the text since it will prove relevant for the analysis of McEwan's novel, too

[58] Wiese, 20.

[59] Id., 5.

a manner that is not that of commentary." [60] Genette's theory of hypertextuality usefully reinforces the overall meaning of the metafictional structures upon which the whole trilogy is built. Indeed, not only do the narrative layers and levels, the different narrating voices or the mosaic of various styles engage the reader within a concentric and auto-referential system of ideas and reflections about writing and its meaning, by thus creating the story-within-story and *mise en abyme* effects mentioned in the introduction, but they also contribute to the creation of a dialectical structure where the narrative texts continuously converse with one another. The more readers pursue in their reading, the more they will find themselves browsing through pages backward in the attempt at retracing the connection between a just-narrated episode and the memory of something very similar, in cases identical, that had been narrated pages before. In other words, readers are part of the communication and dialogue between hypotext and hypertexts, where the former can be taken as representative of the twins' narrative frame of their identity, and the latter are to be regarded as the consequential, continuous attempts at modifying that frame so as to accomplish their "hypertextual project of self-narration"[61]. Although such discourse on the relationship between narratives and identities will be further explored in the part dedicated to trauma, some of its potential interpretative function is thought to be accurately suitable with the focus of the present discussion surrounding affect theory and metanarrative structures. That is, the entire trilogy can be regarded as an immense and obsessive project of reconstruction and unification. The binary structure consisting of what Genette would have called the hypotext and the hypertext (even though the hypertext is here intrinsically composed of a variety of other texts in itself) might be imagined as an affective structure of forces bouncing back and forth, communicating with one another in an effort of final junction, harmony or superimposition. The tragedy, however, lies in the bitter revelation on behalf of the reader that after all the complicated, confusing, puzzling narrative attempts at finding the truth (that of the lost unity of a twinship) no matter whether through facts, official reports, memories, stories, lies, dreams or visions, the experience of identity disaggregation is too traumatic to be representable and, thus, reconstructed. A gap, a void, is meant to remain, perfectly but tragically epitomized by the suicide of one of the twins and the seemingly suggested suicide of the other twin. The brothers do not reunite and so does the narrative, leaving that suspended state in which affect is allowed to survive.

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[60] Genette, Gérard. (1997). *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree.* Translated by Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky, Univeristy of Nebraska Press, Lincon and London, p.5. (original edition, *Palimpsestes: la Littérature au Second Degré,* 1997).

[61] Wiese, 5.

To resume, it has been possible to analyze the intensely metafictional structural apparatus of Kristof's trilogy as a form whose features and artifices arguably conform with the majority of the qualities that characterize the notion of affect. From the structure itself, depending upon a self-referentiality and doubleness which echo thematic and formal reverberations by thus reinforcing readers' engagement with the story, to the stylistic and linguistic choices, capable of operating upon the content with surgical precision and, in this way, delivering a controversial narrative of silences, subtractions, gasps that equally engage readers in the complicated task of filling the voids by means of affective intensities. Finally, the overall intertextual and metafictional layer chaotically developing within the plot itself inevitably shapes the reading experience which results in a nauseating back and forth around the subtle line dividing reality from fictionality, truths from lies. Affect is present at every level of this puzzling story to the extent that in the upcoming chapters (2,3) it will be necessary to explore the range of thematic and ethical implications and consequences that a similarly affective structure forcibly entails. Because a metafictional story always has something more to say, some content to effectively convey, some moral purpose to achieve, and, as it will be argued, when re-reading these narratives within the frame of literary and philosophical theories such as those of affect studies, it is possible to rediscover literature as the most adequate space where all this "saying" can safely take place.

4. Atonement

4.1 Metafiction in Atonement

It is not by chance that a very similar web of communicating and contrasting narratives and superimposing structures is also familiar to Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). Sharing a common and highly destabilizing historical background, that of war, like the trilogy, *Atonement* presents characters meddled with literary reflections and the act of writing, elements which clearly bring to the fore the metafictional features of the novel. The book is composed of three parts: "Part One" dwells on the daily life of the Tallis family as, during the summer of 1935, they welcome some guests in their beautiful country mansion, that is, three young cousins—Lola and her twin brothers Jackson and Pierrot—and Paul Marhsall, a successful businessman in the chocolate industry and friend of the Tallis' eldest son Leon. The plot here develops around two predominant episodes, the famous scene by the fountain and young Lola's rape and, most importantly, around the controversial interpretation that the young main character, Briony, provides by diffusing what readers will eventually discover to be a false narrative of the events. This narrative, however, will inevitably and fatally compromise most characters' fate. The whole section is alternately narrated from an external third person

omniscient narrator and from an internal third person sharing some of the characters' perspective. A similar narrative structure is certainly and voluntarily confusing for readers; yet it is the very formal device which, by the end, provides them with the greater number of tools and pieces of information to reconstruct the meaning of the novel. "Part Two" focuses on the narration of how characters' lives have changed as a result of the dynamics pertaining to the previous part, with particular focus on Robbie Turner's experience in the trenches during the Dunkirk retreat of May 1940, and hints at other characters' conditions, such as Cecilia Tallis' occupation as a nurse in London and her abrupt distancing from her family. Eventually, "Part Three" re-introduces the main character, Briony, as an 18-year-old young woman having exchanged the opportunity to study at Cambridge for a life as a nurse in a hospital. This, as readers gradually learn, appears as her first attempt to compensate for the wrong she has caused to her family members in the past, especially to Robbie and Cecilia.[62] As she used to do as a child, Briony still enjoys writing, although thanks to the explanations given by the third person narrator sharing her thoughts and feelings, it is possible to grasp that Briony has gradually modified her manners of writing: having abandoned the highly imaginative, fictional, extra-ordinary narratives of romances and fairy tales, she has now approached a more modernist and realistic type of writing[63], which is not, however, the final form she eventually adopts—it being the form of the actual novel itself, that is, a postmodernist and contemporary composition. The overall first-hand experience of dealing with and having to take care of young soldiers being horribly wounded and injured because of the conflict contributes to Briony's increasing awareness and empathy that she once lacked. This condition eventually allows her to become sufficiently self-aware in relation to her past and eager to find redemption and, as a consequence, she decides to actually reunite with her sister Cecilia, now living with Robbie who has fortunately survived war, and to beg for their forgiveness. However, a final, unexpected postscript, dated "London, 1999", introduces the reader to a new narrative voice, that is, a first-person narration voicing Briony herself who, as she narrates, is now an old woman suffering from vascular dementia, therefore doomed to gradual oblivion. Nevertheless, she also presents herself as a successful author, and readers finally access the ultimate plot-twisting piece of information: what readers are about to finish reading is actually a novel written by Briony herself about real people and real events up to a certain point since, in reality, Cecilia and Robbie never survived as she described in Part Two: "Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940", "Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed the Balham underground station."[64] However, "What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader

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[62] McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. London: Vintage, Penguin Random House, 2016 (original ed. 2001), p. 285.

[63] Id., 281-282.

[64] Id., 370.

draw from such an account?"[65] None, according to Briony. Hence, readers must reinterpret the overall story as a woman's personal attempt at atoning for a damage she caused in her youth and the intention to do so by exploiting the ability of affective and realistic narratives of conserving someone's existence and memory. Needless to say, this final revelation certainly sets forth the highly metafictional nature and potential of the novel which is here believed to be strongly grounded upon three predominant features: (4.1.1) the narrative voices, (4.1.2) the in-text references to other literary forms, and the overall style of the novel, which requires to be analyzed together with the other two features.

4.1.1 Narrative voices

Narrative voice plays a role as much important, although different, as in Kristóf's trilogy. While in the trilogy the unpredictable and inexplicable shifts in the narrator's perspective from one novel to the other manage to confuse and merge the boundaries between truth and lies so that readers cannot prevent themselves from falling prey to the twins' words and stories until the very last page, or "third lie"; in *Atonement*, the narrative voice limitedly bounces back and forth between a third-person limited narrator and a third omniscient person—except for the last part told by Briony herself through in first person. It should be highlighted that Briony certainly stands out as the core of the narrative. The third person homodiegetic narration sharing Briony's perspective offers the reader accurate insights into her mind, by thus directly providing both descriptions of her relationship to writing and the explanation of the reasons behind the choice of writing a dramatic piece (*The Trials of Arabella*) rather than something prosaic. Indeed, Briony is marked by two features which will result determining in her role as character-author: first of all, she wishes to have "the world just so" because of her "orderly spirit". Secondly, she has a "passion for secrets"[66] which, similarly to the twins of the trilogy, leads her to keep both a diary and a notebook. However, she soon realizes that these two aspects are somehow incompatible: her need for order prevents her from acting in such ways requiring to be kept hidden and secret. For this reason, she eventually considers that "imagination itself [is] a source of secrets"[67], which justifies her choice to avoid prose narrative and storytelling since such forms require a major exposure of the authorial presence, so that what she imagines would no longer be a secret. To an extent, she is a character so obsessed and engaged with the idea of creating or finding other people's plots that she eventually forgets, until the final part, that

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[65] Id., 371.

[66] Id., 4-5.

[67] Id., 6

she should look for her own plot herself. Yet, her pivotal role not just from a plot-related perspective but, most importantly, in terms of source of narrative and interpretative implications, extends further. Indeed, it can be highlighted that in the first part of the novel, the only part divided into chapters, the metanarrative dimension is mainly articulated at the level of how Briony's writing shapes the reader's perspective of the events taking place. Indeed, as a spectator of real lives and a creator of fictional ones, Briony is puzzled when having to make sense of an ambiguous scene, it being bizarre mainly because of the narrative perspective it is first told from, while it will later be clarified to the reader thanks to a shift in the focus of the narration which, however, won't be available to Briony. The episode, which can certainly be regarded as a triggering and fundamental moment for the plot-development—as it has been the case for the twins' separation at the end of *The Notebook*—features Briony's sister Cecilia and Robbie, the gardener of the Tallis's mansion, as the young heroine catches sight of her older sister undressing herself and plunging into the fountain to collect a piece of a very special vase that fell and broke because of Robbie, while he silently stares at her and they eventually part. From this moment on, Briony's imagination and literary formation, which, this far, has mainly been informed by romances and fairy tales, but most importantly, her lack of empathic connection and knowledge of the adult world, are all factors contributing to her complete failure at grasping the essence of what actually happened between "the ordinary people that she knew" and, eventually, her decision of forcing that "illogical"[68] sequence into a narrative that she could control, that she could make sense of, that is, the possibility that the episode concerning her sister and Robbie must have sexual implications.

In addition, the shifts from an external, detached perspective and a narrative voice sharing characters deeper feelings and thoughts produce important and contrasting effects. Firstly, with regards to the presence of an external narration, this certainly ensures that more hints and pieces of factual, objective information are scattered throughout the novel, allowing the reader to collect sufficient proofs so as to be always suspicious of Briony's version of the story (the leading story of the novel), unlike the trilogy where, as aforementioned, not believing in the facts narrated is almost impossible. To an extent, also the presence of a third person limited perspective seems to contribute to the dynamic according to which something always appears to suggest that Briony has some margins of error even though readers may feel more tempted to follow her interpretative process. Indeed, the very fact that other voices are sometimes given space, such as that of Cecilia, Robbie, or Briony's mother, enables the reader if not to reject Briony's truths entirely, but at least to doubt them.

[68] Id., 39.

This dynamic, which Gérard Genette labelled "variable internal focalization"[69] becomes one of the most important factors that determine and influence readers' reactions and interpretations of the story since, almost as in a puppet's show, whoever has written the content of Part One is somehow holding the wires that control readers, forcing them either to believe in one character only to condemn them a few pages later, or to interpret a scene in a specific way and ultimately change the entire narrative concerning that event from scratch. To illustrate this, when following the gradual development of the story, it is possible to notice that the scene of Robbie and Cecilia by the fountain is first narrated from their alternating perspectives[70], so readers' first encounter with this fundamental scene actually occurs within a more or less reliable environment. Only in a second moment, the situation is re-narrated from Briony's perspective[71], as she stumbles across the ambiguous scene from her window and eventually interprets it in her own way. In this case, the narrative strategy posits readers in an advantaged position: they know more than Briony. As such, they can judge her interpretative attempt and make assumptions concerning her illogical thoughts. In this way, to the reader's eyes, Briony's role as an unreliable narrator begins to take shape. However, the narrative devices along the story are also applied with a different order, producing a different effect. Indeed, the second enigmatic and plot-twisting event, that is, Cecilia and Robbie's sexual encounter in the library, is first told by Briony herself, as she randomly sneaks into the library[72]. This reinforces her suspicions about Robbie's maniac attitude towards her sister and, especially when considering the previous small but important episode concerning Robbie's note to Cecilia with the drawing of the female reproductive organ[73], readers get to this point of the narrative feeling perhaps less sure about the totally innocent relationship between the two older characters and more tempted to believe at Briony's version. Yet, almost as if the author enjoyed provoking contrasting reactions on behalf of readers by continuously creating and then disrupting their beliefs, the library scene is eventually retold with the typical in-and-out focal movement from Cecilia to Robbie in a sort of flashback[74]. Once again, readers witness something very pure and sincere, the gradual recognition of a long-existing mutual attraction between the two. Everything seems credible and authentic and it seems now possible to collect enough pieces of evidence to contradict any possible antithesis. As such, Briony's unreliability is reinforced after a

[69] Finney, Brian. "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*". In *Journal of Modern Literature,* Vol. 27. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 68-82, p. 74.

[70] Id., 26-31.

[71] Id., 38-40.

[72] Id., 123-124.

[73] Id., 94.

[74] Id., 130-139.

previous moment of weakening. It can be suggested that this represents the moment where the narrative perspectives, thus a formal and stylistic device, contribute so as to make readers establish an empathic relationship with the young couple that will prove determining for the rest of the story. In spite of this, Briony's ability to create solid narratives causes readers' judgment to hesitate until the very last page. As a matter of fact, just as she decides that Robbie must be Lola's rapist because this would allow her to confirm her suspicions and she, then, cunningly convinces Lola that he is the guilty one, almost against Lola's own opinion ("But I couldn't see. I couldn't say for sure."[75]), so manages Briony to leave readers with the doubt that although the story between Robbie and Cecilia may actually be a romantic one, this would nonetheless mean that Robbie is a totally good character, uncapable of committing a rape. Indeed, at this point of the narrative, readers have had but few insights into his own mind and feelings, therefore, judging him as a bad character is a risk that might be run from people approaching the story. With hindsight, this will explain how important it is that Part Two carefully and empathically shares Robbie's perspective. Yet, although the form might be revealing of the unreliability of the content, readers generally fall prey to the possibility of believing in the authenticity of what is narrated for most, if not for the entirety of the novel, feeling ultimately shocked and surprised when encountering Briony's actual voice in the Postscript. This might eventually be explained if considering another formal aspect of the novel, that is the fact that style, language itself, is used in such a way so as to create a narrative whose affective potential draws readers deep into the narration, towards an emotional engagement that inevitably complicates their ability to successfully make their way among the narrative and interpretative traps or aids, left here and there by the author. For instance, pages of long sensual descriptions shared by one character's perspective allow readers to empathize with a new way of seeing a certain reality that is more particular and detailed than the one that would result from a detached, impersonal third person description. For instance, one of the chapters shares a highly personal description of how Emily Tallis' perceives and experiences several bodily sensations due to her frequent headaches ("She felt in the top right corner of her brain a heaviness, the inert body weight of some curled and sleeping animal. […] Now it was in the top right corner of her mind, and in her imagination she could stand on tiptoe and raise her right hand to it" [76].) In a similar passage, the author's narrative choice provides readers with interesting and deep insights into the way this character feels and copes with her pain, by adding thus an important piece of the overall and more complex puzzle that makes up characters as much realistic and authentic ad McEwan's.

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[75] Id., 167.

[76] McEwan, 63.

Finally, as far as the narration of Part One is concerned, it is possible to suggest that its nature has two major implications within and outside the story itself: on the one hand, from a metafictional and self-referential perspective, it is as if not only the reader but characters too were supposed to undergo the effects of an internal point of view, so that, for instance, Briony witnessing the scene of Robbie and Cecilia by the fountain from a limited perspective eventually causes her to interpret the situation only according to the interpretative elements she (consequently, the reader) possesses. Eventually, the limited perspective is not only a formal device but it also becomes a thematic layer forcing both readers and characters to reflect about how we singularly interpret the ambiguous reality surrounding us according to the interpretative tools and instruments we dispose of, but also about the importance of understanding, to any possible extent, otherness by empathizing with it, rather than withdrawing from it in favor of our inner arsenal of self-produced judgments and opinions which are likely to be incorrect. On the other hand, the chosen narration ultimately serves a very advantageous purpose, that is, as briefly mentioned before in the case of Emily Tallis, it allows readers to familiarize and access characters in a way that is more authentic than that which would result from an external impersonal narration. This factor certainly contributes to the overall empathic dimension enabling readers to establish emotional engagement towards characters and, ultimately, this becomes crucial when considering the potential for this novel (and any other similarly structured novel) to turn into a highly educational and impressive piece of literature, demonstrating that narratives can still achieve ethical and moral effects. These implications will be further extended in the current analysis.

To conclude the exploration concerning Part One, a final mention should be dedicated to the style characterizing this complicated narrative. As a matter of fact, the narrative voice bouncing in and out of characters' internal focus majorly expresses itself according to a rather standard but slightly up-oriented register, with a style that can be defined partly archaic and partly mannered. This is particularly true when the perspective shared belongs to Briony, since, as a young aspiring writer, she is curious about learning and expanding her vocabulary ("The long afternoons she spent browsing through her dictionary and thesaurus […]"[77]): her cousins, Jackson, Pierrot and Lola, come from the "distant north"[78] and divorce is defined by the young author as a "dastardly antithesis"[79], a linguistic expression that is likely to be the result of her voluntary attempt at looking for new words in books or dictionaries rather than surfacing from her daily context. Unlike the trilogy, the style of *Atonement* is apparently not manipulated towards an objectivization and purification of its affective and emotional components, since this would eventually complicate the use of an internal perspective

[77] Id., 6.

[78] Id., 3.

[79] Id., 9.

sharing the inner thoughts and feelings of characters. It is for this very reason that linguistic choices in the novel seem carefully weighted, since it is through specific adjectives or adverbs that the narrator can synthetize the emotional and metaphoric meaning of certain actions, gazes, or bodily expressions, by thus revealing much of each character's personal interpretation of the surrounding world. For instance, Robbie raising his hand in front of Cecilia as they both stand by the fountain, is described as an act accomplished "imperiously"[80] when narrated by Briony, who actually reads the overall scene in a negative way due to her lack of understanding of the adult world. Few pages before, however, readers could actually access the authentic meaning of this act, when the narration sharing simultaneously Robbie and Cecilia's point of view, reveals that he raised his hand as a way to assume "full responsibility"[81] for the broken vase. It can be added that the passages characterized by Briony's narration are the demonstration that she is deeply aware of her role as aspiring writer and her literary self-consciousness is a device used to keep readers under her control as much as possible. Indeed, rather than providing readers with a space of free interpretation, she uses language so as to decide, or at least influence, what they should think about people or situations. As suggested by David O'Hara, Briony's attitude is not to be regarded as the mere whim of a young child who uses self-crafted stories as a replacement for a reality she doesn't like or understand, but her need for control is revealing of a deeper psychological state according to which she apparently struggles with the idea of Otherness, an entity which she evidently has issues with accepting. She doesn't deny this when having to acknowledge the "simple truth that other people are as real as you"[82] and that, as a consequence, other minds cannot be controlled. For this reason, "Otherness is forever sneaking into her constructed, orderly worldview, and she struggles to maintain her sense of authority"[83] because she initially wants to deny Otherness. It will take Briony a life-time experience to eventually understand that Otherness should be welcomed and accepted, and the result of this gradual acceptance will be the novel itself that she has written to atone. In addition, even the syntagmatic composition is predominantly more traditional and fluid, aiming at discursiveness rather than interruptions. To put it simply, Briony would struggle immensely was she to reduce the number of interpretations and opinions about the events occurring to her and people around her to the claustrophobic 2-page compositions of the twins' notebook. Moreover, the general structure of the first part seems to be built on an elliptical, repetitive pattern where episodes are often narrated twice, although from different points of view, and this can

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[80] Id., 38.

[81] Id., 30.

[82] Id., 40.

[83] O' Hara, K. David. "Briony's Being-For: Metafictional Narratives in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*". In Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, Vol. 52, N. 1, pp. 74-100, DOI: 10.1080/00111610903380154, 78.

be regarded as a device suggesting the importance of those specific events but also the typically recurrent and cyclical nature of certain traumatic experiences that are meant to represent themselves throughout our lifespan. This very specific aspect, in fact, will become the core of the trauma-related discourse on narratives and literary representations that will be dealt with in Chapter 2.

Following a powerful crescendo, the narrative structure introduced in the first part of the novel makes sure that readers get to Part 2 after having extensively and deeply connected and familiarized with characters. Indeed, the central block is less chaotically organized, with no abrupt narrative shifts but, equally, with no chapter subdivision. The narrative voice is still a third person, yet the focus is on one character only, that is Robbie, whose perspective is but rarely shared throughout the first part, with the ultimate, logical consequence that Briony's case against him apparently and originally prevails. What is highly relevant about this part of the novel and its form is actually the content that it conveys. As a matter of fact, the story moves from the peaceful setting of the countryside and the Tallis' mansion to the tragic and brutal war scenario of World War Two. Readers get to discover that Robbie is now a soldier fighting for the British Army in France and most of the narration focuses on the British retreat to Dunkirk and, moreover, it follows the journey back home of a small group of soldiers: Robbie (here called Turner), Corporal Nettle and Corporal Mace. Unlike Part One, characterised by continuous shifts in the narrative focal point which often provoke contrasting feelings for readers, who might be tempted to first empathise with and, then, distance themselves from characters and events, Part Two features a more consistent and solid narration, remaining faithful to the aim of representing as sincerely as possible Robbie's inner thoughts and feelings as he struggles to survive during the brutal retreat and desperately struggles to return home to Cecilia. Indeed, the wide, global, collective traumatic experience of WWII, is here filtered through the personal, emotional and fragile vision of a young man and his own way of coping with the horrors surrounding him. For this very reason, contrarily to the contrastive formal structure of Part One, readers find in Part Two a harmonious junction between the narrative voice and its affective style. Most importantly, Robbie's internal focalisation provides realistic and suggestive portraits of human life that are intended to embrace Otherness rather than denying it as, for instance, Briony used to do. This aspect is highly determining since it is very likely that readers get to the beginning of the second part with a range of rather mixed feelings in relation to the main characters: they might feel divided between believing in Briony, thus perceiving Robbie as the executioner, the guilty one, or they might be able not to fall prey to Briony's scheming and hold on to the pieces of evidence scattered throughout the first part suggesting that Robbie is innocent. In the former case, readers would start reading about Robbie's life-threatening experience in France with the attitude of severe judges, thinking that, after all, it is likely that he is bearing the cost of his past. In the latter case, however,

readers' sympathetic bonding with this character may start reinforcing from the very first touching and painful descriptions of his life in the trenches. To this extent, it can be noticed that the style of Part Two seems to step back in terms of register in relation to the previous section. The third person interior narration voices Robbie's feelings, turmoil, hopes, thoughts by adhering to a more informal, popular, raw language which evidently, necessarily and adequately represents the content that needs to be expressed. In other words, war cannot be elegant and refined, soldiers are not likely to have pure and sacred thoughts about their women at home[84] or about the haunting images of corpses and severed limbs[85], death is not aseptic, it has the vivid red of blood and the nauseating smell of putrefaction, it has the shape of a young boy's leg hanging from a tree[86]. By choosing this type of form and style McEwan eventually manages to draw readers deep into a pathetic and poignant reading experience which apparently approaches this section of the novel to the emulation or reproduction of a different literary genre that differs from the one characterising the previous part. Indeed, it seems that the overall story has made a leap towards a more realistic and down-to-earth novel, distancing itself from the vertiginous stylistic and formal experimentations of Part One.

If Robbie's character manages to gradually but consistently elicit readers' sympathy thanks to his truly felt and honest narrative, the formal and structural evolution that characterizes the development of *Atonement* eventually ensures that readers' attitude and opinion about Briony equally changes before the end of the story. Indeed, Part Three brings the focus of the narration back to London, while still in the traumatic environment of WWII. Two formal features are predominant in the third section: on the one hand, the same recurrent formal aspect concerning the author's experimentations with frequent changes in the narrative perspective; on the other, the evident and gradual evolution of Briony both as a character, testified by the deeply sympathetic and brave acts that she accomplishes as a nurse in the hospital, and as an author, proved by her self-aware acknowledgment of how her writing has evolved throughout her life and by the very stylistic and linguistic matter which characterizes Part Three itself – it is important to bear in mind that, on getting to this section of the novel, readers are directly seeing, experiencing adult Briony's new type of fiction. To begin with, it can firstly be outlined that the formal game of shifting and alternating perspectives that dominated Part One, continues, although on a different scale, throughout Part Two

[84] At pages 204, 205, 206 Robbie explicitly refers to a medical diagnosis as "morbidly over-sexed" and reveals the recurrent thoughts about his sexual attraction and desire that he entertains with during his nights in the trenches, "beneath thin prison blankets".

[85] Words like "bombs", "bodies", "corpse", "blood", "crater", "screaming", "wound", "explosion" and other expressions pertaining to the lexical field of war fill the majority of the descriptions (i.e., p. 199, p. 122, p. 241).

[86] Id., 192.

and Three. The content, the situation, that is war, remains as a stable and common background, however, the point of view which the narrative adopts to approach such event changes. In doing so, two main outcomes are obtained: firstly, readers are given the chance both to deepen their knowledge of a crucial character, that is Briony, since they will be majorly exposed to her inner life, and to broaden their general awareness about a globally relevant historical event from different perspectives. As such, when considering *Atonement* as a novel that dwells with the concept of otherness and subjectivity and it does so through its form and its content as well, it becomes even more relevant that this novel dedicates a whole section to the verbal representation of what happened in hospitals during the war. In other words, in a novel about acknowledging and giving visibility to reality as opposed to fiction, readers certainly benefit from the accurate and realistic way in which Second World War and its horrors are illustrated. Even more so, when this illustration also pertains to the point of view of a woman, a nurse, that finds herself having to cope with the psychological and physical traumatic effects of the conflict first-hand. In addition to this, the narration seems to slow down, pausing on pages of detailed descriptions of the hospital environment (i.e., pp. 269-270), of nurses and doctors and their daily tasks (p. 283), or the narration of the same events and situations previously encountered in Robbie's section, concerning the war, the victims, the wounded, the fear and the trauma hovering in the atmosphere; yet, from the perspective of all the people withstanding the conflict from behind the scenes, in hospitals:

> The British army in northern France was 'making strategic withdrawals to previously prepared positions.' Even she, who knew nothing of military strategy or journalistic convention, understood a euphemism for retreat. […] Now she saw how the separate news items might connect, and understood what everyone else must know and what the hospital administration was planning for. The Germans had reached the Channel, the British army was in difficulties. It had all gone badly wrong in France, though no one knew on what kind of scale. This foreboding, this muted dread, was what she had sensed around her.[87]

To illustrate the useful and efficient game of changing perspectives, the very same retreat is seen by Robbie and his fellow companions from a more tragic and bleaker point of view:

[87] Id., 284.

> Henri Bonnet said, 'All that fighting we did twenty-five years ago. All those dead. Now the Germans back in France. In two days they'll be here, taking everything we have. Who would have believed it?'
> Turner felt, for the first time, the full ignominy of the retreat. He was ashamed. He said, with even less conviction than before, 'We'll be back to throw them out, I promise you.'

