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***Affect and Fragile Intersubjectivity. The Restoration of the Subject in the Confessional British-American Novel at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century: Barnes, Krauss, Foer, Eugenides, Self***

- Synopsis -

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### ABSTRACT

This research falls in the line of cultural debates on the subject, ethics, and intersubjectivity in a communicative paradigm, concepts that have proliferated at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium. In the novel of the early twentieth century, we can easily recognize the dissemination of the subject in the vast space of consciousness, while in the following decades, the dispersal maneuvers towards “a decentered subject” (to use Fredric Jameson’s terms) in a new medium of reflexivity and radicalism, triggering a necessary re-establishment of the subject.

The abolition of the novel and the relegation of the subject as centrality are followed by a need to stabilize its vital role. This *turn* is much more closely delineated in the confessional novel than in other contemporary fictional narratives. The present research thesis is endowed to close-reading and literary stylistics as we wanted to observe not only the internal logic of fictional worlds but also their stylistic and intersubjective scaffold. We started our critical approach from the stylistic and narrative analysis as we tried to highlight the stylistic genetic code of the subject in some contemporary British-American confessional novels. We focussed on the subject’s restoration, theories of affect, and the innovations brought forward by each writer in what we have labeled as the *literature of fragility displacement* at the turn of the new century.

Moreover, we abstained from using à la mode labels as postmodern, post-postmodern, cosmodern, alter-modern, or hyper-modern novel as we do not think that these descriptive labels are enlightening. We do consider that is necessary to move away from labels and reconsider the function of deep narratives while unraveling the new coordinates of the contemporary novel that is indebted to the restoration of the subject and affective stylistics. Naming the concept that describes the current paradigm is less important than studying, for example, the affect-stream of contemporary fiction. The new literary theories will emerge from the novels and will announce the direction that literature will take in the coming decades.

Firstly, we have been studying the stream of consciousness and the transformation of the inner monologue in new literary expressions in the contemporary confessional novel: streams of intersubjective consciousness, fluxes of affect, and expressive narratives established on the principle of inter-relationality. Secondly, we observed that the subject of the confessional novel cannot be enclosed in an autistic narrative or in the medium of refraction in the dispersive stream of consciousness, idiosyncratic for the beginning of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the proximity to an urgent reality can easily be recognized in the mass production of historiographical narratives that reinforce an openness towards ethical dialogue and reconstruction in a world that lost its ethical pillars. The concept of subjectivity in the novel is not based only on the antonymic distinction between interiority and exteriority, nor on self-reflexivity, but rather is a compound of fragile intersubjectivity both inside and outside the fictional worlds.

The literature of loss is best described by these confessional narratives that follow the movement of the subject while, at the same time, drawing a very fragile intersubjective space or a place of encounter between individuals. We chose British-American fictions that cannot be included in neo-colonialist debates and writers that cannot be considered marginal, exotic or ex-centric because we wanted to avoid a secondary critical discourse that needed to include geopolitical debated on identity or neo-colonialism theories. The restoration of the subject advances towards the same axis of the literature of fragility, while also distancing itself from the geometry of the confessional novel as self-confession. We have refined these aspects of the confessional novel in the first chapter of this thesis.

Furthermore, we collected a corpus of novels that can be assembled into an affective literary space capable of resonating with the reader without being dependent on a political, geographical, or marginal identity. Last but not least, this research paper focuses on contemporary writers who coagulate in the interstice of the literature of affect and fragility, through convergent, but also divergent stylistic, ethical, and aesthetic ties.

In the first decade of the new millennium, there is a thematic and stylistic shift in the novel on the grounds of rehabilitation of “grand narratives” and realist restoration techniques tied to some recent socio-political events and domestic fictional space. Novelists gradually withdraw from postmodernist experiments to focus on grand narratives in which ethical concerns, new modes of existence, and the emergence of the *online life* seem to be the new tensional forces of confessional narratives. On the other hand, the restoration of the subject requires not only another relationship between inner space and alterity but also this urgent

confluence with the new reality in a “literature of reconstruction” (to use Wolfgang Iser’s coinage).

Thus, an important cultural dialogue opens up by quitting the reflex of deconstruction, triggering a reorientation towards new configurations and ethics of the subject, as the novel is not only a sentence exchange. In the shadow of narrative, there is always a stability and something that has to be confessed or sent forward to meet the reader, even when dealing with a decentered subject. Nothing happens in language, but something happens in-between two participants, as Ludwig Wittgenstein once claimed. The novel as a particular and meaningful cultural discourse includes in its equation a need for the other in order for anything to happen.

The fragile history of the present, grand narratives, subjectivity, and ethical dialogue are the exit corridors in a collapsing building. Many of the theoretical coordinates of the past decades are no longer suited to the current discourse brought forth by the contemporary confessional novel. On the other hand, these forms of fragility, aesthetics of immateriality, and affective theories could be a good starting point for the restoration of the theory of the novel.

