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Narrative Empathy, Vulnerability and Ethics of Care in William Trevor's Fiction

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Abstract – This essay engages with the relationship between ethics and literature. To this end, it addresses the theoretical framework of narrative empathy as illustrative of the supposed ethical power of literary writing. Using a corpus of William Trevor's fiction as case studies, *Reading Turgenev* (1991) and *Love and Summer* (2009), the essay suggests that Trevor's use of metafictional devices (metalepses and the disnarrated), temporal disarray and multifocal perspectives tends to complicate the general assumption of empathy as necessarily easy and spontaneous. These formal strategies of literary representation manifest the underlying manipulative nature of narrative empathy, confronting readers with the ethical effects of empathy. In so doing, Trevor's fiction edges towards the aesthetics of vulnerability in that it entails an ethics of reading and writing that reminds the reader of the darkest sides of human existence.

Keywords – William Trevor; Narrative Empathy; Vulnerability; Ethics of Care; Metafiction.

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“One day,
For our delight we read of Lancelot,
How him love throll'd. Alone we were and no
Suspicion near us. Oft-times by that reading
Our eyes were drawn together, and the hue
Fled from our alter'd cheek.”
Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, “Hell,” V, 123–128

1. William Trevor, empathy and/in literature

This essay draws on critical conceptualisations of empathy in the realm of literature and it does so by focusing on a corpus of William Trevor's fiction, specifically *Reading Turgenev* (1991) and *Love and Summer* (2009). Despite the chronological distance, the two works share a basic interest in the dramatisation of empathic connections among characters, thereby arousing also the reader's empathic responses. *Reading Turgenev*, a novella published in the volume *Two Lives* with *My House in Umbria*, features Mary Louise Dallon, a young Protestant country girl who accepts the marriage proposal by a much older draper, Elmer Quarry, to escape the monotony of her family farmhouse. Trevor's last novel similarly chronicles a marriage of convenience, the one between an orphan Catholic girl, Ellie, and a widowed farmer, Dillahan, who initially employs the girl as a maid in his farm near Rathmoye. Another common point to be noticed is that both *Love and Summer* and the novella are set in the second half of the 1950s, although the time of the story is longer in the latter. Furthermore, the omniscient narrative perspective of both novels continuously shifts, alternating different viewpoints and thus allowing the voices of the various characters to be juxtaposed.

However, if the works analysed here apparently seem to recount the tales of two miserable young women falling in love with less pedantic men than their husbands — Mary Louise developing an infatuation with her disabled cousin Robert and Ellie with Florian — various minor characters contribute, with their subplots, to a complex empathic network which eventually affects and directs the reader's responses to the narratives. Alex Woloch's work on minor characters can offer some insights on the ways novels can capture the reader's attention. As he explains, minor characters have an “orienting consciousness” (22) that, like the protagonists' consciousness, can impact on the novel's fictional universe through their eccentric dispositions. Woloch's exploration of the characters' space in novels seeks to explain how minor characters tend to be sacrificed so that the protagonist can monopolise the reader's attention, thereby creating a form of distributive injustice. And yet, the reduced space allocated to minor characters may paradoxically complicate the reader's emotional responses to the narrative: their disappearance and reappearance at the level of the story generates a web of relations where emotional contagion is potentially encouraged. Trevor's works analysed here are concerned with the exploration of private conflicts, between lovers as well as among family members, which eventually constitute an inexhaustible source of narrative possibilities and empathic reactions.

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In his macrotext, William Trevor has constantly shed light on alienated and lonely individuals, by lending an ironic note to the sense of despair that animates his tales. To use Gregory Schirmer's words, Trevor's use of irony is not merely a narrative instrument to depict the psychological tensions of his vulnerable characters; it rather entails a negotiation between "an affirmation of the need for compassion and connection in contemporary society and a qualifying recognition of the full strength of the forces ranged against those values" (2). In so doing, the Irish writer has deliberately focussed on situations outside his own life experiences: while the Anglo-Irish historical frictions have inspired a part of his fiction (see del Río-Álvaro), most of his tales portray eccentric characters, like lonely and fragile women, in the throes of unsuccessful marriages and illicit love affairs. In this way, Trevor has built a fictional world populated by disconnected subjectivities in search of care and empathy, a dramatic representation that is further highlighted by the use of comic irony which marks the contrast between the sense of innocence of his characters and the bleak reality around them.