It can be suggested that this subtle mirror game or reflecting back and forth from one section to the other eventually reinforces readers' empathic bonding not only with Robbie but with Briony, too. Moreover, it creates a cohesive narrative and thematic matter allowing readers to better understand the emotional and psychological burden of one of the most tragic and traumatic events of collective human history. Lastly, the internal focalization allows readers to get access to several pieces of crucial information, such as the fact that she is evidently struggling with coming to terms with her past mistakes ("Briony felt her familiar guilt pursue her with a novel vibrancy. […], she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable."[88]), her choice of giving up to a future of education for a future of humble service for her country as a way to redeem herself, although "it was all useless, she knew. Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did"[89], the only possible solution "would be for the past never to have happened."[90] In addition, it is interesting to notice that Briony herself ultimately attains to find the form that best suits her needs in terms of writing and narrating reality. Not by chance, this form is precisely the result of sharing other people's perspectives, feelings and stories, of empathizing with rather than controlling Otherness. Briony's gradual reinforcement as an author is actually made possible through real-life experiences and to her decision of remaining open to such experiences, contrarily to her childish tendency to force the real world within the unrealistic, measured parameters of her childhood fiction. Briony's new narrative style is rather lyrical, testifying to her adult choice of being more honest and open with her feelings than she used to as a child-author. The openness and transparency of her language, although mediated through the third person voice, clearly and wonderfully emerges in those pages where Briony must face the corporeal brutality of war, with the injured soldiers arriving at the hospital. The language used to represent the traumatic human damage is true, realistic, cruel if necessary, highly bodily and not refined, nor aestheticizing, contrarily to that innocent romanticizing drive that would guide Briony to embellish most of the normal, banal, sometimes ugly, reality that surrounded her as a child. From a symbolic point of view, it can be argued that it is not by chance that Briony discovers the true face of human bodies, that is, of reality,

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[88] McEwan, 285.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Id., 288.

simultaneously as she discovers the potential for a more corporeal and sincere language. This clearly contrasts her previous creative universe where reality and fiction had lost all confines, leading the young child to deny the real world and to obsessively force it within the parameters of her fiction, of her unmannered imagination. In the hospital, however, "Every secret of the body was rendered up—bone risen through flesh, sacrilegious glimpses of an intestine or an optic nerve"[91], and Briony, silently and covertly writing brief compositions about her daily life in her notebook at night, gradually learns to speak about, to name, to describe the horrors she sees, to realistically convey "the sticky sour odour of fresh blood, and also filthy clothes, sweat, oil, disinfectant, medical alcohol, and drifting above it all, the stink of gangrene." [92] Finally, Briony's growth is perfectly illustrated in a deeply emotional passage depicting the young nurse as she carefully and whole-heartedly manages to take care of a young French soldier severely injured to the point of death. The scene functions within the metafictional structure of the novel as a counterpart to the scene by the fountain featuring Robbie and Cecilia. Back then, Briony completely failed at changing her perspective, from all points of view (literally), and this prevented her from successfully grasping the actual meaning of the scene. Now, standing in front of an agonizing man whose mind is so damaged that it causes him to have visions and hallucinations, confusing reality with past memories, Briony is capable to understand his situation, to empathize with his pain and to recognize his needs. As Luc is convinced that Briony is her dear French fiancée, Briony accepts to lie. However, readers are now fully able to discern the difference that may run between a lie due to a voluntary act of superimposing one's "truth" over the actual truth, for personal, selfish reasons, and a so-called "white lie", arising from an actually deep understanding of real conditions. On this occasion, Briony is partly given a chance to redeem herself since she is supposed to exploit that authorial talent of falsifying reality for a better purpose, that is to say, in order to help Luc to find some peace before death.

> "'Do you love me?'"
> She hesitated. 'Yes.' *No other reply was possible* [emphasis added]."[93]

4.1.2 In-text references

The overall style characterizing the narrative voices animating Part Three, the aforementioned "mature" approach, actually belongs to adult Briony, the 77-year-old successful author who has

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[91] Id., 304.

[92] Id., 295.

[93] Id., 309.

accomplished the novelistic achievement that readers know as *Atonement*. This fact is what paves the way for the last crucial element that the present analysis wishes to explore and that has been previously referred to as one of the three pillars of *Atonement*'s metafictional apparatus: intertextuality and, more precisely, the metafictional implications of the novel as, by following a character's writing and creative evolution, it simultaneously considers, acknowledges or dismisses some of the most emblematic moments or sensitivities of English literary past.

In the introduction to this chapter, metafiction has been presented as a device which intrinsically depends on the idea of doubleness for the very simple fact that the fictional text can either, or both, reflect about itself or about other literary texts by revealing thus what typically hides behind the surface of fictionality, and by even questioning the relationship between reality and fiction. *Atonement*'s doubleness begins at the level of its genre definition. Indeed, when considering the plot itself, with its simple, one-way, fictional development concerning the Tallis family, Robbie and Cecilia's love and misadventures, or Briony's mistakes and her lifetime attempts at making up for them, then the novel can surely be described as a sentimental and war realist novel. However, when moving onto the parallel structural level, the metafictional one, made up of Briony's self-reflexive attitude about art, literature and her writing stance, or Robbie and Cecilia's discussions about other literary texts from the English past, or general reflections concerning the interwoven nature of fiction, imagination, reality and history that emerge from the omniscient external narration, then *Atonement* stands out as a great postmodern literary achievement. Indeed, starting from the 1960s, Postmodernism gradually but decisively arose in-between the well-established literary components of Modernism, hopeful to question and reconsider the modernist heritage. As it is extensively explained in Bran's introduction to Postmodern fiction[94], this cultural movement believed that in the *post*-modern society and world, "existence has become more 'virtual' than real"[95] with the ultimate consequence that the way humans perceive reality is deeply compromised. Borrowing from Jean Baudrillard's thought, it can be suggested that reality suffers a split which gives life to what can be named a simulated version of itself. This simulation is, basically, a representation, but it is not the actual reality. Theories such as Baudrillard's are to be understood within a cultural context that was already highly influenced by Saussure's challenging theories about language, emphasizing that the gap between the world and the linguistic system is basically impossible to bridge: when considering language as a system made up of codes, the *signifier* and *signified*, it is easier to see how this system doesn't need the world to function and "meaning is derived from the relations between elements in

[94] Bran, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*.

[95] Id., 7.

the system rather than their capacity to refer to something outside it."[96] These theoretical features contribute to a better understanding of that intrinsically double, divided and fractured essence at the core of the Postmodernist movement which, for instance, informs the metafictional device that McEwan and many others contemporary authors would adopt (i.e., John Fowles). Briefly, Postmodernity broke with the Structuralist vision of a unified, compact, categorizable world, it provoked a crack in the previous *Weltanschauung* leading to the "impossibility of organizing life into closed structures", which, rather than representing a failure, it was to be seen as "a cause for celebration and liberation".[97] Returning within a literary frame, what has been explained so far would be formally employed and embodied in both new and inherited forms, devices and techniques: metafiction is certainly one of the long-existing artifices having been revisited and brought to success, together with a new ironic and parodic attitude that would characterize most postmodernist fiction. As a matter of fact, when considering postmodernism as a space of reaction and fracture with a consolidated tradition, it can be argued that the overall cultural, artistic and intellectual attitude was nourished by the desire to provoke, question and compromise the validity and credibility of any cultural product inherited from the past. While Modernism, for instance, was inspired by a new, fresh, optimistic spirit as a reaction to the horrors of World War One, Postmodernism was motivated by a general sense of pessimism and disillusionment that spread after the Second World War, where the hopes and dreams that people had believed in before, eventually proved to be too fragile and unstable. This would explain the reasons animating postmodern authors' attitude to use their art as a way to unveil and desecrate the previous solid tradition. Indeed, the disillusionment that dominated the aftermath of WWII convinced intellectuals and authors about the fact that nothing new could be written and created, that the future was bleak and little promising and that what remained as a point of reference and, eventually, departure, was the past. If nothing new could be said, at least, writers and artists could change the perspective upon the already existing heritage, a new form could shed new light upon the already elaborated and sedimented contents and notions, because "art must continue, and so the only solution for those who come after the moderns is to engage with the past once again."[98] Irony then, according to Umberto Eco, serves precisely this purpose: since it represents a formal and technical device working at two different levels (what is actually said and what is ironically implied), irony becomes a tool to establish a dialogic, two-way communication between a factual meaning A and an implied meaning B or, by enlarging the picture, between the past (modernity) and the present (postmodernity). In this way, "the renewed engagement with the past is

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[96] Ibid.

[97] Colebrook, Claire. *Gilles Deleuze*. Routledge: Routledge Critical Thinkers, 2002, 2.

[98] Bran, 14.

made possible through the use of irony, paradoxically saying something new, but only by acknowledging that it has already been said."[99]

The underlying and implied double structure that characterizes an ironic dialogue between meanings, forms, cultural and historical frames, seems to demonstrate that doubleness truly pertained to the general Postmodernist sensitivity. Not by chance, as mentioned above, doubleness apparently distinguished metafictional narratives from many other kinds of texts. Finally, it is now possible to connect the dots: if, so far, the present study has extensively explored the nature of metafiction from several perspectives, it can be argued that this formal and narrative device is highly peculiar to the Postmodern tradition precisely because it seems to adequately adjust to, embody and reflect the intrinsic ironic attitude underlying and informing this new cultural sensitivity. In other words, postmodernist metafictional and intertextual texts share an intrinsic ironic and parodic streak, or attitude, because they engage with the consideration, acknowledgment and eventual criticism of the fictional texts and forms that they rely on. It is possible to venture so far as to argue that metafiction is, to an extent, an ironic device. Thus, a Postmodern literary product is often a metafictional product because it inevitably deals with a formal and thematic construction and subsequent deconstruction of the fiction-reality apparatus, it "reminds us that the work of fiction we read *is* fiction", with the ultimate consequence that this revelation exposes reality for what it is, "just as constructed, mediated, and discursive as the reality we are presented with in the world of fiction."[100]

As the formal analysis of *Atonement* has made clear up to this point, McEwan certainly was interested in the exploration of the relationship between both reality and fiction, and also imagination and fiction, which would explain the predominance of reflections and discussions about fictionality animating the first part of the novel and, in addition, the recurrent references and mentions of other literary and fictional products. If irony allows communication of different elements, then *Atonement* is a postmodernist literary composition conversing with other compositions of different types and genres, and it does so both by directly presenting them as written content or by implicitly commenting on them through characters' personal opinions and conversations. This is how McEwan creates a plot which is not only about the story and adventures, or misadventures, of the Tallis family members before and during the war, but it is also a postmodernist novel reflecting on and, simultaneously, parodying samples of English Literature, with a particular focus on the realist English novel. This can be achieved thanks to a literary, fictional journey that McEwan develops within the novel: as Briony, as an aspiring author, grows up and evolves, so does her fiction, and the metafictional system allowing her to reflect and actually expose her compositions, enables readers to witness a fictional evolution

[99] Ibid.

[100] Id., 17.

which is Briony's as much as it is of English literature. This journey is the point of junction between the self-reflexive and the referential essence of the novel: the literary texts that compose the hypertextual and intertextual web and structure supporting *Atonement* (i.e., Briony's *The Trials of Arabella,* references to *Clarissa,* mentions of Fielding's works or Virginia Woolf) ultimately serve McEwan's purpose to both clarify and better explore some content-related aspects pertaining to the very story of Briony, Robbie and Cecilia, and to simultaneously provide readers with an increased awareness concerning the benefits and limits of literary and fictional forms, aiming at demonstrating, if possible, which type of form can best suit the contemporary needs for storytelling. This intertextual feature is also ironic since readers find themselves reading a story that is told through different forms and voices and they can see and judge first-hand whether these are more or less valid.

Before venturing in the metafictional literary journey that McEwan has ingeniously envisioned for his postmodernist and contemporary readers, it is important to clarify that, generally speaking, metanarrative and intertextual literary compositions never correspond to passive reading experiences. What is here being referred to, is the fact that postmodernist authors believed in the active role of readers to actually construct meaning, rather than being told where meaning lied. In Postmodernity, readers are no longer passive consumers of literature, but they are called to engage in the process of interpretation and creation of meaning. This happens because when browsing through a narrative text that suddenly refers to itself, its formal devices, its author or that comments on other types of literature and fictional texts, either by honoring or contesting them, readers are forced to acknowledge that fiction *is* different from reality, it is an artifice in which we generally choose to believe, it is the very representation, or simulation that Baudrillard referred to. Thus, postmodernist fiction, and certainly *Atonement,* is fiction requiring a moral and ethical, apart from an active, participation on behalf of its readers, "the creation of the text is the result of a collaboration between author and reader."[101]The world that is depicted in the texts produced from the birth of this movement onward, is a world where certainty, stability, absolute truth, points of reference are lost. As a consequence, if fiction is supposed to be a faithful mirror of our society and culture, then postmodernist fictional characters are inevitably the illustration of a humanity continually expected to interpret signs, to create meaning, to find its own truth. Indeed, it can be argued that not only is Briony representative of authors such as McEwan himself, but she is also representative of any reader having to read and decipher reality and of the ethical implications that this active engagement may entail—especially considering the risks of a possible interpretative mistake—and this feature turns *Atonement* into a novel about the making of fiction and the reading of fiction, as well.

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[101] Bran, 20.

Finally, it is possible to gather and divide the literary in-text references of McEwan's novel in at least four main categories, some of which overlap throughout the text: references with thematic relevance, references with formal pertinence, metafictional references about "reading" fiction, metafictional references about "making" fiction.

References with thematic relevance

In this case, readers encounter mentions of some novels or authors whose texts present plot-developments or simple episodes that have been recast and revisited in *Atonement*, generally with a parodic or anticipatory intent. Moreover, these are the literary references that provide readers with most hints so as to understand and judge Briony's evolution as a character. These references can be divided between those mentioned and referred to by some of the characters themselves, especially those interested in reading literature such as Briony, Robbie or Cecilia, and those being predominantly implied and suggested by the author himself, through quotations in dialogues or epigraphs, for instance. The former category includes, from the very start, the pressing influence of Jane Austen's tradition, more precisely, of her *Northanger Abbey,* as readers are informed from the epigraph itself. Austen's heritage and influence upon the novel is actually present at various moments in the novel. The epigraph, for instance, sets a possible interpretative and symbolic frame within which readers are encouraged to read the entire upcoming narrative. In other words, epigraphs are always revealing and anticipatory for some important features that a novel may dwell on and it can be suggested that, to this extent, they function like metanarrative devices. In this case, Austen's quotation from *Northanger Abbey* creates a direct parallel between the two heroines, Catherine and Briony, their personalities and their misadventures, while simultaneously starting a conversation between a postmodernist fictional product like *Atonement* and a pre-romantic, gothic-inspired and sentimental novel such as Austen's. As such, readers are encouraged to collect pieces of crucial information that allow them to form the initial phases of their active judgment of the entire plot: just like Catherine Morland, Briony will also emerge as a heroine whose literary formation (actually based on sentimental literature and ancient fairy tales[102]) determines her inability to logically and intelligently separate reality from the perils of a fervent imagination. Both heroines, hence, will be capable of attributing terrible vices and crimes to two completely innocent men. The metafictional references to Jane Austen can be further traced in other parts of *Atonement,* such as in the general concern of the novel with social class issues (i.e., Robbie's humbler background as opposed to Cecilia's social stability), or in the suggested symptoms of an impending conflict about to break out; however, while in a novel like *Pride and*

[102] McEwan, 39.

Prejudice the underlying tensions due to Napoleonic Wars are but hinted at, in McEwan's text the war-related background soon becomes more than a simple threat. Finally, in order to reinforce the intertextual connection between the tradition represented by Jane Austen and *Atonement,* McEwan himself defined it as his "Jane Austen novel"[103], and critics have thus attributed part of the interpretation of the work as being a contemporary adaptation meant to rescue "Austen from the all-too-common assumption that she is merely a writer of light comedies from a feminine perspective", by thus restoring her central role in the English tradition and the broader implication that fiction certainly has to do with moral issues[104].

Moving forward, both in the literary historical evolution and in the intertextual layer of the novel's thematic references, readers encounter *The Trials of Arabella*, an actual on-page mention to a different type of fiction, namely, a dramatic play, which maintains the connection between McEwan's novel and the sensationalist and pre-romantic tradition which nourished the imagination of Austen-like heroines, and also with Briony's authorial aspiration. Similarly to the case of *Northanger Abbey,* this dramatic representation equally represents a sort of synecdoche of the whole story, anticipating and, thus, alerting readers of the possible risks they might run were they to believe too deeply and blindly in Briony's narration. Indeed, it is relevant to the present analysis that Briony is presented as the author of a story which shares several similarities with what readers will read as the plot of her life too: on the one hand, Arabella is a young girl who, like Briony, struggles with consciously discerning reality from imagination and who "continually misinterprets common interactions in her daily life as melodramatic moments lifted from the pages of her novels."[105] On the other hand, like Cecilia, Arabella falls in love with an impoverished doctor reminding readers of Robbie (more of an aspiring rather than impoverished doctor). Moreover, the "impetuous dash towards a seaside town"[106] anticipates most of the situation developing in Part Two, narrating Robbie and British soldiers' dash towards Dunkirk shores for the retreat. The similarities continue, since Briony tells readers that, in spite of her misadventures, Arabella discovers in herself a "sense of humour."[107] Hence, by considering *The Trials of Arabella* as a mise-en-abyme to Briony's plot and to *Atonement* intended as her creative product (besides McEwan's), this trait seems to suggest that

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[103] Wells, Juliette. "Shades of Austen in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", in *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal,* N. 30, 2008, pp. 101-112. [Online] Available at: http://new.jasna.org/persuasions/printed/number30/wells.pdf

[104] Id., 108.

[105] D'Angelo, Kathleen. "'TO MAKE A NOVEL': THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CRITICAL READERSHIP IN McEWAN'S 'ATONEMENT'". *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2009, pp. 88-105. [Online] Available on *JSTOR* at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533916

[106] McEwan, 3.

[107] Ibid.

readers will find across the main text hints of irony or sarcasm. This suggested feature may, thus, reinforce the ironic and parodic essence that it is here believed to characterize the metafictional nature of *Atonement.* Finally, Briony informs readers that she has willingly decided to end Arabella's play on a positive note, providing her with a happy ending. This might represent one of the pivotal features connecting the two texts, since McEwan manages to endow his readers with a crucial piece of information: Briony is immediately characterized as an author who is likely to transform and adjust factual reality in order to celebrate beauty, love and happiness. As a matter of fact, in the Postscript dated London 1999, during the party for her birthday and celebration of her career, Briony can finally see the performance of her childhood play and readers discover that, when writing *The Trials of Arabella,* she opted for the same happy ending that she eventually, as a grown-up author, dedicated to the two lovers of her lifelong novel, Robbie and Cecilia.[108] Briefly, the dramatic play reveals Briony's deep fascination for the ancient traditional romantic stories (to the attentive and passionate reader, Arabella may appear as the heir of heroines like Austen's Emma or the aforementioned Catherine Moreland and the female correlative of heroes such as Scott's Waverley) and fairy tales that apparently compose most of the young child's literary education and, consequently, explain the spirit that prompted her to write her modern re-writing of those typical plots, namely, Robbie and Cecilia's love story.

In addition, Part One is likely to appear as the richest section of the novel from a metafictional point of view, since references to the literary heritage that evolved after the pre-romantic literature considered this far, that is to say, the 18th-century sentimental fiction, are eventually retraced in commentaries upon Richardson's *Clarissa.* The 1748's novel will have several connections with *Atonement,* however, from a thematic perspective, besides anticipating further class-related concerns, it also introduces the episode of Lola's rape and the consequent efforts at contracting marriage as a repair strategy—yet, while Clarissa won't yield to Lovelace attempts at marrying her, Lola will actually marry her rapist, Paul Marshall[109].

Finally, *Atonement*'s quotations with thematic pertinence are consumed in Part Two of the novel, through the voice and perspective of Robbie during the war, a section which also entails a further jump in the stylistic evolution of McEwan-Briony's writing itself, as it will be later discussed. With regards to the content-related concerns, indeed, Robbie is another character whose nature is highly influenced and informed by literature and reading, as Briony, and this is certainly evident in his allusions and quotations to pieces of war-related poetry or fiction in general that are spoken through the internal third-person narration. For instance, he directly quotes Auden ("*In the nightmare*

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[108] Id., 368.

[109] Id., 323.

of the dark, /All the dogs of Europe bark"[110]) while referring to the poem that Cecilia sent him. From a metafictional perspective, mentioning a literary composition by a war poet, dealing with the notion of death and while being in war, certainly has a highly suggestive function and, as Finney argues, it might create a "connection between the lives that Briony has disrupted and the macrocosm of a world at war."[111]

References with formal pertinence

These involve the more or less implicit stylistic and narrative borrowings that characterize the novel's form, evolving from sentimentalism and modernism to a contemporary, post-modernist composition. This set of references is the one which predominantly characterizes and illustrates Briony's evolution as an author since it corresponds to the type of metafictional pattern representing her lifelong writing and creative journey and it allows readers to confront with different types of techniques, styles, manners of writing with the overall purpose of both judging and criticizing the possible limits of the formal remains of past traditions and providing readers with the right equipment so as to widen their knowledge and awareness about the possibility of finding the best form to represent reality. This second category of formal references begins precisely from the already-mentioned dramatic play about Arabella. First of all, this composition certainly has stylistic relevance since it allows McEwan to put on the page actual examples of a different genre; it, therefore, expands the genre-related intertextual connections of the novel. Secondly, it pursues, from a technical and formal point of view, the same reflections about the confine of reality and imagination which are already present when considering the story of Arabella itself. In other words, young Briony didn't compose a post-modernist and avant-garde text, but a romantic play which demonstrates the extent to which her imagination as a child used to be deeply shaped upon highly sentimental narratives, together with illustrating her obsession for the creation of a self-aware and self-conscious narrative ability, which is unlike for such a young child. To illustrate this, when witnessing the plot-twisting scene of the broken vase, the internal focalization allows readers to see first-hand the way in which Briony's mind grasps pieces of the reality in front of her and immediately turns them into a matter, a sequence that can be narrated or fictionalized: she doesn't consider the possible meanings that may actually determine the interpretation of the real situation going on between Robbie and Cecilia, but rather, she tries to interpret the scene from a "literary" perspective, just like a normal person browsing the pages of a novel would do[112]. However, it is this very precise moment that determines an abrupt

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[110] Id., 203.

[111] Finney, p. 73.

[112] Id., 39.

shift in Briony's approach to and understanding of writing. It is this scene the one which provokes a step further in her formation and evolution towards being the author she will be at the end of the novel. Finally, and consequently, this is also the episode inserting a new formal reference within the text: the romantic and imaginative inspirations are abandoned in order to approach a conversation with a more modern type of literature. Indeed, the narrator depicts Briony's conflict at overlapping a shocking and illogical reality within the ordered and logical parameters of her narrative universe. This conflict is explained as the temptation "to be magical and dramatic"[113], to enforce fictional interpretations upon real ones, by thus believing that the scene is no different from any puzzling and enigmatic scene which Briony could find in a play or a novel. Yet, she is forced to recognize that "[t]his was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world" and the scene "would still have happened"[114]because although she might control her fiction, however reality and the people living in it are independent from her. This idea of independence and uniqueness of other minds inserts in Briony's mind in a strong and impressive way, to the point that she now takes a step further into her formal maturation by realizing that the kind of narrative she has composed this far (such as *The Trials of Arabella*) are no longer adequate and that "only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value", a story where the forms allowing such game of perspectives may even obscure and overshadow the moral implications of the story itself, because, as Briony innocently admits, "There did not have to be a moral"[115]. Yet, decades later, as it will be discussed further, adult Briony will have to acknowledge that writing fiction is always likely to be a highly moral and ethical act and this ultimate revelation about the nature of writing consequently determines the accomplishment of her complete maturation as a contemporary novelist.

Hence, the technical and narrative conclusions to which Briony gets after the shocking scene by the fountain eventually explain the stylistic and formal devices which dominate the rest of the narration related to the Tallis family; the one characterized by the complicated formal apparatus of alternating internal and external narrative voices that has already been analyzed and which puts *Atonement* within an intertextual communication with the 20th-century modernist tradition, by thus pursuing not only Briony's evolution but also the historical development of English literature. The attentive, precise, sentimental style, together with the realistic mood and the experimentations with interior monologues and streams of consciousness might remind of the typical formal virtuosity which was exquisitely represented by authors such as Virginia Woolf. The metafictional conversation which is here being referred to is intelligently conducted through ironic and parodic tones although it

[113] Ibid.

[114] Id., 40.

[115] Ibid.

may not seem so at first; indeed, the critical stance that McEwan adopted in relation to modernist authors such as Woolf and the tradition she represents is actually revealed in Part Three, when readers discover that Part One of *Atonement* originally corresponded to a draft that Briony wrote and submitted to the editors of the journal *Horizon* whose judgment and opinion about the content and style of the composition is made directly accessible to everyone. In doing so, McEwan manages to attain to what has already been referred to as one of the main traits of postmodernist ironic tendency, that is to say, the attitude of considering something which is already known and familiar with the ultimate intention to contest it, desecrate it and reverse the general and widely accepted consideration of it. In this case, the letter that the *Horizon'*s editors write about Briony's composition which readers discover to be called *Two Figures by The Fountain,* actually corresponding to Part One and Two of *Atonement*, can be taken as a postmodernist and metafictional critical commentary helping readers to reconsider what they have already read from a more detached, lucid, conscious perspective. The letter guides readers to distance themselves from the version narrated in Part One and to consider the limits of a form that owes "a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf"[116]. Therefore, in the metafictional journey through narrative forms that *Atonement* sets for its readers, after having discarded romantic fairy tales as too dangerous for an unmannered imagination, McEwan eventually clarifies that Woolf-like narrative techniques (see, Modernism) imply such a formal obsession for the precise and realistic representation of individuals' inner mental and emotional states that this may ultimately clash with moral and ethical implications. As it has already been slightly hinted at, writing cannot ignore morality. In other words, adult Briony eventually becomes conscious of how negatively her innocent, childhood stylistic influences deriving, first, from unrealistic tales and, later, from the classic realist forms were. Especially when considering the alluded criticism to the modernist form, "the interminable pages about light and stone and water, a narrative split between three different points of view, the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen"[117], ultimately prove to be dysfunctional from a moral perspective. As adult Briony is forced to admit, the stylistic efforts she obsessed herself over as a child and which she would later adopt to narrate about the events of 1935 could not "conceal her cowardice. Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream—three streams! —of consciousness?"[118]. After realizing that "style, […] really does have ethical implications"[119], Briony will pursue her authorial and creative evolution abandoning the 19th-century classic realist novel heritage and landing upon a

[116] Id., 312.

[117] McEwan, p. 320.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Finney, p. 72.

more mature way of both seeing and telling reality. As a matter of fact, readers are guided throughout the heart-felt report of the horrors of the war by a different voice, which gives shape to Robbie's thoughts and feelings according to the more traditional style that would majorly pertain to another important literary branch developing shortly after the modernist period, that is to say, the war literature. If, on the one hand, it has already been analyzed the extent to which Robbie's section more or less ironically mentions examples of war poetry as a way to simultaneously demonstrate his self-reflexive and self-conscious literary stance as a fictional character and to connect *Atonement* to an even richer variety of cultural and artistic heritage, on the other, the same section also entails a metafictional dialogue mainly concerning the formal and stylistic debts and influences informing this specific part of the novel. For instance, it seems that McEwan (or Briony, indeed) aspired to a narrative form that would echo a Hemingway-like approach to the verbal representation of the conflict. Borrowing from his own words, the author opted for "a choppier prose with shorter, simpler sentences"[120], a prose which, ultimately, better exemplifies the mature form that Briony has been able to elaborate as a result of her lifetime experiences, moving from the obsessive attempt at imposing her imagination upon real conditions by thus failing at grasping the true meaning and essence of other people's feelings and actions, to the adult awareness that reality can often be the one shaping our imagination and narratives, rather than the opposite. Moreover, at the beginning of the current analysis related to *Atonement,* one of the main arguments that have been put forward concerned the problem with Briony's (questionable) ability to acknowledge and accept Otherness, both in real life and within fictional matters as well. If acknowledging Otherness was to be taken as index and measure of the extent to which Briony's narrative forms evolve towards an increasingly more human, empathic and self-conscious form, distancing itself from an unrealistic sentimentalism or an "immoral" modernist formality, then Part Two stands out as the best representative section for the junction between the experience of embracing Otherness and the narration of this important interpersonal encounter.

Metafictional references about "reading" fiction

As already anticipated, *Atonement* is metafictional also to the extent that it refers and mentions novels or authors whose fictional production is relevant for a better and deeper understanding of the role of readers according to the various types of fiction and the degree of ethical and moral engagement that may be implied in the act of reading. These references involve actual readers of McEwan, who are called to take active role in the construction of the novel's meaning and judgment,

[120] Ian McEwan, interview with Omer Ali (p.59), mentioned in Finney, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion", p. 74.

Briony, as a fervent reader of sentimental literature first and the modernist novelistic tradition later, but they also involve characters like Robbie and Cecilia, who often discuss about literature by giving voice thus to other perspectives on what it means to be a modern reader.

As D'Angelo argues, "if *Atonement* is a novel concerned with the 'making of fiction', it is also a novel concerned with the *reading* of fiction, as well as the reading of experience."[121]As such, Part One does more than simply introducing metafictional, self-referential concerns related to what sentimental or modernist fictions are; it also exploits such intertextual references to guide readers towards a better understanding of their own role and the evolution of this role across time. For instance, Briony herself is a bad example of dramatic and romantic readership when considering the fictional distortions that she applies to reality owing to the literature she has read. Other examples include references to exponents of 18th-century literature as presented by other characters such as Robbie and Cecilia who are equally identified as readers of such novelistic tradition, yet each with his or her own aesthetic preference. Indeed, Cecilia tells Robbie that she is currently reading Richardson's *Clarissa* yet, she is not feeling truly passionate and involved by this text and she would rather "read Fielding any day".[122] At this point, the metafictional level is activated in order to prompt readers to reflect about the implications of this type of fiction: why does Richardson's text fail at catching Cecilia's attention? Following D'Angelo's interpretation of 18th-century scholars' debate concerning the differences between Fielding and Richardson, it seems that *Pamela*'s author "does not invite his readers to participate in shaping the novel's meaning"[123], but it rather seems that Richardson was more dedicated to the creation of didactic and educational fiction for passive and receptive readers. On the contrary, although Fielding still shared with Richardson the desire to represent and, eventually, improve society's vices, he attempted to do so by adopting a different form and perspective, corresponding to a satirical and critical narrative asking readers to actively participate through a "decision-making" process related to the characters' actions. This is apparently made possible through an "interplay between traditional narrative devices and the novel's self-conscious disruption of such devices"[124], a process which basically recalls the typically metafictional technique of displaying fictional artifices through self-reflexive narrative strategies. This considered, the references to the 18th century literary tradition prove useful for two main purposes: on the one hand, they inform readers of *Atonement* about which type of literary form and narrative heritage better conforms with Modernist sensitivity (that is to say, Fielding's rather than Richardson's) and, in doing

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[121] D'Angelo, p. 89.

