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Family Crises in Confession, Fragility and the Indelible Subject in *Great House*

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This paper discusses the indelible role of the subject in confessional fiction, by looking at Nicole Krauss's novel *Great House* (2010). I argue that there is an intersubjective immersion in *Great House*, depicted through fictional confessions in front of another, that builds a different narrative architecture, which differs from the stream of consciousness novel and the self-conscious novel. Moreover, I look at the rehabilitation of the subject, not in isolation, but in the context of interaction and indebtedness in-between subjects, a process which portrays a novel of exposure and fragility, where the subject is always at risk in the encompassed family space it inhabits. In the end, I show how the asymmetrical relationships from a shared life and the string of confessions attest a re-humanizing of the subject in *Great House*, while also indicating a reconfiguration of the view of the reader, as the novel demands from her new forms of attention and affective reading, rather than interpretation.

***Keywords*: intersubjectivity; aesthetics of fragility; literary affects; contemporary American novel; Nicole Krauss.**

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
(Lev Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*)

There are no happy families in literature, or at least this is what Tolstoy taught us. For most of its life, the novel has been and continues to be a genre of diversity. On the other hand, happiness forms a unified land of stagnation that sooner or later is bound to crack in the variegation of unhappiness.

For the last two decades, the Great American novel and its narrative undercurrents are rising in the contemporary literary field, washing clean the land of self-reflexivity, which had reached the dead end street of the "delirium of reflexivity" (Hassan, 2010: 129) at the peak of a "genocidal postmodernity" (Hassan, 2010: 131). The epitome is the rendition and rehabilitation of the subject, in a fragile and vulnerable intersubjective space. In the following pages, I would like to focus on the way the subject is rehabilitated in Nicole Krauss's *Great House*, through confession, while at the same time being contorted and negatively imagined in an encompassed family space.

Great House gravitates in the most familiar of spaces for the reader, a house, in which the writer circumscribes the personal experiences to an overwhelming expressive function of fictional confession that renders a map of feelings and affects. The subject caught in this intersubjective space is not just a signifier, but a quintessence. Significantly, we are witnessing the rehabilitation of the subject from the lethargic condition it was forced into in post-structuralism.

Taking into account a plethora of books published in the United States after the year 2000, we can infer that the grand narratives are back, along with recounts and fictional representations of the American family, and its unhappy adventure in the land of prose. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2001), Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*

(2002), Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), Nicole Krauss's *Great House* (2010), or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* (2016) embrace intersubjective experiences and familial affairs. One can read all of them through a multitude of theoretical approaches, but their axis is rather simple, as it orients stories of family crises in a representational reality. But what happened to the American novel at the beginning of the 21st century and which critical theories quadrate most adequately with the contemporary novel?

Review of Literature

At the start of the 21st century, the novel goes through an "affective turn" (Clough, 2007; Armstrong, 2014), depicting a new geography of feelings and affects that can be consciously mapped by the reader, beyond the "sympathetic identification" (Armstrong, 2014: 464). According to Nancy Armstrong, across several disciplines, there is a "comprehensive effort to rethink the source and operations of human emotions" (442). But have the novels changed?

Firstly, I would suggest that the writers have shifted their perspective from narratives of the past or metafictional prose, and have become more concerned with the developing reality they inhabit. Coextensively to the critics' theoretical debates on the "urgency of the subject" (Jameson, 1997: 41) and the return of the ethical studies in the Humanities, the authors demystify the self-reflexive mechanisms of postmodernism.

Following the same line of thought, Iago Morrison concludes that the novels at the beginning of the 21st century go through a "shift in sensibility" (2013: 10), and the "resurgence of affect as a central concern in fiction" (2013: 12). Moreover, Rachel Greenwald Smith comes up with an interesting category of "literary affects as impersonal feelings" produced by literary texts (2015: 11), that differ from the personal emotional response felt subjectively in our lives. In her attempt, Greenwald Smith examines new forms of affective reading and close encounters with texts, in an approach that ruptures the "imagined coldness of their postmodernist predecessor" (59) that left behind an exhausted land impoverished of emotions.