Thus, the negative thinking that announced the end of literature and of the novel seems to be an erroneous prediction. The independence and cohesion the novel has acquired in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the accelerated development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are not followed by the disappearance of this multifaceted genre, but by its numerous reconversions, aesthetic, and ethical mutations.

In the novels written by Julian Barnes, Nicole Krauss, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Will Self, the central writers of this thesis, we observed the restoration of the subject in the inner circle of a fragile intersubjective relationship, a subject that distances itself from the Cartesian auto centric subject, the alienated subject of modernism, and the decentered and incoherent subject of postmodernism. This fragile subject is co-dependent and based on intersubjectivity in terms of composition, a subject indebted to principles of affection, the new coordinates of narrative that propose a different approach to the novel both in the act of reading and a different critical approach.

## **Resume**

### **Chapter I**

We theorized in the first chapter the key concepts of the thesis by indexing critical and cultural theories about the subject and affect (which we implicitly link to the restoration of the subject in the confessional novel) in the poetics of the novel and in the adjacent critical discourses that signal, in a different manner, the change of the novel as a cultural discourse.

Secondly, we delineated the limits of theory in regards to the secondary concepts used in this thesis and some critical theories that mark the beginning of the new millennium: intersubjectivity, confession and confessional novel by analyzing the most enlighten theories connected to the novel that gravitate in an unstable area of the literature of fragility from an aesthetic, ethical, and sociological perspective.

## **Chapter II**

In chapter two, we discussed the supremacy of theoretical self-reflexive theories by referring to two of John Barth's essays published in the late sixties and early seventies. We wanted to highlight some points of vulnerability through an analytical study of a theoretical sample that might be a better analytical choice than the general recalling of the vast (waste) land brought forth by postmodernism and the numerous theoretical debates that followed.

The close reading of Barth was followed by a close-reading of one of David Foster Wallace's essay in which he demands a change of attitude from the writers themselves by assuming new forms of emotion and vulnerability in their writings. These new magnets were seen as the new revolutions in the writing of the novel. As a result, we underlined the differences in perception and critical discourse between a postmodernist writer and a theorist of affect and vulnerability.

## **Chapter III**

The third chapter focusses on the novels of Julian Barnes which have a disjunctive function that opposed the critical discourse that accompanied the novel at the end of the twentieth century by addressing the ethics of the literary subject. We analyzed two novels by Barnes published at the end of the twentieth century which signal a breaking-point in the postmodernist logic by denoting a confessional voice that marks a different aesthetics of the subject in the novel.

Furthermore, we theorized the beginning of the novel of fragility by marking a new aesthetics of certainty in Barnes' fictions. The subject's restoration comes from moments of fragility in a new ethical and aesthetic context. The stylistics of fiction and non-fiction are abolished by the subject's zero exposure in a non-typified confession in *Levels of Life*<sup>1</sup> and in a novel about the dialectics of endings that rehabilitate the subject's affective memory in the novel *Nothing to be Frightened of*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Barnes, *Niveluri de viață*, traducere de Radu Paraschivescu, București, Editura Nemira, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, *Nimicul de temut*, traducere de Mihai Miroiu, București, Editura Nemira, 2009.

## Chapter IV

Nicole Krauss develops an unusual aspect of the subject in an expressive confessional narrative in which the subject must be understood beyond the argumentative discourse, in a narrative theory that recovers affect as a central aspect of the novel.

We theorized the turn of expressive prose by analyzing *Great House*<sup>3</sup>, in which the restoration of the subject is indebted to the empowerment of expressive and descriptive functions of narrative which recall the modernist fiction of the stream of consciousness by replacing it with a stream of intersubjective affects.

This expressive poetics signals different aesthetic categories such as negative fragility and intersubjectivity, essential concepts that are needed in the critical approach of the contemporary confessional novel.

## Chapter V

In chapter four, we theorized the subject as fragile intersubjectivity as depicted in Jonathan Safran Foer's novels. In *Everything is Illuminated*<sup>4</sup>, intersubjectivity appears as a space of confession and recognition displayed in an epistolary narrative (a confessional fiction that reminds of the eighteenth-century sentimental novel) in which the affective aesthetics the present tense confession is more important than the restorative subject of the historiographic fiction.

On the other hand, the contradiction of a supposed restorative intersubjectivity positive space of recognition appears in the most recent novel *Here I am*<sup>5</sup>, where the encounter with alterity forces the paradoxical situation of an *unconditional present* outside yourself, in a novel in which the inner monologue is almost absent and has been replaced by an argumentative dialogue of exteriority.