[122] Id., 25.

[123] D'Angelo, p. 90.

[124] Id., 91.

so, it can be suggested that McEwan's novel attains a sort of educational value whereby his readers can discover something about the modern history of English Literature. On the other hand, as far as the present analysis related to the act of reading fiction itself, to what it means being a modern reader, to what is needed to satisfy new readership's sensitivity, then Cecilia is not only a fictional character, but she also briefly embodies any real-life reader but from within the fictional world of *Atonement.* However, this aspect becomes particularly clearer at the end of the novel, when the actual readers are provided with the right instruments to reconsider the entire narrative from a more conscious perspective and they can, thus, feel implied and engaged in the discourse related to *reading*, besides making, 20th century fiction. Finally, a further important in-text reference that continues the implicit discourse concerning the reading of fiction and the role attributed to the postmodernist reader of past literary fictions is, once again, the *Horizon*'s editors' letter since they believe that in Briony's *Two Figures by the Fountain* too much attention is dedicated by the young author to the attempt at playing with characters' perspectives within a static narrative environment. On the contrary, they simultaneously make Briony reflect about the fact that contemporary readers may actually "retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens"[125]. If, at the time of the narration of Part Three, Briony was still persuaded that a modernist Woolf-like approach to writing represented "a new kind of fiction" which "could capture the essence of the change"[126], she will be finally capable of acknowledging that she was wrong, and readers will testify her new approach when returning to the second part of *Atonement,* where Robbie and Cecilia's realistic, human, down-to-earth and nostalgic story is actually narrated. This gradual process of formal maturation is likely to explain why the overall style of the final section, similarly to the case of section two, adheres to a beautifully written and sincere prose, embodied in the corporeal dimension of human's shades of pain, sufferance, turmoil, disease, aiming at portraying reality at its most transparent essence.

Metafictional references about "making" fiction

This last set of references is highly relevant from a thematical perspective. Indeed, one of the main themes of *Atonement* actually concerns the value and role that writing has been imbued with over the last centuries and the reasons animating a person's intent to write. Apart from few literary references, this category is mainly composed of character's self-reflexive opinions and discussions about literature which ultimately demonstrate the relationship between imagination and reality or fiction and history, and the extent to which humans' lives can be deeply shaped by narratives.

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[125] Id., 314.

[126] Id., 282.

Indeed, all of the previous intertextual components, be them more or less ironically intended, eventually compose the very formal, thematic, true essence of Briony's *Atonement* as a postmodernist product. In other words, besides irony, parodies, intertextuality, extreme formal experimentations, confusing plots, unstable characters and original technical devices, postmodernist fiction means, first and foremost, an engaged type of fiction and writing it, as well as reading it, is, by definition, "an act of creating a world"[127]. As such, what may come across as perhaps the most important metafictional reflection on the role of writing emerges in the final section of the novel. If, in the first part, young Briony thought that writing comes from imagination and that the real world can be molded so as to fit what the mind suggests, and if in the second part the world of imagination and fairy tales is abandoned in order to make room for the brutal and sadly real experience of war and death allowing Robbie to understand the importance of empathy, compassion, and mutual recognition – qualities that Briony totally lacked as a child and that partly determined her "cruel" behavior—, in the third part, experience and imagination comes together and suggest a possible final moral. Indeed, the more Briony-character meddles with the throes of real life as a nurse during the war, the more Briony-author grows up and comes to grasp the ethical implications of her childish games. This understanding coincides with an increased and inevitable sense of guilt which she is forced to confront with: this is when writing comes to the aid. Having abandoned drama or tales, together with the idea that "there did not have to be a moral", she turns to a new literary form enabling her to abandon a "hide-and-seek" authorial perspective, secretly hovering behind other people's stories yet coming from her own (wrong) interpretation of reality, in order to achieve a narrative which is actually ad truly capable of empathizing with the past and to rewrite such past by giving voice to her "victims", like Robbie and Cecilia[128]. When on finishing the novel, the reader is told the truth by Briony herself, namely that Robbie and Cecilia died during the war and that part of the content narrated was made up so as to give the two lovers the happy ending they deserved, a second re-reading of the whole text is necessary, and this allows readers to draw comparisons between the various literary attempts made by the heroine throughout her life. It is out of this more conscious and critical analysis that readers can empathize with Briony and understand the serious intention of her atonement. Starting out as a young and innocent child with a too fervent imaginative spirit that caused her to obsess over narratives and formal whims while ignoring the concrete meanings and ethical implications of real-life events, adult Briony is capable to acknowledge what she believes to be the right place and role of fiction and writing, ultimately admitting that:

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[127] Bran, 25.

[128] Id., 281.

> I have not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Or rather, I've made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place. It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away.[129]

To conclude the analysis of the fictional universe composed by McEwan himself, one where fiction and its artifices and devices have been completely unveiled and, in most cases, criticized or, at least, questioned, readers are finally forced to confront with an ambiguous situation: how are they supposed to still have faith in narratives and, most importantly, in an author (Briony) who has just revealed that the entire written composition is actually a lie and, moreover, that she has willingly manipulated and decided the fate of such written content? If Briony herself admits that what she has elaborated is pure fiction, only meant to imagine different possibilities which could not verify in real life, then the only answer is that whatever readers have just read simply bares no meaning at all. In other words, the authorial self-referential admission of an active manipulation of reality inevitably neutralizes any possible moral or aim that the author herself may wished to obtain by the very novel she has written. However, it is this very dynamic whereby the metafictional apparatus characterizing the postmodernist form of *Atonement* eventually threatens and questions the possibility for meaning, value and moral of a story that eventually highlights and outlines the apparently remaining source of meaning itself: that is, writing. Lastly, Briony's atonement doesn't actually correspond with the story she has written, that is to say, with her choice of giving a fictional life to Robbie and Cecilia, but rather, "it is Briony's actual *writing* of the novel that may be her vital act of atonement"[130], her apologia. Hence, what are readers supposed to make of all the reflections and suggestions prompted by the preceding 350 pages or so? As it will be argued later, it is likely that the only possible, acceptable, although bizarre, solution is simply one of complete ambivalence. "The attempt was all."[131]

4.2 Affect in Atonement's narrative

Given the highly complicated and vertiginous structure supporting McEwan's metafictional text, it has been important to extensively clarify and explain the functions and dynamics which a similar system imply within a narrative composition and, having done so, it should be easier now to venture into the final reflection of this chapter pertaining to one of the most pressing purposes of the present thesis: metafiction as the form of affect. While the overall formal features of Kristof's trilogy,

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[129] McEwan, p. 370.

[130] O'Hara, p. 84.

[131] McEwan, p. 371.

starting from its linguistic choices, its syntagmatic structures or its compact, essential and minimal style has enabled a more feasible and logic connection with affect and its meaning and manifestations, *Atonement'*s affective forms may be less evident at first. For this reason, the section pertaining to the identification of affect has been separated from the rest of the analysis, contrarily to the trilogy. Consequently, this final section will select and analyze what are believed to be some of the most revealing passages or aspects of the novel which can be re-read and re-interpreted within affect theory, by drawing attention both to structural and formal features and to thematic dynamics emerging from the plot.

First of all, as it has already been mentioned throughout the previous analysis, a metafictional structure is intrinsically characterized by an inherent doubleness. Metafiction is never a one-way form. Its self-referential nature implies that the main text and its characters can dialogue with itself, through conscious references to its own fictional stance. Consider a passage such as the following where young Briony's perspective about her first writing attempts and her personal opinion about them is expressed:

> At the age of eleven she wrote her first story [...] lacking, she realized later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader's respect. But this first clumsy attempt showed her that the imagination itself was a source of secrets: once she had begun a story, no one could be told.[132]

This is but one of the several paragraphs where the narrator gives voice to a character's own fictional awareness and consciousness by thus enriching the self-referential universe of the novel. Likewise, intertextuality generally gets the main fictional narrative to refer or reflect about other types of literary texts or fiction in general, as it has already been illustrated by mentioning, for instance, Robbie and Cecilia's discussion on their opinions concerning Richardson and Fielding's different writing manners and readership. Moreover, the intertextual existence of other fictions whose plots, characters, themes remind and recall those pertaining to *Atonement* itself certainly produce a double effect, like an echo resounding in-between two walls, such as it has been mentioned with regards to *The Trials of Arabella* reproducing a microcosm of what will eventually happen in the novel itself. This process produces a mirror game whereby the continual in-text reflection of certain fictional aspects being relevant to *Atonement* gives life to an amplifying effect which reinforces the meaning of those aspects by forcing readers to inevitably pay more attention to specific themes or fictional features. In other words, a popular novel like Austen's *Emma* is widely known for dealing with

[132] Id., 6.

themes such as social class inequities and opportunities, love and dangers hiding behind the false assumptions that one may inherit from one's own wrong vision and interpretation of reality. Now, if a novel like *Atonement* chooses to retrace and replicate certain features of a text like *Emma,* then readers must necessarily consider how relevant the themes found in Austen may be for the purposes of McEwan's text too. In addition, metafiction's doubleness is likely to manifest itself even at the level of the various voices that are likely to fill the pages of a story-within-the-story. Indeed, had Briony not revealed her true identity at the end of the novel, *Atonement* would simply present itself as a fictional text characterized by an omniscient third person narrator with internal focalization. However, as readers finally discover that the story narrated until the end of Part Two was a second existing composition previously written by a younger Briony, separated in time and style from Part Three and, evidently, from the Postscript, the overall effect is one resulting in a doubling of narrative voices, since the narrator of the first two sections is not the same narrating the final section and, even more precisely, the various narrators eventually identify with the same author but the author of the novel is not the actual author of the entire product, that is, Briony is not Ian McEwan. It can be argued that irony is also a technical device and "mood" informed by a degree of doubleness, as analyzed in the paragraph about Postmodernism.

Hence, the metafictional structure arguably is an affective structure, or form. This is apparently due to the fact that affect is a notion imbued in the idea of duplicity (not dualism, however). As explained in the introduction to affect theory, the philosophical understanding of this entity defines it only in unstable terms as something which can be multiple things at the same time, an idea which is generally synthetized with the notion of "potentiality". When applying this to the realm of emotion and cognition, for instance, it has already been explained that affects can be simultaneously both, feelings or thoughts, yet in a state of anticipation, of potentiality, of whatever precedes definition. Moreover, before actualizing itself into something definite, into a form, an entity, affect is mainly a movement, a force putting potentialities into contact before ultimately becoming one of them. Finally, in this dynamic it is possible to retrace a process very similar to the doubling effect taking place in *Atonement*'s metafictional form.

It is this very affective feature of what can be identified as "ontological instability", that is, being and not being something at the same time, that characterizes any animate or inanimate body that can affect or be affected, to determine the second aspect that might explain why *Atonement* presents a deeply affective potential. With regards to this, the novel's particular narrative choices play, once again, an important role, specifically for their unreliability and instability with the ultimate consequence of seriously affecting the whole sphere pertaining to reader's emotional, cognitive and ethical response not only to the events narrated but, most importantly, to the general value and

meaning of the novel. At this point, the elusive, simultaneous, or, to borrow from the contributions of specialized scholars, the impersonal, ineffable, virtual or open nature of affects[133]eventually explains the reason why, in certain contexts, such as literature, the realm of reactions, of emotional experiences or ethical judgments may be one of ambivalence or suspension. What is here being referred to, is the very same suspension discussed in the case of Kristof's trilogy; that is, a narrative whose form, linguistic components, rhythm, narrative voices and style disrupt any certainty, by letting readers sink into the puzzling experience of not knowing how to interpret a story, how to feel about a character's behavior, how to judge certain actions. For instance, the very fact that in *Atonement*'s different voices are allowed to speak here and there in the narrative eventually contribute to evoking a specific set of emotional reactions and empathic relationships on the reader's part, however, the more the narration develops, the more such reactions become contrastive and conflictual. To illustrate this, when getting to the second triggering event of the plot, that is Lola's alleged rape, once Briony has convinced herself that the man having raped her friend must be Robbie, the reader who has been attentive enough to Briony's authorial and imaginative tendencies will easily take distance from her accusation. As such, readers' spectrum of beliefs and disbeliefs, his or her box of interpretative tools that each person possesses while reading a fictional piece, ensures that readers' expectations and interpretations never fully adhere and overlap with the heroine's ones. This produces that well-known gap, or distance, which was frequently common in the twins' story too, although achieved differently, and which makes it possible for Robbie and Cecilia to tell their own story in the second part of the novel. It is in that space and absence, nourished by confusion and uncertainty, that the reader can build an empathic connection with the two lovers by grasping the full intensity and tragedy of the consequences that Briony's wrongdoing has caused. As a consequence, while in the trilogy affect predominantly arises as a paralyzing and intense state as a result of a deep and striking contrast between the synthetic, aesthetic form and the alleged, suggested brutality or immorality of the content narrated, it might be argued that affective forces in *Atonement* largely manifest under the form of empathic resonances developing between the reader and the characters or situations occurring in the narration. Yet, these reactions often clash with each other, since the narrative voices sharing various perspectives, dive readers deep into characters' inner states by, first, arising sympathetic bonds and, immediately after, disrupting them. This is exactly what occurs when moving onto Part Two, as the shift in the narrative and the way adult Briony has, later in life, chosen to narrate of Robbie's experience in the trenches gives life to a touching, truthful and highly empathic narrative whereby readers' perceptions of Robbie's role inevitably turn from suspicious, unreliable and generally

[133] Gregg, M. & Seigworth, G., *The Affect Theory Reader*, 9.

negative to particularly positive and sympathetic. To illustrate this, an emblematic affective episode involves the final moments of Part Two, as Robbie and his fellow soldiers reach the shores of Dunkirk where thousands of military men are already waiting for the retreat. Here, perhaps out of boredom or out of an enduring psychological despair due to the war conditions, a group of several soldiers starts targeting a defenseless RAF pilot who soon becomes the evident scapegoat for all the anger and frustration that traumatized and worn-out people (who were men before being soldiers) have been experiencing in one of the most hostile human environments. In particular, the "excuse" which justifies the assault is connected to the fact that the RAF supposedly played a vital role during the evacuation from the French coasts. Indeed, RAF pilots had the duty to protect the men as well as the boats leaving the shores from the attacks of the German Luftwaffe. However, the relatively younger and unexperienced British pilots majorly failed at counterattacking the enemies, an unfortunate fact which certainly complicated the retreat further[134]. On being provocatively asked why he didn't prevent other soldiers from dying, the poor man, standing alone with an expression of "mute apprehension"[135] on his face, "made no attempt to deny his responsibility"[136] by thus surrendering as a victim to the increasing tension and turmoil which starts spreading among the mass like a wave in the ocean. As an affective resonance which rises from the guts, from the sensory walls of each soldier in the midst of chaotic emotional states, the general approval and feeling of disgust and vengeance contaminates body after body, ultimately causing physical reactions of violence and assault. "They hated him and he deserved everything that was coming his way", even suggests the external narration while interpreting the generally shared feelings among the soldiers[137]. While the emotional value and implications of this crucial passage will be later discussed within an affect-related perspective pertaining to the issue of trauma, what stands out as highly functional to the on-going metafictional discussion is Robbie's reaction to the intensely unjust scene. As a matter of fact, Robbie is completely uncapable of remaining indifferent to the gratuitous violence being served. If the story narrated up to this point was a story full of examples of how tragically and compromisingly people might misconceive of others' nature due to subjective preconceptions, from this moment on the story will gradually open so as to embrace more and more examples of interpersonal recognition. The emblematic narrative instant determining such crucial and radical shift in the orientation of the story, from a self-oriented *Weltanschauung* to a "other-oriented" one, significantly takes place at the level

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[134] Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund. "THE RAF'S VITAL ROLE IN THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION". May 2020. [Online] Available at: https://www.rafbf.org/news-and-stories/raf-history/rafs-vital-role-dunkirk-evacuation

[135] McEwan, 250.

[136] Id., 251.

[137] Ibid.

of the face. In other words, even more than verbal explanations, suggestions or inferences, or even more than actions, it is the body itself, its *affective* potential here conveyed through facial expressions that ultimately affects another body's emotional resonances by thus provoking an empathic reaction. Indeed, the face certainly bears a highly important value when it comes to expressing emotional states or interpreting the overall situation, condition, or stance of a body. Most importantly, the face can be seen as the siege of identity. Silvan Tomkins was among the first scholars within affect studies arguing that "the face expresses affect, both to others, and to the self"[138]. It is relevant, hence, that McEwan focuses readers' attention upon the slight details of the RAF man's face and to how such details influence on the one hand Robbie's emotional engagement and, on the other, the mob's general indifference. What is even more important, is that Robbie proves to be capable of a really extensive and double type of empathy: on the one hand, there is a more "cognitive" empathic identification, one enabling Robbie to understand what other soldiers may be thinking of or feeling about the RAF man and their needs to objectify him, to scapegoat him, to wipe away his mortal, human face and replace it with the idea of an enemy, of a target for violence ("Turner understood the exhilaration among the tormentors and the insidious way it could claim him"[139]). On the other, however, he feels almost unwillingly drawn towards a more bodily and emotional, sensational empathy, one allowing him to read the actual signs on the poor man's face and body, such as his fists under his chin, while gripping his cap and hunched shoulders, presumably a "protective stance, but it was also a gesture of weakness and submissions which was bound to provoke greater violence."[140] At this point, the attentive, inquiring, judicious and alerted reader may wonder if his or her feelings and opinions can actually fail any certain stance, any strict final decision. It can be argued, then, that if metafiction inevitably disrupts the suspension of disbelief, it can, contrarily, provoke a more pervasive suspension per se, be it emotional or ethical. Hence, narratives of this sort do more than simply provoking reactions, be them reflections about the perils of imagination, the ethics of writing, the importance of truthful reports or the experience of specific sets of emotional states. Such narratives ultimately postulate the actual existence of any possible, categorizable, unequivocal reaction in the first place. This would be in tune with the bitter, final conclusion to which Briony herself eventually gets while reflecting upon the moral value and the utility of her written attempt. Her fiction, after all, ended in itself. If the moral objective she had fixed for her to achieve was atoning for her crimes and mistakes,

[138] Frank, J. Adam and Wilson, A. Elizabeth, 25.

[139] McEwan, 252.

[140] Ibid.

it is not her novel that might provide her such forgiveness, not even God, since, within the realm of fiction, no divinity stands above the author himself or herself. "It was always an impossible task".[141]

In conclusion, reconsidering everything that has been deeply discussed for both the twins' trilogy and *Atonement*, it can be stated that the presence of metafiction proves relevant for both narratives, and the hundreds of pages written over the past decades show the priority that such topic has always been attributed to in the analysis of Kristof and McEwan's works. In both cases, writing itself is not merely a vehicle to tell stories, but also a pragmatic tool to achieve something useful, and in this, it seems that what matters, from a metafictional perspective, is the attempt. Although Kristof believed that writing was a suicidal act and that, precisely in its harsh and brutal nature lied the obsessive fascination she had for fiction[142], writing still represented to her an instrument to numb the pain or to redeem oneself by inventing alternatives to reality. Likewise, even though from a postmodernist perspective McEwan seems to suggest a bitter and inconclusive ending, he still allows his readers to grasp a subtle, yet positive message, that writing and, consequently, fiction inevitably imply imagining and imagining actually lies at the core of our ability for empathy. As such, imagining is "the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality."[143]However, as suggested in the Introduction to this thesis, what possibly remained to be explored was whether a highly innovative and contemporary critical theory such as Affect theory might shed new light upon such novels. Hopefully, it has been shown that an affective re-reading of metafictional forms may provide a deeper and different understanding of a similar device. Hence, the same objective is to be achieved in the following chapter, since, the trilogy and *Atonement* are metanarratives as much as they are trauma narratives. Thus, the following chapter will entail a more conscious and analytical approach to the nature and presence of trauma in both narratives, focusing not only on the traumatic content emerging from the pages, but also on the expression of the traumatic experience itself, on the way in which trauma assumes a body and a shape, be it through words or silences, presence or absence, bodies or language. Briefly, on the way affect manifests itself not only through technical and formal devices but also through bodies and how such experience can be affectively elaborated and narrated.

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[141] McEwan, 371.

[142] Savary, Ph. "«Écrire c'est presque suicidaire », entretien avec Agota Kristof", Le Matricule des Anges, N. 14, 1996. [Online] Available at: https://www.lmda.net/1995-11-mat01421-agota_kristof?debut_articles=%40790

[143] McEwan, I. "Only Love and then Oblivion." The Guardian, 15 Sept. 2001 [Online] Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2

Chapter Two

The content of Affect:
the Trilogy as an affective trauma narrative

1. What is trauma?

The word 'trauma' comes from the Greek *trauma,* meaning a 'wound'. The term was initially used to indicate a physical injury and it was only from 1864 that the word came to be ascribed to a specific psychological condition of the human mind being to some extent damaged.[144] This update apparently took place as a consequence of a phenomenon strictly related to the ways in which people's lives were being affected by the impact of the Industrial Revolution. More precisely, an increasing number of men began suffering from what came to be known as "railway spine"[145]. What doctors would face in such conditions, was a symptomatology typical of someone having suffered from a railway accident, yet, without presenting actual physical injury. This mystery cast doubts as to whether the damage might have lied elsewhere, namely, in the psyche rather than in the organic body itself. Thus, the fact that painful and hysteric conditions could have sources other than physical trauma encouraged experts to introduce a new use of the Greek term for "psychological wounds"[146]. However, a debate around the nature and symptoms related to what Oppenheim labeled "traumatic neurosis" soon sparked off, dividing those who believed that such condition could be due to actual physical accidents and genetic factors (e.g., Jean-Martin Charcot) or, simply, to neurological damage. Yet, it is to one of Charcot's students that modern psychology owes some of the most important contributions. Indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century, Pierre Janet foresaw that the future success of psychological studies was to be found in the field of 'psychotraumatology' [147], namely, the branch studying the mental and psychological consequences of a traumatic event, be it physical or purely mental such as being victims of psychological abuses during childhood. Among the several

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[144] Harper, D. (n.d.). "Etymology of trauma. Online Etymology Dictionary". Retrieved March 19, 2022, from https://www.etymonline.com/word/trauma

[145] Davis, C. & Meretoja H. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Routledge, 2020, 29.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Avico, R. "L'ATTUALITÀ DI PIERRE JANET: La "psicanalisi" di Pierre Janet". Il Foglio Psichiatrico, Dec. 2nd 2017. [Online] Available at https://www.ilfogliopsichiatrico.it/2017/12/02/0048/

consequences, Janet was the first to refer to the phenomenon of 'dissociation', that is to say a condition whereby the mind witnesses an event so shocking that it fails to assimilate and integrate such event within a logical narrative in the victim's consciousness[148]. The term 'dissociation' thus refers to the fact that, because of the violence of the traumatic event and the impossibility of making sense of it, the memories and ideas related to it somehow take a life of their own and remain hovering above and haunting the person's present until the trauma is eventually identified and repaired, a phase which corresponds with therapy and recovery. This fundamental intuition was, however, shadowed by the influential work in the emerging field of psychoanalysis led by Sigmund Freud, who actually included Janet's suggestions in his studies but without proper acknowledgment. Freud first discarded Charcot's stance whereby traumatic neuroses and hysteria have hereditary causes and, contrarily, he posited the possibility that the problem might originate from sexual abuse in childhood. This theory was eventually widened by Freud himself so as to include a more general "dynamic of drives present at infancy"[149] within the sources of neurosis. A fortunate but also unfortunate turning point for studies in psychotraumatology was the First World War. Besides the unspeakable number of soldiers who lost their lives, among the survivors many were victim of either physical or psychological wounds, and sometimes both. While the former presented terrible injuries ranging from severed body parts to infections and organic damages, the latter's symptomatology partly coincided with the typical condition of a person suffering from hysteria and it could include fatigue, tremor, nightmares, impaired sight and hearing, which made it impossible for any soldier to fight properly. This situation came to be known firstly as "shell-shock" and, later, as "war neurosis" and it soon became clear that these soldiers didn't suffer from any physical injury but were traumatized as a consequence of continuous and violent exposure to dangerous, frightening and brutal life conditions. Thus, the damage lied in their psyche. On the one hand, Freud's theorization of a traumatic event, which he defined as "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield"[150], proved crucial for a deeper understanding of the actual impact of war and, on the other, it paved the way for further studies that eventually gave solid ground to the 'Post-traumatic Stress Disorder' theory. Unsurprisingly, it was another war, in Vietnam, that provided experts with myriad

[148] Davis and Meretoja, Op. cit., 29-30.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Freud, S. (1920). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1995. [Online] at: https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_Beyond_P_P.pdf. When mentioning the protective shield, Freud refers to a specific mechanism within our psychic apparatus which should function as a protection for the organism from potentially harmful excitations.

of cases of PTSD, which, consequently, "made it possible for victims of war and violence to be recognized as psychiatric patients"[151], and, thus, to receive proper treatment and therapy. Indeed, at the time, with very little historical and theoretical background, properly acknowledging and, hence, treating traumatized people caused endless debates and tensions in the medical and psychological domain. For instance, as Gersons and Carlier report[152], faced with the first cases of shell-shocked soldiers, British psychiatrists would easily dismiss them as cases of simple hysteria. Shortly after, French psychologist C. S. Myers firstly introduced treatment units behind the front lines where soldiers were treated through hypnosis. This growing interest in shell-shock recovery eventually actualized in a concrete project, the famous Tavistock Clinic in London[153]. What is highly relevant is that in this recovery environment psychologists and psychiatrists intuitively grasped the potential efficiency of language as a tool to use during therapy. As a matter of fact, when considering linguistic studies, the highly functional nature of language easily explains the ways in which such communicative function can prove relevant when having to reconstruct the story of a trauma and, thus, to assimilate it. Indeed, language allows us to represent the world, to recognize, to categorize and to express feelings, to communicate ideas and opinions, to provoke specific reactions in our listeners and to maintain social intercourses[154]. Hence, the gradual elaboration and application of the so-called talking therapies eventually provided an efficient ally in guiding patients' recovery mainly because, if considering the extent to which a traumatic experience severely affects the cognitive structures of the individual, this condition inevitably involves language, too: when something is not understood and absorbed by our cognitive structures, naming it, acknowledging it, speaking of it, might result in a very difficult task. With the words of Michelle Balaev, "[t]raumatic experience becomes unrepresentable due to the inability of the brain, understood as the carrier of coherent cognitive schemata, to properly encode and process the event."[155] As a consequence, the gradual coming to terms with one's trauma may begin from the gradual creation of a trauma narrative. The implications and connections between the use of language as an autonomic cognitive mechanism

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[151] Gersons, B.P.R & Carlier, I.V.E. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The History of a Recent Concept". *British Journal of Psychiatry,* Vol. 161, 1992, pp. 742-748. [Online] Available at http://bjp.rcpsych.org/

[152] Id., 3-5.

[153] The clinic is today known as Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and it is a specialist mental health institute specializing in talking therapies and providing education and training programs, too.

[154] Marx, C., Benecke, C. & Gumz, A. "Talking Cure Models: A Framework of Analysis". *Frontiers in Psychology,* Vol. 8, 2017, p. 1589. [Online] DOI https://dx.doi.org/10.3389%2Ffpsyg.2017.01589

[155] Balaev, M. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory". *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 149-166. [Online] Available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/44029500 p. 4

enabling individuals to create and tell stories, or narrative, both to themselves and others, and how this affects and intertwines with trauma will be further explored in relation to affect theory, too.

