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The book of change: Autofictional strategies and recursive structures in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*

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Abstract:

*This article examines the interplay between autofictional strategies and recursive structures in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018), focusing on the narrative construction of a fluid self. Moving beyond traditional biographical linearity, Heti employs "spatial" narrative techniques (Mitchell, 1980) to reveal the process through which the artistic agency can reassemble a maternal lineage burdened by societal expectations. The article demonstrates that the recursive structures Heti employs organize diverse discursive systems—specifically the I Ching, photography, and biblical parables—to unmake the stable, compliant "I" of traditional autobiography. A close reading of the text's central motif, the knife, discloses the fact its recursive occurrence converges to bind the narrator's personal struggle to the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust. Finally, drawing on Isabelle Grell's (2018) concept of the "unmade I" and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture" (1996) the article illustrates that Heti reconfigures the patriarchal construct of "woman-as-mother" into a site of perpetual transformation.*

Literature, as a creative expression of the mind, has always been seen through the relationship between fact, often understood as truth, and fiction – understood as its creative rendition. It has always created worlds different from those writers, readers, and others inhabit. The degree of difference has varied depending on writers' creative endeavours and dominant aesthetic styles. The borderline a

work of art establishes as the boundary between real life and fiction has been contested, tested, breached, and sealed again.

In the current culture with its focus on the self, and its representations, the recent rise and popularity of autofiction come as no surprise. The explorations of the performative self can be recognized all over the art world. Moreover, popular culture, and media culture provide for an inexhaustible array of possibilities to examine the forms of self-presentation, self-assertion, and self-representation. Gronemann (2019, p. 244) contends that with the “extension of the techniques and media available for self-presentation” it is impossible to separate the fictional from the factual. She adds that with the “boundaries” between the reality of the subject and that of the media becoming less and less transparent, the “fragility of the self” (ibid.) has been exposed. The rise of media culture generates opportunities where a “nobody”, with the right use of media culture strategies, can become a “somebody” thus erasing the hierarchy, subverting it, or at least relativizing it.

The French writer Serge Doubrovsky, the originator of the autofiction genre, claims that the self inscribed in autofiction writing is a “nobody” in contrast to “sociologically justified ‘somebodies’” and thus contrasts autofiction with the traditional life writing (Doubrovsky in Dix, 2018, p. 3). Such theoretical reframing corresponds with the possibilities contemporary culture has afforded to representations of oneself. To sum up, the understanding of the self at present has grown more complex with the immersion of media in art and everyday life. Autofictional strategies can be seen as an indexical form reflecting on the interlacing between the notions of the real and the imaginary, but also the real and the virtual. The result is a self that is in a constant process of making, and unmaking.

Autofictional strategies in recent Anglophone women’s writing

Sheila Heti, together with Siri Hustved and Sigrid Nunez, count among the recent generation of Anglophone writers who have employed autofictional strategies in their novels to offer intense reflections on the process of identity-making (emphasizing its fluid, multifaceted, and socially constructed nature]. Heti’s novel *Motherhood* (2018), Nunez’s novel *Friend* (2018) and Hustved’s novel *Memories of the Future* (2019) emphasize that identity is not static but continuously shaped by relationships, societal expectations, and deep-dive explorations of the self. Therefore, their narratives foreground the self as fluid, multifaceted, and socially constructed.

As Ferreira-Meyers (2018, p. 30) points out, in autofiction “the blend is so strong that it becomes impossible to decide what is fictional and what is autobiographical in a text”. The three abovementioned writers balance their fiction along this ambivalence to create narratives that develop the protagonists’ identities as dynamic, ongoing negotiations between the self, others and the world.

The first-person narrative of Nunez stages the writer-protagonist and her reflection on literary themes and the process of writing with the effect of blurring the line between the character's life and the author's experiences. The unnamed protagonist in the novel *Friend* explores her relationship with her deceased friend, who was a well-known writer. Nunez adds layers of self-awareness and autobiographical elements to the narrative and contemplates grief, art and literary friendships. In *Memories of the Future* Siri Hustvedt weaves autofictional strategies through a dual narrative that shifts between the protagonist's past and experiences that date back to when she was a young writer in 1970s New York City and her reflections on those memories in her present-day life. The novel features a fictionalized version of Hustvedt's younger self, exploring the formative years of her creative journey. Through this autofictional portrayal, Hustvedt draws upon her own experiences as a writer and an artist, incorporating real-life observations and reflections into the fictionalized narrative to expose the power external validation and misperception imposed on the sense of her self. Heti's novel *Motherhood* takes autofiction to an intimate level as the book frames the fictionalized account of the protagonist's struggles with the decision of whether or not to become a mother and draws from Sheila Heti's real-life experiences. All three of the books are examples of texts where the focus on both the authors' personal stories but also their authorship complicates the structure in the respective novels. Moreover, the role of a writer, a creator of stories, necessarily brings in reflections on identity formation, grief, memory, and cultural pressures and conformity demands.