Interestingly, Trevor's exploration of the most vulnerable sides of human existence seems to illustrate the power of literary writing in shaping our emotions. How does the Irish writer achieve such an emotional engagement in the reader? The notion that reading literature can contribute to enlarge our understanding of the human mind is a widespread one and it has been investigated, among others, by Suzanne Keen who argues that, by sharing feelings with literary characters, readers inhabit "safe zones" (*Empathy and the Novel* 4) far from the real world. This fictional distance, Keen adds, "paradoxically opens up the channels for both empathy and related moral affects such as sympathy, outrage, pity, righteous indignation, and (not to be underestimated) shared joy and satisfaction" (4). If narrative empathy entails empathic reactions to fictional representations, this effect is a way of reminding the reader that there is "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" (4) induced by reading, viewing or hearing about another's condition. And yet, Keen is highly critical of "the contemporary truism that novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world" (xv). In her view, the lack of adequate empirical data does provide confirmation of the tenuous relationship between reading and empathic concerns. The fundamental premise of Keen's analysis of narrative empathy implies that the common idea of reading as a way to expand and elicit empathy and altruism is a problematic notion, contrasting, therefore, with Martha Nussbaum's stance. For the American philosopher, reading fiction can be instrumental in teaching readers to be more reflective, inasmuch as "[i]f literature is a representation of human possibilities, the works of literature . . . will inevitably respond to, and further develop, our sense of who we are and might be" (*Cultivating Humanity* 105). Nussbaum's contention is still highly debated. Keen, for instance, argues that the reader's reactions can be multiple, claiming that "there is still a great deal that we do not know about emotionally evocative narrative techniques" ("Novel Readers" 31). Thus, Keen questions the role of literature in promoting responsibility and in cultivating mankind, while underscoring the paradoxical nature of empathic concerns. In a way, empathy can similarly occur for sadist or evil characters and the mechanisms that govern empathic feelings are multifaceted and unpredictable. In this light, returning to Trevor, it can be argued that a certain fascination with weird and tricky characters problematises an easy empathic concern precisely because it can illuminate shared vulnerabilities, favouring connections and understanding that transcend differences.

Trevor's fiction strives to portray the complexity of human emotions. As I have argued elsewhere, a certain engagement with the exploration of emotional fluctuations, modelled on experiences of loss, seems to chime with an elegiac mode that favours "redemption and consolation in light of traumas, displaying the transformative power of literary

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imagination” (“Between Hagiography and Insanity” 110).¹ The characters and the situations that the Irish writer creates push the reader’s emotional responses beyond commonalities, achieving, instead, an approach to understanding across differences that ties in with what Eric Leake calls “difficult empathy” because it can foster “the development of more expansive identities that incorporate the best and worst of people” (184). This critical view on empathy, which questions one’s own assumptions, demonstrating how empathic identifications can be slippery or, as Nussbaum puts it, they may entail “a kind of ‘twofold attention’, in which one both imagines what it is like to be in the sufferer’s place and, at the same time, retains securely the awareness that one is not in that place” (*Upheavals of Thought* 328).

Starting from these premises, the focus of this article is on the complex empathic mechanisms through which Trevor’s fiction illuminates the most vulnerable and paradoxical sides of human existence, thus problematizing our shared capacity to yield empathic responses. To do so, I will examine how some formal strategies direct and complicate narrative empathy. In particular, I will first analyse how the use of some metafictional devices, such as metalepses and the disnarrated, together with temporal disarray, may work as vectors for dramatising empathy in both characters and readers. I will turn, then, to explore the conflicts among some characters, showing how multiple focalisation and character identification become the narrative strategies that challenge the distribution of readers’ empathy. In so doing, it is finally suggested, the Irish author creates narrative portrayals of empathic concerns which complicate the general assumption of empathy as necessarily easy and spontaneous, while also refracting an aesthetics of vulnerability.

2. Empathy between Metafiction and Temporal Disarray

In *Reading Turgenev*, as the title itself suggests, the act of reading plays a central role. Trevor carries out his metanarrative experimentation with the adaption of Turgenev’s writing, specifically the novel *On the Eve* (1865),² which becomes the symbolic vehicle allowing for the blossoming of the romance between Mary Louise and Robert. The man is a reader of the father of Russian realism and during Mary Louise’s visits he usually reads his cousin extracts from the above-mentioned novel: “*A gentleman in the early forties*”, Robert reads aloud, “*came out on the low porch of the coaching-in*” (*Reading Turgenev* 90; emphasis in the original), while Mary Louise is fascinated by how “[d]elight caressed each word he uttered, gentleness or vigour matched phrase and sentence” (91). The intertextual incursions in Trevor’s novella can be read as examples of “metaleptic movements” (Wagner),³ intertextual transgressions that establish connections among different fictional worlds. These echoes from other texts not only elicit

¹ I am using the formula «elegiac fiction» after Edward Engelberg’s contention that a number of twentieth-century novels shows an interest in loss and sadness as motifs that can validate “the belief that one’s life has been a series of missed opportunities” (2).

² *On the Eve*, Turgenev’s third novel, is a work in which love and war are intertwined to create a complex portrait of human life. Set against the backdrop of the Crimean War (1853-1856), the story recounts Elena Stakhova’s romance with a Bulgarian soldier, Ivanov. While criticising the question of social reforms, *On the Eve* also investigates the role of women in Russian society since Elena eventually leaves the countryside and becomes a nurse on the front.

³ After Gérard Genette, who defined metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse” (234-235), thus designating a transgression of the boundary between the level of the telling and that of the told, Wagner (2002) has argued that metalepses operate within the limits of narratives, in particular, with regard to “horizontal metalepsis”. These occur as intertextual references where certain characters appear in other stories, thus generating a confrontation between “parallel heterogeneous fictive universes” (Pier 332).

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empathy in Trevor's characters, they also tend to direct the distribution of the reader's empathy. Trevor uses this horizontal metalepsis as oversetting. He entwines the two stories for the reader to recognise the echoes between them. The parallels between Trevor's novella and Turgenev's story can be drawn in the life changing events that occur to the characters, particularly to the women, who are led to a sort of emotional and psychological exile from the rest of the world. This symmetry, I would like to suggest, shows a dissolution of textual boundaries, providing the reader with an empathic engagement which finds a reverberation in the analogous feelings of love and loss that animate both novels.