What appears certain, is that there seems to be a primitive, instinctive and particularly human tendency to entrust our deeper feelings and turmoil to words and, hence, to narratives. It was predominantly with the rise of Poststructuralist theories and trends both in philosophical, literary and cultural studies that a more conscious understanding of the relationship between words (or language) and traumatic experience came to the fore—those very theories which would, later, be critically and severely questioned and subverted by the Postmodernist wave mentioned in the previous chapter and, with pertinence to trauma theories, some of the most relevant were guided by scholars such as Caty Caruth and Soshana Felman. What is interesting to notice when approaching more contemporaries, post-war theories about trauma such as Caruth's is that, in spite of the complicated and varied nature of trauma, there are some fixed and recurrent factors always coming into play: the body, the consciousness and language. These three dimensions are involved at different levels and measures in any traumatic experience. Although the dynamics of a similar event are to be better explored further, it can be anticipated that the way we first enter into contact with trauma is through a corporeal dimension where, however, consciousness is not active. It is as if, for some seconds, the body and the mind took two lives of their own by thus creating the gap, the space in which the trauma permeates, silently. For centuries, most authors and experts have considered language (e.g., writing fiction or talking therapy) the best tool at our disposal in order to bridge the body-consciousness gap created by a traumatic experience. However, to what extent can language, a cognitive resource, reflect the true nature of a trauma? As a matter of fact, once the trauma has breached the "protective shield" mentioned by Freud, among its first consequences lies the tendency of trauma to actually resist and block the narrativization of itself. Why is it so? According to Jakob Lothe, "the attempt to narrate blends into an act of remembering that activates, or intensifies, painful memories of the traumatic experience"[156]. As such, the problem at the basis of trauma representation might not be language itself, rather, the corporeal and bodily sensations and emotions that the individual experiences when having to articulate trauma. Thus, if we consider the traumatic experience as being characterized by the two incompatible poles of body and consciousness, and if we bear in mind that, so far, trauma representation has mainly been treated from the perspective of the second, it is possible to claim that a change entailing the perspective of the first might be a valuable alternative. This is why it can be argued that a rethinking of the ways in which fiction and literature shall approach trauma necessarily implies a rethinking of the importance of the bodily and corporeal dimension, together with the

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[156] Id., 154.

psychological and linguistic ones. What is going to be discussed and argued later in this chapter is actually the chance that a similar rethinking may ultimately derive from the theory illuminating the intentions and purposes of the present thesis, namely the affect theory and studies. As a matter of fact, while untangling some of the most relevant features pertaining to the nature and manifestations of trauma in the previous paragraphs, it is likely that certain words might have rung a bell to the attentive reader: gap, distance, body, corporeal, consciousness or experience. These are all words and notions which equally pertain to the field of affect theories and which have already been employed to explain, for instance, the affective value and potential of metafictional narratives. Thus, it is possible to argue that even a trauma narrative and, more precisely, a traumatic experience, is, first and foremost, an affective experience.

2. The intersection of trauma and affect studies

Firstly, trauma studies and affect studies meet on a significant range of features and aspects. To begin with, it is sufficient to browse through the pages of manuals such as Davis and Meretoja's *Companion* to immediately realize that, when describing the experience of undergoing a traumatic event, one of the most commonly employed collocations presents the verb "affect" itself. Such coincidence may seem rather casual to most, however, it emerges as highly significant to the purpose of this study. For instance, "[…] legacies of violence that are traumatizing for those [*affected*] by them also concern those who are not directly [*affected*]"[157], but also "sociocultural approaches have argued that many catastrophic events give rise to 'cultural traumas' that [*affect*] a whole community […]."[158] However, the word "affect", be it a noun or a verb, is not only associated to the discourse on trauma to refer to the impact of a similar experience, but it is often employed within the same frame yet borrowed from another well-known field: psychoanalysis.

As a matter of fact, the deeply versatile nature of the notion of affect, a nature which can imply both pros and cons, has also ensured that such notion has always been easily adopted by various fields of human knowledge—Spinoza's philosophy, for instance, is one of the several examples. With relevance to the study and understanding of trauma and human psyche, it goes without saying that Sigmund Freud's theoretical thought extensively illuminated the obscure realm concerning the functioning of human psyche, with further important consequences and resonances in the period characterized by the First World War. Indeed, as aforementioned, the global conflict certainly provoked psychological impacts whose essence could not be reduced to mere, although brutal,

[157] Davis and Meretoja, 1.

[158] Id., 4.

physical traumas. It was psychoanalysis, then, which came strongly to the fore by exploring the darker implications that a highly concrete, visual, deeply experienced and felt trauma like war may have upon men's mind, ultimately clarifying past false assumptions related to the field of the psyche—such as some wrong beliefs and prejudices whereby hysteria was a typically female disease due to the presence and unstable interior movement of the female organ, the uterus (from the Greek "ystera")—and paving the way for future, innovative suggestions related to a deeper understanding of mankind, especially in a time that "is sometimes characterized as traumatic or post-traumatic."[159] Hence, in Freud, affects are intrinsically biological and physiological mechanisms contributing to the way our mental apparatus works especially when dealing with the famous principle of pleasure and its dynamics of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of human drives. More precisely and importantly, affects are at the basis of the idea according to which "felt emotions are a conscious *perception* of something which is, in itself, unconscious."[160] Not by chance, in one of the most relevant theoretical books about affect theory, Gregg and Seigworth exploit such "Freudian" notion so as to explain the way in which affects, intended as force-relations which can increase or decrease a body's capacity to affect or be affected, cannot be totally separated from thought and consciousness, since, ultimately, "thought is itself a body, embodied."[161] According to Freud's pleasure principle, human organism instinctively acts towards the satisfaction of physiological and psychological needs by searching for sources of pleasure and avoiding sources of pain. This is achieved through an internal mechanism, as corporeal as it is mental, animated by forces or impulses pushing the Self to activate. For this reason, Freud argued that "we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle"[162] and its dominance upon individuals' mental life would explain the general biological and psychic tendency to always maintain a stable and standard level of organic excitations. Briefly, the body always longs for balance, for a biological homeostasis which, within a psychoanalytical perspective, also involves the abstract processes of the mind. Anytime this longed-for stability is threatened by both external or internal factors, the instinctive and immediate reaction of the organism codifies the variation felt and experienced as source of unpleasure. This is when and how a body is *affected.* "Psychological" affects, hence, may increase or decrease the number of excitations and, in order to restore balance, the brain (the corporeal) and the psyche (the abstract) get equally involved in dynamic processes characterized by the release of the

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[159] Id., 1.

[160] Nersessian, E. and Solms, M. "Freud's Theory of Affect: Questions for Neuroscience", Neuropsychoanalysis, 1:1, pp. 5-14. [Online] DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/15294145.1999.10773240 p. 5.

[161] Gregg and Seigworth, Op. cit., 3.

[162] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 7.

tension state through psychological impulses and physiological energy charges. In other words, this would arguably be the whole process underlying typical and common daily-life situations in which, for instance, at the insurgence of the thought "I am hungry" generally follows the action of grabbing some food (corresponding to the release of the tension). To illustrate how deeply everything is connected in the realm of affect, this psychoanalytical theory certainly reminds of a similar and prior philosophical understanding of affects as "affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections."[163] Not by chance, almost three centuries after Spinoza, affect theorist Brian Massumi would equally refer to affect within the same idea of forces determining a body's liveliness, "the perception of one's own vitality, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability."[164] However, finally turning to Freud's theorization of affects within his pleasure principle, it should be noticed that the entire process is often likely to fail, since, if bodies truly were primordially and biologically meant to always maintain a stable condition of pleasure, it wouldn't be possible to explain the amount of unhappiness and pain individuals have always withstood. Indeed, Freud himself eventually reconsidered the pleasure principle rather in terms of a "strong *tendency*" towards a pleasurable balance, which can be "opposed by certain other forces or circumstances, so that the final outcome cannot always be in harmony"[165] and this contradiction may explain why humans' inner life is ruled by laws and processes which science alone cannot clarify. Thus, hunger, thirst, sleepiness may be regarded as internal, physiological factors provoking a variation in the homeostasis prompting specific actions such as eating, drinking or going to bed. Cold or heat, instead, might belong to the ensemble of external circumstances affecting a body's harmony, whether through unvoluntary manifestations like goosebumps and sweat or impulsive gestures which can correspond to energetic releases to lower internal excitations, such as embracing oneself against the cold or squeezing one's eyes against the blinding sun.

While most of the perturbations such as the one just mentioned are often likely to successfully restore the balance of pleasure, others have proved to cause internal variations amounting to severe ruptures, splits and cracks of the pleasure-seeking system itself. Trauma, for instance, certainly is one of such perturbating circumstances since, according to Freud, it breaches the "protective shield" of our physiological and psychological body with such an intensity that the organic system which should

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[163] Spinoza, B. *Ethics*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1996 (original edition published in 1677), p. 70. Cited in Robinson and Kutner, "Spinoza and the Affective Turn: a Return to the Philosophical Origins of Affect", in SAGE Journal, Vol. 25, No. 2. [Online]DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418786312

[164] Massumi, op. cit., 36.

[165] Id., 9-10.

receive the stimulus is caught unprepared and structural, besides mental, damages are produced. Hence, by applying the parameters related to the body's capacity and vitality determined by affects, it can be argued that trauma is primarily an affective event dangerously and, often irreversibly, decreasing an individual's capacity for life. When someone is affected by a traumatic experience, be it simply witnessed or actually experienced, the shock, fright, anxiety and the immediately consequent inability to understand the meaning of the event compromise the victim's connection with reality. The body assimilates the traumatic impact, the brain registers the shock, yet the mental structures and systems which generally support our subjective perception of time and space, those regulating the processes to interpret and attribute meaning to external factors or those sustaining our linguistic apparatus undergo a sort of disruption. Every function collapses, the body continues living while the mind remains caged in the frozen time and space of the traumatic moment, often doomed to relive it in a cyclic, repetitive, obsessive and reiterative pattern, for instance through hallucinations or dreams, as Freud suggests[166]. According to Ruth Leys:

> […] trauma lies outside all representation because under conditions of trauma the ordinary mechanisms of consciousness and memory are temporarily destroyed. The result, […] is that an undistorted, material, or 'literal' registration of the traumatic event occurs that cannot be known or represented but returns belatedly in the form of 'flashbacks' and other repetition phenomena.[167]

These words interestingly introduce other two relevant features which apparently join the field of trauma with that of affect: belatedness and irrepresentability, or "unspeakability"[168].

The first, the belatedness of trauma, has been originally theorized in Caty Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), where she interestingly reflects upon the way in which a traumatic experience is 'unmediated' in the sense that "it is *not* directly available to experience", it is not "experienced *in time*"[169]. Briefly returning to the aforementioned triad of body-consciousness-language, while the three components are normally in a stable balance and harmony, the sudden and frightening traumatic stimulus perturbates this stability and it is recognised as life-

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[166] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 32.

[167] Goldman, M. and Leys, R. "Navigating the Genealogies of Trauma, Guilt, and Affect: An Interview with Ruth Leys". In Project MUSE, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Vol. 79, No. 2, Spring 2010, pp. 656-679.

[168] Colins and Meretoja, 4.

[169] Caruth, C. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History.* Baltimora: John Hopkins Univeristy, John Hopkins University Press, (1996) [2016] pp. 63-64.

threatening "one moment too late."[170] This is when affect theory crosses over the nature of trauma again and it is once more Massumi the one having attained to a definition of affect in temporal terms, too. More precisely, he considers an experiment carried out through the application of electrodes during which the participants were asked to signal with their finger the moment they became aware of the reception of an electric stimulus. What came out, was that it seemed that a delay existed between the unconscious activation of physiological mechanisms being affected by the stimulus and the conscious moment of elaboration of the stimulus (corresponding to the movement of the finger). In other words, "the body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived, and because the entire vibratory event is unconscious, out of mind."[171] Massumi's words certainly echo Caruth's and it can be argued that the "one-moment-too-late" temporal frame of the traumatic elaboration is, more precisely, the "missing half second"[172] Massumi refers to in order to explain the moment when affect arises. Thus, it would be this inevitable and affective gap between the traumatic experience itself and the consciousness of that experience that determines the impossibility of ordering the event within a logical and, thus, linguistic understanding.

At this point, the third element binding the two main theories can be reintroduced, namely language and verbal representations of affective experiences, such as trauma. Indeed, if the event cannot be known as it happens, it cannot be told. As a result, the latency and belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*)[173] of trauma inevitably creates a temporal, cognitive and linguistic space; a space where time remains frozen, consciousness has yet not arisen, and language is not available. It would then be this cognitive-affective split that underlies the manifestations of one's psychopathology, namely, the general behaviors through which a victim more or less voluntarily manifests his or her own trauma. In most cases, these behaviors are encouraged by unconscious processes and, for instance, it is generally the role of a psychotherapeutic treatment to guide the person towards a gradual awareness about their own traumatic and traumatized condition. As aforementioned, it is not a casual fact that the first successful post-war approaches to trauma therapy would largely rely on the careful and attentive analysis of the linguistic details, features and variations characterizing patients' speech manners: language is what basically makes us social beings connected with the outer world; in the absence of it, achieving this connection would be almost impossible and, as a result, when language is absent or partly unavailable, it is likely that something more complicated and obscure has actually occurred. Freud dedicated a whole text, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), to the case-analysis of

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[170] Id., 64.

[171] Massumi, 29.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Davis and Meretoja, 24.

how dreams, visions together with the language used by patients to relate of those episodes would provide relevant information for the therapist so as to retrace a prior, often unaware traumatic episode in their life. Sometimes it may be a word said almost unintentionally or the famous “lapsus”, something mistakenly pronounced at the place of something else and in that apparently unwilling exchange a deeper meaning may arise, one that from Caruth’s trauma-related perspective would correspond to the “story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.”[174] Hence, the unavailability of language to traumatic experiences is likely to be one of the strongest factors having animated humans’ long-existing attempts at speaking of it, of narrativizing it. Indeed, trauma theory has amply made clear that, on the one hand, the subject seriously struggles to verbalize both the life-changing episode itself and the range of emotional states that result from it, yet, on the other hand, because of the unconscious manifestations of the event, be them through repetitive images, dreams, or even conscious mental re-enactment of a specific scene, the overall experience is actually very accessible to the subject. Paradoxically, it seems that from an internal perspective, the traumatic content is more or less consciously accessible, yet this accessibility almost entirely fails when it comes to externalize such content through language, as if the mere cognitive effort itself of internally grasping it and consequently attributing words to it in order to express it would ultimately go amiss. The reflections concerning the relationship between trauma and language eventually seems to reinforce the idea of an existing divide, a gap, a potentiality underlying the entire traumatic experience, from its occurrence and the insurgence of psychosomatic manifestations, to its gradual healing and elaboration. In the initial incapability of restoring to language, the essence of the traumatic experience and its brutal consequences remain but potentially understood, felt and communicated.

This gap arguably creates a virtual space, or, in other words, an affective space. It is useful to bring back to one’s mind how the analysis of Kristof’s *The Notebook* previously unveiled the affective nature of a narrative and form based on suspension, on subtraction and ambiguity or ambivalence. In similar narratives, most is felt right where less is told. On the one hand, affects have been here introduced and presented as forces “prior to intentions, meanings, reasons and beliefs”[175], prior to cognitive functions, which would clarify straightforwardly why affects remain outside language. On the other, it can be argued that affect becomes a language itself and that, as a result, it can successfully constitute the language for trauma’s unspeakability. This would primarily be retraced in those notions that have already been introduced and which defined these affective forces as intensities that are

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[174] Caruth, 4.

[175] Leys, Ruth. “The Turn to Affect: A Critique.” In *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 37, no. 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Spring 2011, pp. 434-472, p. 437. [Online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659353

predominantly corporeal, of the body itself. The body is the first receptor, recipient and vector of affects, just as the body is the first human component being affected and impressed by traumas. Eventually, the body is the canvas upon which affects can be identified, either as thoughts or feelings. As a consequence, if language fails, we automatically look for alternative ways at communicating and this is when our corporeality starts playing a relevant role: following Tomkins' theories, facial expressions can be regarded as evident, external, outward-oriented manifestations of emotional states that firstly arose as affects within the body. Also gestures, which in most cases are involuntarily signifying and telling, can constitute an affective language that precedes conscious meaning. It is then possible to state that affect is the only possible, truthful language to represent trauma, not in spite of its apparent approximation but precisely *because* of it. If this way of communicating seems just approximate and imprecise is mainly because of a too generally spread habit of marginalizing the body from the picture, rather than bringing it back in the center. This eventually reconnects with Massumi's suggestion that the modern thought has envisioned, measured and understood reality and experience only within a strictly dualistic frame and the same has always happened also for the distinction between feelings and thoughts, emotions and reason. Affects theorists would then wonder, where has the body gone? Why was it removed from the picture of human tools to access and create knowledge? In contrast to this, it is by acknowledging a body's potential and embracing new languages, such as affect, that much more can be achieved in terms of knowing human nature.

3. Literature as the juncture between trauma and affect

Given the similarities and reciprocities between trauma and affect, everything seems to strongly suggest that Trauma studies and Affect theory must inevitably cross the paths of Literary Theory and literature in general. To begin with, as suggested by Nicole Sütterlin, literary representations of psychological trauma can date back even to Homer's *Iliad*[176]. To a certain extent, be it the *Iliad* or the more recent 'trauma-fiction' (i.e., McGrath, DeLillo, McEwan himself), literature and art have always accompanied human history of trauma in the more or less conscious attempt at speaking of and shaping as many different shades of pain, turmoil, shock, fright as possible. What appears certain, is that there seems to be a primitive, instinctive and particularly human tendency to entrust our deeper feelings and turmoil to words and, hence, to narratives. Not only does literature intertwine with trauma theory owing to the power of narratives to reconstruct meaning and attribute sense to illogical situations, but it also overlaps with affect theory because "literature and trauma also

[176] Davis and Meretoja, 11.

reflect[s] on this interplay between the material body and the event(s) to which that body testifies"[177]. In other words, trauma literature can be regarded as a kind of fictional product whose content and form put the bodily dimension first, both as tool to communicate the intensity of the experience and as point of departure for a reconsideration of the role of bodies in contemporary post-traumatic narratives. However, in order to achieve this potential, in-between, real-but-abstract level of communication, language is still needed. Contrarily, trauma fiction would be constituted by empty books. Thus, the actual question to be answered would probably be: how can language become affective? How can it reach a suspended, ambivalent, metaphorical dimension filling the gap between the inner and the outer, the empirical and the cognitive? One possible answer may simply be found by considering the main factors and components supporting any fictional form: narrative styles, voices, points of view, narrative techniques and artifices and the topics that can be adopted and treated. The author's choices in relation to these elements certainly determine most of the affective portion of the overall fictional product. In other words, if trauma means a disjunction between the experiencing (the empirical) and the understanding (the cognitive), then narrative and literary language may prove useful in order to circumvent the *gap* and get the issue across anyway, although differently. Thus, for instance, had Kristof resorted to a more discursive, lyrical, sensational narrative composition in *The Notebook,* the general affective potential deeply undermining readers' responses to the representation of the violent and traumatic events of the twins' life would have been perhaps weaker. But also, technical devices dealing with repetitions of images and words, or alliterations can be associated to the same reiterative and repetitive re-enactment of the traumatic moment which distinguishes post-traumatic manifestations. Or the periphrasis, as a verbal construction built upon a tension between the signified (the answer or solution) and the signifier (the form used to suggest the answer itself) becomes a sort of roundabout expression or euphemisms to express something without necessarily and directly naming it. In doing so, it can be suggested that the meaning remaining implied behind and by any symbolic language can be regarded as corresponding to the traumatic content remaining unavailable to cognition. Indeed, Geoffrey Hartman argued that:

> […] in literature, as in life, the simplest event can resonate mysteriously, be invested with aura, and tend toward the symbolic. The symbolic, in this sense, is not a denial of literal or referential but its uncanny intensification. […] In short we get a clearer view of the relation

[177] Id., 73.

> of literature to mental functioning in several key areas, including reference, subjectivity, and narration.[178]

Hartman has equally proposed a further significantly interesting suggestion that allows more associations between trauma, literature and affect and which appears to reinforce the importance of bringing the body back into the picture of literary trauma representations. Quoting nothing less than Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner,* the author states that "[t]he post-traumatic story often needs 'a suspension of disbelief'"[179], an expression which, within the analysis of metafictional products, such as Kristof and McEwan's novels, stands out as particularly relevant. In other words, Hartman seems to create a parallel between the mental processes that govern a traumatized individual's tendency to imaginatively re-enact the experience, often unconsciously and obsessively, almost to embody the amount of confusing and highly intense feelings arising from trauma into something real, concrete and the equal process whereby readers typically accept the narratives they read as real facts simply because "[i]magination pursues a *body* [emphasis added]"[180]. It can be further argued, then, that certain types of literature provide potentially perfect ground for traumatic representations because they seem to satisfy the needs of a traumatized mind and body looking for a reconstruction of sense and meaning by thus overcoming the shock and fright having originally impacted and affected the body:

> We are drawn into a species of belief by the recovery of certain visceral sensations [affects]: extremes of heat, cold and thirst, glare of color, horror of the void, loss of speech. Perhaps the only way to overcome a *traumatic severance of the body and mind* [emphasis added] is to come back to mind through the body.[181]

Thus, an affective language, that is, a language that rediscovers the potential for bodily communication, together with an affective form, be it the double, self-referential, echoing pattern of metafiction or the adherence to deeply sensorial, suggestive and empathic styles (one should think of the analysis of Robbie's truthful and emotional narration of war in Part Two), ultimately become the

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[178] Hartman, Geoffrey. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies". In *New Literary History,* vol. 36, no.3, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 537-563. [Online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057300

[179] Id., 541.

[180] Ibid.

[181] Ibid.

only efficient tools through which a trauma can be interiorly retraced, relived, restored, re-elaborated and outwardly rendered, represented, finally, recovered and, most importantly, transmitted.

The possibility for trauma narratives to encourage a successful trauma recovery is also intrinsically due to another relevant feature of the relationship between trauma and literature: subjectivity and narrativization. As individuals, we are taught to achieve a gradual awareness and sense of our Selves, to recognize our human entirety, as corporeal, emotional and intellectual beings and the more we feel secure of this uniqueness, the more we feel stable within our Selves. As a result, trauma is always experienced as a disruption and dissolution of the Self as it "pathologically divides identity"[182] and, together with it, the possibility for individuals to narrate of their identity, too. From a contemporary perspective, it is to Paul Ricoeur's theories on narrative identity that some of the most interesting suggestions are owned although the notion itself predominantly derives from more pedagogically informed theories. Indeed, the French philosopher aimed at theorizing the way in which narratives can help answer the most existential and controversial human question, "who?", and how narratives seem the only adequate tool for the representation of both the change and the permanence of one's identity[183]. This would be due to the belief that human beings instinctively learn to organize outer and inner contingencies within logical and ordered narratives. In more contemporary terms, British author Will Storr convincingly explains the primordial processes supporting human compelling need and tendency for stories and narratives by appealing to a peculiarly common and simultaneously ignored fact:

> [h]umans might be in unique possession of the knowledge that our existence is essentially meaningless, but we carry on as if in ignorance of it. […] Our brains distract us from this terrible truth by filling our lives with hopeful goals and encouraging us to strive for them. What we want […] is the story of us all. It gives our existence the illusion of meaning and turns our gaze from the dread.[184]

Storr later qualifies the brain as the processor of stories, more than logic[185] and it can be argued that the very same processes prompting our mind to make up stories so as to respond to the fright of the

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[182] Balaev, Op. cit., 150.

[183] Crowley, Patrick. "Paul Ricoeur: the Concept of Narrative Identity. The Trace of Autobiography". In *Paragraph*, vol. 26, No. 3, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, November 2003, pp. 1-12, p. 1. [Online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43263868

[184] Storr, Will. *The Science of Story Telling.* London: William Collins, 2019, pp. 1-2.

[185] Id., 3.

awareness of human mortality are likely to be activated even when individuals autonomously try or are asked to make sense of their past traumatic memories (in most cases, these very episodes are death-related). In addition to this, there is another strong stance sustaining not just the need to rely on personal accounts and narratives but to venture as far as creating stories of identification. In other words, the primordial spirit animating humans' constant tendency to narrativize their experiences also animate the motives that make us curious about reading of other people's narratives. According to Lisa Zunshine, this would be related to the so-called Theory of Mind, referring to "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires."[186] This theory would thus explain the more instinctive mechanisms attracting people to read fiction by unconsciously perceiving it as a space for guessing and identification of other people's minds and emotional states, thus, as a space where mind-reading activities that are also very common in our daily life interactions ultimately become the source both for knowledge and empathy. In other words, our Theory of Mind gets stimulated with every emotional and intellectual attempt at decoding other bodies and what they communicate so as to reveal inner states[187]. The result of this, would actually correspond to a pleasurable cognitive satisfaction that makes us need even more social interactions, to the point that it can be argued that novel reading ultimately participates in those cultural activities which turn individuals into social beings. Hence, when it comes to reading of trauma fiction, it goes without saying that this activity enhances each reader's personal awareness and sensitivity about human trauma and how others can respond to it in their intimate sphere.

Finally, having extensively explored the several features motivating why trauma is here suggested to be the content of affect, while metafiction has been argued to represent its form, the thesis will eventually reinforce such stance by implementing theory with practice, that is, by declining the above-mentioned considerations within Kristof and McEwan's novels. Indeed, their literary compositions can certainly be seen as metafictional representations of traumatic experiences, where voices merge, confuse and reflect one another by ultimately depicting a controversial and rich picture of the many ways in which a trauma can be experienced and elaborated. Once we have established that language itself will never be able to faithfully and completely relate a traumatic experience – something is always lost along the way –, should we proceed in praising any type of literary trauma narrative or is it high time we, as human beings whose history is also, inevitably, the "history of a trauma"[188], claimed new and more appropriate tools to make sense of our traumas? If so, what new

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[186] Zunshine, Lisa. *Why We Read Fiction. Theory of Mind and the Novel.* Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006, revised March 2012, p. 13.

[187] Id., 23.

[188] Id., 16.

role would literature be entrusted with? Can literature overcome the linguistic barrier and assume a corporeality that would allow the *unsaid* to be said?

4. Speaking wounds: the voices of trauma in the Trilogy

In Kristof's trilogy, trauma is pervasive, and it lurks behind several circumstances as a potential threat waiting to impact characters' lives. If the previous formal analysis concerning the metafictional structure of the trilogy has not focused particular attention upon thematic issues and features pertaining to the plot, it is mainly because these would have characterized the central core of the upcoming discussion, with the hope to demonstrate the ways in which this self-referential literary work brilliantly exploits the devices of metafiction to produce an intense, reverberating, overwhelming representation of trauma. While reflecting upon the structure of *Atonement,* it has been possible to mark a strict parallelism between the idea of a formal evolution of the style and a more content-related evolution, the one characterizing the journey through life and experiences of the heroine Briony. Similarly, it can be argued that the gradual development of the story of the twins, becoming increasingly more puzzling and confusing book after book, can be regarded as a formal, verbal rendition of the difficult process of traumatic elaboration and recovery. In other words, it is as if the interior, intimate dynamics determining the characters' personal path of restoring and healing from a traumatic experience were easily retraceable by simply following the gradual evolution of the story, both in its events and in its form. What is further argued in the present section is that the number of traumatic manifestations enriching the distorted plot of the twin brothers actually originate and pertain to one single thematic core: identity. Hence, war, exile, loss and abandonment or sexual abuses and perversions are not separated sources of trauma, but they all contribute to the increasing intensity with which trauma is provoked, inflicted and transmitted through characters' identities. What is to be finally argued in the upcoming section is that, given the strict correlation between trauma and identity, it can be suggested that by analyzing how characters are presented, evolve, and narrate of both themselves and their evolution, namely, by understanding how characters retrace the story of their identity, most of the traumatic content of the trilogy comes to the fore. In addition to this, while the novel presents identities as means of what will arguably be defined a "pathological communication" and, by doing so, it represents the ways in which trauma can manifest, it also portraits the extent to which trauma might be regarded as an experience drastically reducing identities to bodies. What is relevant to consider in order to efficiently explore both dimensions is, for sure, language. This will ultimately enable the analysis to touch upon affect both in terms of content, in its relation to the experience of trauma and in terms of communication, in the way bodies turn to specific languages to

speak of their traumas. Indeed, if identities become the stage of trauma then bodies become the theatre of affects.

4.1 A schizophrenic identity

Identities are complicated and traumatic experiences complicate them even further. Considering the extent to which the trilogy is a narrative deeply imbued with violence and pain, it is thus important to understand that what readers approach is a composition being crafted from and within trauma, and, more precisely, it might be crafted by a traumatized narrator himself. Indeed, one of the most interesting reflections that come to the fore when analyzing the implications of how trauma is represented and narrated in the book actually argues for what can be defined a "schizophrenic" thesis, that is, the possibility that the entire content is the product of a personal elaboration of just one man in the attempt at overcoming the wounds upon his psyche. Hence, this suggestion would inevitably force an entire revisitation and reinterpretation of the whole novel which would no longer be the metafictional report of two twins tragically separating from each other in the midst of war only to spend the rest of their lives reciprocally looking for the other but it would stand out as the narrative of a desperate man spending his whole life in the attempt at reconstituting a sense of self, identity, unity which the trauma and horrors of war in his childhood have deeply and irreversibly disrupted. Several technical and thematic features certainly contribute to the demonstration of the existence of a schizophrenic narrator and are to be consequently analyzed across the tree novels as elements that might be the direct result of a traumatized narrative, from the peculiar use of names and pronouns and how this use evolves across the story, to several significant episodes depicting actions or reporting comments that might be particularly psychopathological.