David Foster Wallace could be seen as another precursor for the writers active at the start of the new millennium if we take into consideration the "new sincerity" he was demanding from them. As David Foster Wallace once said, courage and change might come from the total exposure of the writers and their ability to be vulnerable and pathetic in front of the reader, but also to be the subject of unwanted persiflage from critics. From his perspective, the writers should write about the "plain untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (2009: 63). Enriching his legacy, Adam Kelly (2010) discusses the concept of sincerity in contemporary American fiction and Wolfgang Funks (2015) comes up with a poignant view of the recent novel and "literature of reconstruction" that builds significance, rather than deconstructs meaning. Furthermore, Jean-Michel Ganteau addresses the concept of vulnerability as an aesthetic category, amassed upon Levinas's philosophy of vulnerability in the "face of the other." Ganteau thinks that vulnerability became an aesthetic category in the late 80s, against the inheritance of modernism and its graceful dominance. Equivalently, the literature of vulnerability can be understood as moving forward from the aesthetics of high modernism. Moreover, the concept of vulnerability imposes a new role for the writer, as well as for the reader, and a primeval affective reading.

Leaving the "linguist turn" behind, I argue that a literature of exposure and fragility was fostered at the beginning of the 21st century through the confessional novel, which focusses on the rehabilitation of the subject as an intersubject, in an ecosystem where the intersubjective relationship is of utmost importance. The subjects' encounter is always asymmetrical, demanding an affirmative formation and a negative confrontation and deformation in their exteriors, not just interiors, without losing contact with the contingent reality they cohabitate in.

From this junction of theorization, we can attest the re-emergence of new fortified subjectivities, rather than the deconstruction of the subject as was the case in post-structuralism. But the literature of fragility cannot possibly endure without a subject, and I dare say without an in-

tersubjective relation in-between subjects. More than anything else, fragility is a relationship of indebtedness, susceptibleness, and culpability between subjects.

As a result, I want to emphasize the boundaries and mechanisms of the literature of exposure and fragility of the subject that can be delineated in *Great House* and the way confessional fiction brings forth new forms of subjective and affective responses from the reader. *Great House* is one of those niche novels that have nothing in common with what critics used to call a *postmodernist novel*. But rather, the novel depicts a story of fragility and vulnerability that reassembles the subject, across several familial relationships, in a prose that differs from the stream of consciousness specific to the beginning of the 20th century. Also, *Great House* does not just render the myth of the American family or the Jewish family. Rather, it moves forward towards an idea of ubiquitous family crises that might happen anywhere, anytime, as all families live in a "great house," and all of them carry the weight of unspoken truths, mending affects, and untamed feelings.

Great House and The Literature of Fragility

Nicole Krauss published three novels that depict distinctive modes of a poetic of loss, as the writer herself confessed in an interview, admitting that her books deal with ways or representing catastrophic loss, rather than portraying stories about the Holocaust:

> I know that this goes against the grain of what most critics might say about my work, but I would not say that I've written about the Holocaust. I am the grandchild of people who survived that historical event. I'm not writing their story – I couldn't write their story. There are characters in my novels who have either survived the Holocaust or been affected by it. But I've written very little about the Holocaust in terms of the actual events. What interests me is the response to catastrophic loss. (Krauss, 2010)

If we were to take the writer's confession into account, we could rather address the loss of memory and the effects it has on the subject in *Man Walks Into a Room* (2002), notice the remnants of love and the loss of love in *The History of Love* (2005), or the family crises and the indelible subject in Nicole Krauss's most recent novel, *Great House*, the focal point of this study. Likewise, the fictional conglomerate of her second and third books shows that they are not solely about the Holocaust, nor are they stories that should be read exclusively through the prism of Jewish studies.

Contrary to Krauss's confession, Holocaust fiction and the memory of the Holocaust are midpoints for Jessica Lang's study of the *History of Love* (2009). Joye Weisel-Barth examines "the fetish" in *Great House* from a psychological point of view, but barely discusses the novel's narrative architecture (Weisel-Barth, 2013), and Phillipe Code (2011) folds an interesting perspective on Krauss's *History of Love*, implying that there is an omnipresent narrator that makes known the past but in a rather misguided manner, as there are no certainties in his metafictional journeys.

Contrary to these outlooks, I suspect that Nicole Krauss's novels, Man Walks into a Room, The History of Love, and Great House have a more substantial appendage in the flux of confessional novels published at the beginning of the new millennium. Notably, the triptych of novels renders a geography of emotions, affects, and intersubjective resonances, which are copious in the narrative architecture, and more carefully constructed by Nicole Krauss. Furthermore, the writer uses a stream of expressive confessions in her novels that portray the interior subjective space and its exterior encounter with a secondary subject.