The act of narrating, with that of reading, has the power to rouse emotions and change human beings and, in invoking the ethic function of reading, as well as of writing, Trevor is acknowledging that the search for the self may depend upon what we read. Nussbaum's contention of the educating function of literature is particularly relevant here. As she argues, "[t]his commitment to the making of a social world . . . is what makes the adventure of reading so fascinating" (*Cultivating Humanity* 104). Nussbaum has further explained that the empathic approach to literary works is not a linear one, since "the text will cultivate sympathy unevenly, directing our attention to some types of human beings and not to others" (101). This insight is made clear by Suzanne Keen when she suggests that the "capacity of novels to invoke readers' empathy may change over time" (*Empathy and the Novel* 169) or when she explains that "[r]eaders' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances" (170). As a consequence, reading can become the source for a summer infatuation to develop and, in the case of Mary Louise, it is the site from which the empathic connection with her cousin rouses.

Empathy among characters is above all portrayed through the narrative structure of the novella itself. First of all, there is a clear temporal division of the narrative. *Reading Turgenev* is divided into thirty chapters: while the chapters with even numbers are flashbacks chronicling the beginning of the story, those with odd numbers are set in the present, featuring a nearly sixty-year-old Mary Louise. The tenses switch from past to present throughout the narrative, contributing to a sense of temporal crisis which, taking up Jean-Michel Ganteau's idea, is "one of the pillars of the poetics of vulnerability" (169) since it tends to push the present on the brink of a never-ending past. Not only does temporal disarray animate the narrative articulation of Trevor's novella in that it challenges the chronological linearity of temporality, it also has an impact on Mary Louise's vulnerable psyche. As she muses, the "present's hardly there; the future doesn't exist" (*Reading Turgenev* 187), thus revealing a melancholic vision of temporality.

The narrative, therefore, unfolds along two main temporal axes. First, it presents a young Mary Louise in the mid-1950s, when she marries Elmer Quarry, leaving her farmhouse to move to the near town. Here, the girl experiences loneliness and disappointment: the marriage remains unconsummated, heated arguments break out with Elmer's two sisters, Matilda and Rose, and Mary Louise eventually falls in love with Robert, her disabled cousin she used to love when they were children. Their idyll, however, abruptly ends when Robert dies, leaving Mary Louise traumatised. Robert's death exposes Mary Louise to the classical mechanisms of Freudian melancholia: the obsessive quest for compensating her loss, which leads her to steal some objects from the house her aunt is going to sell and, then, to buy Robert's clothes from the family that had been given her cousin's items for charity, signals the girl's vulnerable condition. Mary Louise's melancholic incorporation of her sense of grief entails what Sigmund Freud defines as "*identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (249; emphasis in the original), a process that cleaves her wounded psyche and produces a "cessation of interest in the outside world" (244). The attempt to reiterate the past, with the recreation of Robert's world in the attic where Mary Louise gradually retreats from the outside world in an emotional exile, carries the sign of loss and absence. This is expressed in various ways, and especially

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through the recollections of Robert's reading of Turgenev and in her re-reading of her cousin's books, while "[h]is voice continuing, and her embracing it, was their act of love" (*Reading Turgenev* 187). The metaleptic movements between Trevor's tale and Turgenev's story "can foster and further imaginative immersion" (Hanebeck 259): by dissolving the boundary between represented and representation, metalepsis "plays with the possibilities of human understanding, and ultimately, its inescapable limitations" (120). The dialogue between the two texts generates a plurality of meanings that orient the reader's distribution of empathy.

This view holds that readers can collect references to certain characters on the basis of textual clues. To some readers, the allusions to Turgenev's romance can be a reminder of narrative situations when emotions are conjured up: they might identify themselves with both heroines as they experience intense feelings of love and loss. The main reason why readers are likely to empathise with Mary Louise is that her perspective opens and closes the novel. Moreover, I would like to argue, this situation is doubled, and thus amplified, on the discourse level as Mary Louise is simultaneously a witness to Elena Stakhova's prior situations, thus recalling Keen's situational empathy which «*responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance, involves less self-extension in imaginative role taking and more recognition of prior (or current) experiences*» (*Empathy and the Novel* 80; emphasis in the original). As Hermione Lee acutely observes, "Turgenev provides an alternative universe of romance, interest, excitement, energy, as opposed to the moribund, hostile, confining world that surrounds her" (26). Mary Louise's identification with a literary character, in her case with Turgenev's heroine, is a common narrative technique for eliciting empathy, depending on "the retrieval of active personal memories similar to those described in the text" (Bortolussi and Dixon 88). As in Dante's *Divine Comedy* the reading of chivalric romances kindles intense passion between Paolo and Francesca, in the famous passage quoted in the epigraph of my essay, so reading romantic stories, in Trevor's novella, is not merely a metanarrative device through which human vulnerability is conveyed; it rather entails empathic identification by means of shared emotional states.