The Notebook

To begin with, when having to approach the discourse on identity, a common expression can easily come to mind: *nomen omen.* If one's name determines to some extent one's being and identity, the lack of realistic names for people and spaces in *The Notebook* becomes significantly revealing. Even more so, if considering that the overall context representing the stage upon which the twins' drama is played actually recalls situations far from being irrelevant and ordinary: a global conflict, with sufferance, violence, exiles and deportations which unfortunately involved millions of people. Facing an historical circumstance that has left clear, recognizable, tragically familiar memories for the global collectivity, Kristof decided to remove any trace of denomination by conferring to characters, places, events in her story a hint of instability, ambivalence, estrangement which ultimately provides her narrative with a fairy-tale like décor and it can be argued that this is precisely

one of the many features suggesting the possibility that the entire narrative derives from a schizophrenic and unstable voice. As far as names are concerned, characters are simply identified through attributes. The twins, Grandmother, the Priest, Father, Mother, the housekeeper or the policeman are not given names but simply identified through the trait which majorly distinguishes their role within the narrative and, in doing so, their figures remain strongly impressed in the mind of the reader throughout the whole story, more like types than actual individuals. Moreover, it can be argued that by not providing characters with names, Kristof seemed to intensify some of the effects that traumatic conditions like war or living under totalitarian regimes may have on individuals' identities, as situations that tend towards an annihilation of the Self and a reduction to nothing more than the body. However, this condition interestingly changes from the second novel, as characters' identities are eventually identified through names. As it will later be discussed, this firstly serves the purpose of achieving a higher degree of authenticity and realism that the narrative of the trilogy wishes to obtain for the last two sections in the attempt at searching for a logic and meaning that *The Notebook* apparently lacks. Secondly, with regards to the main characters, that is, the twins, it can be argued that it is not a chance that their names, Lucas and Claus, are anagrammatic names which may reinforce the interpretation of the twins as one schizophrenic being.

It is not only through names but even through their substitutes, pronouns, that the narrative and its content undergo a major alienating effect. Indeed, besides never being referred to through names, the twins' identities are further reduced to a self-referential narrating "We" which never seems to be aware of being the synthesis of two different individuals, the "I+you", but rather, perceives itself as being the unity of two "I's" that, despite being two, do not feel different but the same. There are arguably several implications in a similarly narrating "We": firstly, it certainly reinforces the overall feeling of estrangement that the narrative produces by impressing upon the emblematic figure of the twins an aura of mysticism and mystery augmenting readers' empathic but controversial responses to their actions and thoughts. In other words, stating that certain actions are always accomplished by the same subject although knowing that this subject implies two different people, may create a general feeling of uneasiness and suspicion ultimately undermining the truthfulness of their identities. In passages like:

> We are doing our immobility exercise in the garden. It's hot. We are lying on our backs in the shade of the walnut tree. Through the leaves, we see the sky and the clouds. The leaves of the

> tree are motionless; the clouds also seem to be, but if we look at them for a long time, very attentively, we notice that they change shape and stretch out.[189]

the "we" allows readers to set a specific scene in their mind, with two young boys practicing the same exercises in the garden, then lying on the grass looking at the sky. The issue, however, is that a similar narration would not be realistic were they actually two separate and distinguished individuals. As suggested by Michèlle Bacholle, "[t]he twins' too great unity calls into question the 'reality' of the narrating *we*", and this would arguably reinforce the idea of a schizophrenic narration[190] just as the presence of the anagrammatic names (Lucas-Claus) does. Thus, what can be grasped by this excerpt is that two different beings are able to accomplish the same movements, at the same time, and to share the same emotional and cognitive perceptions, or, in other cases, the identical, raw, pragmatic ethical stance ("We wanted to see how you defend yourself"[191], "We weren't trying to be kind. We've brought you these things because you absolutely need them. That's all."[192]). They feel the same —or rather, not feel at all ("After a while, we really don't feel anything anymore."[193]) and their bodies even manifest the same symptoms ("We feel sick and have stomach cramps"[194], "We can no longer open our eyes. We can no longer hear."[195]). In the case of dialogues, for instance, the narrating "We" never splits, so that the only possible interpretation that can be formulated is that the twins' enunciations must be told simultaneously, which would actually sound and seem arguably creepy. Secondly, the estranging and discomforting effect that this narration provokes introduces a second interesting reflection concerning writing as well as identity and being implied in the use of a symbiotic "We": the way this pronoun works actually recalls the image of Siamese twins. Indeed, if we consider that the use of a pronoun joining two different individuals into one apparently replicates the way Siamese twins are actually connected through their bodies and organs, it can be argued that in Kristof the organ ensuring this connection is the text itself. Considered from this perspective, writing acquires a majorly fundamental role in the way it can affect and mirror identities. Moreover, if writing can replace a corporeal junction, it can be suggested that it can equally replace the body itself. Hence, whether writing shapes and substitutes bodies or bodies communicate like writing does, what appears

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[189] Kristof, 87.

[190] Bacholle, Michèlle. "Pushing the Limits of Autobiography: Schizophrenia in the Works of Farida Belghoul, Agota Kristof, and Milcho Manchevski." In *Romance Languages Annual X,* Waterville: Coby College, 1999, p. 7.

[191] Id., 55.

[192] Id., 43.

[193] Id., 17.

[194] Id., 45.

[195] Id., 119.

certain is that the two poles are connected and the ground upon which they meet may precisely be that of affects.

As anticipated, the possibility for a schizophrenic identity is not limited to specific, technical devices, but it also manifests in the events taking place and being narrated so that it is important to consider the written text as nothing more than the product of a traumatized mind. To put it simply, the trilogy becomes a graphical and verbal representation of a trauma. As a result, this means that by analyzing the text in the attempt at demonstrating that the twins do not exist except from inside the main character's mind, it will be also possible to bring to the fore and discuss episodes and scenes which will no longer appear just as plot-related components to develop the narrative, but they will acquire a deeper meaning by being re-interpreted as manifestations of a post-traumatic symptomatology. Secondly, this re-reading would explain the abovementioned alienating effect provoked by Kristof's choice of depriving the narrative of truthful names for people, events and places so as to increase an overall sense of what can be defined rather a "suspicious realism" than an effective unrealism itself. Indeed, the whole trilogy's narrative focalization sharing the twins, or either Lucas and C(K)laus' perspective, inevitably sets the limit for the content and its interpretation: readers can only see what is being narrated to them. The result is that of a narrative about war as remembered and perceived by the voices narrating it, be them the twins' or just one pathological man, Lucas/C(K)laus. Regardless of which interpretative possibility is the most valid, both would conform to the idea that the way trauma is narrated in the first book is the result of how the narrator more or less consciously decides to elaborate it and transmit it. In this case, the strategy would be one of manipulation of the traumatic content and memory through a concrete act of purification that is here achieved through writing, because writing is the medium of stories and stories, or narratives in general, are what individuals turn to in order to make sense and order of chaos. Hence, it is by changing the narrative of their trauma that the twins can change the impact that the memory of it has in their lives. To illustrate this, although the City of K certainly stands for a truly existing town in Hungary just as the war often referred to by the twins in their notebook evidently corresponds to the Second World War, none of this is depicted in its historicity and truthfulness but it undergoes a process of defamiliarization ultimately stacking the whole context in a quasi-imaginary world. This world, according to interpretative personal choices, may either be the mental representation of two young boys uncapable of dealing with the pain of private and collective violence, from being abandoned by their mother and suffering from abuses by other village inhabitants to being affected like everyone else by the severe conditions of war and poverty, or the psychopathological representation of a world that is distorted and mystified both as a result of a disrupted mind and of a conscious act of manipulation of painful memories as a coping mechanism.

Besides the twins' imaginative vision of the brutal world surrounding them, other psychopathological symptoms of a possible schizophrenic disorder can be retraced in comments that other characters make concerning the twins' particular behavior, as when they report of their father once claiming that "[t]hey live in a different world. In a world of their own. It isn't very healthy. […] They're odd. You never know what they might be thinking."[196] Moreover, several chapters of the notebook describe the twins' practice of exercises to strengthen their mind and body and these respond to a strict ethics which certainly is rather infrequent for such young children but which, just as the moral reasons underlying their manner of writing, it is equally animated by the same apparent intent at reducing and subtracting whatever is unessential or, simply, too much. Their pragmatic ethics, apparently in tune with the overall war-related context characterized by misery, poverty, tyranny and violence, seems to follow the natural laws of the struggle for survival: they do what they think it has to be done. To an extent, it can be argued that even their moral sphere is the direct product of their trauma. So, they decide to toughen their bodies because they want to be able to bear the pain of Grandmother's physical punishment when it occurs[197] and, as suggested few lines before, this eventually responds to their general tendency to reduce the extent to which their bodies can be affected, emotionally and cognitively.

The Proof

If, in the first novel, symptomatic manifestations of a possible schizophrenic disorder are arguably mainly depicted through the several bizarre and controversial practices and behaviors that the twins adopt by following their raw ethics, hints at this pathological condition continue in the second novel, *The Proof,* after the alleged separation of the two brothers. The symbiotic "We" is here reduced to one single identity, Lucas', and readers should be careful and attentive in discerning any behavior or discourse that might thus be psychopathological. First of all, starting from the very first page of the second novel, Lucas is immediately referred to as the "idiot"[198] and when asked to provide reasons for this title, he seems very lucid in explaining that he has a "nervous disorder due to suffering a psychological trauma as a child during the war"[199], and that he "suffered a traumatic disorder" which is why he is "not quite normal."[200] Actually, readers should notice that this is not the first time in the trilogy that the situation affecting the twins is explicitly referred to. In their notebook, they once

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[196] Kristof, 23.

[197] Id., 16.

[198] Id., 220.

[199] Id., 221.

[200] Id., 205.

mentioned a letter which they were given reporting their exemption from school owing to their "infirmity and […] psychic trauma."[201] Thus, similar references may actually contribute to the stance suggesting that the twins do not exist and that the idea of the "other" is an imagined condition which is at the same time both the inevitable result upon the psyche due to the traumatic experience and a strategy that eventually allows Lucas to cope with the experience itself. Moving forward in *The Proof*, indeed, readers witness a dialogue that might equally be highly revealing of what actually occurred throughout the first book, especially when analyzing the context in which it occurs, since the narrator makes clear that Lucas is alone, sitting on a bench in the garden with his eyes closed:

"What do I do now?"
"Same as before. Keep getting up in the morning, going to bed at night, doing what has to be done in order to live."
"It will be a long time."
"Perhaps a whole lifetime."[202]

What seems rather obvious from this scene, is that Lucas is actually talking to himself or, more precisely, to that imagined twin brother with whom he would hide behind a narrative, symbiotic identity—the "We" of the notebook—and, now that this symbiosis has been disrupted, the narrative seems to unveil his secret by restoring a more "realistic" third person omniscient narration and showing what has always been hiding behind the written compositions of the first book. What this perspective ultimately suggests is that Lucas is not even actively conscious and in control of this traumatic and narrative division, but he is arguably a victim of it. This would reinforce the schizophrenic thesis because the fact that Lucas falls prey to the hallucination and conviction that he has a twin brother is a direct manifestation of how severely a trauma can affect the person by deeply compromising his or her ability to actually discern reality from imagination or, in this post-traumatic context, delirium. Similarly, in these initial pages of the second part, Lucas also manifests symptoms that might either suggest a condition similar to amnesia, since he realizes that he has been forgetting to perform some of his daily duties for the previous weeks and a man working with him makes a statement related to Lucas' condition which, seen from a psychoanalytical perspective, sounds rather significant: "It'll pass, it'll pass. He neglects his garden, he lets the milk turn sour, he doesn't eat, he doesn't drink, and he thinks he can go on like that"[203], suggesting that the way Lucas has been acting

[201] Id., 162.

[202] Id., 222.

[203] Id., 193.

is actually odd and unusual. Other narrative details that provide evidence of Lucas's mental disorder can equally be found in comments such as "I don't know how to go on living"[204], which sounds like the very intimate avowal of a personal vulnerability that the twins at the time of the notebook would never confess so overtly in their attempt at hiding their feelings. Moreover, the Lucas of the second novel makes very little reference to the existence of a twin brother, giving the general impression of being a person who has always been alone (i.e., "I haven't left this town since my mother brought me here six years ago"[205], "I live alone"[206]).

In addition, as the title suggests, the second novel of the trilogy should play the role of convincing the reader that what it is being narrated in its pages correspond to the actual truth about the twins' story and that the change in the narrator's voice equally contribute to reinforce the reliability of the content. It is as if the author was telling readers: "You can trust what will be told in this part." Indeed, for instance, if on the one hand Lucas seems to live completely alone, far from that symbiosis that would have him live, speak, act as sharing the same body of his twin brother in *The Notebook,* in *The Proof* he sometimes refers to a past loss, by therefore limiting the existence of an actual brother not to a visionary and imaginary dimension, but to a more realistic condition whereby he is conscious of a past, a loss that cannot be present.

> Lucas says, "I know the pain of separation."
> "The death of your mother."
> "And something else besides. The loss of a brother who was one with me."[207]

It is here interesting to notice the use of the expression "who was one with me", which may actually be read from two different perspectives. At a basic, superficial level, this may simply prove that Lucas is recovering from his trauma and that he is accepting the fact that he is now alone. However, by reconsidering the schizophrenic thesis, which means, by considering Lucas as more unreliable than how he may appear because of his psychic disease, this same expression can actually be read as an unvoluntary psychopathological confession, as if his wound was speaking at his place. Lucas actually provides no context to locate the actual meaning of his enunciation, no assumptions as to whether this brother is dead can be made and, more importantly, "being one with someone", doesn't necessarily mean that they were very close. This expression rather recalls of the already mentioned

[204] Id., 197.
[205] Id., 202.
[206] Id., 204.
[207] Id., 235.

image of the Siamese twins which has been associated with the possibility of a unity that can only be possible in Lucas's imagination and, consequently, in his writing. Thus, this very same comment would still be significant and meaningful even if interpreted as the manifestation of a deeper torment whereby Lucas was one with a brother that actually never existed except in his traumatized mind and, therefore, his gradual recovery and healing starts in the very moment he is capable of admitting that this symbiosis is a thing of the past, regardless of whether it was real or just imagined. As the priest will later say to Lucas in the attempt at consoling him, "You have suffered a wound from which you have not yet recovered"[208], but—it can be added—, from which he has started recovering, nevertheless. Thus, readers should be very careful in trusting the suggested reliability of the content, since, as the abovementioned passage proves, the narrative is still subject to manifestations of a psychopathologic condition which would necessarily undermine the authenticity itself.

Another crucial moment in the narrative that may go rather unnoticed occurs as Lucas asks Peter to hide some of his notebooks and, on this occasion, he is questioned about his missing brother. Lucas is convinced that his brother Claus is living on the other side of the border, yet he hasn't heard from him since the day they separated; for this reason, when Peters asks him, "Do you write to him?", Lucas answers, "I write to him every day in the notebooks."[209] What is here suggested, is that from the perspective of a psychopathological communication, this might actually be taken as a clear statement revealing that the notebook, that is, everything narrated in the first book, is the result of Lucas's written and verbal representation of a life that is not the real one, but rather the life he has been living in his broken psyche, where the imagined existence of a brother whom he talks to and whom he feels one with through the text is nothing more than the result of his trauma. This, with hindsight, is going to be further illuminated by a comment that Claus provides in the third book while looking back on his childhood and admitting that he bought a notebook "in which [he] wrote down [his] first lies"[210]. Thus, the existence of the twin brother may certainly be one of these lies.

Moreover, even from a content-related perspective, it can be outlined that the story is rich of scenes and stories whose traumatic and traumatizing potential may provide reasons to believe that characters can reasonably be deeply affected and impacted by their surroundings. Episodes such as the assassination of Sophie by her brother Victor, or the apparent suicide of the poor child Mathias are deeply disturbing events that arguably increase the already deeply traumatized environment in which most of *The Proof*'s equally disturbed characters live. With reference to this, Lucas is certainly not the only victim paying the costs of all the painfully collective experiences that have been narrated

[208] Id., 248.

[209] Id., 259.

[210] Id., 378.

in the first book, and he actually gets to know people who, in their own personal way, have been equally affected: Yasmine and her story of childhood sexual abuses[211]; Clara and the sudden loss of her husband[212]; Victor and the hatred for his too invasive sister which he vents in his obsessive writing[213]; Mathias and the unbearable pain of not being accepted for his bodily deformation and for not feeling recognized by Lucas as a son, or a brother[214], a pain eventually resulting in frequent nightmares and visions[215]; the insomniac who hasn't been sleeping for eight years after the loss of his wife[216]. Everyone has their own pain to recover from and so does Lucas, although it might be suggested that the shocking and disturbing events which compose part of the plot, such as the discovery of Mathias' body hanging next to the skeleton of the Mother and her baby that Lucas kept hidden from the times of *The Notebook,* can be seen as triggering factors affecting his already unstable psyche. This is important in relation to the fact that, towards the end, Lucas' character suddenly leaves space to Claus, presented as the twin brother Lucas had been looking for and who was equally on the search for the other. What is interesting, is that Peter, an old friend of Lucas, informs both Claus and readers that Lucas has disappeared after years spent alone, constantly working in the bookshop and spending nights in the cemetery where, years later, the dead body of a woman was found, arguably Yasmine's[217]. It is indeed believed that Lucas actually killed the woman as a result of the despair felt when Yasmine wanted to take Mathias away from him by thus preventing Lucas from successfully reconstructing through his relationship with the child the same unity that he had with his twin brother, and this might reasonably correspond to an ultimate act manifesting the intensity to which the pain he has always been exposed to eventually led him towards resorting to death and violence as coping strategies. Accepting that Lucas could actually kill the woman he loved may finally be another element highlighting is too compromised schizophrenic identity.

The Third Lie

Finally, although the narrative logic which should animate the final book, *The Third Lie,* is supposed to respond to the idea of a truthful narrative aiming to finally recompose the order of all the puzzling and distorted events that have been narrated this far, this part is equally characterized by

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[211] Kristof, 213.

[212] Id., 235.

[213] Id., 271.

[214] Id., 317.

[215] Id., 273.

[216] Id., 278

[217] Id., 330.

elements revealing of a possible schizophrenic condition. From a logical perspective in the structure of the trilogy, it seems that the final part corresponded to a sort of awakening, as if Lucas/Claus finally restored to a lucidity and clarity of mind allowing him to overcome the post-traumatic visions and hallucinations which confused him as much as they confused readers in the previous two sections. Briefly, most of the plot is basically represented but also reconstructed within a more authentic and realistic context. For instance, the narrator firstly returns to a rather reliable first-person voice sharing the perspective of Claus (whom readers should arguably regard as Lucas) as he retraces situations which prove a continuity and a consistency with the previous parts. In this way, it is easier to suggest that the two different characters are actually the same individual. For instance, Claus spends his time in prison walking in the courtyard, "a habit [he] developed during [his] childhood"[218] and a habit which certainly reminds readers of the same exercises that the twins used to practice so as to toughen their bodies. By walking in the courtyard, he is also reminded of the sky he used to stare at sitting on the bench in his childhood's garden[219]. Claus also looks back on the memories of his childhood by mentioning either people or events that readers are already familiar with, yet he finally provides more realistic details about their occurrence. He refers to a time spent in a rehabilitation center after suffering from a leg injury[220] and he even seems to be victim of past memories whose truthfulness he cautiously questions, such as the existence of that symbiotic unity with a lost brother:

> […] was it once a reality, the perfect happiness in the white house, or had I merely hallucinated it or dreamed it up during the long nights of five years spent in a hospital? And he who lay in the other bed in the little room, who breathed at the same rhythm as me, the brother whose name I still believe I know, was he dead or *had he never existed* [emphasis added]?[221]

Moreover, readers are also given logical explanations for how the child eventually developed a habit and passion for writing and, more importantly, for how writing unveiled to him its potential for concretely affecting and manipulating reality, which arguably explains how he ended up writing *The Notebook.* Indeed, this manipulatory tendency first manifested itself as Lucas/Claus would read other children in the hospital the letters sent by their parents by totally reversing their content, "The results were, for instance: "Our dear child, whatever you do, don't get well. We're getting along just fine

[218] Id., 344.

[219] Ibid.

[220] Id., 357.

[221] Id., 358.

without you […]"'[222] and this would ultimately respond to a strong ethical stance that the young child assumed from a very young age, that is, always saying the truth. Another episode which readers may recognize and that is here given a more realistic explanation corresponds to the actual moment when the child met the so-called "Grandmother", which is already presented in the first chapter of *The Notebook,* however, Claus explains that he was taken to the woman's house by a nun, not by his mother, that he was alone, not with a brother, and that the lady was not his grandmother although he ended up calling her "Grandmother"[223]. If, on the one hand, the process whereby the narrative of *The Third Lie* predominantly retraces the story that readers have already encountered to ground it in a more logical order, on the other, this doesn't prevent it from still representing the canvas upon which symptoms of a possible trauma might appear. Indeed, Claus may be regarded as a more reliable narrator, however, he still has visions and hallucinations that *The Proof*'s Lucas would also have and that cause him to see and speak to his brother as if he was truly there[224]. With regards to this, an important and lucid declaration is eventually provided to readers as Claus seemingly overcomes and comes to term with the post-traumatic split he has suffered from for most of his life:

> All this is a lie. I know very well that I was already alone in this town, with Grandmother, that even then I only fantasized that there were two of us, me and my brother, in order to endure the unbearable solitude.[225]

Before drawing some conclusions, it should be outlined that, once again, thematic and plot-related dynamics contribute to enrich the range of traumatizing and triggering factors eventually affecting characters' mental stability. Although *The Third Lie* may present fewer affective portraits of death, violence and sufferance contrarily to *The Notebook*'s dismembered corpses or *The Proof*'s hanging skeletons, it is still the representation of a world being silently and secretly affected by pervasive memories of death. Starting from Claus himself, he now figures as a character whose more realistic, authentic nature is also due to his apparent capacity to be more in touch with his feelings that the notebook's writer initially was. This can be grasped by the frequent reflections that he entrusts readers with and that reveal of his inner torment and anxieties related to death ("Death will obliterate everything soon. *It frightens me* [emphasis added][226]), or the feeling of almost being haunted by the

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[222] Id., 361.
[223] Id., 366.
[224] Id., 385.
[225] Id., 395.
[226] Id., 355.

idea of his twin brother's death[227]. For instance, a relevant passage where this obsessive thought actually merges with Claus' alleged schizophrenia and the possibility for healing corresponds to a moment that is highly significant from a pathologically communicative perspective as well: firstly, it is a dream or hallucination, thus, it is a possible symptom of psychic instability; secondly, it is about Claus meeting his brother, visiting his house where he now lives with his children and, finally, Claus killing his brother as he was about to open the door and leave him, hence, it is a vision about his brother's death. Finally, still caught up in his dream, Claus imagines a dialogue with a man asking him whether he has actually killed his brother and the conversation is, arguably, rich in pathological details and traces:

> After a few moments he asks, "So, then, you killed him?"
> I say, "Yes."
> The old man says, "You did what you had to do. That's good. Few people do what must be done."
> I say, "It was because he wanted to open the door."
> "You did well. It was good that you stopped him. You had to kill him. With that everything falls into order, the order of things."
> I say, "But he won't be here anymore. Order doesn't mean much if he isn't here anymore."
> The old man says, "On the contrary. From now one he'll always be with you wherever you go."[228]

What can be suggested from this excerpt, is that by applying trauma-related interpretations to its communicative intentions, it ends up explaining most of the purpose of the trilogy as a trauma metafictional narrative. It is possible, then, to re-read it in the following way and within a more trauma-informed context: at this point of the narrative, Claus is still coping with the pain deriving from the awareness of the very solitude affecting his childhood and that he tried to overcome by writing to an imagined brother in his notebook. This on-going torment is gradually finding some relief, as demonstrated by the more realistic and credible narrative employed by the narrator Claus, yet he still struggles with post-traumatic symptoms causing him dreams like the one just mentioned. In this specific vision, he ends up killing the brother he was looking for and whose imagined existence allowed him to make his life more tolerable. Killing him means losing him, yet it is an act whose symbolic potential corresponds with the gradual achievement of a new mental, psychological

[227] Id., 358.

[228] Id., 387-388.

awareness, that is to say Claus' ability to recognize and accept that that brother never existed, and his haunting presence was nothing more than a traumatic manifestation. By killing him he consequently makes a step further in his recovery. By actively deciding that he must split himself from this frenzied image rather than accepting to be a victim of it, he manages to re-own part of his single identity. Finally, by interiorly acknowledging the split and, ultimately, by representing it through words and writing, he can gradually create a senseful narrative of his own Self, he can bring order back into his disrupted story.

In conclusion, a final reflection is necessary in order to ultimately demonstrate the extent to which identity is portrayed as schizophrenic throughout the trilogy and how this strictly correlates with the way Kristof chose to depict and represent trauma. Indeed, in the final book the main character and narrator Claus certainly seems lucid in retracing and reconstructing the meaning of all the shocking events that have characterized his life and, at the same time, he also makes comments and accomplishes actions which are more or less consciously revealing of the fragile and unstable condition of his fractured identity, constantly on the search for a reassembled unity which he concretely embodies in the process of reuniting with a lost brother. As *The Third Lie* eventually demonstrates, the predominant means through which this effort is made is writing. Claus explicitly describes all the ways in which writing has allowed him to overcome the pain arising from the experience of solitude and loneliness, from violence and from death. It has been the concrete act of turning his life into literature, or fiction, that has enabled him to recreate a narrative meant to attribute meaning to the previously disrupted narrative of his Self and his trauma. His identity is to be retraced and reconstructed through the text itself. However, this final section can certainly be regarded as the most densely metafictional and self-referential of all the three sections, as some of the previously mentioned comments by Claus about writing, lying and inventing stories testify. To these, some other aspects can be added so as to enrich the metafictional apparatus of what can now be reasonably defined a trauma metanarrative: Klaus changing his name into Klaus-Lucas to publish poems [229], Lucas asking Klaus to complete the manuscript he has been writing[230], Klaus being reproached for often telling too many lies[231] and being forced to write lies while working for a newspaper[232]. While the ethical implications carried by all this writing and all this lying will be discussed later on, the conclusion that these elements eventually suggest is that *The Third Lie* is, inevitably, a lie too. However, there can be lies invented to hide secrets, to trick others, to manipulate reality, and then,

[229] Id., 426.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Id., 447, 459.

[232] Id., 469.

there is fiction and writing fiction. This is what occurs in the trilogy as Kristof declares, through Lucas/Claus' voice, that:

> I try to write true stories but […] at a given point the story becomes unbearable because of its very truth, and then I have to change it. […] I try to tell my story but all of a sudden, I can't—I don't have the courage, it hurts too much. And so I embellish everything and describe things not as they happened but the way I wish they had happened.[233]

Thus, writing here contributes to the possibility of restoring the unity that a traumatic experience can initially split by becoming a space where one's psyche, animated by the symptoms provoked by the fracture of the protective shield, can find a material and faithful representation even if this means writing of alternative realities. Writing and, together with it, literature become the safe spaces where a broken identity can undertake the path for reconstruction and healing by imagining a life that is not fake, but simply other; for instance, the life a person could have if he or she hadn't suffered from a trauma or the life one could have once the trauma will be healed. Finally, "stories that aren't true but might be real."[234]

4.2 The affective reduction of identities to bodies

In Kristof's trilogy, traumas are as much pervasive as bodies. There might be a direct correlation between the two dimensions since, as argued in the introduction to this chapter, traumas are often communicated through the bodies they affect. What is going to be argued in the next paragraph is that the traumatic conditions that pervade the entire trilogy and that have been deeply analyzed in the previous section do not merely affect characters' identities by acting upon their psyche and provoking schizophrenic behaviors and manifestations, buy they equally impact identities at the level of the body. Moreover, the way this impact is produced and the general effects it can provoke seem to respond to the very same notion that has been discussed in the analysis of the trilogy's metafictional structure and which is believed to resume the essence of the formal and technical choices supporting the narrative, that is, a general tendency for a process of reduction and restriction. In other words, just as the twins' writing longs for a drying and restricting effect, so does the traumatic content force characters' identities to shrink both corporeally and morally. Consequently, a line can be drawn to divide two different reflections, one reasonably influencing the other: the first concerns the discourse on ethics and morality, since when one regards the trilogy as an intense and faithful

[233] Id., 345.

[234] Id., 410.

portrait of human nature and its complexity, then one must accept that the novel will inevitably deal with ethical implications. More precisely, the way this connects with the realm of trauma is the consideration that the world depicted in the novel, a world of war and misery, forces characters to an extremization of their lives, a reduction to the satisfaction of the most basic and essential necessities with the only purpose to survive. This is the only logic animating even the twins' strict ethical code and, as a result, their actions, among which their writing. The second reflection, instead, takes a step further and attempts at answering a question: what happens to identities as a result of a similar ethical and, inevitably, emotional extremization? The solution that is to be argued is one considering that the world depicted by Kristof has been so intensely and violently deprived that individuals are no longer capable of conceiving of human nature as nothing more than its most concrete and corporeal dimension; identities shrink to bodies because bodies can be objectified and, thus, submitted to the same laws of materialism and economy that ensure survival. Finally, affect will once again prove useful in exploring similar considerations since a narrative that is restricted to its essentiality about characters that are reduced to the materiality of their bodies inevitably becomes a story that express itself through a deeply affective language.