I argue that by juxtaposing reflections on motherhood and creativity, Heti raises questions about identity, societal expectations, and the nature of self-expression. Formally she works with autofictional strategies. They break narrative linearity and underline the spatial density of the text. The close proximity of her fiction to the real events and facts from her biography can be possible through the "adventure" of language" as Doubrovsky claims (in James, 2022, p. 41).

As Dix explains, it is one of the three ways in which Doubrovsky uses the term. "The adventure of language that he [Doubrovsky] talks about is tantamount to a form of literary experimentation, exploring how far it is possible to move language in the direction of direct representation and how far the distortions added by memory, thought, feeling and mood impinge on that process" (2017, p. 71). In Heti's case the experiment is developed both as a subject and object of her writing. The novel's protagonist, much like Heti herself, is an author and is working on a novel that questions the culturally embedded role of a woman in a patriarchal society as a child-bearer. As Heti's narrator/protagonist struggles with writing that has turned into a decision-making process, the form Heti's novel takes is an answer to Doubrovsky's quest in terms of the limits of language and representation.

Heti constructs a narrator whose self is in a state of constant change. The fluid self is established with the use of recurrent motifs, situations, and metafictional strategies. They function in the novel as “recursive structures” where the self, in the process of making, remains in discourse with the character of Western metaphysics and culture (Khawaja, 2022, p. 142). On one hand Heti employs a Western philosophical form of dialectics to deliberate on the concept of motherhood, on the other hand she works on the central question of the novel through several, sometimes culturally and intellectually diverse discourses ranging from the mystical and religious, to the biological and social. The tarot-reading motif, use of photographs, the incorporation of a Biblical pretext from the book of Genesis, and the Chinese divination system *I Ching*, among other elements, can be understood as recursive structures, a formal method that turn Heti’s novel into a philosophical meditation where the focus is given to a “difficulty... making decisions at all” as Kate Wolfe observed in a 2018 interview with Heti. Such decision-making may give rise to an ambivalence that corresponds with the origin of autofictional writing, and its understanding of writing as a “mode of existence” (Gronemann, 2019, p. 242). Therefore, in reading Heti’s writing the “existentialist dimension” of literature, the point Doubrovsky makes about autofictional narratives (Doubrovsky 1989; 1991 in *ibid.*) necessarily coalesces with deep philosophical introspection.

The troubles with self-presentation

Sheila Heti focuses on the primacy of the narrative, and her “predilection” (Doubrovsky in Gasparini, 2009) for its form, therefore the novel foregrounds subjectivity as elusive and continually in the process of transformation and change. In a search for “the original form” her text employs “reader capture strategies” such as the “‘reconfiguration’ of narrative time” (*ibid.*) and “interdiscursivity”.

The book thematizes space as a metaphor. Heti asserts her authorship as a creative force and power, while at the same time advocating the novel as a form apart from life. About three months before the publication of the novel, in an interview with Claudia Dey, Heti is asked:

The protagonist of *Motherhood* is unnamed, but the assumption is that her life is close to your life. Do you ever feel overexposed?”

Not through my books... It’s something I’ve crafted in the novel form. Even if it contains my thoughts, I am putting a work of imagination into the world. I’m putting an artwork into the world, not myself. (2018)

In the context of autofiction theory, several things are said in this exchange. First, Heti affirms a conscious breach of the referential pact between the author and reader, the “metaphorical contract” common for traditional autobiography (Lejeune in Dix, 2018, pp. 5-6). In doing so, she undermines the “assumption that a first-person narrative *uncomplicatedly* refers to a stable, factual object”

(Lecarme in Dix, 2018, p. 6, emphasis mine). Next, Sheila Heti foregrounds her authorship; she sees herself primarily as a novelist, stating, “because a novel to me indicates the kind of intelligence you use to shape it and to create it, and that it’s a form apart from life,” and further explains, “... a novel is self-consciously symbolic... a novel takes up more space” (Heti in Dey, 2018). The novel is apart from life because it is crafted, yet it is life because it is the result of imagination and cognitive processes. Heti’s insistence on the symbolic order of fiction parallels what Dix explains as the preoccupation of autofiction “with potential overlaps as well as the spaces that fall between such categories as truth and imagination” (2018, p. 13). Both Dix, and Gronemann (2018, p. 13, 2019, p. 242) accentuate that autofiction narratives look for their form in the symbolic realm of language, and their authors are incredulous towards straightforward, unmediated representation.