The other narrative strand alternatively focuses on the present, above all on Mary Louise's last days in the asylum where she has been confined because of her presumed madness. Here, images of the past resurface in the old woman's mind, thus providing the reader the means for reconstructing the ultimate meaning of the last events of the plot. The use of the present simple embodies the haunting repetitions of a traumatic past: as the omniscient narrative voice observes, "[m]emory is sometimes perfect, clear as light" (*Reading Turgenev* 70). The juxtaposition of the present with past recollections echoes what Ganteau calls "the frozen time of traumatic re-enactment" (94), leading Trevor's heroine to recall the year when she fell in love with Robert and the tragic consequences in the aftermath of his sudden death. The central event that triggers Elmer's decision to take his wife to the asylum is when she is suspected of poisoning Matilda and Rose. Emotional tensions impinge on Mary Louise's psychological wounds and the reader cannot but feel empathy with the poor girl before Elmer's sisters' accusations. Trevor calls upon empathy when he describes the conflicts of the first year of marriage between Elmer and Mary Louise, depicting the mental state of his unfortunate character alone in attic: "[h]er tears oozed from the corner of her eyes and ran into her hair, dumping into her years and her neck" (60). What Trevor evokes in this passage is Mary Louise's exposure to grief and pain through the insistence of the image of the tears permeating her body, a motif becoming the condition for the emergence of empathy. Interestingly, such an 'easy' empathy is challenged, as it will be shown in the next section of the article, by the continuous shifting of narrative viewpoints which problematises the reader's emotional responses to Trevor's heroine.

Trevor's last novel similarly features temporal disruptions and metaleptic references to other textual sources. What readers eventually realise is that behind the romance the novel

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portrays, a collective feeling of existential anxiety looms large in the small fictional community of Rathmoye. The thirty-six chapters of *Love and Summer* chronicle the summer infatuation between Ellie and Florian, covering a temporal frame of just three months, with continuous flashbacks on the past of various minor characters. The temporal structure, therefore, articulates a “melancholic temporality” (Ganteau 93) in that it tends to amplify and extend personal losses, establishing connections among characters and putting parts of the story in relation to previous or later events. Loss percolates through the very initial pages of *Love and Summer*: the novel opens on a funeral scene, with the coffin of Mrs Connulty travelling from “from Number 4 The Square to Magennis Street, into Hurley Lane, along Irish Street, across Cloughjordan Road to the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer” (*Love and Summer* 1). The meandering course of the coffin symbolically articulates the tortuous combination of multiple focalisation and temporal disorder in the novel, despite Trevor’s use of a third-person extradiegetic narrator. The reader is then invited to delve into the private realm of the Connulties, learning specifically about the dead lady’s daughter, Miss Connulty, and zooming in on her failed romance, a tragic event which inevitably anticipates the one blossoming between Ellie and Florian.

This condition of temporal turbulence is further expanded by other stories of vulnerability, such as Florian’s past infatuation with Isabella. Florian’s Italian cousin still haunts his dreams to the extent that the young man overlaps her with Gloria, the protagonist of Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). He eventually merges the image of the heroine of the novel he is reading with Ellie (Chapter 7), thus revealing a troubled temporality that affects the relation between story time and narrative time. Likewise, disrupted temporality also obsesses Ellie’s husband, Dillahan, who is both a perpetrator and a victim of a tragic accident: the reader gradually finds out that he had accidentally killed his wife and his child with a tractor. While the catastrophic event is never directly described, the flux of thoughts that still torments the miserable man is illustrative of his painful past: “he could not prevent”, the narrator notes, “the memory from nagging when another June came” (21). Perhaps, the most evident manifestation of this traumatic temporal frame is best illustrated by a minor character, Orpen Wren, who appears only marginally but whose consciousness manifests the signs of loss and disorientation that may capture the reader’s attention. The old man roams the streets of Rathmoye with a dossier containing important documents belonging to the archive of the St. Johns of Lisquin, a prestigious Ascendancy family in decline. Once a librarian in their property, Orpen, who “lived in both the present and the past” (42), seems to have forgotten that the St. Johns of Lisquin had sold and left their property. Upon meeting Florian, he feels certain the boy is an heir of the family and tries to give him the old documents. As Ellie observes, “the past has him in its grip” (196), thus hinting at a vision of a crystallised temporality. The ellipses, flashbacks and gaps that permeate the story create a vulnerable form that disorients readers, asking them to build hypotheses on what can occur or to imagine the characters’ mental and emotional states. This fragmented temporal flux, in which loss and grief are refracted, directs and orients the readers’ distribution of empathy, raising consciousness on a vulnerable subjectivity that, though tangential to the storyline, signals an instance of extreme alienation. In Orpen Wren, Trevor condenses a certain saturation with a past that cannot be fully assimilated. Temporal dislocations and an emotional lyrical mode constitute, as Ganteau explains, the pillars of a poetics of vulnerability (Ganteau 167). Wren’s fragmented testimonial accounts dispel certainties, disclosing “a dissatisfaction with the limits of representation” (170). By performing the symptoms of loss and melancholia, Trevor’s vulnerable narrative, then, can be said to present, rather than represent, the frailty it thematises, triggering off “the solicitation of the reader” (170). Emotions, as Sara Ahmed explains, are “performative” (13), and they display a “paradoxical temporality” (93) based on the materialisation of the future but also on the iteration of the past. In this minor character, Trevor juxtaposes an ambiguous temporality

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as it struggles between past recollections and future. The elderly man, who “had been emotionally affected by what he had witnessed” in his long life (*Love and Summer* 42-3), symbolically manipulates linear time, showing, as Keen states, that a disordered narrative form can be more compelling since it can make “a text more challenging to understand” (*Narrative Form* 99). Thus, the readers’ imaginative reconstruction becomes a further means for complicating empathy. The disruption of temporal progression distances readers from a spontaneous emotional contagion towards the characters, an entanglement also conveyed by the possible alternative worlds created by Trevor’s intertextual incursions.