In *Great House*, the expressive function of the various confessions forces the reader to react affectively, rather that interpret, as the narrative structure is entirely exposed. The affective reading demands "impersonal feeling" (both internalized and exteriorized) which does not necessarily mean identification with the characters, but rather a whole range of possibilities of existence. These traits force an ethical discussion and reading of the exponential confessional novel, based

on moments of trust, rather than truths and the search for hidden meanings.

The suffocating emotional territory of *Great House* if filled with both uttered and silent confessions from characters that are rather similar to Dostoyevsky's "man from the underground," as they do not search for any form of redemption. As self-explanatory as it might seem, happiness has no variations in form and narrative ("all happy families are alike" – but are they?), and this is one of the reasons why happiness is not a good companion to the lives of the novel. In this frame of reference, *Great House* reads like a virtual map of shared unhappiness in the presence or temporary absence of alterity.

Great House unveils its intersubjective space as an essential point in the architecture of the novel from its very incipit, an intersubjective tension that is sustained at the beginning of every chapter: "Talk to him." (10, All Rise), "I don't support the plan, I told you. Why? You demanded with angry little eyes." (46, True kindness), "That evening we went reading together, as we always did" (69, Swimming Holes), "I met and fell in love with Yoav Weisz in the fall of 1998" (97, Lies Told by Children), "Where are you, Dov? It's past dawn already." (147, True kindness II),"Your Honor, in the dark and stony coolness of my room I slept like someone rescued from a typhoon," (172, All Rise II), "Lotte remembered me until the very last. It was I who often felt I could no longer remember the person she had once been" (206, Swimming Holes II), "A riddle: A stone was thrown in Budapest on a winter night in 1944" (248, Weisz).

From this perspective, *Great House* is not a novel excessively turned inward or self-reflexive, because its subjects are always linked to one another, affected and transformed by their interaction and personal histories or altered by the anxiety that remains from their encounter, or produced by the temporary absence of the other.

Thus, the subject's negative emotions and remnants from the past are overwhelming in *Great House*, leaving little room for metafictional journeys as in *The History of Love*, or excessive factual psychological information as in *Man Walks Into a Room*, as the map of emotions and affects contours the primary conglomerate of the text: "and for a moment I felt brushed by loneliness (14), I was overcome by a feeling of regret (…) I admit that I even cried" (34), "I feel more alone with you than I feel with anyone else" (40), "A kind of ravaged feeling entered" (61), "I would catch myself staring at my wife, feeling a little bit afraid" (80), "It's something amazing to feel that for the first time someone is seeing you as you really are, not as they wish you, or you wish yourself, to be" (118), "Our fears drove us deeper and deeper into a bunkered silence" (160), "Suddenly I'm frightened, Dov. I feel a shiver, a coldness is seeping into my veins (171).

So, how can a subject with so many feelings be dead? There is a simple answer to this peculiar question. The subject of *Great House* is most definitely not dead but is rather an indelible subject. Significantly, there is no need to interpret the complex ramification of feelings and affects in the novel, but they most definitely need to be taken into account as the book deals with them extensively. Considering this frame of reference, I could say that the novel goes "against interpretation" (Sontag). The remaining thing that the reader can do is accompany the confessional subjects who depict fictional worlds, but not fictive responses or affects.

This intersubjective relationship of the subjects from *Great House* is not constituted on cause-effect patterns, nor on facts, but rather of forms of attention and fragility from their shared lives. As if to give more attention to this aspect of the novel, Nicole Krauss makes use of a narrative close-up that is an essential part of the novels' narrative architecture. The narrative close-up differs from the one employed in film. I believe that we can observe an affective narrative close-up that depicts the inner lives and intersubjective connections of the subjects directly without requiring interpretation, while the visual close-up is stuck in the exterior and demands to reach the inner life it wants to illustrate.

In the novel, there is an overdose of feelings and affects, for the most part, negative emotions that set the subject in motion, as happiness and positive feelings do not configure plots. On the other hand, in the brief history of the subject, it is not sufficient to observe the redemptive aspect of confession, but also its transformation or passage through time. As a confession is about

something that happened or was felt by the subject. Thus the chronotope of the novel deals with the modification of the subject, not only its loss. Also, unhappy emotions trigger a moving forward for the subject, while happiness depicts a more careful stagnation: "Of course it always made her happy to receive a letter from someone who admired her work" (69), "we'd later imagined lying sun-drenched, naked, and happy in bed" (89).

