

Laura T. Di Summa, « Sufficient and necessary conditions to remember »

On the shelves of bookstores memoirs have slowly conquered a separate location, one that seems to belong both to fiction and non-fiction, history and narrative, detachment and emotions. My aim is to try to disentangle this confusion by drawing on what is specific of memoirs and their cognitive understanding. Broadly speaking, memoirs are forms of encounter. When I start reading a memoir I am, at first, attempting to learn something about somebody who happens to be both the author and the character. I am, in other words, committing myself to a fictional element – reading a story about a character- without for this reason precluding an interest in an actual story, something that truly happened. But the blend between fiction and non-fiction does not simply stop at the dichotomy between character and author; it involves a reflection on content, on what is said, on how it is said –the narrative structure- and also on what, following from the latter point, is *unsaid* in memoirs.

Memoirs will be analyzed under the framework of narratives, and, more specifically, literary narratives. Memoirs, I will argue, represent an interesting case of study in the way narratives are defined, experienced and understood. A first question will dwell on the more general problem of narratives, on their use, and on the possible ways in which their coordinates can be described. Narratives in memoirs do, on this respect, present a specific structure and trigger a subsequent learning response that opens to a further analysis of the author and the reader. Such a consideration stems from another crucial issue: memoirs are decisional and intentional encounters. I, author, present myself to an audience I do not know, and I tell them something about myself. Two problems immediately follow; the first one is how, as an author, I decide to uncover myself as the subject of *my own* memoir. How will I construct my story, and how is the construction going to bear on its being not only created by the author but also received by an audience? Secondly, how is the reader going to feel memoirs? Are memoirs responses to certain expectations, or are they openings to deeper levels of cognition?

In the course of this paper I will analyze these problems and their relation to another problem

that I find specifically crucial in the case of memoirs, namely, learning. If we focus on the importance of learning we can try to build a tentative taxonomy of the main features of memoirs. I will divide this paper according to what I take to be some of the most important features of memoirs starting from the most general to the most specific. My analysis will start with a description of narratives and the importance of narratives that does not exclusively belong to memoirs. I will then enter more specific features of memoirs; their structural components and the more debatable ethical value. I will finally conclude with what I take to be the strongest point of memoirs, namely, their capacity of displaying the self, the character. In the last section I will consider how the encounter with the person also includes the reader, the encounter with the author of a memoir is also an encounter with ourselves.

What do we mean by memoir

In this paper I aim to maintain a narrow notion of memoirs. The genre I am concerned with is the one of literary memoirs. Literary memoirs are not simply autobiographies, they are not, in other words, a mere chronological collections of facts. Literary memoirs aim at a higher goal, they are a description of the person where the person, and so the author, is not solely describing or reporting his or her life, but narrating, and in part, as it will emerge in the end of the paper, discovering it together with their own self. Authors of memoirs put themselves as characters, they, in a sense, construct, or reconstruct a character around the experienced facts of their lives. Lives become forms of creative construction, and the memoir, in itself, unfolds the character as a discovery; the discovery of a personality that does not appear in the pedantic enlisting of facts. We assist to the disclosure, through memoirs, of a mechanism of self-consciousness and self-clarification that is not necessary in a more simple historical analysis. The revealing of a consciousness, of a person, is a mechanism abundantly used in literature where characters are entirely fictional. But there is more than a creative and literary technique. Treating themselves as characters, as the subject and object of the memoirs, authors invest cognitive energies not only in the analysis of events, but in the possibilities that these events had to offer to the them. Writing a memoir can also lead to imaginatively reconstruct the past and the ordering of memories. It is through writing that life actually assumes a specific shape. Life can be treated in terms of “bios”, of organic existence –I was born, and I died, or I am going to- but it can also be the description of something we need to discover, and more strongly to accept. It is only in the latter sense that memoirs take shape. Specifically memoirs are forms of encounters with the very author of the memoir. Olney refers to the “shaping” of memoirs as “life-writing”. Life-writings involve,

according to Olney, the practice of “weaving”. A crucial element in weaving a life is creation, and, more specifically, creation according to a pattern. The author of a memoir has to find the best way to get to a description of his own life, a description that not only reports fact, but that reports facts according to a chosen structure. I will not enter the specificity of each technique, but I will, in the course of the paper, emphasize some passages showing how different structures have been adopted to unfold events in the author’s life. Also, memoirs imply selection: only certain events will be told in order to get to the specificity of the life of the author and of the very same author. The final portion of the paper will be dedicated to the implications and difficulties of “weaving”; finding an expression to the self is not always easy, neither for the authors of memoirs nor for their audience.