4.2.1 Affective ethics

As priorly suggested, the first element to be considered mainly pertains to how the trauma narrative of the trilogy expresses itself through the representation of a world that struggles to survive among the horrors of war and of the ways in which this survival mode obliges individuals to inevitably turn to highly pragmatic standards of living, from raw ethical stances to materialist behaviors and a general lack of human empathy. Indeed, the violent world depicted by the twin's symbiotic voices in *The Notebook* is a world in which the trauma of war forces individuals to rediscover very essential and materialistic behaviors, morals and actions. Basically, it forces them to autonomously craft and adhere to that pragmaticism which has already been analyzed as the feature animating most of the twins' actions and intents, causing them to shape a strict ethic following rules that respond to notions such as doing what *has* to be done, not to what they *feel* or *believe* it should be done. In the trilogy's fictional universe, emotionality has very little space and repressing it is presumably wiser than acting upon it.

Thus, believing that the twins are capable of committing the deeply disturbing actions they accomplish throughout the first part of the narrative because they are cruel or completely immoral, is actually a false assumption. Rather, they ultimately turn out to be nothing more than victims of the world they live in and which becomes their principal source of knowledge and understanding of how to go on living and surviving. Moreover, considering the extent to which their life is marked by pain and sufferance form a very young age eventually provides sufficient evidence to interpret the ethic

motivating their action as based upon the idea of limiting as much as possible the impact that any future violence, or trauma, may have on their lives. It is needless to say that the brief compositions enriching *The Notebook'*s plot are certainly the result of this extremizing process, taking place as much at the level of their behaviors as at the level of their writing.

Hence, practices such as punching each other repetitively produce an anaesthetizing and inuring effect whereby their body almost takes a life of its own, separating from their consciousness which, on the contrary, is basically switched off as a result of the continuous exposure to the same affective experience. At the end, "[i]t's always someone else who gets hurt, someone else who gets burned, who gets cut, who feels the pain."[235]Similarly, they also insult each other repeatedly in order to overcome emotional pain, such as shame or fear, because certain negative words (i.g., "faggot", "prick", "turd") or positive ones (i.g., "darlings", "loves", "joy") respectively re-evoke painful feelings and memories whose effect they wish to disarm. The use of emotional suppression in favor of a more unemotionally motivated ethic also underlies the twins' decision to help the deserter they find in the woods by bringing food and blankets to him, something which they don't do because they are kind and generous but because they rationally, almost scientifically and objectively know that he "absolutely" needs them to survive[236]. By applying this moral code, they are thus able to accomplish both "good" actions—such as helping the deserter—or "bad" ones, such as not intervening to protect Harelip as she gets abused by some other village boys so as to see how she protects herself[237].

Yet, the reader may arguably wonder how it could be possible for two individuals to be capable of behaving morally towards some people and immorally towards someone else. The possibility, then, is that their ethic is simply *amoral* and unemotional. This would eventually explain why they apply the same ethical standards even to themselves by thus punching each other, inflicting reciprocal verbal abuse or fasting. Indeed, was their moral code even slightly animated by their emotional sphere, it could be argued that they would at least preserve themselves from masochist acts and reserve violence only against other people judged as "deserving" of it. In those cases where their actions seem to derive from the activation of emotional states, these feelings are, nevertheless, never "other"-oriented, but rather self-oriented, that is, they act according to how they get personally affected by the surrounding events and they only consider those emotions which would prompt them towards actions whose concrete results would conform to their pragmatic ethic, while suppressing all other kinds of emotions. As it will be later better explained when exploring the bodily dimension of the novel, extreme conditions like war tragically expose bodies to trauma, men are defenseless in

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[235] Id., 17.

[236] Id., 43.

[237] Id., 55.

front of the horrors which they experience first-hand, bare and bones. In other words, trauma finds a very feasible and accessible route to break the protective shield.

Hence, it is through bodies that characters like the twins daily experience abuses, violence, abandonment or misery. As a result, their bodies automatically activate following the previously illustrated principle of pleasure elaborated by Freud; faced by threats, their organism is encouraged to restore a homeostasis, a balance which may either correspond to a reduction or increase of excitations. For this reason, it might be here argued that the twins' moral sphere is not as much sensitive to either emotional or cognitive suggestions as it is to affective ones. In other words, they learn to shape their actions according to crude and essential necessities as a consequence of the affective experiences they have had in the past, those events having affected their bodies and identities at a very primordial, instinctive and deep level, without emotional or logical awareness of them. For instance, a typically affective state that the two have soon familiarized with and that, consequently, they have eagerly tried to neutralize because of how this state has affected them, is shame. To illustrate this, after carefully and attentively observing Grandmother doing several chores, they decide to help her, however, while on the one hand the woman interprets this decision as a suggestion that she might be too old, on the other, the twins explain that the only reason that has pushed them to act was shame, because "[t]he work is hard, but to watch someone working and not do anything is even harder."[238] It can be argued that a similar behavior may pertain to the range of psychopathological behaviors of a trauma victim when considering the breach in the logical and cognitive shield of the individual's psyche resulting from the experience. The breach, thus, is likely to ensure that a more direct and open connection between the "broken" Self and the outer world from which the Self receives constant suggestions becomes the source of behaviors, both verbal and non, that have not been previously filtered. In addition, there are reasons to suggest that shame is actually and primarily an affect before being, as it is generally believed, a feeling. Shame is an affect in the extent to which it is a state *embodying* itself, taking a materiality through a body and, consequently, affecting it. More precisely, borrowing from one of Tomkins' leading theories in the field of affect studies, shame can be included among the nine affects composing a sort of starting kit for the emergence of a later emotional life and awareness in the individual (i.e., "the primary affect of shame-humiliation is at the core of the quite different emotions of shyness, embarrassment, and guilt."[239]). We generally experience shame while being in the midst of a positive affective moment, that is when, for instance, we might be feeling joy or excitement, and something suddenly interrupts this emission of positive affects with a consequent inhibition of these. Hence, one might feel encouraged by a spur of surprise

[238] Id., 11.

[239] Frank and Wilson, op. cit., 4.

and happiness when recognizing an old friend in the street whom, however, doesn't reciprocate. This sudden, implicitly violent obstacle to the excitement that originally pushed the person to act eventually provokes shame and, in addition, the very fact that shame arises in relation to feelings that we intimately and personally feel as positive but is experienced as deeply negative, also means that shame somehow sets the limits for our joys and excitements. To this extent, shame is affective and in being affective it is also (variably) traumatic, since it affects the person in a sudden way, it creates a fracture, a gap between the positive excitation and the negative impact of the experience provoking shame and it generally leaves the person struggling with equally unpleasant states of embarrassment and shyness that might prompt socially avoiding behaviors. By repositioning all this within the analytical frame of *The Notebook,* the twins' experience of shame prompt them to accomplish an act which is self-oriented to the measure that their decision to help Grandmother by providing for all the house chores only enables them to come to terms with a selfish need to numb the unpleasant exposure to shame, it certainly doesn't derive from gratuitous kindness. Thus, a similar passage exemplifies the fact that the rigid and pragmatic ethic followed by the twins may sometimes be motivated by reasons which rather than being emotional, can be better defined as affective, since they are the result of how a traumatic experience directly affects their body, brutally exposed to the outer world and, thus, inevitably condemned to be shaken at a very core level, with no protection.

4.2.2 Affective bodies

In the trilogy, then, the affective component of trauma arguably embodies itself in the equally anesthetized ethic that the twins adhere to precisely to reduce the affective scope of their life just as it eventually identifies with the corporeal and bodily dimension that extreme life conditions like war inevitably reduce individuals to. Indeed, the world of the trilogy is evidently inhabited by men whose primary wish is a one for survival, that is, the possibility of pursuing an ethic that outdoes any emotionally dependent bias, any rationally informed behavior. As seen in the previous paragraph, men simply learn to do what has to be done. In this ethical shrinking, individuals are no longer seen as complex identities, but they are equally submitted to the laws of materialism and economy. Thus, the violent world in which a character like Lucas/Claus struggles to survive is a world that has abandoned him, that has deprived him of his identity of human being, of child, of someone's son or nephew; he is merely reduced to the most objectified and corporeal thing he has, that is, his body. The self-aware and conscious experience of being deprived of his identity and only being regarded as a corporeal thing both by his peers and adults (such as, sadly, even by his mother), is what arguably teaches Lucas/Claus to adhere to a similar essentiality as he grows up: being a first-hand victim of violence teaches him to perpetrate violence as well, being sexually objectified by adults initiates him

to perverted sexual relationships. Finally, it is by finding himself having just his body as a shield that Lucas/Claus reasonably experiences trauma in a deeply affective way, just upon his body and this is the element eventually leading him to attempt a gradual reconstruction and reappropriation of his own Self by turning to another strictly concrete and pragmatic tool, writing and, more precisely, the text itself, in which he finds the solace of an imagined companion, of another body sharing the solitude of his own.

When trying to understand how bodies in the trilogy emerge from the written text as the center of the traumatic experience and as the actual carriers of identities, one of the most important elements to consider is the way in which images of violence and pain, that is, trauma, are affectively depicted. The world portrayed in the first book is a horrid world, to the point that it almost seems unreal. It is a world inhabited by characters who all show the different extents to which a violent war can affect and impact human lives, and, finally, it is a world where people seem to have necessarily and forcibly resorted to violence as the sole possible solution or response to the brutal and inhuman consequences characterizing their "new" lives. "The war has made them stingy and selfish."[240]Hence, mothers abandon their children because of the inevitable poverty they end up in after their husbands have gone to the front[241]; poor old people like Grandmother are crushed by the duties that have to be accomplished in order to survive and their life is only shaped upon the necessities of economy, because, differently, they would end up starving[242]; children are capable of the utmost horrific acts, too violent for the innocence which should characterize their lives and identities, they are taught (or self-taught) to trick others, to rob, to fight, to verbally and physically abuse of their mates ("The big children often attack the smallest ones. They take all they in their pockets, and sometimes even their clothes. They beat them up too, especially those who come from elsewhere."[243]) and, also, some of them behave in manners that are so perverted and discomforting that it arguably seems that a mental instability and pathology maybe the only explanation, as it has been argued for the case of Lucas/Claus himself. But also Harelip, for instance, a young child regarded by everyone as "mad"[244], presumably manifests her trauma mainly through sexually and erotically disturbed acts, such as having sexual intercourses with a dog[245]. Yet, it seems that this perversion is equally spread among children as well as adults: the priest of the town used to give Harelip money in exchange for sexual

[240] Id., 72.

[241] Id., 5.

[242] Id., 10-11.

[243] Id., 53.

[244] Id., 30.

[245] Id., 36.

practices[246], his housekeeper offers to wash the twins' clothes only to eventually have them to get undressed and practice oral sex to them[247] just as the foreign officer being sheltered by Grandmother persuades them to urinate and perform physical violence on him[248]. However, the traumatic charge implied in a condition like war is not limited to what it makes people capable of, but also to what it forces people to witness, that is, death. Indeed, it should not be normal and ordinary for common people to find themselves frequently exposed to the bare-bones reality of death, yet, in extreme conditions like war, this event sadly and tragically acquires a too disturbing and unnatural occurrence. Hence, the twins first find themselves coming across a dead soldier during one of their strolls in the woods outside the town, "he is still in one piece, only his eyes missing because of the crows"[249]. Later in the story, the mother that previously abandoned them makes a sudden reappearance carrying a baby and encouraging the twins to join her in a jeep and run away with her. Yet, an explosion abruptly puts an end to the promise of a reconciliation. The twins see their mother dying in front of them, "[h]er guts are coming out of her belly. She is red all over. So is the baby. Mother's head is hanging in the hole made by the shell. Her eyes are open and still wet with tears."[250] Finally, they get to discover the dead body of their friend Harelip whose house has been destroyed by a fire. She "is lying on the bed. She is naked. Between her spread legs there is a dried pool of blood and sperm. Her eyelashes are stuck together forever, her lips are curled up over her black teeth in an eternal smile; Harelip is dead. […] She died happy, fucked to death."[251] The language used by the twins to relate of similar images aims at reducing and, even more, anaesthetizing any emotional value so that the manipulation achieved through writing may allow them to overcome any painful reaction on their part. It can be argued that it is as if the twins first experience a possibly traumatic event which deeply destabilizes and impacts their Self which, owing to war-related conditions, is a Self drastically reduced to a body, that is, to a purely affective and sensitive dimension. Thus, the burden of the shock becomes so unbearable because completely unfiltered and unprocessed that twins find writing as the only concrete tool to retell of those traumatic events in a way that should deprive them of their equally traumatic value. They create a narrative which fits their coping needs, but which doesn't necessarily allow them to heal. However, it is a strategy where it seems that the text and how this represents the

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[246] Id., 67.

[247] Id., 80.

[248] Id., 89, 91.

[249] Id., 13.

[250] Id., 146.

[251] Id., 154-155.

experience should leave no recognizable trace of emotionality or morality, aiming at a quasi-scientifically objective report where an experiment is coldly observed and precisely reported.

Nevertheless, the linguistic and written manipulation is one that, according to Benedettini, digs and originates in the body[252]. The body becomes the siege of trauma and pain and by looking back on the previously mentioned theories that seem unify affect, trauma, body and language, one can venture to suggest that within a traumatic environment, bodies are irremovable, they are the most extreme dimension to which one's identity can be reduced, nothing further can be subtracted. This is because a trauma is a deeply affective experience just as affects tend to embody primarily in bodies, before assuming any other recognizable emotional or moral shape. Thus, in the trilogy, everyone speaks through their bodies and traces of this communication can actually be found, in spite of the twins' effort of removal and denial. Although the abovementioned images of horror and death are certainly narrated in their occurrence and development and then stored as facts that leave no consequence, other passages may betray more affective reactions. For instance, something interesting occurs as the twins decide to sneak into a camp after a night of explosions and rifles. The camp is empty, yet the twins find themselves facing one of the many portraits of the horrors of war which, not casually, corresponds here to a brutal and unfiltered representation of dead bodies.

> The black pyres we saw from above are burned bodies. Some of them are thoroughly burned, only the bones remain. Others are barely blackened. There are many of these. Big and small. Adults and children. We think that they killed them first, then piled them up, poured gasoline over them, and set them on fire.

The verbal rendition of the scene is in line with many other in the twins' notebook, the style is sober, the words seem to be chosen accurately and carefully, the images are strikingly clear and frames, the horror of piled-up, burnt corpses of adults and children is scientifically reported. However, the narration pursues, revealing one significant detail:

> We *vomit*. We run out of the camp. We go home. Grandmother calls in to eat, but we *vomit* again. [emphasis added][253]

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[252] Benedettini, Riccardo. *Il Corpo in Frammenti. Teatro e Romanzo in Agota Kristof.* In *Feuillages,* n.1, Verona, 2016, p. 20.

[253] Kristof, 143.

Although the narration is eager to stay as much adherent as possible to the simple description of the sequence of the events, among which, the act of vomiting, it is precisely this detail that from an affect-oriented perspective betrays the twins' strategy by eventually becoming a clear, bodily and unvoluntary manifestation of how a trauma has just breached their organic shield, catching them completely unprepared to process it. This is, thus, an evident example of how bodies can be traumatically affected and, as a result, how a traumatized identity reduced to a body still finds ways of communicating itself outward. Other bodies communicate their states in the narrative, from Harelip's body epitomized by illness and disease, to Grandmother's body being characterized by a pervasive dirtiness which, not by chance, affects the twins' bodies as well, because affects move from body to body, "affect marks a body's *belonging* to a world of encounters"[254] so that even twins' bodies "smell of a mixture of manure, fish, grass, mushrooms, smoke, milk, cheese, mud, clay, earth, sweat, urine, and mold. We smell bad, like Grandmother."[255] Similarly, their bodies are equally impinged upon and affected by other bodies when a woman caresses their heads, by thus creating an affective connection which silently but deeply disturbs them because although it is possible for them to throw away the apples, biscuits, chocolate and coins, "it is impossible to throw away the stroking on our hair"[256]. Finally, even their Mother's body, hidden in a closet, seems to secretly communicate the failing attempt of the main character to simultaneously preserve and deny the trauma of abandonment and the obsession over a motherly figure which will never return, except, perhaps, in his made-up narratives.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Kristof's trilogy certainly comes across as an emblematic literary metafictional attempt at retracing the sources, the story and the elaboration of a trauma. More precisely, it is a novel where the metafictional engine creates a double, referential and reflecting narrative dimension in which affects echo and resound by thus intensifying the affective scope of the content. Moreover, the formal and technical choices characterizing the narrative voice and its evolution from the synthetic notebook to the confusing, later attempt at rebuilding a senseful and logic narrative by moving back and forth in time, in and out of consciousness, in-between reality and fiction, have arguably proved interesting strategies to faithfully replicate the inner processes through which humans' organism withstand, absorb and elaborate a history of trauma and psychic disease. However, not only the form of the story but even its content has emerged as highly affective in its traumatic nature, by providing useful material so as to alternatively explore the realm of broken and

[254] Gregg and Seigworth, 2.

[255] Kristof, 15.

[256] Id., 34.

fragmented identities through a new language, one which bring bodies back into the center of both trauma narratives and, perhaps, trauma healing.

Chapter Three

The ethic of Affect:
Empathy and the moral scope of trauma narratives

The previous chapter ended upon a reflection about the ethical value that a narrative like the Trilogy carries and embodies with the intent to guide readers to consider how identities can be mediators of ethical and moral codes and, thus, how traumas, certainly capable of deeply influencing one's identity, can eventually and consequently influence ethics and morality as well. However, when dealing with the realm of literature and fiction, the discourse on ethic must inevitably consider what can be regarded as a metanarrative ethical implication, that is to say that the act of writing is in itself a moral and ethical act. This is arguably due to the fact that writing fiction, as it has been demonstrated throughout the previous analysis of both Kristof and McEwan's novels, is a task that always and inevitably calls into question the Other. While keeping a personal journal may correspond to a rather morally "free" habit, writing fiction always owes something to someone because when fiction is written, hopefully, it will also be read. This dynamic implies a reciprocity establishing a connection between writer and reader and this encounter is sufficient to provide fiction with a moral and ethical value. In addition, this value is generally determined by the content of the fiction being written and read. For instance, in the case of trauma narratives, the Trilogy has amply demonstrated that writing becomes both a source of reconstruction of the logical order that a traumatic experience tends to shatter and fragment, and also a source of imagination providing concrete strategies and tools to manipulate the traumatic content of an experience and, perhaps, relieve it. However, it can be argued that narratives of trauma are asked to participate in ethical discourses that extend beyond the personal, intimate sphere of who *needs* to tell and give sense to a trauma by resorting to writing. Indeed, as soon as these narratives are given shape, they are invested of a duty that transfers itself from the writer to any individual who will ever come across that narrative. This situation, arguably more pertinent and better illustrated in the pages of *Atonement,* will allow the current final analysis to touch upon some ultimate interesting discourses that mainly concern an exploration of what can be regarded as the most relevant ethical component of an affective trauma narrative, that is, Empathy, here believed to be a human force which can strongly arise from fictional texts by thus creating bridges that allow people to virtually meet and share their experiences, even more so and importantly, when these are

experiences of pain and sorrow. Through empathy, knowledge of ourselves and the other is expanded and increased, emotional awareness and sensitivity are reinforced, and this is likely to embody the final ethical scope of trauma fiction as a space of openness and acknowledgment of the Other through which anyone can gradually and positively reconnect to Oneself.

1. What is empathy?

To borrow from one of the most exhaustive and accurately elaborated theoretical works of recent years, "[e]mpathy, a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading."[257] Moreover, scholar Suzanne Keen also clarifies that this system enabling an automatic sharing of feelings is a deeply human peculiarity and it activates at *pre-cognitive* levels. More precisely, the biologic system believed to enable empathy involves mirror neurons, specific types of neurons which "fire when a certain type of action is performed *and* when primates observe another animal performing the same kind of action. Scientists propose that such brain circuits might account for emotional contagion and empathy in primates, including humans."[258] This introduction already seems to suggest a strong familiarity between empathy and affect and it could be argued that affects are trauma-related components as much as they are empathy-related features.

The similarities actually continue in terms of definitions, since when introducing the concept of affect it has been fundamental to explain the ways it would differ from a mistaken synonym, emotions and, more precisely, it has been suggested that affects involve, incorporate and exceed both sensations and reasoning. Not by chance, empathy can often be misunderstood for *sympathy*, however, while the second generally manifests as an ability to understand and be supportive in relation to someone else's feelings, empathy involves a deeper, less cognitive, more corporeal and sensorial engagement with and sharing of those very feelings. According to the Psychiatric Medical Care, although sympathy may generally come across as an adequate feeling to experience, in other cases it may actually lead to a distancing and separation from others. "When a person is sympathetic, they may give helpful advice or look upon someone with pity. They often feel relieved that they are not in the same struggle […]"[259]. On the contrary, empathy stands out as a source and promoter of

[257] Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.4.

[258] Eggum, D. Natalie and Eisenberg, Nancy. "Empathic Responding: Sympathy and Personal Distress". *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy,* ed. By Jean Decety and William Ickes, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009, p. 24.

[259] Psychiatric Medical Centre. "The Difference Between Empathy and Sympathy", Psychiatric Medical Care Communications Team. [Online] Available at: https://www.psychmc.com/blogs/empathy-vs-

human connections, which is also what makes it a presumable relative of affects, as those corporeal forces putting bodies into a communicative web of intensities and vibrations. Moreover, the PMC underlines that empathy does not require someone who understands as much as it requires first and foremost someone who *listens*[260], that is to say, a testimony or witness to someone's specific shade of torment, pain, sorrow, anguish and the likes. Hence, it is possible to suggest that, besides affect, trauma can equally be involved when it comes to sharing empathic bonds since it may arguably be due to the difficult conditions characterizing a post-trauma situation that a victim is likely to feel the instinct to vent and confide their overwhelming interior states to someone. Indeed, the moment someone starts opening towards the Other is also the moment one starts creating their own senseful and meaningful trauma narrative and it is when receiving a word, an expression or gesture conveying an empathic understanding that one can also overcome the suffocating feeling of solitude and loneliness to which a traumatic experience often leads. This feature is precisely what connects empathy not only with the field of trauma studies but, even more, to the discourse on testimony and memory significantly elaborated by the so-called Cultural Memory Studies.

Indeed, trauma literature does more than simply enabling individuals to tell of their trauma, because it also becomes a space of empathic sharing of traumatic experiences which can emerge from a personal, intimate perspective so as to reach a collective value. Within this space, trauma literature elevates to a higher status: it becomes an instrument of testimony, witness, memory and transmission. By narrating of a personal trauma, the listener or reader is suddenly implied in the experience itself, he or she is asked to participate to it, with eventual and arguable ethical consequences. Moreover, some events may be perceived as individually traumatic for some people, not for other, while other events may actually become bearer of a trauma affecting entire populations and generations. For instance, the death of a family member may be more or less affecting depending on the type of relationship between the deceased person and the person being affected by the event, while 9/11 or the global conflicts like WWI can certainly be labelled as cultural and collective traumas for specific groups of human beings. Still, the moment of sharing corresponds to the opportunity of recognizing reciprocal traumas or, eventually, understanding that what was thought to be a unique, individual, intimate violent experience has also occurred to someone else, a dynamic which would give rise to a more collective and cultural understanding of traumas. Trauma literature has thus become a powerful "object of remembrance"[261], and trauma narratives together with other media have gathered across

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sympathy#:~:text=The%20Differences%20Between%20Empathy%20and%20Sympathy,-Now%20that%20we&text=Empathy%20is%20shown%20in%20how,not%20having%20the%20same%20problems.

[260] Ibid.

[261] Colin and Meretoja, 61.

time an important number of testimonials. These have eventually constituted a massive block of memories enabling humans' past generations to connect with one another as a coping mechanism during the aftermath of a traumatic event and also ensuring that future generations will always have access to stories and histories of traumas that can help reconstruct certain facts and reinforce empathic bonds across cultures, ages and human beings. For instance, personal trauma-related narratives, like letters or diaries, "when read alongside public documentation like court records, laws, edicts, maps, birth, death, marriage and prison records enable historians to develop a plausible narrative of an historical event or era"[262], provided it is labeled as authoritative and truthful. In this way it is possible to consider the testimonial essence of trauma narratives as a fundamental component of the ethical spectrum of trauma narratives and the field of Cultural Memory Studies also seems to suggest that a key factor in the process of acknowledging and overcoming traumas, be them more or less private collective or private, is precisely the process of sharing of those very histories of trauma. As *Atonement* will clarify, it is at the social level that traumas are healed and it is, eventually, affect that encourages us to come together and connect.

As previously hinted at, empathy additionally merges with affect at a very biological and organic human dimension. It is not a chance that Keen's manual mentions Antonio Damasio, one of the intellectuals to whose reflections contemporary thought owes the possibility of having been liberated from that caged, categorized, dichotomous *Weltanschauung* initially referred to while explaining the virtual and elusive nature of affects. Indeed, if affects are pre-conscious and pre-emotional, in a similar but different way, "[h]uman empathy clearly involves both feeling and thinking."[263] That is to say that when empathy arises, it means that the cerebral spheres pertaining to emotionality and cognition are equally engaged and this simultaneous activity and sensitivity may also explain why empathy is more intense and affective than sympathy alone. The intense engagement characterizing empathy is arguably due to the fact that for empathy to take place, another typically human function needs to be involved: imagination. The first important clarification to make is that, rather against common belief, imagination is not a purely and exclusive cognitive function, but it also has more corporeal dimension, and, consequently, emotional or sensorial. Looking back on 18th and 19th century philosophy, the branch of empirical epistemology argued that knowledge comes from experience, hence, it is through the body first that notions, opinions, ideas can later be formulated. This process eventually established the basis for the idea of "moral knowledge" intended as the cognition of human subjects, clearly different from that of non-human entities and which pertained

[262] Id., 68.

[263] Keen, 27.

to the field of “natural knowledge”[264]. These suggestions gradually reinforced the idea that the mind, with its reasoning and thinking, is no longer so strongly divided and separated by any corporeal, sensorial, emotional sphere, that is, by any *res extensa*. Moreover, the mind is even *embodied* in a matter, that is the brain. In addition, it was the domain of arts, both visual and verbal, that turned into a stimulating and delicate source of challenging reflections about the relationship between emotion and cognition. Indeed, while journalism needs to follow the leading rule of faithful and objective reports of real events, drama or fiction-making always and inevitably portray different extents of “alternative” realities. For something to be described, narrated, depicted or represented as alternative or different, it also needs to be imagined, that is, depicted and represented in our mind first. Thus, every fiction is born from an act of imagination. Secondly, art is known for being the realm of emotions, sometimes even more than that of reflection and thinking which are arguably more pertinent to other forms as it may be the case for philosophical essays or political treaties. Hence, aesthetic products stem from emotional biases and these are involved both at the departure point, that is the feelings that prompt a writer to write, and at the arrival point, that is the feelings experienced by readers as they browse through different narratives. For this reason, fiction surely relies on imagination and this inevitably involves, to different degrees, cognition, emotion and even experience. Any aesthetic written work deriving at different extents from these ingredients, is arguably going to ensure an empathic experience, which can be labelled as “aesthetics’ empathy”. Finally, “[t]he acts of imagination and projection involved in such empathy certainly deserve the label cognitive, but the sensations, however strange, deserve to be registered as feelings.”[265]

To move forward, no fiction-related critical analysis can avoid a consideration of how empathy works within a certain text, how it is crafted, achieved and transmitted outward. The first chapter of this thesis has extensively discussed the formal, stylistic and technical elements that characterize fictional texts like Kristof and McEwan’s, and, as a result, it should be evident by now that any literary product requires language and language is also believed to be one of the key sources of fictional empathy, both for the potential of words to make us “sympathize with the beings removed at the greatest distance of time as well as of place” and to contribute to understanding and belief.[266] Hence, to begin, there are several technical cares to pay attention to and to respect when it comes to the analysis of deeply resounding narratives. For instance, names of the characters can have an influence upon readers’ empathic reception, so can descriptions of characters’ personalities, physical types, actions, thoughts (namely, the way their consciousness is represented and conveyed) and role

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[264] McKeon, 8.

[265] Keen, 28.

[266] Id., 44-45.

within the plot trajectories all contribute to what is generally known as character identification. More technically pertinent features also involve narrative situation and its empathic implications which can be achieved by focusing on elements like the position of the narrator within the narrative, the relationship between the narrator and the characters, or the perspectives shared by the narrating voices. Finally, to these it is possible to add further fictional traits that range from the length of the novel, the general expectations related to the genre, the overall organization and representation of the setting and even metanarrative artifices which act directly upon the reliability and authenticity of the text by thus inevitably affecting the empathic response as well.