Great House portrays several family crises, as different familial relationships surface in all sections of the novel. Noticeably, the setting is a different home, a trace that highlights the intersubjective space of the book. In the first episode, the house where Nadia lives is hit by a storm, as Nadia confesses the loss and the disintegration of her past life in front of a judge in a hospital room. In the second episode, a father discloses the sorrows and remnants from his relationship with, what he considers, an ungrateful and distant son while waiting and sharing the same home without taking to each other. The third chapter, *Swimming Holes*, depicts the relationship between a husband and his wife, and the fixed distance and space of unknowingness that evolves even in the closest of familial relationship, while the last chapter from the first part of the novel portrays the complicated relationship between siblings and an absent father that has total power over their lives in a house that is described as a prison. The second part of the book mirrors the first four chapters, without maintaining the same order. *True kindness* opens up with Aaron's confession waiting for his son, Dov, to return home, and the way they failed each other. Contrary to the indebtedness of the subjects seized in the "great house" where families spend their lives, there is a negative illustration of a non-connection that calls for affects. The intersubjective familial space in *Great House* is one always in expectance of something or indebtedness. But some subjects do not expect anything in return: "Afterwards I couldn't talk to anyone about it, not even your mother, but I talked to you. True Kindness, that's what they call themselves, the ones who arrive in their kippot and their Day-Glo yellow vests, always the first there to hold the dying as they go in shocked silence, to gather up the child without limbs. True kindness, because the dead cannot repay the favor" (Krauss, 2010: 171).

Symptomatically, the *true kindness* which is the ultimate form of forgetting oneself in the face of the other is not enclosed in Krauss's book in the "great house" inhabited by people related by blood or in the "great house of God". Rather, it is expelled in an extra-territorial intersubjective space where the subject has given itself to another that cannot extend itself back to manifest its gratitude. Moreover, it forces a compelling discussion on the ethics of familial relationships, as it suggests that there is no "true kindness" for the families portrayed in *Great House*, as in-between its members there is always a form of intersubjective indebtedness.

In the second chapter of the second part of the book, Nadia confesses her "true loneliness" in front of Dov, whom she injured in a car accident and accompanied to the emergency room. Even if her confession is in the face of another, Dov is unconscious, therefore absent. "Talk to him" is the sentence that opens the novel and activates the intersubjective space between subjects.

The third chapter, *Swimming Holes*, precedes the confession from the first chapter, as the husband without a name in the previous section, Arthur Bender, is forced to reimagine his wife's life and decisions, as he found out she had a child about whose existence he never knew anything. In Bender's house, Weisz and Arthur discuss the history of a desk carried along from one chapter to another, a desk that was used by Lorca (a fictive hypothesis in the fictional world), that belonged to Nadia and Lotte (Bender's wife), as well as Weisz. But there is one more aspect that should be taken into consideration, as the desk has 19 drawers, one of which is inaccessible to all the characters that owned it, including Nadia and Lotte. Poignantly, as the unfolding of the book shows, the mysterious drawer is and was empty all the time, as a four-year-old child had to place the most important thing for him inside and lock it. But the child did not know what the thing was. That child was Weisz, who after losing the desk tried to find it all his life, as he sought to find other belonging that the Jews lost during the war. Of course, if something were to be hidden, it would have had a precise meaning in the novel. Indirectly, we could "interpret" its emptiness as another clue that confirms the narrative structure of total exposure the book creates. From this

point of view, there are no hidden meanings for the reader to expose, as the novel addresses the intersubjective fragility of the subject in full view. As in a Greek play, the actors play their roles in front of the reader, in the enclosed space of the amphitheater. Consequently, sometimes, interpretation should not go past the obvious. First and foremost, *Great House* is a fictional story that unveils its whole truth through unmediated confessions.

Another prominent strain in the novel that gives the title of the book is explained thoroughly in the same chapter. The Great House from the Talmud is the home the Jews lost to fire: "Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form. Later his school became known as the Great House, after the phrase in Books of Kings: He burned the house of God, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire" (Krauss, 2010: 240).