There are several steps that need to be made before getting to the “learning of a person” in memoirs. I will begin from the most general. These are aspects that memoirs share with other forms of narratives. When we focus on memoirs as a form of literary narration, we need to start by clarifying what we intend narratives to be in a less specific way. The considerations that we can draw on narratives apply to memoirs as well as to other genres. Briefly sketching some of the important elements necessary to call something a narrative helps us understanding the most direct structural features of narratives that will further lead to more complex forms of unfolding, and finally of learning through memoirs. In what follows I will present two elements of narratives that emphasize the importance of narrative construction in both the structuring of a story and, even more strongly, in the development of our reason and folk psychological skills. For what concerns the structuring of narratives I will rely on Carroll’s account of narrative closure; to instead ground narratives as one of the most basic and necessary paths in our development, I will rely on the scientific contribution of Hutto and his account of folk psychological narratives. The remaining part of the paper will instead try to create a taxonomy of the constitutive elements of memoirs, from the use of structure, to ethical learning to finally the importance, in memoirs, of the discovery of the character, a discovery in which we also participate as readers.

Structural Considerations on Narratives.

1. Narrative Closure

Dealing with the structure of narratives, Carroll provides an interesting account that fits well with the description of memoirs I want to provide. Although his account is not genre-specific, his presentation of narratives closure and the importance of causal mechanisms and macro-

questions can be seen as an initial step in the analysis of some of the elements characterizing memoirs. These features can be used as a framework for the most specific characterization of memoirs I will try to provide later in the paper. One of the first points to be analyzed is then what we mean by narrative closure and how closure obtains through relevant questions and causal connections. We experience narrative closure when a sense of finality and completeness is given; when we feel that nothing is left unsaid. What should not be left unsaid is a response to one or more fundamental macro-questions, and eventually a set of micro-questions, that the story presents. As he writes:

Narrative closure obtains when it is the description of the causal nexus or parts thereof that generates the presiding macro-questions and the subordinate micro-questions that rivet our attention and which finally answers them, thereby eliciting a sense of completeness in us.¹

This description does capture one of the aspects I want to emphasize in the notion of narrative when applied to memoirs. Memoirs need closure, and this is so because of the relevance of macro-questions in the structural composition of memoirs. In simply listing a number of events that occurred to me, I am not reaching closure because I am not posing relevant questions; neither is my audience aware of the presence of any questions, nor am I trying to trigger any questions –I am simply either reporting or listening to a report. Such a practice does not in itself differ from writing a diary recording daily events. A diary proceeds at the same pace of a life, it begins and ends with it without being concerned with the organization of events; events just happen. It does not make sense to write a diary for an audience. Even when diaries are published they leave the clear impression of not having been written to be read by anybody but the author. This is reverted in the case of memoirs; the audience wants to know what happened in “my” life, what is the sense of the relation between the events I am presenting. Author and audience are linked together. The author might respond, through different mechanisms to a question relevant to himself as a character: Who am I? What has my life been truly about? Memoirs have a sense of finality in their being a way to define the life of a person, to trace its most essential boundaries, they are forms, as mentioned before, of life-writing.

The definition of narrative closure as a response to macro-questions needs to be further specified by adding what might be seen as conditions for its application. Carroll summarizes these

1 Carroll, N. 2007:4.

“realization conditions” in five points. 1. The discourse represents at least two events and/or states of affairs 2. In a globally forward looking manner 3. Concerning the career of at least one unified subject 4. Where the temporal relations between the events and states of affairs are perspicuously ordered, and 5. Where the earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the subsequent occurrence of the events and/or states of affairs in the chain of events being described or are a contribution thereto.² The last condition listed, although weakened by the fact that only some connections need to be causal and that the connection itself can be weak, is indeed Carroll’s more interesting point when attached to the analysis of memoirs. Carroll presents his conditions as general conditions for narrative connections without entering the specificity of each genre. Yet, in the case of memoirs the importance of causal relations is further emphasized by the intent, conscious or implicit, to make of memoirs a form of interpretation and learning. In order to learn about the character we need narrative connections to respond to the selection of events and to the structure in which events are described. So far I then listed memoirs as forms of narrative, as narratives characterized by closure, as narratives that depend on causal connections, and finally as narratives in which the causal connection entails the possibility of “learning”. This last assumption requires further clarification. We can learn about the author of a memoir, but we can also learn about ourselves as readers. In the next section I will consider the relation between learning through narratives and cognitive development. Again, this is another general feature of memoirs and it can be applied to other forms of narratives. When we relate narratives to cognitive development the process of learning involves both the author of narratives and the referents of narratives. As a self, learning how to produce narratives enhances reason and leads to a more complete and refined use of our reasoning abilities. But narratives also open to the others. We can refer to a process of co-production of narratives in which we learn both about our own reason and about the audience; narratives require authors and listeners or readers, and both engage in a learning process. In this sense narratives are folk psychological mechanisms, we learn how to make previsions, we anticipate the intentions of others, and we learn more about ourselves and the environment in which we describe and evaluate events related to our own lives.