However, the ethical scope of a narrative is never a one-way process, indeed, it can even be argued that reciprocity is itself an ethical requisite. Thus, when relating the discourse on empathy to the discourse on ethic the focus should not be limited to how an author can create an empathic narrative but also, perhaps most importantly, how readers can and must participate in that narrative for it to be a true source of empathy. As a matter of fact, if the act of listening to someone's trauma story is a moral act, requiring listeners to become active sharers of the painful experience and, thus, to guarantee that a private story becomes a collective story through memory and testimony, this is also due to the fact that we are social beings capable of empathy. Thus, this spontaneous emission of vibrations, of affects, be them negative or positive, has an ethical value precisely because it *connects* individuals, it ensures social bonds that consequently need to be respected, maintained, understood. However, for empathy to be a valuable ethical code, it should also involve some degree of action. In other words, it is not sufficient for someone to be capable of accurately imagining and, thus, feeling what someone else is going through, for this identification should promote ethical behaviors as well. This is one of the possible limitations of empathy and, as literature itself may demonstrate, empathic narratives do not necessarily affect readers' ethical codes in very concrete manners. Sometimes the experience is limited to spontaneous, sudden but transitory moments of intense engagement and identification with the story and its characters, drawing readers deep into the throes of the plot, only to be consumed and stored when the final page is closed, leaving readers ready to return to their normal lives. In other cases, provided empathy arises, it still doesn't always encourage altruistic and ethical actions. Actually, varying from individual to individual, one may empathize so intensely, thus experiencing someone else's pain, sorrow, despair to the point that they wish to act only to stop the negative experience mainly for their own sake, rather than for the good of the actual victim. In other words, some scholars believe that when empathy arises in real life conditions it often leads to action, but when the distress is represented (that is, in fiction for instance) a "divorce" may occur: "emotion

without action."[267] This might arguably be due to the fact that when reading a fictional text, regardless of how precise, realistic, truthful and credible it may be, and in spite of how eagerly and deeply readers may believe in its story and characters, there will always be the background, latent and silent awareness that what is being read is merely fictional, or, was it even slightly true, it is necessarily a thing of the past, since it wouldn't and couldn't be otherwise narrated. Readers are thus left with the bitter taste of an overwhelming inability to actually intervene in the distress or turmoil affecting characters and, according to philosopher Kendall Walton, this limit in empathic resonances "often affects the one realm that Victorian social problem literature most tried to influence—the ethical response of readers."[268]

Thus, the debate concerning the ethical spectrum of literary narratives as sources of empathy and actions is more than ever actual and delicate and this is the reason why the present thesis wishes to draw its final conclusions by reflecting precisely upon the relationship between empathy and ethic as declined and embodied in the specific form of trauma narratives and the resort to writing. By finally turning to affect theory one last time, the present study intends to venture as far as to suggest that in-between the quarrels over a more ethically engaged literature as opposed to a possibly idle or purposeless literature, there might be another possibility: that even ambivalence, paralysis, doubt, suspension and inaction are profoundly and potentially ethical stances and that it is precisely because of the purely affective nature of these states, since they are all states experienced through the body first, that affect itself acquires an ethical value as it becomes a sort of compensation chamber, a space of suspension where the body experiences exterior, potentially empathic triggering stimuli so intensely that no action or clear judgment is possible. It is an affective, thus, corporeal, pre-emotional and pre-cognitive paralysis preceding the final formulation of an ethical decision, and it is not a void and meaningless space, since it can be argued that it is in those very suspended moments that literature truly happens, within ourselves, first.

2. Atonement

2.1 Morality as the acknowledgment of trauma

The first consideration to put forward is that the present thesis certainly regards McEwan's *Atonement* as a trauma narrative even though it also argues for a predominance of other aspects that

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[267] Harrison, Mary-Catherine. "The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dicken's Realism." *Narrative,* 2008, Vol. 16, No. 3, Ohio State University Press, pp. 256-278. [Online] Available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/30219607, p.5.

[268] Ibid.

apparently emerge and stand out more strikingly from the novel. The ethical implications of the act of writing of a traumatic experience are precisely among these elements and this is why the novel's trauma-related analysis is to be separated from the section related to the exploration of trauma in the Trilogy.

Firstly, there are several features that pertain both to formal and thematic components which can be regarded as manifestations of a history of trauma in McEwan's text: to begin with, the structure itself of the overall composition. Something that is typically associated with trauma is the situation whereby a similar experience leads to a fragmentation in the cognitive system pertaining to perception and construction of logic, order, sense. The chaotic narrative of the trilogy certainly stems from such a withstood condition and, even though it may seem more elaborated and rationalized, *Atonement'*s narrative structure may equally be a result of a post-traumatic and fragmented narrating voice. The first chapter has already extensively analyzed the organization of the novel, yet it could now be useful to underline that the four compositions characterizing the entire novel do not belong to a fluid, ordered, continuous narrative, but they are pieces of stories, told from different perspectives, moving backward and forwards, disentangling through attempts at remembering accurately merged with erroneous fantasies, in other words, the structure seems to mime and replicate the mental mechanisms marking the evolution of the elaboration of a trauma from its onset to its potential healing. It is precisely the opportunity of recovery that also makes *Atonement* a trauma narrative and, thus, another element to consider in this section.

However, for someone to be able to repair a trauma it is necessary that a traumatic experience occurred in the first place. Hence, moving from the form to the content, the triggering event which is arguably attributed the label of "traumatic" for how it fails at being successfully and logically assimilated by the character's (Briony's) psyche is the scene by the fountain and the ambiguous, illogical exchange between Robbie and Cecilia. As Houser suggests by borrowing from theories of Levinas about literature and ethics, what Briony experiences can be defined a "traumatism of astonishment". [269] In a more implicit and latent way, this trauma affecting young Briony is also meant to be reinforced and augmented by other episodes which become traumatic to the extent that they are mistakenly interpreted, such as Robbie's letter portraying the female reproductive organ or the intercourse of the couple in the library. It is by showing these episodes by the perspective of someone who is not capable of attributing to them the right meaning that these scenes become sources of a trauma that Briony will forever try to recompose, reorganize, retrace and repair, by thus ending up writing the puzzling novel known as *Atonement.* As Caruth suggests, "[t]o be traumatized is precisely

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[269] Amiel-Houser, Tammy. "Reading Fiction with Levinas: Ian McEwan's novel Atonement." In *Levinas and Literature,* New Directions, vol. 15, ed. By Michael Fagenblat, Arthur Cools, pub. by Walter de Gruyter GmbH, p. 248.

to be possessed by an image or event"[270] and it can be argued that Briony's writing certainly manifests the extent to which her mind remained somehow stuck, frozen upon the traumatic scene she has witnessed from her window and that she eventually returned to for most of her life in the several attempts at putting the event into a narrative that would make sense to her.

At this point, Briony's trauma enters the field of empathy and ethic. Indeed, the first reaction after the ambivalent and puzzling scene by the fountain is to put it into words, into a narrative, "she sensed she could write a scene like the one by the fountain"[271] which would allow her to satisfy her obsession and fascination for creations and narratives that she has already manifested through *The Trials of Arabella*. Additionally, considering that the scene has not been made up entirely by her imagination as she used to do for her romantic tales, she also starts considering what it may be like to turn an event occurred to someone else into her fictional creation. In other words, she discovers the existence of "separate minds, as alive as her own"[272] and she takes up the challenge to fictionally enter and represent these alterities. First of all, from a theoretical perspective, the mechanism enabling Briony to embark on this interpretative attempt is the Theory of Mind that has already been mentioned, that is to say that primordially human cognitive process which explains our satisfaction and pleasure derived from the possibility of guessing and imagining other people's mental states, their opinions, ideas and feelings. This considered, it can be seen how ToM can actually be regarded as the cognitive component of the range of bodily mechanisms which are activated before empathy arises, the other components arguably being affects and real-life experiences. If art, from drama to fiction, is capable of promoting and stimulating men's ToM mechanisms it is because it allows a constant practice and training of imaginative and mind-reading abilities, which is also, according to Zunshine, the reason why we read fiction, as "our enjoyment of fiction is predicated—at least in part—upon our *awareness* of our "trying on" mental states *potentially available* to us but at a given moment *differing* from our own."[273] First of all, ToM can actually be applied to the plot of *Atonement* itself, to the extent that it fosters the explanation of why Briony may be so overtly obsessed with reading a certain type of fiction and, eventually, imitating it through her writings. As the omniscient narrator explains, "[i]n a generally pleasant and well-protected life, she had never really confronted anyone before"[274] and, as a result, it is likely that she finds in fiction a safe space where she can

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[270] Caruth, Cathy. "Introduction" in *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 1-5.

[271] McEwan, 40.

[272] Ibid.

[273] Zunshine, 18.

[274] McEwan, 15.

imagine different, alternative lives and experience other types of emotional states. However, the true source of satisfaction she finds in literature is not as much related to the experience of reading as it pertains to the act of writing her own fiction, since this concrete act provides her with a sense of control and order and, to venture even further, it can be suggested that she exploits writing, aesthetic, imagination to face in an undirect way the inevitable encounter with Otherness. Indeed, "[b]y reducing others to the status of artificial things, she can take the mystery out of alterity, she can accommodate chaotic reality with a tidy narrative of her own design"[275] by thus believing that she has found a strategy—which will eventually fail—that prevents herself from the real-life condition of empathizing and understanding people different from her. For instance, no wonder that the main activity that Briony shares and engages in with her cousins, the twins and Lola, predominantly corresponds to having them act for her own play. In other words, rather than spending time to familiarize with them, to play like most children do, Briony seems to feel the instinctive need to attribute to her cousins an artistic, artificial identity that she has made up for them and that will allow her to manipulate them. This manipulation and the risks it may lead to precisely converge in a very "real" event, one having little to do with fairy tales, that is Lola's rape and Briony's ability to persuade the child to confess something that she wasn't even sure about. If Briony may more or less successfully be the author and authority of her own narratives, she also ends up demonstrating that when these very same processes are taken to real life, applied to real people, things may take a very dangerous twist. Indeed, the first faux pas that Briony accomplishes and that will force her to acknowledge the existence of a line and a gap between fiction and reality actually occurs when realizing that the scene by the fountain may be a great narrative occasion for her, opening both the doors of "an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself"[276] as well as those overlooking different ways of being, thinking and feeling; the secret of alterity rendering up to her. However, ToM's theorists also warn about the fact that "the process of attributing thoughts, beliefs, and desires to other people may lead to *misinterpreting* those thoughts, beliefs, and desires."[277] As she will confess later in life through the re-writing of the event itself, 13-year-old Briony, in 1935, did misinterpret the situation taking place between two people who eventually turned into passionate and faithful lovers. Turning to the theories on empathy previously discussed, it can be suggested that her misinterpretation occurred out of two predominant conditions; the first being Briony's already-mentioned literary education, based upon narratives whose generic and thematic pertinence are likely to have distanced her from a mature acknowledgment of reality rather than preparing her to this

[275] O' Hara, Op. cit., 77.

[276] McEwan, 41.

[277] Zunshine, 15.

encounter, while the second may be retraced in a presumable deficiency of empathy. She fails at logically feeling and understanding what Robbie and Cecilia are going through because she is not capable of empathy and she cannot empathize arguably because in spite of how imaginative and intelligent she might be, she certainly lacks experience, that is to say, the exposition of her corporeal identity to surrounding events and dynamics which could deeply affect her and, thus, improve both her knowledge of the world and her ability to feel *with* the world. Deprived of such fundamental basis, her writing cannot but be amoral and, as a result, her lack of ethical sensitivity leads her to fatally destroy two real lives.

However, and hopefully, as the analysis of Briony's metafictional journey both as an author and as a person has already highlighted, her writing is not doomed to an eternal amorality and, indeed, it is by a gradual and inevitable opening to real life experiences and necessities that she will land upon a more morally informed art. What is going to be further argued is that, not casually, Briony's elaboration of a form and style that respond to some sort of ethical bias coincides with a manner of writing that is also more in touch with reality and transparency and this emerges precisely by measuring the extent to which trauma is represented in the narrative. Indeed, while the unit of measurement to identify trauma in the trilogy may be the presence and detection of any sign or manifestation of pathological communications, in the case of *Atonement* one should look for evidence of formal transparency and descriptive honesty in order to measure and quantify the empathic and, thus, ethical evolution of Briony's trauma narrative. In other words, if the traumatic and shocking events in Part One have been artistically manipulated by the young girl, innocently and foolishly persuading herself that through artistic adjustments one could impact and modify real events, the traumatic experiences that characterize Part Two and Part Three will actually come to the fore more directly and sincerely, without the perception of previous authorial attempts at modifying their painful and brutal essence. Although readers are meant to discover that the war report of Part Two is invented by Briony, it is important to first analyse it at the level of its content within the novel, which means beyond its metafictional implications, as the story of Robbie himself trying to survive the hostile dimension of a global conflict. To this extent, the situation is highly threatened by traumatizing factors and, interestingly, the narrative doesn't cover and hide them but remains faithful to the range of emotional states experienced by Robbie. As such, Robbie is delicately and touchingly portrayed as a sensitive man who is evidently struggling with a post-traumatic pathology. Actually, he is simply depicted in the most honest manner, not for how 13-year-old Briony thought and imagined him to be (see, a maniac).

Thus, the war report of the second section finally reaches the status of a narrative elaboration of a traumatized Self; Robbie is tormented and he arguably copes with the consequences of two main

painful events, the first being the false accusation of Lola's rape and the second being his forced separation by the woman he loved, Cecilia, which becomes even more tragic when considering that he has been divided by her to join the British army in France, that is, another deeply traumatizing situation. In the attempt at detecting trauma-related symptoms and manifestations, it is possible to outline that Robbie's war narrative is characterized by recurrent images, sensations or ideas that reflect one of the most typical features of any trauma. Robbie's being a victim of trauma, then, becomes evident precisely by looking at how recurrent and obsessive certain thoughts and feelings are in his war experience. The first situation, actually corresponding to an expression imbued with specific emotional value, which his mind constantly returns to is a phrase, pronounced by Cecilia and which Robbie has transformed into a sort of surviving tool: "*I'll wait for you. Come back".* Besides containing in itself the notion of return and of a time that remains frozen in the waiting of that return, elements that characterize a traumatic experience as well, the phrase acquires a deeply symbolic status for Robbie who often finds himself repeating these words as the promise of a hope and of a future life with Cecilia. To him, a successful retreat is not necessary for patriotic and nationalist reasons, it is only a matter of personal survival in order to go back home. "This is why he had to survive."[278] Moreover, the narrative often reveals the typically traumatic pattern of recurring experiences that can be retraced both in sentences like, "They pursued him, the old themes"[279] but also, from a more content-related perspective, in passages where the narrative voice returns to scenes from Robbie's past, in the attempt at remembering and very similarly to what occurs in Kristof's *The Third Lie,* where Claus actually accomplishes a memorial journey of personal reconstruction. Hence, Robbie often fills the endless walks that mark the retreat to Dunkirk or the still moments of frustrating wait for enemy assaults with memories that are supposed to bring him some relief, such as Cecilia and the library scene or the day he saw her in the café before they parted, as they kissed and "when their tongues touched, a disembodied part of himself was abjectly grateful, for he knew he know had a memory in the bank and would be drawing on it for months to come."[280] Thoughts like these are the only one Robbie engages with, because they are the only one tasting of a sweeter life prior to pain, prior to sorrow, prior to trauma. As Briony would use her creative imagination to anaesthetize the shock of alterity, so does Robbie hold on to loving memories to make his war experience a little more tolerable. Thus:

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[278] McEwan, 203.

[279] Id., 204.

[280] Id., 206.

> In one pan of the scales, his wound, thirst, the blister, tiredness, the heat, the aching in his feet and legs, the Stukas, the distance, the Channel; in the other, *I'll wait for you*, and the memory of when she had said it, which he had come to treat like a sacred site. […] These memories sustained him.[281]

These memories, in addition, allow Robbie to resist the despair and shock that might come from more shocking and equally recurrent, repetitive, obsessive images that are carriers of trauma rather than carriers of solace. Indeed, another symbolic image which becomes a symptom of traumatic content affecting the young man is epitomized in the severed leg of a child which Robbie finds hanging from a tree. The narrative perfectly illustrates how a trauma occurs: on first seeing the leg, Robbie describes in a very neutral and almost objective manner the steps that his mind takes before realizing that what he is looking at is a human leg. No evidence of turmoil, shock, fright is provided, and it is then impossible for readers to grasp the extent to which that image, among the many other horrific images he is constantly exposed to, might truly affect him. The process which is at stake in this moment illustrates the inability of the mind to assimilate the nature of the shocking event so that "the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena"[282] which actually characterize the PTSD phase. Caruth also provides another interesting suggestion in order to better understand how Robbie's psyche is affected by the hanging tree, for, something being fundamental to determine the traumatic extent of a situation is the equal extent to which the body is exposed to the event. In this case, sight plays a fundamental role, and the narrative seems to outline the predominance of visuality characterizing the scene (i.e., "[t]he way it was angled in the fork, it seemed to be on display, for their benefit or enlightenment: this is a leg."[283]). According to Caruth, "the act of seeing, in the very establishing of a bodily referent, erases […] the reality of an event. […], the body erases the event of its own death."[284] In this way, it is possible to see how relevant the corporeal and bodily dimension is in the realm of traumatic experiences and, as a consequence, this reinforces the idea of how equally important it is to see affect as a potential language to explore trauma narratives. In addition to this, the body becomes a vehicle and mediator of the traumatic content precisely because the narrative itself, language, seems to fail at extensively replicating and explaining the horrific sight. As mentioned above, the moment is but simply and essentially described, reminding of that sober and

[281] Id., 227.

[282] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 12.

[283] McEwan, 192.

[284] Caruth, 29.

minimal style used by the twins to relate of intense and shocking events. Only the body remains a stable, fixed testimony of the trauma that has occurred and only Robbie's body is exposed to witness this sight, so that, when asked to cognitively turn it into a narrative, the text returns nothing more than: "this is a leg". To Houser, "it is the untold violence and unrepresented suffering that cause the shock here."[285] As already suggested, while the first sight of the leg seems to leave Robbie relatively indifferent, his mind will remind him of this image to manifest something that he hasn't fully grasped, that has left him emotionally suspended. Actually, Robbie's trauma is meant to come to the fore and force him to face the full emotional burden that it carries; his trauma basically needs to be acknowledged. Moments before the retreat, in the midst of a frenzied delirium due to a wound, Robbie is suddenly taken back to the moment of the hanging tree and this is when the meaning of that apparently meaningless sight and, thus, its traumatic implication, is finally revealed to him and it will allow him to concretely attempt a recovery, a reconstruction. "He must go back and get the boy from the tree"[286] just as he had found the twins who got lost the night of Lola's rape and took them home safely. The image of the leg immediately unveils something deeper to Robbie, that is a sense of guilt which has been suffocating him since the events of 1935 and with which he had never managed to come to terms because, from his innocent perspective, they were too absurd and illogical to him, just as the leg he saw on the tree. Indeed, looking back on Freud's theorization of trauma neurosis, Caruth suggested that:

> […] the recurring image of the accident in Freud, as the illustration of the unexpected or the accidental, seems to be especially compelling, and indeed becomes the exemplary scene of trauma *par excellence,* not only because it depicts what we know about traumatizing events, but also, and more profoundly, because it tells of what it is, in traumatic events, that is *not* precisely grasped.[287]

Finally, Robbie's realization coincides with a strong desire to return to the tree and "gather up from the mud the pieces of burned, striped cloth, the shreds of his pyjamas then bring him down, the poor pale boy, and make a decent burial."[288] In other words, it is by an affective, spontaneous spur of empathy which Robbie has certainly acquired and inherited by being forced to face death on a daily basis during war, that he finally is capable of acknowledging his past and find peace. More

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[285] Amiel-Houser, 251.

[286] McEwan, 262.

[287] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 6.

[288] McEwan, 262.

importantly, it is through language, words, narratives that readers can faithfully see how this story of trauma is ultimately accomplished.

2.2 Reviving from trauma through empathy

As the previous section pertaining to traumatic manifestations in *Atonement* has hopefully demonstrated, empathy seems to become an ethical imperative when it comes to recover a sense of Self, of Other and rediscover affective connections of bodies, before any other human quality, that allow individuals to see each other as more similar than one way may think, more connected, certainly less alone, "[c]ommon, therefore human."[289] If the Trilogy shows how solitude may create a tragic downward spiral with no way out, *Atonement* depicts the way in which opening towards other beings by relying upon our empathic connections and making these bonds a primary moral objective may become a fundamental step in the process of trauma healing. This final possibility, then, paves the way for a final argument as well; that any literature choosing to give shape to this ethical purpose, choosing to illustrate in the most affective and honest manner how traumatized individuals can come together and heal, it will then be a highly ethical literature.

Indeed, the final version of *Atonement* is a concrete example of how someone's journey of acknowledgment and recovery from a trauma may be entrusted to words that, when shared with other people, in this case readers, can manifest their affective potential. That is to say, that readers approaching McEwan's novel are likely to live the experience of empathizing with characters and their traumas to the extent of being intensely moved, touched, briefly, affected. This occurs because any example of trauma literature is fiction, and "[f]iction, as we know, depends upon its persuasive lies for its world-making powers. But fictional world-making is only ever as effective as the participatory reader makes it, through active cocreation"[290]Therefore, for literature to trigger empathy and, thus, morality, it needs to be as much an act of creation as of reception. In this case, the formal features of the narrative that have been extensively analyzed until now, from the linguistic choices to the narrative voices and perspectives, become important elements to create affective and empathic stories. Considering the case of Robbie and Briony, the two main characters whose perspectives are majorly shared, readers are likely to find themselves struggling with controversial and conflicting emotional and moral biases precisely because of how the narrative "tricks" them into empathizing with the wrong characters. This is achieved thanks to the various technical devices mentioned in the previous introduction to empathy and pertaining to character identification and narrative situation and

[289] Id., 241.

[290] Keen, 34.

how different adjustments of these features may variably reinforce or diminish the potential empathic connections between the text and its beneficiary. Indeed, readers who enjoy the experience of feeling deeply involved in the stories they read, may easily silence any instinctive doubt or suspicion arising from Briony's "amoral" narrative in Part One, by choosing to believe in everything that she says although they are given the chance to see the same events as told by different perspectives. Thus, one may get to the end of the first section moved by hostile sensations towards Robbie, ignoring any affective and bodily perception suggesting that he might be innocent. Other readers, eager to remain alert to any possible ambush by the author, soon realize that Briony is an unreliable narrator and that she is not a character animated by good intentions. This dynamic, then, is likely to provoke the arousal of conflicting sensations in those readers who try to resist those forces that would encourage them to empathize with a morally debatable character. However, from the second part it can be suggested that the narrative finally and harmoniously finds a balance: the form, the content and the overall moral stance become consistent, reliable. Readers are then asked to release the block in their empathy channel and to overcome the moral paralysis affecting them in Part One. They discover themselves capable of being moved by Robbie's painful words just as they implicitly and inevitably start harboring hostile feelings towards Briony, depicted as the executioner of the story.

Finally, reaching the final section, where the narrative perspective returns to an older, more mature, socially formed and engaged Briony, who still identifies herself as a writer, the challenge that she is faced with is arguably complicated. To put it simply, she finds herself endowed with just one tool, her writing, in order for her to redeem her reputation and her moral role within a story that has been shattered precisely because of her initial amorality and how this would precisely be conveyed by an erroneously created narrative. Moreover, she doesn't have to redeem herself in front of the people she has caused wrong to, that is, Robbie, Cecilia, her family, since most of them are actually dead. Within a final metafictional dimension, Briony knows that readers are the ones expected to forgive her. Thus, she dedicates her life to the elaboration of a story setting all the frames and limits of the ethics of writing: on the one hand, the form she uses is a form that evolves from the world of fairy tales to the loyal, corporeal, visual depiction of war, hospitals and their horrors, a form whose humanity derives from Briony's own experience of humanity and Otherness in her real life. On the other hand, the content she chooses to relate initially responds to the obsessive claim and need of an accurate and truthful report of events (that is, a realist Woolf-like approach to writing) only to discover that fiction is not history and that literature can be the space of lies as long as they have ethical and moral purposes. Exploiting imagination to falsify reality to the expenses of an innocent person is amoral, while using fiction to create an alternative story allowing readers to empathize with a character that they had previously and mistakenly judged negatively is moral. Thus, just as writing

enables victims of trauma to feel empowered by the possibility "of making a painful, distressing experience (partly) communicable and comprehensible by relating it to something"[291] and to someone, so does writing alone become an ethical act itself in the very moment it is used as a tool to connect individuals, even more so when this sharing may correspond with the recovery from a traumatic experience itself. Briony needs readers to forgive her for her to be able to come to terms with her past and readers wouldn't be able of such forgiveness unless she had resorted to writing in order to bridge the abyss which she has been stuck in for most of her life. "I]t is Briony's actual *writing* of the novel that may be her vital act of atonement" since the novel she composes is eventually a portrait of empathy and of what it means to give a narrative sense of other minds, so that she can "give back what she initially deprived others."[292]

3. Affective agencies: the ethical stance of ambivalence reuniting Kristof and McEwan

Claiming that any literature can reach ethical value by exploiting the range of technical and thematical devices capable of encouraging human empathy is as much true as it is, perhaps, an easy guess. *Atonement*'s ending shakes readers' emotional, cognitive and moral dimension and presumably leaves them struggling with the gradual elaboration of how cunningly they have been tricked by the author and, yet, how moved they are when discovering that Robbie and Cecilia died or how sorry they might feel for an old Briony and her great atoning accomplishment. Cognition here collides with emotion and, therefore, while the ethical value of the story itself may easily be grasped, as the previous paragraph demonstrated, what remains to be considered is the moral engagement that is arguably required and expected from readers themselves. How should they judge a character like Briony, especially when feeling stuck in the controversial experience of cognitively judging her as a manipulator but emotionally empathizing with her disruptive sense of guilt? The conflict becomes even more pressing and urgent as it is predominantly experienced at a very sensorial and corporeal level: the body is the central stage of the moral drama. This arguably occurs because the narrative of *Atonement* has formally (i.e., metafiction and the range of empathy triggering devices) and thematically (i.e., stories of trauma, of war, of loss, of guilt that can be as private as they are collective, human) reached the status of a deeply affective narrative. Readers have experienced this narrative through the entirety of their bodies and when a body is affected, a change occurs, a mark remains that modify the essence of that body. It can be thus argued that it is at this very level, one that comes way before any high ethical role that literature may acquire, that another, subtler but also deeper moral

[291] Colin and Meretoja, 30.

[292] O'Hara, 84.

dimension is activated, and both the Trilogy and *Atonement* exemplify this; it is what one can regard as the ethical value of affect itself, before it is embodied in any fictional form or content and it pertains to the experience of ambivalence which has already been anticipated.

Firstly, the situation affecting readers who engage with narratives like Kristof and McEwan's manifests itself by assuming some of the features that have been considered while explaining that readers going through Part One of *Atonement* may come across and feel entangled in conflicting moral biases. They are likely to feel divided between trusting that entity that within the realm of fiction is generally regarded as a God-like figure, the author, and, with metafictional regards, readers know that Briony has authorial tendencies and that she openly confesses that she wants to write about the events she has witnessed. At the same time, the narrative is constructed so as to confuse the logical and empathic parameters used to interpret any novel, since, although readers can access a different, more reliable version of the scene by the fountain and the scene in the library, by thus understanding that Robbie intends no harm against Cecilia, the shifting perspective is no longer available for the scene of Lola's rape. In this case, readers can only *choose* to trust Briony, cunningly manipulating them as much as Lola. It can be thus argued that a sort of empathic short circuit here occurs, influencing readers' affective responses. This conflict arguably paves the way for the creation of a space, a void characterized by cognitive and emotional suspension, only the body acquires a communicative dimension: it is likely, for instance, that on closing the final pages of Part One, one's stomach may be gripped by a slight block, a vibration emanating from somewhere in-between our sensory walls and looking for a way up and out, or, for a way to consciousness. Thus, one may find themselves surprised and puzzled at realizing that there are bodily and corporeal activations occurring apparently silent or unconsciously. In other words, as one's mind starts articulating a reflection like, "What is the thing I feel in my stomach?", something deeper has already taken place, namely, affect, and it has emerged out of a gap which has here been embodied in a narrative. Morality stems, then, from this gap, since what follows is the inevitable search for an answer to that pre-conscious and pre-emotional bodily activation and in the attempt at finding a solution, one necessarily ends up considering the ways in which the narrative must have affected the body itself. At this point, readers' moral engagement arises from a situation of ambivalence to one of decision, thus, ethic: should we believe in Briony or not? Should we condemn Robbie, or not?