As already mentioned, the presence of metaleptic references plays a key role also in *Love and Summer*. Florian is reading *The Beautiful and Damned* and an obvious comparison between Florian and Anthony, the protagonist of Fitzgerald’s novel, may be easily drawn by the reader, owing to their common unwillingness to establish deep personal connections. The metaleptic motif is further indicated by Florian’s accidental rediscovery of an old diary containing his own narrative vignettes. Florian’s fictional universe is populated by “adolescent creations often verging on the affected” (*Love and Summer* 143), with sketched portraits of men and women living complicated relationships. Trevor’s metatextual creation of a parallel fictional world, which exceeds the borders of his novel, is indicative of the manipulatable nature of narrative empathy. In line with Keen’s contention that “contemporary fiction considered more broadly proves a site of contestation, where the meaning and value of empathy receive a thorough going-over” (*Empathy and the Novel* 123), Trevor complicates the path of empathy, showing that reaching certain judgments, namely seeing Florian as a careless lover, is complicated. The metatextual incorporations seem to lead Florian to a deeper understanding of himself, while also suggesting a change into the reader’s empathic judgment about the young boy:

Reading and rereading the scraps he had given up on, Florian did not readily conclude that time, in passing, had brought perception, only that his curiosity was stirred by the shadows and half-shadows imagination had once given him, by the unspoken, and what was still unknown. (*Love and Summer* 147)

The passage quoted here is symptomatic of the peculiar blurring of fictional borders, instilling a new empathic perspective into the narrative. Interestingly, the emphasis on a counterfactual experience, highlighted by the expressions “shadows”, “half-shadows”, “unspoken”, and “unknown” can be interpreted, in some respects, with the metanarrative category that Gerald Prince has labelled the *disnarrated*, through which he describes “all the events that *do not* happen but, nonetheless are referred to (in negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text” (2; emphasis in the original).⁴ Disnarrated sentences, therefore, create the illusion of an apparent erasure in the text which, by contrast, is never achieved. What the *disnarrated* conveys pertains to the domain of the potential, “expressions of impossibility or unrealized possibility, . . . purely imagined worlds, desired worlds, or intended worlds, unfulfilled expectations, . . . crushed hopes” (3). As in metaleptic transgressions broader interpretative methods are elicited, so the disnarrated seems to favour the construction of alternative fictional worlds, opening up to doubts and hypotheses in the distribution of empathic connections. This insistence on unrealised possibilities and hypotheses is, as Keen states, a narrative device that makes texts more exposed to empathic connections. “*Curiosity*”, Keen explains, “stimulates engagement with narrative by inviting the reader to wonder why. *Surprise* startles the reader or viewer with the unexpected, a reward of narrative in itself that in

⁴ Prince distinguishes the narrative category of the *disnarrated* from the *unnarratable* and the *unnarrated*. While the *unnarratable* is what cannot be narrated because it «transgresses a law [...] or because it falls below the so-called threshold of narratability» (1), the *unnarrated* is what is omitted «because of ignorance, repression or choice» (2).

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turn results in renewed curiosity” (*Narrative Form* 153-54; emphasis in the original). By indicating alternative roads, the disnarrated does put some emphasis on such possibilities, making them more visible. Moreover, the “unspoken” in Florian’s storyline emphasises something which has been lost, a past that returns. The negative and the hypothetical modes alert readers to the complex nature of empathy: on the one hand, the reader is invited to establish emotional connections to the young man because of his missed opportunities, of becoming a famous writer for instance. On the other, Trevor employs a narrative device that creates a distance, showing the mechanism of control of the characters’ consciousness and possibly reducing emotional contagion in the readership.

In *Love and Summer*, disnarrated expressions recur not only with regard to Florian’s turbulent past, split between a solitary life with two parents exclusively concerned with their artistic aspirations and the vain infatuation with his cousin Isabella. While his childhood seems to be characterised by dreams that “faded into the darkness, passing outside memory” (*Love and Summer* 62), his creative writings legitimate a counter-narrative which embodies his own vulnerability. As he writes in one of his notes, the protagonist of a story, maybe his alter ego, “*might have gone to Spain*” (146; emphasis in the original), thus evoking “cities he had never been to, misfortunes he hadn’t experienced” (145). In the same vein to Florian’s fragile condition, Ellie’s existence is infused with a mixture of cruelty and piety, thus revealing an unfathomable nature that brings her close to Florian. Her conflictual feelings and disrupted identity, which favour difficult empathy in readers, thus blurring “the boundaries between self and others, unsettling us” (Leake 181), materialise through disnarrated sentences. By the end of the novel, Ellie, who is unable to govern her passion for Florian, decides to leave her husband, joining her lover in his trip to Scandinavia. The plan, however, fails when Trevor’s heroine suddenly crosses the frontier from the role of a possible heartbreaker to that of a compassionate partner. When she realises that Dillahan’s traumatic past still haunts his mind, she eventually decides to remain at Dillahan’s farmhouse. Her empathetic understanding of this tragic truth manifests itself through counterfactual expressions: “the truth she yet might tell to draw the sting of his agony”, the woman reflects in a sort of epiphanic revelation, “would cause more suffering than she could inflict, more than any man who had done no wrong deserved” (*Love and Summer* 198). Ellie’s longing is counterbalanced by ‘the what if’, by the roads not taken, a hypothetical mode that ultimately questions the reader’s genuine empathic response towards her. Once returned to her farmhouse, her redemptive journey leads her to silence and atonement. As Florian finally confesses to her, Dillahan has saved her (206), thus demarcating the emotional confusion of a character dwelling on the brink between victim and victimiser. As we may see, the disnarrated promotes a different view and, in Florian and Ellie, it opens up to such crucial human conditions as “carelessness, ignorance or limitations, [...] delirium, and obsession, psychological trauma” (Prince 4), which can modify the reader’s empathic response, thus edging towards the realm of *difficult empathy*. It is through Ellie’s hypothetical reflections that readers can look for signs of her multi-faceted personality.