2. Narratives and Folk Psychology

The importance of learning does not proceed immediately from memoirs. Focusing on how we learn, and not yet on the content of what is learnt, implies a reflection on how narratives can, in

² Carroll, N. 2007:11.

general, work as a mechanism of learning. In this latter case learning through narratives is the result of cognitive and developmental processes that are shared in everyday communication. Daniel Hutto has recently provided a significant account of the role of narratives in folk psychology and so in the development of reason. Hutto's main goal is to frame folk psychology as a form of narrative practice. It is a narrative practice that makes use of reason to predict and explain intentional attitudes. The Narrative Practice Hypothesis is defined as follows:

The Narrative Practice Hypothesis claims that the normal route through which children become familiar with the core structure of folk psychology and the norm-governed possibilities for its practical application is through direct encounters with stories about people who act for reason³

A first important feature of narrative practices is their coming, and relying, on a second-person perspective and not only on a third person perspective. I do not, in other words, simulate the behavior of others, nor do I simply enter a more distant standpoint; what I do is to listen to "stories", explanations, and second-person interpretations as workable sources of understanding and learning. As Hutto emphasizes our "best chances" in understanding are the revelations of others. Hence, we are not concerned necessarily with the truth value or with the scientific and theoretical coherency of the other's perspective, but with the social, cultural, and somewhat personal account the other provides to us. Moreover, it is only in the other that we can find responses to actual possibilities. As much as we can conjecture a reasoned explanation, we are back, in our understanding, to the direct testimony of the other –we are not third party spectators but gifted listeners.

Hutto reconstructs this story beginning with intentional attitudes and ending with propositional attitudes and beliefs. What he shows is a cognitive development of reason in folk psychological practices, practices that are strongly and essentially affected by the construction and communication of narratives. One of the points of the analysis is to draw away from innate mentalistic abilities and to build instead a practical, and actual development based on the encounter of different cognitive takes; from intuitions, to propositions, to finally full narratives and beliefs. Such a mechanism follows a precise path of development that can be summarized as going from 1. used of embodied skills to "navigate the social matrix" without any need of propositional attitudes or reasons for action 2. development of certain syntactic construction and especially content clauses, 3. shift from understanding others in terms of intentional action to the

3 Hutto, D. 2008: 5.

understanding of others in terms of propositional attitudes, 4. participation in conversations and appropriate exercise of imaginative abilities and the following understanding of beliefs.⁴

The idea of participating in a narrative mechanism leads us to a mechanism of cognition that is essentially co-cognition. The setting is interactive; the learning children and the narrator participate together by providing propositional inputs of understanding. Parents as storytellers place the children in a specific viewpoint that enhances a vision of context, participation and embodiment. There is, in other words, nothing such as a sterile ground of applied cognitive norms, reason develops instead as a vital narrative opportunity. As Hutto puts it, training and learning are identical, and, if there is a norm, this norm is strictly exemplar and manifest; it is a way of reaching a common psychological ground. This point also implies a certain pluralism: the exchange setting valid in Western countries would not apply to other countries. Narratives practices obviously do change when the setting is altered as well as the social and cultural norms in place. If we follow a narrative, if we develop our reason through it, then such a development cannot be oblivious of the reality in which the narrative unfolds.

It is then undisputable to see in Hutto a basis for the cognitive and psychological necessity of narratives. If on a more immediate scale we can impute to narratives the responsibility of our reason development, on another scale we can play with the interaction and learning capacities that a scheme such as the one presented in the narrative hypothesis can imply. In other words, we can combine the importance of learning with what outlined in the previous section concerning the structure of narratives. We are now in the position to start listing some of the more specific features of memoirs and the mechanisms through which they enhance learning. I will initially be concerned with what we learn from memoirs, and with the techniques through which we get involved in memoirs and we learn about the author. I will then get to a different dimension of learning, the developing of the author through memoirs, and the way in which we learn about ourselves.

A Taxonomy of Memoirs

1. The Structure of Memoirs

A first level of learning derives from the fact that the authors of memories structure the events of their lives in specific ways, thus unfolding their memories according to determinate artistic and

⁴ Hutto D. 2008: 146

stylistic interests. This kind of learning is filtered not only by the selection of certain episodes instead of others, but by the structure that the author consciously decides to assign to the narration. This form of learning focuses essentially on a first dimension in which we come to know about the author, the character of a memoir. Rick Moody's *The Black Veil* is an example of how the value of a memoir can be attached essentially to selections in the structure. The significance is not given solely by an emphasis on the importance of certain events instead of others but by the fact that events are framed in more complex structures that mirror the life of the author. In *The Black Veil* Moody plays with constant digressions into his ancestry, in particular he keeps returning to his ancestor Joseph Moody, and to his way of covering his guilt –the old Moody was accused of murder- by wearing on his face a black handkerchief. Rick follows Joseph, the old Moody, in his story in the meanwhile uncovering his own memoir, a story that does contain the same and yet new, contemporary amount of guilt. The contemporary Moody has to deal with his rough past life, alcoholism and psychiatric problems. We also know from the outset that the old Moody was taken as a character by Hawthorne; the actual Moody is the character of his own story. The structure of memoir is in this sense a reflection on the coexistence of being a character and an author, on the awareness of how memories are intertwined and of how their interpretation changes because of their being so. From being a character in the past, a fictional character, Moody becomes the character of his own life, thus having to show the guilt embodied by the black veil he cannot but constantly refer to. In a sense the actual Moody has to remain the character of Hawthorne's story, he can only express himself through the metaphor of his ancestor, and ancestor that, so tells the structure, was already a character.