Something very similar occurs as a result of the reading experience of the trilogy as well, and mainly in the episodes narrated in the twins' notebook. Thus, as this thesis actually started with an analysis of *The Notebook* itself, the circle is to be here closed precisely by a reconsideration of the very same novel and some of those features which have been initially discussed as sources of affect and that can now be re-read within an ethical frame as well. Indeed, while analyzing how the style

and form of the trilogy can be a both a source and a vehicle of affect, two main notions have been introduced and have also been further explored in the present chapter: firstly, imagination and how it fosters empathy and, thus, affective encounters; secondly, suspension and ambivalence as possible reactions that certain narratives may provoke when a clash between affective engagement and ethical controversiality.

As far as the first is concerned, the trilogy requires that another element should be added to the discussion about the role of imagination and this is the concept of distancing. Still borrowing from 18th-century philosophy about aesthetics' empathy, it seems widely acknowledged that distancing has a fundamental role in our capacity of connecting our sensory walls with an exterior object or situation. The object of identification has to be removed, distanced from the subject of identification and this is a dynamic which, to an extent, it certainly occurs in the field of aesthetics since artistic products like fiction are always about representing a reality which is removed from its real dimension itself. There is always and inevitably a gap. Then, imagination allows us to fill it. According to 17th-century author Joseph Addison, he believed that imagination can be regarded as both an empirical and aesthetic faculty, and that, with regards to literature itself, imagination establishes a sort of mediation between the words on the page and a sense of their meaning or function[293]. Thus, mediation means encounter, and, as a result, affects are at stakes. In the case of *The Notebook,* the notion of distancing can be retraced in the already-mentioned notion of subtraction and reduction that has been used to analyse the formal and technical features of the novel, so that the twins constantly strive to minimalize their form in order to reduce the impact of the content they narrate with inevitable consequences upon the dynamics concerning readers' responses. As a result, the way the form and technical choices adhere to the content is in fact so bizarre and contrasting that the empathic processes are brutally and intensely blocked and resisted by one's moral bias. Indeed, constantly exposed to unfiltered scenes of violence and death, the twins teach themselves how to prevent the insurgence of emotional states triggered by exterior violent circumstances as their writing style manifests. Consequently, when coldly and matter-of-factly relating of a young child, Harelip, having a sexual intercourse with a dog, no trace of subjectivity from the narrator's part can be identified[294]. The very same effect is produced few chapters later, when the priest's housekeeper, a young woman, invites the twins to her house and, after taking a bath in front of them, naked, helps them with their cleansing routine by having them get undressed and, eventually, engaging in an oral sexual intercourse[295]. Finally, the reader is equally

[293] McKeon, Michael. "Aesthetic Cognition. Feeling the Emotions of Others.", New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 2017, in *English Literature*, Vol. 4, 14.

[294] Id., 36.

[295] Id., 80.

puzzled when the foreign officer secretly staying at Grandmother's house, asks the twins to urinate on his face[296]. But also, the narrative seems to testify that the twins themselves are capable of cold-blooded, immoral behaviours or reactions, like coming across the dismembered body of a dead soldier and, with no second thought, taking what they need from him, like weapons, and then leaving. Readers are not given to know whether the two brothers truly reacted so coldly as the scene actually occurred only to modify their reaction at the moment of relating the event in their notebook, however, was it so, this would arguably reinforce the idea that the twins truly resort to writing as a very concrete tool to manipulate the emotional and traumatic charge of events in their life. Hence, in similar passages affect is intensely active: firstly, it manifests in the episode itself, within a plot-related frame, as suffered by the characters in relation to first-hand traumatic experiences of death; secondly, it technically arises from the narrative choices whereby the author-narrator turns to the potential of an essential, raw, sober and minimal language which actually brings to the fore the narrative's skeleton, its corporeality, and this would conform with the already-mentioned thesis according to which the entire dimension pertaining to the body and its language, that is, its affective dimension, should be brought back into the frame of literary analysis and interpretation; lastly, as a result of the prior two conditions, affect eventually emerges in-between the gap that necessarily results from the representation of a deeply intense, shocking, traumatizing event and its verbally aseptic rendition and this final feature is the one echoing within a moral and ethical dimension. At this point, subtraction may pave the way for paralysis.

Indeed, such gap or suspension is the element automatically activating readers' ambivalent responses to the content narrated, since it creates a collision arising from the fact that readers may identify with characters to the point that when similar events occur, the way characters behave may not conform with how readers would expect to behave in real life situations and according to their personal ethics. This clash gives rise to a sort of interior conflict, to an extent the same occurring in the case of McEwan, leaving readers to the more or less conscious perception that there is something wrong with what they are reading although they may not realize it immediately. This conflict, breaking out from the collision of ethical, emotional and cognitive biases, forces readers to undergo an estranging and strange experience of fictional identification, since the very natural and primordial tendency that wants us to empathize, engage and identify with plots and characters while reading is subjected to a sudden interruption, an obstacle forcing a consequent consideration: ethically, we are uncapable to judge; cognitively, we are unsure about the most logical interpretations and assumptions; emotionally, we are tormented by not knowing what to feel or,

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[296] Id., 91.

sometimes, why we feel in a very specific way. What is argued here, is that this clash resulting into an inevitable *impasse*, represents the fourth and last dimension in which affect manifests in trauma narratives. While reading of how the twins have decided to describe their reactions (or non-reactions) facing the death of a friend or, even, of their mother, readers' instinctive need to empathize with them, a need responding to processes such as the Theory of Mind, fails at being satisfied because their ethical and emotional systems make them aware that this is not how a normal person should react and respond to a similar experience. This reflection triggers ambiguous and ambivalent affective states, since readers do feel something, yet they are likely not to know how to identify and label their reactions. Thus, it is as if their body autonomously came alive, preceding consciousness and emotionality, and activating itself in a state of paralysis or suspension. Perhaps, it might be argued that as individuals we do not only empathize with narratives through our logical interpretations of their content or through our emotional responses to their events and characters, but, also, through our bodies, thus, our affects.

Finally, the same can thus be said for both the Trilogy and *Atonement,* since if on the one hand they can be regarded as literary representations of a wide range of human traumas and from this perspective they thus attain to the ethical purpose of training readers' empathy, knowledge and sensitivity and guiding them towards the experience of rediscovering how affectively, potentially, virtually connected we are through our wounds; on the other, similar narratives are ethical also to the extent that they are controversial, conflicting, that they expect readers to approach the reading experience accepting to feel involved not only emotionally and cognitively, but corporeally as well. The above-mentioned states of paralysis, uncertainty and ambivalence which can be experienced and that may either grip one's stomach or have readers to close the book for a brief affective pause when they just feel too much, are actually states that are not empty and without a purpose. On the contrary, these moments are fundamental to the very condition whereby readers consequently assume an ethical position and decision. These affective moments are the virtual, suspended, invisible but at the same time deeply and intensely felt spaces in which morality takes a shape in the in-betweenness of human bodies, resulting from the echoing of affects between the sensory walls that Massumi refers to. Then, ambivalence may arguably be an ethical position because it is one of the most affective features that can be experienced; ambivalence is the temporary state of inactivity that precedes important actions, it is the potential form of agency.[297]

[297] Giglioli, Daniele. *Critica della Vittima. Un esperimento con l'etica.* Milano: Nottetempo, 2014, p. 108.

In conclusion, Chapter Two has mainly attempted a careful analysis of how trauma intended as a literary content can be given fictional shape and representation, with a particular focus on the Trilogy's narrative as characterized by an inherent pathological communication that formally expresses the post-traumatic conditions affecting an arguably schizophrenic identity. Such analysis has certainly anticipated and introduced images as well as themes that pertain to trauma and that, as a result, are carriers of violence, pain, shock, corpses, misery and, in addition, they are also carriers of the memory of all these conditions. This considered, it would have been thus impossible not to reflect upon the moral scope that similarly intense and tormented narratives imply, and this has consequently been the motive animating the exploration of this final chapter, aimed at approaching the discourse on trauma from a different perspective, that is, its ethical value as mediated by the affective experience of empathy and as manifesting in the pages of *Atonement.*

What can be eventually concluded with pertinence to both novels and their ethical value is that first of all, this value is first and foremost embodied in the very fact that both stories exist because someone needed them to exist. In other words, they are ethical to the extent to which they satisfy an individual's inner need to attribute a narrative shape to an indefinite, illogical, unmediated private shock. However, something that trauma narratives can certainly teach is that no history of trauma, be it personal or collective, can survive without a social dimension. Trauma needs Otherness to be overcome. Thus, considering affects as those vectors that connect human beings in an infinite web of communicating bodies, when one rediscovers and reinterprets traumas through affects, then one also sees how empathizing with and acknowledging our most human, vulnerable and delicate wounds eventually reinforce a sense of Self that is the first step in a healing process.

In addition, when one thinks of affects as the energies and intensities determining the connections that, as human beings, we are capable of sharing, then it can be argued that a further moral role that trauma narratives cover is that of memory and testimony. Just as affects transfer from body to body and resound within bodies, so do stories of trauma "recreate and abreact the experience for those who were not there—the reader, listener or witness can experience the historical experience first hand."[298] Thus, reconstructing the Self from fragmentation to unity is possible both when turning to written, verbal encoding of the fragmented experience as well as when discovering that others might have undergone very similar experiences. Within this frame, trauma narratives are certainly affective to the measure in which they are entirely human; they are human in how they elaborate and represent traumatic experiences which are never only personal, but can always be culturally mediated and collectively shared; they are human because they often derive from someone's (i.e., an author,

[298] Balaev, 5.

perhaps) need to entrust the mental, fragmented story of a trauma to a more logical and senseful narrative; they are also human because these narratives connect the victim to an empathic listener who is asked to participate in the transmission of a traumatic memory. Affect encourages someone to write just as it encourages someone to read and, thus, to assume the moral duty implied in the role of confidant.

However, by re-reading stories like the Trilogy or *Atonement* through affect theory, it has been possible to open a new window upon perspectives on trauma narratives and their ethical scope that might be further explored since, while within a more psychological frame affects might be elements determining human connections, when approaching them from a more philosophically-oriented theory, these entities are also synonyms of uncertainty, of indetermination, of primordiality, that is, anything that is human before being cognitive or emotional, they are the example of an unmediated humanity. This considered, facing stories of trauma that represent immoral behaviors which may be the result of a precedent trauma itself, readers may struggle to accept the affective experience resulting from having to bear witness to these stories, from the twins choosing to sacrifice the body of their father to be able to cross the borders to Briony's deciding to pronounce Robbie's name when asked to identify Lola's rapist. It is, then, the experience itself of ethical and moral uncertainty deeply affecting readers' stomach that controversially but arguably becomes the final ethical value of trauma literature, or to be more precise, similar states become the verbal tool to have readers experience what occurs inside their bodies before ethical stances and decisions are formed and taken. Briefly, when literature crosses the path of affect theories and trauma studies, it is inevitably invested with the role of representing how morality may originate.

Conclusions

Once having embraced Affect Theory, it becomes almost impossible not to see, feel and conceive of oneself and other living and non-living entities as being constantly pervaded and permeated by affects. These visceral forces emanating from spaces of virtuality and indeterminacy are meant to embody themselves into visible and concrete matter by thus affecting bodies which, consequently, affect other bodies in an infinite web of encounters, and, in this way, they end up being everywhere, at any time; one cannot stop, all of a sudden, conceiving of reality as something different than the canvas of continuous manifestations of affects. Once having embraced Affect Theory, *becoming* becomes more important than *being,* because the first implies the idea of a movement, a change that is the condition itself of existence, opposed to stasis, to death. Becoming means that a body undergoes a transformation that will modify its state and it is this very process that reveals the potential of bodies to exist since it is in-between these subtle, more or less visible variations that bodies come to the fore as being the core of affects and, as one of the several purposes that the present thesis wished to demonstrate, whatever affects may be, they certainly are profoundly human, before emotions, before reason.

The experience of trauma is, as well, a thing of humanity. Whether it affects the restricted and solitary dimension of private life or it reverberates and echoes among the bodies that contaminate one another in different communities, trauma, like affects, (violently) modifies a state, a way of being by thus marking an inevitable, often irreconcilable, fracture between a moment before and after the trauma itself. Yet, even when it comes to human trauma, what emerges as more revealing about the body undergoing the experience is not the static picture of its trauma but its evolution, that is, all the symptoms and their entire range of variegated manifestations through which a traumatized body makes its struggle for survival, for life, visible. That is, how a body shows its fight to reconstruct an identity, to hold on tight to its humanity. In most cases, it is exactly by focusing the attention on the silent and affective languages of human wounds that the movement, the transformation of the traumatized body can be retraced, and it is arguably through this anamnesis that the story of the trauma can be reconstructed and, finally, that the trauma can hopefully be recovered. The case history of a trauma, its evolution and the way this affects a body, can be stored through different media and, across centuries, literature has always proved to be one of the most popular and adequate.

Thus, literature is, not by chance, another typically human product. As argued with references to theories such as Storr's and why humans instinctively restore to storytelling to make sense of reality and existence, or Zunshine's and the cognitive systems that attract individuals to fiction, what has emerged as unquestionable is that literary products always respond to several human needs. As such, literature becomes the form enabling humans to give their affects a shape, an order, a visuality, a materiality and, in doing so, literature also becomes the media through which others can undergo affective experiences, by letting their bodies open to the stimulation and enticement that certain words, or situations or, simply, stories can imply. Literature, hence, becomes simultaneously a recipient and vector of affects. When it comes to the branch of trauma narratives, moreover, literature elevates to what can be regarded as the highest status of human testimony. Indeed, what the present analysis strongly hoped to suggest, is that among the various existing media or aesthetic products, trauma literature is perhaps the most powerful, truthful and reliable sources to turn to when looking for a space where one can simply and vulnerably be human.

If trauma literature can be considered the narrative product that arguably best represents the core of humanity, with its crisis, weaknesses but also resilience and potential for resurgence, this is also because affects are not only the very essence of traumatic experiences themselves, but they can also characterize the form used to narrate of these experiences. In other words, language can be affective. In the case of literature, words, graphics, punctuations, structures, narrative rhythms and voices are all technical artifices that someone, an author for instance, can deliberately choose to imbue with affects so that anyone meant to consume similarly composed narratives is more likely to respond to these in an affective manner. Thus, if humans can feel drawn and engaged at a very corporeal level with narratives such as trauma ones, it is also because human empathy gets equally involved in the exchange. Briefly, we read of someone else's trauma and the very ways this is narrated, together with what is narrated, eventually contribute to the composition of intimate portraits of those very common things that allow us to recognize ourselves just as humans and hurt like everyone else. It is this sudden revelation of collectivity, community and similarity that makes us capable of feeling with and for others by thus embarking upon a journey of recovery that moves from the solitary universe of personal, unacknowledged traumas to the power of reconstruction that only social, mutual recognition can prompt. Finally, it should be needless to say, but it is important to say it anyway, that any literary product capable of ensuring that a similar exchange and experience occurs becomes a profoundly ethical product, one for which writing it as much as reading it are both moral acts per se. This is arguably due to the fact that, when it comes to trauma, writing about it and reading about it are actions that attain to some sort of human need that is longing to find any relief. Those confiding to narratives their own traumas are looking for a safe space of openness and relief just as those reading of other's

traumas may discover themselves as closer and more similar to other people. Trauma literature creates testimony, heritage, memory, and acknowledgment; it also creates reality, truthfulness, reliability because it has roots in the most human strengths and vulnerabilities.

It should be clear then, by now, that the present dissertation originates from the very strong belief that the versatile and relatively new realm of affects corresponds to a truly promising field for future knowledge, awareness and exploration of mankind as understood in its most intrinsic core and essence. Given this, the original intent was to turn affect theories into useful tools to be employed for some equally and hopefully useful purpose. This is when and how the realm of trauma studies has come to the fore, presenting itself as very similar to that of affects and, as a result, likewise promising for a better understanding of trauma, firstly from a literary perspective and, secondly, within a more therapeutic discourse, if possible. In other words, the present thesis has been animated and motivated by very human forces, directed towards very human issues and achieved through very human tools.

To resume, any study wishing to demonstrate something, is likely to begin its exploration from a question that is meant to be ultimately answered. In the present case, the study initially wondered, “How is a wound put into words?”, a question inevitably accepting and embracing a rich diversity of possible fields of exploration, so that, the following step was to focus on a very specific kind of domain in which words can be used to give voice to wounds, that is fiction. A new question has been thus formulated, “How can fiction represent trauma?” and it has soon become obvious that the following analysis would need to disentangle and cope with three main issues: form, content and ethic.

As far as the form of trauma narratives is concerned, this thesis has amply demonstrated that the artifice of Metafiction has reasons to be regarded as one of the most adequate for contemporary representations of human traumas precisely because, from a formal perspective, it apparently shares several features which can easily be explained and interpreted in affective terms. If this is possible, it is arguably because metafiction has been extensively and wildly experimented and employed as a technical device to represent and interpret postmodernist concerns and sensitivities. Among such concerns, language certainly represented a challenging issue forcing scholars and intellectuals to rethink the ways reality might be linguistically conceived of. With pertinence to the field of traumatic experiences, the limit case of language and representability has mainly involved debates and questions such as how we can name an event characterized by such an intensity that even recalling it already means being profoundly engaged with it. Indeed, a trauma is never only lived once. Each trauma is lived twice, as it occurs and as it is narrated. The emotionally intense barrier to cognitively and linguistically overcome when facing traumatic experiences, then, can be hopefully supported from new kinds of communicative tools and mechanisms and, not by chance, this thesis has attempted

at demonstrating that affects can become strong allies. Affects are the embodiment of experiences and, as such, one should turn to the body and its communicative signals in order to make sense and tell of traumas. Traumatized bodies always have a story to say. In addition to this, the metafictional engagement with postmodern features is also related to the range of formal elements that contribute to the creation of complex narratives, since postmodern literary texts are always characterized by some degree of complexity as a very result of the new vision and understanding of world and human society itself in postmodernity. To borrow from Wiese, "the palimpsestic structure becomes the only strategy to reconcile the paradox of the unrepresentability of experience."[299] As a consequence, since metafictional texts are also palimpsestic narratives, examples like Kristof and McEwan's have certainly come to the fore as challenging stories structured upon confused narratives moving back and forth in time, in and out of memories and reality, as well as relying upon self-referential discourses that question the overall reliability of the narrative and readers' response to it. They have emerged as complex products and it is this very challenging essence that arguably makes them truthful reports of unrepresentable and unspeakable experiences of trauma. Thus, a similar necessity for structural and formal complexity is also a condition for trauma narratives, to the extent that "some critics have argued or even assumed that trauma can only be represented in complex, challenging and, even perhaps, modernist or postmodernist forms."[300] As a result, it can certainly be concluded that metafictional narratives may provide the most adequate parameters to satisfy the needs of any traumatic elaboration and expression.

Yet, the attempt at giving voice to human wounds is an effort that implies formal as much as thematic issues. As a result, besides wondering how a trauma can be put into words, it has also been important to explore what it actually means to represent a trauma, what is, in very concrete and matter-related terms, that demands to be represented. Which experience needs to be embodied? In order to answer this query, the second chapter of the present study has been extensively formulated around certain thematic cores whose understanding is believed to be fundamental when it comes to make sense of traumatic and post-traumatic representations and elaborations. Notions such as belatedness, corporeality, repetition, fright, division, identity, pathological communication, death and memory certainly characterize experiences of trauma, however, they seem to suffer from the already-mentioned syndrome of unrepresentability, as if they were all conditions that could only be understood when lived first-hand. This is when affect theory has come to aid once again by demonstrating that when affects merge with the realm of traumas, all those notions that firstly appeared too obscure and complicated to understand and conceive, immediately acquire a clearer

[299] Wiese, 20.

[300] Colin and Meretoja, 290.

dimension by eventually embodying themselves into more concrete and visible matter. Hence, by considering trauma studies together with affect theory, it has been possible to highlight several features that the two approaches originally share and, thus, it has been equally possible to argue that when traumatic experiences are re-interpreted and re-considered by adopting the terms and "rules" governing affects, traumas acquire a corporeality that might help the narration as well as the reception of these painful stories. Narratives like the twins' compositions, from their childhood memories to a life-long attempt at reconstructing a sense of Self through writing, or Briony's journey through some of the most affirmed genres and forms of English literature mirroring her own personal evolution through some of the most complex twists of private life, are narratives that carefully depict traumatised, traumatic and traumatizing realities and offer interesting perspectives on how to represent as well as how to interpret them.

Moreover, as far as the issue of representing trauma is concerned, it appears obvious that the act of writing itself, the very dynamics and rules that allow the creation of a narrative, become part of trauma literature as well. Kristof and McEwan's characters are deeply entangled and embedded not only in the fictional stories they belong to but also, and most importantly, in the stories they make up and write. These stories, additionally, eventually arise from one simple, common, often unacknowledged need: coping with trauma by resorting to writing. Thus, besides being a formal component, metafiction has also become one of the most fundamental themes of the selected narratives. If, in the first chapter, it has been fundamental to analyse the stylistic and generic features of these metafictional texts, in the second chapter, the form has been embodied into a content and this content is represented, undoubtedly, by the notion of corporeality, of the body; the body of the characters, their identities, as well as the body of writing, how words embody experiences of trauma. By doing so, it has then been possible to argue that the writing carefully crafted by the twins to relate of the events occurring during the war in the small town of K. is a verbal and graphical embodiment of the affective experiences withstood and whose intensity and pain they attempt at modify through language. It is the very performance, act itself of writing that acquires a bodily and corporeal meaning and symbolism within the narrative to the extent that the physical text is given the role to replace whatever the trauma has removed. As it has been argued, the text almost becomes an organic extension of the twins themselves, enabling them to embody that unity that should be physical, yet there are reasons to believe to be simply imagined, invented. As Mod suggests, "C'est par le geste de l'écriture que le narrateur matérialise un univers dans lequel les deux frères auraient toujours vécu

ensemble, ce qui ne fut pas le cas dans la réalité."[301]The world they objectively and surgically depict comes to the surface of the pages in terms of bodies undergoing traumatic experiences: bodies are abandoned, bodies perpetrate violence upon other bodies, bodies abuse and are abused, bodies are burnt, bodies are divided. The materiality to which every aspect of human life is reduced perfectly renders the idea of what a traumatic experience like war may imply, where humanity is marginalised and annihilated both physically and existentially for the mere purposes of survival. It is this tragically diffused loss of identities that transforms the corporeal writing of *The Notebook* into the pathological writing of the *The Proof* and *The Third Lie*, as narratives about the frustrating attempts at reconstructing a senseful past by relying on someone's memory. The issue, though, is that this reconstruction becomes a very complicated task when accomplished by an individual whose identity has been shattered by a traumatized past, now coping with what has been argued to be a schizophrenic identity. Thus, writing becomes the most concrete representation of an inner chaos that is looking for an order and, as a consequence, the narrative that results from this process is subdued to the dynamics of a frenzied and shocked mind, uncapable of distinguishing reality from imagination and turning to lies as coping mechanism. Moreover, this happening within a metafictional structure, it means that readers are seriously engaged in the feverish delirium of Kristof's trauma narrative and they end up feeling equally subject to the affective and corporeal suggestions arising from the peculiar text. Finally, the characters' bodies manifest a trauma, the narrative embodies the trauma and, last but not least, readers' bodies respond to the literary representation of such trauma.

In addition to this, while Kristof's story has extensively exemplified how affects can become powerful allies for a better rendition and transmission of traumas within literature, McEwan's *Atonement* has come to the fore as the example of a story in which the metafictional apparatus paves the way for a narrative enabling the author-narrator to exploit writing as a tool to manipulate reality by transforming it into a fictional creation meant to compensate for real-life traumatic experiences that are no longer modifiable. The narrative voices chaotically echoing within the pages of *Atonement,* besides being the evidently fictional product of McEwan's imagination are, secondly, the pages used by the character-author Briony to tell of her own trauma, which is composed of a couple of events that, because of her unrequested participation, have resulted in situations damaging real people close to her and for which, as a result, she feels deeply guilty. It is through a highly self-referential narrative that Briony wishes to make up and atone for the wrongs she has caused and to demonstrate that,

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[301] Mod, Melinda. « Agota Kristof, une écriture de ruine aspirante à la survie. Décryptage de la figure du double dans le *Grand Cahier* ». In *Hommes & Migrations,* N. 1306, 2014. [Online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.2803

perhaps, literature, fiction and writing in general may truly have the potential to help individuals recover from traumas. This would arguably be due to the already-mentioned rules and features that apparently govern the cognitive mechanisms that humans activate when having to create stories, narratives, whether these are personal narratives used to reconstruct the story of a trauma, in its outbreak, development and final recovery as it may occurs within the environment of a psychotherapeutic programme or within the pages of books and novels where authors wish to confide their inner torments and stories and make them accessible to others.

However, as the third and last chapter has attempted at clarifying, no matter how beneficial the literary confession and representation of trauma may be, every attempt at verbalizing it always implies ethical issues. Indeed, when Briony chooses to transform her interpretation of the ambiguous scene by the fountain into fictional matter or when she decides to venture beyond the boundaries of fictionality and imagination and to deeply affect reality by testifying against Robbie in the case of Lola's rape, all these situations inevitably involve some degree of immorality. By committing them, Briony becomes guilty. Therefore, by narrating them, she takes on a very specific role, a duty, thus, a position with moral bias. By deciding to elaborate a traumatic past with the support of writing, Briony inevitably accepts to accomplish and attain to several duties: first, she becomes responsible for the extent to which imagination, an intrinsic component of fiction, is given access to her report by thus more or less manipulating the narrated content; secondly, she is responsible for the lives of the people that, in her story, become characters by choosing to provide them with a fictional fate that differs from their real-life fate; lastly, she is inevitably responsible for her readers who have to be persuaded that all the lies and manipulations that Briony has exploited to develop her narrative go beyond immorality since they ultimately achieve a higher and further ethical objective embodied in the very written product itself. Indeed, although Briony is telling the story of a trauma, when a similar story is entrusted to fiction and literature, one must accept the intervention of imagination and its consequences upon the narrated content. Readers should not feel fooled and thus condemn the author when discovering towards the end that most of the story was the product of her imagination. As a matter of fact, the same imagination that allows Briony to write *Atonement*, thus, to atone for her mistakes and to reconstruct a fictional story where trauma is healed, it's the same imagination that enables readers to access her story and, eventually, to empathize with it. Aesthetic empathy, as it has been named, stands out as the vehicle through which affects are transported within an ethical dimension, just as metafiction is arguably the vehicle guiding affects towards a formal embodiment. If affects have been identified as forces that transfer from body to body and create connections or echoes, empathy explains the engagement that each individual can assume in relation to others, even when this participation occurs within the pages of a book. Writing about a trauma, then, is, from its

core, an act deeply imbued with ethic: it is ethical because writing means connecting and, as it has emerged from Chapter Two, stories of trauma are stories of humanity, thus, stories that always establish some sort of connections between the teller and the listener. Trauma-writing is also ethical because these connections are made possible and eventually reinforced by our primitive ability to activate processes like empathy that simultaneously involve affective as well as imaginative mechanisms, therefore, they engage the entire range of manifestations of human essence, in its corporeal and abstract nature. Writing of someone's trauma is ethical because, by relying upon connections, imagination, empathy and affective resonances, it paves the way for knowledge and understanding, for memory and remembrance; in other words, it fills voids and gaps, those between individuals, those in different spaces and, especially, those in time, ensuring that the transmission of these stories of trauma may create a cultural heritage with two main roles. On the one hand, the heritage has the moral duty towards the Past to resist oblivion and forgetfulness, on the other, it has a duty towards the Future, too, in terms of using the knowledge derived from the transmission of trauma narratives to limit the possibilities that certain traumas may occur again, or, were this not possible, at least to build generations of individuals that are more capable of absorbing the shock, of dealing with traumatic accidents in a more conscious manner and, finally, of healing from traumas in the most peaceful way.

Writing about the post-traumatic resonance of the events of 9/11, McEwan reflected about the fundamental role that the interdependence of empathy and imagination plays when it comes to fictional narratives, arguing that "Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality"[302]. As this thesis reaches its conclusion, it is now possible to expand McEwan's suggestion and claim that imagining what someone else's story of trauma may be like is the very core of humanity. If traumas are part of the story of human existence, then it is in-between the affective experience of traumas that the most human essence is contained and might be potentially reconstructed, brought to the surface, empathized with, understood and, finally, shared in an infinite web of human connections. In order to do so, the *history* of trauma must be firstly turned into a *story* of trauma, by thus reaching the status of a story that, by relying upon affects and their myriad of manifestations and potentialities, ultimately becomes a safe space of vulnerability, openness, avowal, acknowledgment, acceptance and mutual recognition. Trauma literature finally becomes the precious recipient of stories of reconstruction and resurgence that may entice an affective contagion and contamination prompted by the written pages and virtually spreading from bodies encountering other bodies, ultimately and hopefully paving the

[302] McEwan, Ian. "Only Love and then Oblivion", *The Guardian*, 15 Sept 2001. [Online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2

way for a collective rediscovery of human strengths and potential only because of and thanks to traumatic experiences turned into accessible stories that are not stories of humanity in its being, but of humanity in its wonderful becoming.

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