3. Multiple Focalisation, Character Identification and Difficult Empathy

When it comes to literary fiction, the engagement with empathy seems to be questioned by a wide range of situations. Researches show that a distinction needs to be drawn between fiction and literary fiction, acknowledging that if the latter “tends to challenge — rather than confirm — readers’ beliefs and expectations, then this challenge is at least in part created by morally ambivalent characters” (Lissa, Caracciolo, Duuren, and Leuveren 45). If *Love and Summer* exhibits narrative empathy, it does so by means of empathising techniques that create

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ambivalent emotional connections. Florian's desired world, for instance, discloses his enigmatic personality. His metanarrative texts complicate the image of the selfish and unscrupulous lover, presenting, instead, a fragile man. The reader's transactions with Florian emerge in a condition of *difficult empathy* orienting readers towards the human struggles in every character's life, and engaging them in a more complex, other-oriented perspective that requires more active imagination in order to see things differently. As Leake suggests difficult empathy strives to enlarge our understanding beyond "those who assure us and confirm our sensitivities" (184). A critical vision of empathy "pushes us to not only see others differently but to also perhaps see ourselves differently and more expansively through problematic others and their social conditions" (184).

Though Trevor does not employ autodiegetic narration, the multiperspectival focalisation grants the reader insights into the characters' mental states. The juxtaposition of diverging, conflicting viewpoints on the same event or character creates narrative tension, making empathic connections more complex. In *Love and Summer*, a doubtful empathy contributes to a larger understanding of human vulnerability. Notwithstanding Florian's redemptive words, Ellie's ambiguous condition, for instance, is constantly questioned throughout the novel. The presence of multiple focalisation has the effect of limiting and problematizing the reader's empathic responses towards Ellie, a formal strategy through which Trevor constructs alignments among characters, inviting the reader to develop empathic engagement and distance at once. As alluded before, minor characters can play a crucial role in this sense: by delving into their consciousness, the reader can unveil some truth about the protagonists of the story. In particular, Miss Connulty's external perspective on Ellie's romance with Florian illustrates the complexity of the girl's emotions. If Ellie's plan to leave Dillahan distances the reader from any empathic connection, Miss Connulty's sharing of a similar bad romance works as a tool for repositioning the reader's empathic concerns.

This paradox is captured by Miss Connulty's insights into Ellie's presumed victimisation by Florian. When the reader first encounters Miss Connulty, in the aftermath of her mother's funeral, a sense of figurative captivity clearly seems to define the woman. Moving between the kitchen and the guest rooms of her paternal house in the central square of Rathmoye, which has been a bed and breakfast for a long time, Miss Connulty is like entrapped in a sort of ontological isolation, a lonely observer in a village where almost nothing happens. And yet, from the windows, she seems to be endowed with a dominant perspective over Rathmoye and, one morning, while "idling at the window from which so often she viewed the Square, Miss Connulty [had] noticed the two when they appeared there from Magennis Street" (*Love and Summer* 87). As the narrator gradually plunges into her consciousness, hatred and remorse consume her. The death of her mother is a relief to her, a point that Trevor beautifully depicts with the image of Miss Connulty wearing her mother's jewellery she used to long for as a child. Apparently unsympathetic, Miss Connulty is also addressed without a proper name, "a formality imposed upon her when, twenty years ago, her mother ceased to address her by either of the saints' names she had been given at her birth" (8). This comment by the narrator indicates the problematic relationship between Miss Connulty and her mother, a point that the reader reconstructs, in a gradual way, by putting together Miss Connulty's recollections and her brother's memories. What emerges is that, in her young age, Miss Connulty had been seduced by a married Englishman, a regular guest at the pension, who later disappeared, leaving her pregnant. The relationship with her mother deteriorated in the aftermath of this event, specifically when her father took her to Dublin to have an abortion. Miss Connulty's wound becomes the distinctive site of her empathic engagement with Ellie. Through her stream of consciousness, the reader learns that Ellie was the "[c]hild of an institution, child of need and of humility, born into nothing, expecting nothing" (88) and, in her view, she is an innocent "victim" (88) of the yearning attention of a stranger.

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Significantly, Miss Connulty is like a reader, trying to identify with Ellie because of their similar romance. In this sense, Miss Connulty relies on character identification, this being, in Keen's words, the "most commonly nominated feature of narrative fiction to be associated with empathy" (*Empathy and the Novel* 93). Her emotional fusing with Ellie, however, is only partially reliable since, as the reader discovers in the final pages, Ellie is not a victim, but she consciously decides to join Florian, until her sense of compassion for her husband ultimately prevails. Miss Connulty's easy empathy is therefore challenged by the shifting focalisation that Trevor masterly employs. Despite Miss Connulty's empathic endorsement, the reader knows that Ellie's thoughts are not innocent. Ellie is less a victim than what Miss Connulty believes, a fact that the narrator clearly states when he reports that "what had begun as fantasy was every day acquiring a little more of reality" (*Love and Summer* 169). Furthermore, a feeling of guilt can be easily inferred, for instance, while scrutinising Ellie's thoughts. The woman bears in her mind the story of a nurse found dead after her secret romance with a man had been found out: as Ellie wonders, could there be "an echo of that nun's misery long ago in what so ordinarily had come about this summer and now must end?" (184). Here, the reader is invited to provide an answer to this existential question, a matter that contributes to shed light on Ellie's vulnerable personality.