Another example of learning through the structure of memoirs can be found in Grass' *Peeling the Onion*. The very title of the book reminds us of a procedure, a structure, that the author intends to adopt. The idea of peeling the onion does remind us of a painful act-discovery, but also to a discovery that touches tragic episodes of life in a somewhat understated and homey fashion. Grass discovers himself through an act that is neither bold nor authoritative. He tells us, through his metaphor, of a consciousness that, despite the grandiosity or futility of events, has the capacity to remain humble and delicately self-directed. It is an intimate narration that presents a person who is now a father and a grandfather, who has been a well-known artist before being a writer and who, almost with the same intensity, also had to live with the enormous burden of having lived through, and in part participated, in the Nazi regime. All these episodes are layers, layers that have effects on us –they make us cry- but they are nonetheless episodes of a life that wants to narrate itself in simplicity. In both Moody and Grass' cases we do learn more about the

author through the use of a structure that reflects both on the actual structure of the life in its factual events, and on the way in which the structure of memories is evaluated and felt by the author.

A further technique is the one adopted by Pamuk in *Istanbul*. In this case it is the actual history and geography of a place that tells the story of the author. Pamuk uses historical testimonies, personal pictures and pictures of the city to both explain his life through Istanbul, the city, and to separate himself from it as an autonomous character. The character has to regain his autonomy from the city and its past, an autonomy that is nonetheless still dependent on the city. The city appears as a parallel character that helps shaping the author, yet it also tells us about the strong connection between Pamuk the writer and his native country. The structure is inevitably what leads us to interpretation, it is a key for learning about the author. It is also, in a more refined sense, the actual landscape that the author has to confront in order to properly speak about himself, to become, as the previously analyzed Moody and Grass, the character of the memoir.

2. Ethical Components in Memoirs

Memoirs deal with events in the life of a person, and it would not be misleading to also consider the evaluation of these events. Evaluations can of course assume a number of dimensions; one of the dimension that can be considered is whether memoirs, as a form of narrative, also deal with ethical components. The role of ethics in the understanding of narratives has been deeply analyzed by Gaut. In the larger than simply the one of memoirs Gaut unfolds a cognitive argument based on both epistemic and aesthetic claims. The epistemic claim of cognitivism is “formulated in terms of artworks’ capacity to teach us, and therefore to exhibit a kind of understanding about certain matters, including psychology and values”.⁵ The aesthetic claim adds that artworks can teach under certain conditions of aesthetic merit. I will here focus on the less problematic epistemic notion. Relevant to the problem of learning is seeing how teaching is framed in Gaut’s definition. An initial distinguishing feature is that the teaching of artworks is not “by experience”. Reading does not imply direct acquaintance but it nonetheless requires the same confirmation that we find in real-life events. The lack of direct experience is bridged by the use of imagination. Even though fictional works might lack real life testimony they develop real life by “imagining” it. This is not at all absurd. Imagination is widely used in real life cases any time we think, plausibly, about counterfactual situations; imagination establishes cognitive

5 Gaut, B. 2007: 140

possibilities. There nonetheless is a possible objection: imagination can be irrational or highly implausible, it can be, in other words, very far from being a form of learning and very close to make us diverge from the true content of something, being it the artworks or the actual fact. It is because of this reason that Gaut adjusts his position to “disciplined imagination”, one that combines relevant evidence –evidence on the imagined state of affairs-, avoidance of fantasy, affective imagination –where I take into account the sense-experience and vividness of the work, and finally experiential imagination –the construction of a minimal set of imagining principles guiding the construction. If we follow this guidance imagination becomes something that not only moves us toward learning, but toward the pursuit of the truth, of a truth that has epistemic status.

Imagination does also play a similar role in memoirs. As already emphasized memoirs are not solely about facts, they are ways of structuring facts, but the presence of a structure leaves space to our own imaginative abilities. Even though memoirs might not have to face the pressing problem of irrational imagination or an excess in fantasy, they strongly share the relevant evidence and affective imagination features. Memoirs do not say everything and they let us use our imagination to learn more about the character. In Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, we are often asked to suspend the chronology and to use our imagination in order to learn about her life, about the “magical thinking” involved in her extremely tragic situation, but also the magical thinking that she has to adopt in such dramatic circumstances. Didion tells us about one of her birthdays spent when her husband was still alive. After reading a long, complex passage of Didion –and she reports the passage- her husband simply asserts “Don’t ever tell me again you can’t write”.⁶ In two pages Didion manages to make us think about the value of relationship, her career, but also her insecurities and the way in which her husband was capable to placate them. We need to imagine several aspects of their relationship, but we easily do it by working with the relevant context of an anniversary and death, with our affectionate responses and with the vividness -the passage is reported and so “read to us”- through which she gains such an effect.