## Chapter VI

In the chapter devoted to Jeffrey Eugenides, we isolated a particular case of the restoration of the subject *of literature*, as a subject independent of secondary theoretical approaches which are demystified in *Middlesex*<sup>6</sup>, through a morphology of the subject outside determinations, a subject that refuses the pre-established discourses of late modernity.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicole Krauss, *Marea casă*, traducere de Carmen Toader, București, Editura Humanitas, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Totul e iluminat*, traducere și note de Fraga Cusin, București, Humanitas, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, *Iată-mă*, traducere și note și note de Andra Matzal și Cosmin Postolache, București, Editura Humanitas, colecția „Humanitas Fiction”, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*, traducere și note de Alexandra Coliban-Petre, Iași, Editura Polirom, colecția „Biblioteca Polirom”, 2005.

The theory of the subject was preceded by a theoretical debate on the transparent subject of the literary confession as depicted in *The Virgins Suicide*<sup>7</sup>, followed by a narrative that portrays a subject "beyond literature" as illustrated in *The Marriage Plot*<sup>8</sup>, Eugenides most recent novel.

When self-reflexive theoretical debates achieve a state of exhaustion there is a (re)turn to realism that rebuilds, first of all, the texture of the world. The marriage plot, an important theme in the Victorian novel, is reinterpreted in contemporaneity by revealing an *aesthetics of authenticity* (to use Charles Taylor's terms) and a nostalgia for grand narratives.

## **Chapter VII**

In the following chapter, we theorized the subject's technology between perception and consciousness in *Umbrella*<sup>9</sup>, a fictional novel that calls for a plural debate about the present and future of the novel in the Gutenberg era, coupled with a secondary dissertation linked to the act of reading the contemporary novel.

The subject is depicted in the same formula of intersubjectivity in a novel that is based upon a stream of affects and a multifaceted consciousness. Will Self projects in his latest novels an alternative space of collective timeless consciousness. Within this new space, the subject's technology is no longer understood only as inter-relational among individuals, but also as a dependence and interconnection of space and time.

## **Conclusions**

The final section of the thesis addresses the changes brought forth by the contemporary confessional novel and the restoration of the subject through the affective restoration of narratives at the beginning of the twenty-first century between intersubjectivity and fragility, two aesthetic categories needed in a theoretical debate on the contemporary fictions. This reading morphology follows the logic of the stream of affect and has vulnerabilities if we consider the return of sentimentalism and dispersive subjectivism as reading pattern.

In the end, our conclusion was that the monologue imposed in late modernity by the theoretical discourses of exact sciences must be extended towards a genuine dialogue, not so visible truths and certainties that cannot be validated through numbers and patterns because literature's extensions cannot be reduced to percentages. The confessional contemporary novel preserves these fragile certainties that should not be argued for but addressed through different aesthetic categories and literary approaches.

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<sup>7</sup> Idem, *Sinuciderea fecioarelor*, traducere și note de Mirela Adăscăliței, Iași, Polirom, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *Intriga matrimonială*, traducere de Dana Crăciun, Iași, Polirom, Colecția „Biblioteca Polirom”, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Will Self, *Umbrella*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013.

The disharmonic truth and the *post-truth age* bring forth conclusions that cannot be entrusted to arguments or theoretical interpretation in a growing trend that leads to a *culture of opinion* paradigm, but also to moments of certainty and fragility that are so carefully mapped in the contemporary novel. The confessional fiction is a narrative of undetermined affects which breaks from postmodern fiction by imposing new certainties and texture to the fictional worlds. Furthermore, the domestic fiction returns while this minor intersubjective stream of affect invades the territory of the contemporary novel through narratives that shift the reader's gaze from the past to the fragility of the present, a tensional time of fear and anguish.

On the other hand, we should be aware that many of the recent theoretical approaches no longer match the affective stream of the contemporary novel, marking an important loss in the theory of the novel that is defined, in some cases, by distancing itself from the intrinsic logic of the narrative. The infinite poetics of affect offers a palpable exit from a logocentric approach both in writing and in theory. The abandonment of some damaged critical instruments opens an intermediate aisle to interpretations based on distinct aesthetic categories such as fragility, vulnerability, affect, and intersubjectivity - categories that prove to be essential in a theoretical discourse on the restoration of the subject in the confessional novel.

The restored subject of the confessional novel addressed in this thesis is different from the concept of self, identity, and philosophical individuality, sociological or psychological subject and belongs, first of all, to literature, a vital cultural discourse that regains its independence at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The contemporary confessional novel offers an alternate history of expressive endurance and fragility, and the numerous manifestations of the subject and its many narrative declinations open up a vital ethical dialogue about the subject's resistance in literature against emotional asthenia. The confessional novel translates into narratives of exposing intersubjective encounters, a narrative stream that can be hard to deconstruct leaving aside the accusations of sentimentalism that are replaced by different aesthetic categories.

The endurance of the subject is due to these unexpected truths and moments of certainty that cannot be exhausted through interpretation but rather through *innerpretation*.

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