Following Leake, we can agree that "difficult empathy pushes the limits of our understanding in reaching out to those with whom we might not otherwise wish contact or association" (176). This paradoxical coexistence of easy and difficult empathy towards the same character shows the limits of narrative empathy, but it also brings to the fore the tensions between the level of the discourse and that of the story. Discourse entails manipulating the story and choosing the focal perspective and it allegedly can orient the readers' distribution of empathy. By the very end of *Love and Summer*, Miss Connulty imagines Ellie's coming to her, confessing the truth, with "neither of them saying what should not be said and never would be" (*Love and Summer* 210). The hypothetical mode, an imaginary situation that recalls Prince's disnarrated, establishes connections with Miss Connulty's own dreaming about a son born from Ellie and Florian's summer romance, perhaps a reminder of her unfortunate abortion. In her view, "[n]one of it was impossible" (210), thus suggesting possible alternative stories embedded within the plot which the reader ought to take account of when displaying empathy. This hypothetical remark allow the imaginative space to further permeate the factual one, complicating the reader's possible search of a course of action. Unlike *Reading Turgenev*, where Robert's death and Mary Louise's melancholic impasse entail a sense of temporal stasis, what, however, seems to characterise *Love and Summer* is a final sense of redemption that helps the various characters to work through their vulnerable conditions while also eliciting an uneasy empathy in the reader that implies reservations and doubts. I would like to suggest that Trevor's manipulation of empathy, via multifocal perspective, seems to favour an ethics of care and compassion which tends to chime with the ability to change perspective. Empathy, as Leslie Jamison remarks, "means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see" (5), an extension that invites readers (and characters) to accept a gaze other than their own.

Seeing things with the logic of difficult empathy, the reader of *Reading Turgenev* can similarly acknowledge how the empathic response to one character is triggered at the expense of others. If we move beyond the love story between Mary Louise and Robert, we find a range of private conflicts that animate the ordinary lives of other minor characters, thus complicating our empathic engagement with them. Elmer Quarry, for instance, is as much a victim as a victimiser. Mary Louise's focal perspective is prioritised, as the novella opens and closes with her viewpoint. The empathic reader is then inclined to share her vision of Elmer as a cold and unemotional husband who "had married her because of his sentimental notion that the name should continue above the shop" (*Reading Turgenev* 68). However, there are many moments in

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the novella that may deviate the reader's empathic response to the man, alternative paths that manifest themselves through the continuous shift of focalisation. This manipulation of the reader's empathic directions allows for what Peter Goldie has described as «in-his-shoes perspective shifting», a narrative condition where multiperspectival focalisation directs the reader's empathic engagement “in order to imagine what thoughts, feelings, decisions, and so on *you* would arrive at if you were in the other's circumstances” (302; emphasis in the original).

During the wedding, for instance, Miss Mullover, the old schoolteacher of both spouses, meditates on how their behaviour as children and, when asked her opinion about Elmer by Mrs Dallon, Mary Louise's mother, the teacher admits that Elmer “is not a troublesome man” (*Reading Turgenev* 30), convincing Mrs Dallon that while the bridegroom “was decent and reliable [...] Mary Louise could do worse” (30). Though Mrs Dallon does not utter any words, the narrator acutely observes that two ladies seemed to silently agree on the fact that Mary Louise “could do worse”, thus corroborating the idea of the heroine as an ambiguous character and then complicating the reader's feeling of easy empathy to her. Rather than following Miss Mullover and Mrs Dallon's depiction of Mary Louise's problematic nature, the reader is instead led to learn about Mary Louise's gradual obsession with her husband's cold manners and with his sisters' outpourings of rage. The narratorial commentary on Mary Louise's potential harm is further nuanced by Matilda and Rose's frustration, thus foregrounding her presumed victimisation. Not only Elmer's two spinster sisters resent having to share their house and their habits with a woman they think suffering from mental instability, they also have frequent, heated arguments with their brother. Elmer's vulnerability is further contrasted by the viewpoint of Mary Louise's sister, Letty, who sees him as an insensitive man. The shifting of focalisation is then a narrative technique which favours the *in-his-shoes approach* towards both characters. The change of perspective tends to produce feelings about the characters' emotional states in a multi-layered way, where the tension between the said and the unsaid, the real and the imaginary, generates doubts and compassion at the same time.

The reader can eventually realise Elmer's ontological fragility when it emerges that he has become addicted to alcohol. It is through Bridget's eyes, the manageress of the hotel where Elmer spends his evenings, that an empathic response towards the man finally rouses. Interestingly, Bridget muses on Elmer's conjugal relationship with his wife, imagining “to be a fly inside Elmer Quarry's head, able to see what he was thinking as he lay down beside his young wife” (136), thus trying to ‘extend’ her own gaze beyond the reality she can barely observe. Whereas the narrator chooses to depict Elmer as becoming isolated, preferring alcoholism to his marital responsibilities, Bridget's fascination with his eccentric behaviour gives Elmer a more human touch than the image of the unscrupulous victimiser. The contrast between the story-level and the discourse-level, with flashbacks emerging later, and the manipulation of the focal perspective facilitating the *in-his-shoes* empathic perspective, determines the way readers develop their empathy and, in Elmer's case, this eventually leads to compassionate feelings.