What Gaut also adds is that learning has a specific value in the case of ethical learning. According to Gaut we do use our imaginative resources in order to get to the ethical imaginative sphere of the reader. We have a capacity to feel the irresolvable strength of ethical questions and ethical questions seem to be the ones in which our experiential imagination is most triggered. A problem with ethical judgments in memoirs is that we might feel a “suspension” of ethical judgment in

⁶ Didion, J. 2005: 166.

front of a story that presents us with a possibility that is strictly personal to the subject and that we will, as a consequence, never experience individually. In the end, those ethical responses are subjective to the character in question and they do not closely regard us –we are just spectators of the ethical response of somebody else; if, for instance, I suffered a recent loss I might be willing to consider ethical issues concerning the loss of a dear one, but if I have not suffered any loss, my relationship to a recent death described can be detached, descriptive, and not necessarily a function of ethical evaluation. But there is a stronger objection to the uptake of ethical judgments. Even though I can “impersonate” the character of a memoir I also have to deal with the fact that ethical decisions are already presented as a form of learning. What makes memoirs so hard to write is that they are supposed to already deal with the acceptance of already taken moral decisions, and these decisions might very well be wrong. As a reader I am facing a moral dimension, but this dimension is framed in a much bigger framework where what matters is also the author’s construction of identity, the real construction of a life. In such a scenario moral merits or demerits, even though still present, are going to lose their pressing interpretative importance, or at least they have to be in part subordinated. Recently Yoshiro Tatsumi has published a memoir in comics on the history of Manga and on his own life and development as an artist. The book works between semi-epical narration, the theme of the life of an artist, and the historical reports from post-war Japan. All these elements, the tension of becoming an artist, the economical problems of Tatsumi’s family and the development of a radically new system of customs in Japan are pregnant with ethical significance but the only one entitled to “play” with this ethical significance is the young Tatsumi who, as the title says, has to face a “drifting life”. Often in the book Tatsumi is portrayed as undecided, wavering between different career choices, attentive and at the same time forgetful of what is happening. It is Tatsumi’s task to decide, ethically or unethically, for his life. As much as we can agree or disagree with his decisions, as much as we can sympathize or not with him, our decisions are still dependent on what the character/author had decided and had to decide about his or her own life.

3. The Character. Between Fiction and Non Fiction

A common point in structural reflection and ethical reflection is that they both yield to a reflection on the author and on what the author has to say as the character of a memoir. This is, I believe, the most important point in the analysis of memoirs. Memoirs focus on one character and it is in the description of this character that we can identify the most important features of

memoirs. If, on the one hand, we learn about the author, the peculiarity of memoirs is that also the author learns; it is a learning and discovery of identity.

Olney sketches a beautiful profile of life-writing by focusing on a retrospective analysis of how the “I” emerges or defines itself. The unfolding presented is something close to the memoir of memoirs, to what happened to them, to how they were born and how they became aware of themselves in the multiple shapes they can assume. Olney presents the story of memoirs as a trilogy. The first element of the trilogy is Augustine, the second Rousseau, the last Beckett. Augustine in *The Confessions* presents the first correlation between life-writing, narrative and memory. Recollection is a tool of identity and it is only through recollection that Augustine’s life regains unity and continuity; in the fair presentations of the past, the spotless and unforgiving capacity to recapitulate his own past mistakes, Augustine reaches a solution, and so a confirmation of his conversion –the only true affirmation of a life, and the product of the life’s continuum. There is something in Augustine that closely resembles recitation. The recitation of memory is always regarded as possible, and it resembles the recitation of a psalm. The starting assumptions are then two. One the one hand, memories can clarify what the important nexuses of life are, on the other hand, we have the ability, and certainly Augustine did not lack it, to meticulously recapitulate anecdotes, episodes, turning points, sufferings, and in all these, their relationship to memory. Yet even though Augustine’s narration begins and proceeds in a highly chronological fashion, there is an enormous attention on the emotional impact of certain events. In recalling his mistress, his son, his pagan life, the influence of Greek and Latin literature, Augustine cannot but dwell on the almost melancholic love that these episodes bring to his life. Chronology looks forward, but the value of looking forward is explained in the capacity of looking at the precious components we find in looking backwards. What is explained is the value of memories for self-consciousness:

The mind, through memory –and in the Confessions Augustine will say that mind and memory are one and the same thing- can recall experiences of the past, but it can also, in the present, recall itself to itself, “can be understood by its own thought”, and this too, whereby “the mind is present to itself”, is accomplished through memory.⁷