The allegorical story depicts the way the Jewish soul is built around the house that burned in the fire; once again the meaning is fully disclosed in front of the reader. But considering the many homes that appear in the narrative stream, the "great house" is more than the House of God, depicting the home inhabited by any family. In the intimate space of a home, the subject forms and deforms itself through others. Nicole Krauss narrates the negative realm of affects buried in every house, and from this perspective, the attribute "great" is paradoxical. As in the end, the home is a small space for the subject's formation and deformation within limits assembled by both kindness and hostility.

The last chapter of the novel provides a distinctive framework. The beginning of the episode finds Weisz all alone, remembering his childhood and the quiet life before the Second World War began in 1944 when Budapest was attacked by the Russian and Romanian army and conquered. But following the logic of the book thus far, the riddle Weisz emits, is for someone else. The incipit addresses the reader, who is invited to solve a riddle:

> A stone is thrown in Budapest on a winter night in 1944 sails through the air toward the illuminated window of a house where a father is writing a letter at his desk, a mother is reading, and a boy is daydreaming about an ice-skating race on the frozen Danube. The glass shatters, the boy covers his head, the mother screams. At that moment the life they know ceases to exist. *Where does the stone land?* (Krauss, 2010: 204, emphasis in original)

The reader's solving the riddle is not as important as the involvement (and likely reactions) it demands from her. She could say the rock fell inside the home, thus disrupting the minor life of the family or she could pick one of the rooms. The only one who covers his head is the child and the reader might consider that the stone landed in his room. But these are minor hypotheses, while the important action is the allurement of the reader in the intersubjective space it creates, a corner she already inhabited. In the excerpt above, we are witnessing the disruption of one happy family by the will of an outside event that has nothing to do with the enclosed space of a home inhabited by an average family. Thus, the representational reality and the outside political or social events are part of the formation and deformation of the subject.

Ultimately, fictional confession is a means of comprehension and attention and demands a new "aesthetic of trust" (Hassan, 2010) between writer and reader, fiction and reader, which had ruptured out of postmodern suspicion according to Ihab Hassan. In medieval times, confession was a means of gaining access to interiority. Later it transformed into a method of building one's individuality. In recent times, confession has become rather banal in the public sphere (Tambling, 1990: 3), as is being used incessantly in television and nowadays in the digital world as well. But these confessions are empty renderings of isolated subjects, highly individualist, who justify their action without an intersubjective relationship in mind. Moreover, these confessions are very different from the ones depicted in fiction, as the latter have an aesthetic dimension. Fiction is

neither true nor false, and confession in fiction offers an expressive, direct apprehension of the subject.

In conclusion, the subject of the novel is not rendered in isolation, in a unique stream of consciousness, but reconstructed as an intersubject. Confession is motivated by an "inner compulsion to understand" (Axthelm, 1967: 130) and I think this is one of the reasons why the confessional novel at the beginning of the 21st century is conjointly renewing the lost connection with the reader. Concomitantly, in *Great House*, there is a reconfiguration of the subject in its intimacy, as the empirical world loses its primacy. On the other hand, "confession is always limited to the past" (Tambling, 1990: 19), so the story is always about something that happened which cannot be reversed. There is no redemption in fictional confession, as Ian McEwan made evident in *Atonement* (2001), another novel that addresses the ethics of fiction and the negative encounters of the subjects, their complicity and misguided interpretation in the face of the other.

Conclusions

Subjects in the contemporary world are forced to operate *as if* differences are easily overcome, and the negation of the other is not a full step for the determination of one's individuality. The philosophy of understanding and accepting the-one-different-from-you is (theoretically) solved with utmost legerity. But the face of the other and the intersubjective space subjects inhabit does not start with understanding, but rather with negation, followed by fragility and risks. Precisely these new forms of misunderstanding and negative intersubjective affects are portrayed in *Great House*. The novel has no heroes. In its narrative stream, a writer exposes some radical subject caught in a shared asymmetrical life. From this viewpoint, the reader witnesses several fictional confessions stuck in-between exterior and interior. Moreover, as there is no escape from this intersubjective immersion and narrative architecture, the primary focus of the novel seems to be a critical re-humanizing of the subject that requires an affective reading from the reader.

Undeniably, there is a shared connection, but there is also an in-between space of collision between subjects that keeps them at a distance from one another. This negative intersubjective space is visible in times of conflict and crises between them. For that matter, the novel encloses an important ethics of the subject in the contemporary world. In the contemporary novel and society, the world of the subjects if full of torment, and their encounters are at times catastrophic and filled with loss. Nonetheless, they endure.

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