In this light, some kind of redemption seems to surface in Trevor's stories, even when the characters tend to elude any possibility of empathic response. The reader's obvious empathic engagement with Mary Louise is significantly complicated by Trevor's fusion of irony and emotional turmoil. By the end of the novel, we learn that the local community had interpreted the woman's melancholic incorporations as the clear manifestations of a mental illness:

In the town it is generally believed that Elmer Quarry's life was taken to the asylum because she couldn't be managed any more, which is true enough. At the time it went about the town that she played with toys and imagined rats were going to attack her. On several occasions she had attempted to administer poison to herself. She'd bought clothes from the poor when there was a shopful of clothes underneath where she lived. (216)

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The former troublesome girl, attempting to poison her sisters-in-law and stealing money from the wall-safe of the Quarrys to buy Robert's old clothes from the family the garments had been donated to, now becomes a fragile subject for whom compassion is at least possible. Owing to a complex narrative structure, the reader is again forced to reorient his empathic responses. Even by her family, Mary Louise is perceived as a fragile and dangerous woman, guilty of doing "funny things" (208). The narratorial commentary quoted above turns Mary Louise into a sacrificial victim of whom the local community needs to get rid. Again, the focal perspective swerves and the old Mrs Mullover recalls Mary Louise's "childhood fascination with Joan of Arc" (208). Like the French saint, Mary Louise is a martyr, "hearing voices" (140), a comparison that seems to confirm the idea of the girl's insanity.

When Mary Louise finally returns home from the asylum, her reappearance on the discourse-level brings forth the truth about her supposed madness. The reader finds out that for "thirty-one years she passed as mad and was at peace" (221) and that she had never tried to poison anyone. In the very final scene, when an old Mary Louise is in the church with a young clergyman, a sense of bewilderment unsettles the churchman as well as the reader. Mary Louise tells the clergyman about Turgenev's novels, informing him that "for eight years she has flushed the prescribed drugs down the lavatory" (220) and that she has never taken them because they were not necessary. For the clergyman her life seems "as mysterious as an act of God" (220), a feeling arousing contemplation and admiration on the whole. Thus, Trevor's juxtaposition of multiple and conflictual perspectives complicates the direction of empathy, favouring the creation of a narrative tension that refracts an aesthetics of vulnerability through the permanent contrast between emotional expressions and narrative treatment of emotions. Rather than cultivating humanity, one might speculate that narrative empathy helps us to see how we live our lives, torn between certainties and doubts, good and evil. If empathy means "to pay attention, to extend ourselves" (Jamison 23), then Trevor's fiction attracts narrative empathy because it shows the complexity of humanity, illuminating its most vulnerable side.

4. Coda: Empathy and Vulnerability

The analysis has attempted to illuminate how Trevor's ethical commitment aims at arousing the readers' empathic and emotional responses. Along these lines, the Irish writer can be said to find his own place among other authors, from George Eliot to Margaret Atwood, who, by using Keen's words, resort to empathy to "run the gamut from moral approval to subversive deconstruction" (*Empathy and the Novel* 121). By complicating the narrative structure, manipulating the relation between story and discourse, Trevor fosters an empathic engagement through his writings, promoting an aesthetic of vulnerability where characters, plots and narrative techniques are instrumental in the distribution of empathy.

The poetics of vulnerability, as theorised by Ganteau, aims at "a strong immediacy effect, hence the solicitation of the reader" (170). Such an effect is a way of reminding readers of the ethical power of literary writing inasmuch that it displays the fractures of human life. The texts analysed here share Ganteau's conceptualisation of vulnerability as a literary category in that they both expose the four basic characteristics of this mode — namely, surviving a loss, the testimonial format of the narrative, the consistent presence of the past and the performative function of the emotions the narratives convey. Against this backdrop, Trevor's fiction creates the condition for the emergence of hidden truths about mankind, demonstrating how some formal strategies may direct the reader's empathic engagement. This concept of vulnerability is shared, as we have seen, by Mary Louise and Ellie, who both try to fill their void with a romance. While one problematic outcome of Mary Louise's lack of love is the development of a melancholic feeling, which definitely alienates Elmer from her, in Ellie's case, carelessness and a quest for care arouse a sense of ineluctability which however generates compassion.

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Crucially, Trevor's fiction seems to facilitate an ethical encounter with the most fragile sides of human existence that involves the embracing of suffering and the need for relationality, conveying an emotional oscillation in line with an ethics of care that sees vulnerability "as a dynamic force more than a shackle" (Ganteau 11).

Vulnerability and empathising strategies thus converge in Trevor's narratives owing to the feelings of ethical involvement they elicit. Seen in this light, Trevor may be said to use narrative empathy to explore the paradoxical meaning of human vulnerability. Whereas, as Nussbaum argues, novels can instil comprehension, because readers "learn what life has done to people" (*Cultivating Humanity* 92), Trevor's vulnerable texts refract empathic connections, offering the reader the means through which to imagine the life of others and to seek the truth in the mysteries of human existence.

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