What is presented narratively as “ex-order” is a blend of chronological and processual methodologies. The story is taken as a process where it is fundamental to consider the evolution of the author in understanding and valuing his or her life as a process moving toward the discovery of the self. The processual side is symbolized by the discovery of self-consciousness but

⁷ Olney, J. 1998: 16

also by the motivation underlying the possibility of this discovery. It should not be forgotten how Augustine got to his internal and private analysis; Augustine took what was initially external, religion, as the only true internal feature of his life. The mark represented by his conversion becomes, literally speaking, what provides the language of and for the memoir, and so the route conducing to the opening of the self. Narrating his life Augustine does not have the fear of portraying, and so betraying, an “I” that he is not; he cannot fear this movement because there is no fear of being the “I” God has asked him to be. Augustine the intellectual, the man who has lived a godless life can, through the language of the conversion, expose with candor what he did wrong and what he did right; through religion he assumes a standpoint that overcomes the problem of defining what identity is. Hence, conversion is the actual possibility of confession; the individual is free to elaborate on memories once he has assumed God as a constitutive part of existence.

But such a clarity in the presentation of the self is far from being a necessary condition of memoirs. To be more precise, we can say that the clarity and naturalness that are part of the transposition of memories are goals, but, very often, utopian goals. Rousseau is an emblem of this movement. He begins the *Confessions*, the *Dialogues* and the *Reveries*, with an assumption on honesty, one that stems directly from the subject, narrator and character. Rousseau is concerned with the presentation of an original, almost purified self. In his way of conceiving memoirs, origins are precisely what should be investigated, and told. There is an obsession and fascination for original states, for the famous original state of self-love and harmony that Rousseau had strived to present as foundation of the entire humankind. It is for this foundation that he writes, and his memoir, spread across his entire production, is a description of how, he, alone, purely, and originally represents an incarnation of such a position. But getting to a pure beginning, and so to a clearer conception of his internal life and self-consciousness is not as easy as it was for Augustine. Augustine had found in God the narrative language to present himself to himself, the past to the present, and, with it, the continuity of the person. Rousseau does not have this narrative, he has to build the concept of redemption by himself, and he often fails. He generates apologies, excuses, remarks of candor and oblivion, remarks on the educational path that his life had to follow. The incidents told –and in part covered or diminished in their importance- are never presented as sins, they cannot “stain” the self that Rousseau wants to portray. Abandoning all his five children to the foundling hospital becomes a normal action, one for which excuses can be found, one that does not touch the pure “originality” of Rousseau the person. But who is he? Does the integrity in researching his origin match with a full account of

what it means to maintain identity? The clear and spotless internal identity that Rousseau keeps defending is not only a myth when compared to some of the actions he engaged in, it is also impossible to identify among all the different identities with which Rousseau describes himself. There is a strong and perpetual instability of being, one that keeps coming up in the way the name of the author is displayed. Rousseau evaluates himself, he is his own “judge”, the one that assists to the various presentations of himself. Rousseau doubles himself and becomes the Frenchman, Jean-Jacques, Rousseau, *moi*, but it is almost impossible to understand who he really is. It is impossible also because he feels that his life, identity and personality are not accepted, he is “one of a kind” a foreigner in his own country. Rousseau aimed, through the *Confessions*, not at a stylistic comment, but at a judgment directed to his very own character. He wanted to find recognition, and he could not really find it, neither externally –the public, the world, the original society oblivious of itself-, nor internally –who am I? How many times will I have to excuse and defend myself?

The circle does not reach an end, it does only reach a new starting point that Augustine could not have foreshadowed: the self is obsessed with itself but can hardly talk about it. Rousseau represents the problematic moment of identity, the one in which the self calls itself in question and obsessively struggles.

But there is a further way to cast a light on the obsessive, unstable subject portrayed by Rousseau; we can see in Rousseau the beginning of the problem a new, relevant problem in memoirs, what I will name the blending between fiction and non-fiction. We can say that memoirs work between fiction and non-fiction in their being, as mentioned before, a research for identity. In a memoir the author becomes his own character, reconstructing a life implies starting anew with a presentation of the self that not only might be impossible to accomplish, but that might involve introducing, as an addition to the real self, a figure of the self that is, in the end, a fictional construction. Nozick had formulated this point by working on the curious puzzle of persons becoming characters and vice versa:

Think of our world as a novel in which you yourself as a character. Is there any way to tell what our author is like? Perhaps if this is a work in which the author expresses himself, we can draw inferences about his facets, while nothing that each such inference we draw will be written by him. And if he writes that we find a particular inference plausible or valid, who are we to argue?⁸

Who are we to argue? Authors of memoirs are almost forced to present themselves not only as

8 Nozick, R., “Fiction”, in *Ploughshares* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 74-77.

real persons but as characters, protagonists of a life that has become a story. Memoirs allow us believe in a more blurred boundary between fiction and non-fiction, and their characters purposely shift from one side to the other. Rousseau is a perfect example of how the creation of a parallel fictional character helps the unfolding of a non-fictional confession. Rousseau moves across different “hes”, changes the reality of facts and tries to depict what in the end is a mythical original state –a fictional state- of whom he is probably the only actual, or just desired, figure. The research for an original being becomes a form of fiction; Rousseau struggles with it by doubling and dissociating himself, but the result, the original position as a real, non-fictional state, cannot, in the end, be achieved.

Beckett echoes this dissociation, he reaffirms the dissociation but his affirmation is not negative, but positive. Beckett knows that the original state cannot be found, that memories can fail us, that getting back to the self is an impossible task. But this is not a conclusion, or the morose acceptance of one. It is instead a new reflection on what memories can do for us. We might not know who we were thirty years ago, as Krapp fails to recognize his own voice in the tape, but we need the tape, and so memories to creatively recreate ourselves. We paradoxically need memoirs to allow us to be fictional characters by playing with our multiple tapes of memories. Olney focuses specifically on the double value of memory for Beckett: memory as a means and memory as a substance:

...as a man Beckett no doubt remembered, probably in a rather blurred manner, whatever happened (or did not happen) thirty years or sixty years earlier between himself and his mother; as a writer however, what he remembers is that he has placed the “memory” as a thematic bit at carefully chosen, significant spots in different works. Recalling and tracking the occurrences of such a motif, we are able to follow the course of Beckett’s career.⁹

The substance of memory is then Beckett, the author and the character; his unfolding adds to memory the creativity intrinsic of experience but also the reasons why experience can, in memoirs, ultimately render memory a problem. Even though Beckett is the possessor of those memories, the possibility of him playing with his memories, and in part inventing them is still open in memories being also a contribution to his literary career.

This does not stop memoirs from being created; what cannot be stopped is the search of identity in which memoirs participate. There is a special energy in writing the word “I”, and authors of memoirs are not too resolute in using it. In a sense, we can say that a memoir cannot begin with

⁹ Olney, J. 1998: 342

“I”, it can only end with it. Primo Levi, in *The Periodic Table* and in *The Drowned and the Saved* tells the story of an identity that during history, and so experience, cannot be achieved. Walking into a concentration camp is the beginning of non-identity. Glasses, bracelets, combs, personal items are piled up as a symbol of deprivation; what remains are head shaved and numbers, men that cannot be men, as the original title reads *Se Questo e' un Uomo* - if this is a man. It is because of the self, of the necessity of finding it again that Levi writes, to conclude with a lost identity. Again, the “I” is the end, but also the goal, the motivation. In the case of Primo Levi the “I” has disappeared for a long time, and with the “I” the capacity to remember. The fight for a lost identity can then only occur as a way of recovering memories, and only in the end we come to know how memories can belong to the self.

But the struggle with an indefinable identity can take several routes. It is interesting to notice how memoirs can be written in a foreign language; not the mother language but the adopted one. Beckett wrote also in French, he looked at himself as a different person with the underlying assumption that a shift in language makes us more aware of our own identity, an identity that is closer to us because of its capacity to change. A recent example is the prose of Hemon, and of the two Hemons. The one born in Bosnia, witness of the conflicts and of a reality that in his writing assumes both surreal, crude and comical aspects, and the Hemon in Chicago, married with an American woman. In *The Lazarus Project* Hemon intertwines a work of fiction with a real travel dedicated to the research of Lazarus, but also of himself and of the curious as well as mysterious photographer traveling with him. The language is English but Hemon keeps reminding us of conversations in other languages, of the alienation that language can produce, historically and personally.

Beckett, Levi and Hemon inherit from Augustine the necessity of recollecting memories, the difference is that this necessity is now an impossibility. On the one hand, we can recur to a fictional reconstruction of memories. On the other hand, we accept that the level of internalization required by our own memories is hardly sharable; being it profoundly hidden into us, it is sometimes impossible to find in us as well. It is important to notice how this remains nonetheless a form of learning. Memoirs teach us what it means to say “I”, but also the enormous difficulty of saying it. This is a high form of recognition, and one we, as readers, can engage with.

4. Our Relationship with the Characters

There is a further consequence stemming from the discovery of the “I”. Authors of memoirs

struggle in their trying to achieve a presentation of the “I” that would conform to what, in a sense, they want their person to be. They work on their own memories to regain them and to let memories assume shape. We have seen how often this process involves the creation of an alternative character, as in Rousseau, or the acceptance of the instability of the character, its being always in part impossible. This form of learning does not end, it is more likely to be a never ending investigation.

It is a never ending investigation on the part of the author, but it is also, as I know want to claim, an investigation on the part of the reader. In the section dedicated to Hutto we have seen how working with narratives implies a combination between listening to a narrative and producing one. The same is valid in the case of memoirs; being the audience of a memoir is a way of learning more about our reason and about how our reason can deal with memories that belong essentially to us. Reading memoirs is learning about our own identity as readers, and in this, we learn how to deal, participate, and perhaps invent our own memoir.

One of the angles from which we can see this double contribution in learning is by looking at our emotional responses. It is through the emotional connection that we can say that we are able to learn both about the author and about us, thus completing a circle of understanding. Robinson has reflected on this issue by providing an analysis of emotions in fiction. The two basic motivations underlying the importance of such an analysis are that emotions are necessary to a full understanding of literary works, and that our responses to characters and events in literary works parallel our responses to real life persons. Of course, the latter point is valid in memoirs, both in the case in which we believe the memoir to be realistic and in the case in which memoirs flirt with fictional constructions. Both points further depend on an analysis of what emotional involvement implies. First, emotions are not insular but a process of interaction between the organism and the environment. Secondly, emotions detect what is significant to us, thus directing attention. Thirdly, emotions are not only thought-processes; they motivate bodily responses and physiological changes. There is, in other words, no cognition without affection, and affection is used as a significant source of data for interpretation. Using emotions as interpretative data leads to a process of cognitive monitoring; the initial emotional appraisal is reanalyzed in its accuracy, and so in developing more complex interpretative responses, thus enlarging the range of aspects that motivate the overall response to the work. I can in this way rivet my emotional response to elements such as the unfolding of the story, the creative ability of the author, and my general reaction toward the characters. But there is more; to complete the process of understanding and

interpretation of the work we are also called to think about our own emotions. Once we think about our own emotions we add our real lives to the work of fiction. We can say that to accomplish a deeper interpretation we have to enter the reality, the non-fictional dimension, of our own emotions. We feel the real life of the emotions in fiction, and we better understand fiction when we truly respond emotionally to it. Learning about fiction becomes learning about our own emotions. But there is more, the presence of our own emotions helps us in filling the gaps of the narration. Narrations are “full of gaps”; several elements are left implicit and others are not included in the narration. By using our own emotional responses we are able to follow the story even in the absence of these elements. We enter an emotional “train of understanding” where what is unsaid is easily filled in by our capacity to “live the emotions with the character”. We are capable of doing this because the emotions we encounter in narratives are also our emotions, emotions we can participate in. Also memoirs are full of gaps, they are full of “unsaid” parts. The author of a memoir does not need to tell us everything, but we nonetheless feel the importance of what is not literally named in them. But what is unsaid in memoirs is also an invitation for us. We are invited to discover the character through our own feelings. We can see a parallel mechanisms between the character looking for the affirmation of his self-consciousness and our reflection on our own self-consciousness; on how a life we have not physically experienced can tell us about the value that those experiences can have for us. Behind the enormous varieties of solutions in finding a way to describe the life of a person there is always the lingering question of how a life can be described, a question that concerns both the author and the reader. The emotion stimulated by memoirs is an emotion of self-investigation, one that is shared as a common element of learning. Reading memoirs is a way to cope with the all range of emotions that characterizes us as persons. We learn how to reorganize them, but we also learn how they can reach relevant positions in our lives. What we learn is how our own emotions can become memories, and how memories a source of identity.

In this paper I dealt essentially with literary memoirs, with what Olney defines as forms of life-weaving. The reason to focus on literary memoirs instead of on simple autobiographies is that literary memoirs, as a separate genre, show a number of interesting and specific features. In a general sense memoirs are complex forms of encounters with the self. They involve a reflection on identity that applies both to the authors of memoirs and, as briefly seen in the last part, to the audience. What I aimed to do was to reconstruct a taxonomy of emotions starting from more

general consideration on memoirs as a form of narrative, to more specific features. The crucial element in memoirs is the character. We can, as Olney does, trace a story of how characters have been portrayed in memoirs, and so a story of the different ways in which self-identity can be explained. In this explanation I mentioned the interrelation between fiction and non-fiction, and the impossibility of the character of a memoir to be truly and only one person –the existing one. In the process of searching identity memoirs open different possibilities, possibilities that also encompass the creation of a new character, one who can, so to speak, bear the implications of memories. Finding the subject of a memoir is a difficult task. Recollecting memory is not always possible, and sometimes, as in Beckett, the very research of memories is an impossible one. When we refer to what identity, and so the construction of a person is in memoirs, we also ask why that recollection has taken place, and what we can do to try to justify it, or at least understand it. Memoirs deal with what is experience, with what is said, but also with what is unsaid. The unsaid of memoirs is both what we cannot bring ourselves to say and what simply cannot be told because it is impossible to reach, because it is somewhat locked in a structure, a life, that is closed also to us. Nonetheless memoirs remain the expectation of an encounter. The recognition of the difficulties implied by searching for the self is something we share as readers; it is an emotion we share with the authors of memoirs. Recognizing this emotion is a form of learning on the part of the audience, something that brings us closer to the most relevant features of memoirs and to what is so hard, but also fascinating to grasp. The last “macro-question” of memoirs is that the task of explaining and understanding a life is also on us.

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