Heti’s narrator is also an active world creator. In the part called “Bleeding” (Heti, 2018, pp. 141 - 149) the unnamed narrator spontaneously visits a card reader. When the psychic draws the card of Death, a card from Major Arcana, the following conversation takes place:

“Is there any chance that your art form is bleeding you out?

Perhaps?

Well, hon, I think you’re in for a big burning—and you have to let it happen. You need to make a concentrated effort, and really fall into that deep space”. (ibid. p. 149)

“The deep space” mentioned in the text is exactly what Heti referred to when she mentioned the novel “takes up more space” than life. It is not just the physical length, but a psychological and symbolic depth that traditional autobiography rarely explores since it is preoccupied with being “referential”. Autofiction as Dix puts it “permits a degree of experimentation with the definition and limits of the Self” and “challeng[es] existing definitions of what constitutes a legitimate cultural norm” (Dix, 2018, p. 10). The risks are multitudinous, since Heti “deliberately conflates the first-person narrator of the novel with the author” (Shirm, 2022, p. 309), and the novel’s central character and first-person narrator in one shares similarities with Heti, including being “an author of several books who lives in Toronto, a divorcée, the daughter of Hungarian-Jewish immigrants” (Blair, 2018). “But will it destroy my life?” (Heti, 2018, p. 149), the narrator asks, inquiring. The clairvoyant represents a wholly new environment, the Other, where the narrating self can be confronted with her own expectations, doubts, and desires, and the decision-making is performed through the narrator’s engagement in the dialogue with the Other. In such a way, the card reading, not dissimilar to the reading and interpretation of books, stands for the whole discourse, with its own props and tropes. Bleeding, as the title suggests, evokes not only the specific physical moment in the female bodily cycle, but also a painful effort in achieving something. The exploration of the narrating self dwelling

with the question of motherhood happens in the environment that works in the juxtaposition with intellectual reasoning. In the Western tradition, decision-making corresponds with the employment of rational thought and logical deductions, while tarot-card reading functions with an archive of archetypes and symbolism in an intuitive rather than logical methodology. In other words, rational reasoning and tarot-card reading are different approaches to understanding, sorting out, and interpreting information. While rational reasoning relies on logical thinking, evidence, and critical analysis, tarot-card reading is based on symbolism, intuition, and belief in a spiritual and mystical connection. Art (including writing) resolves this aporia, and can be viewed as the synthesis of both approaches. Recursive structure is the mechanism of this synthesis. It allows the narrator to reconnect the logical question (Should I?) and the symbolic understanding (the Death Card) until a new understanding emerges.

The biological function of bleeding, a part of the female reproductive cycle, is perceived as the process of purification, and cleansing of residual, often unnecessary remnants. In the context of the book, at the surface level it can refer to the natural process a menstruating woman's body recurrently undergoes when conception has not occurred. However, as a tool to thematize writing, it seems the tarot-card reader is encouraging the narrator to examine new strategies in writing. At the same time as with all utterances the interlocutor (this time the narrator, and implicitly, the reader) projects the clairvoyant's reading onto the intimate exploration of the relationship between the narrator and her mother. The psychic acts as a surrogate maternal figure or a "Wise Woman" archetype. It turns a tarot session into a recursive loop where the narrator talks to a stranger to finally "hear" her mother. In that context, bleeding can be read as a transitory process before the narrator can reestablish the bond with her own mother.

Spatiality of the novel (societal expectations)

Heti's assertion that the novel "takes up more space" mirrors the narrator's own internal negotiation with the spatial demand of domesticity and motherhood where a woman is often expected to shrink her self to make room for others. The assertion could not be developed further on and in detail in an interview, however, it might be looked at in the light of the theory on space in literature, and Heti's own writing. WJT Mitchell contends that while the universal objection against the notion of spatiality in literature is that it is a "mere metaphor, [which] denies essentially temporal nature of literature" (1980, p. 541) his reading of Leibniz reveals that Leibniz's notion is both relational and kinematic, and allows for multiple data in complex relationships (ibid. p. 543). What I understand as multiple data in Heti's book are the multiple discourses she opens up while in the search for the answer to her central question. They structure the text and reach out into various areas of social and cultural

discourses, and embody a metaphor that can be derived from the etymology of the word text: a web (ibid. p. 547). As Kristeva posits a critique against the static structuralist reading of a text, she extends the reading of Bakhtin, and his dialogical imagination: “Each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read... [Any] text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (1980, p. 66). Heti repeatedly employs motifs and narrative strategies that break narrative linearity and resurface as recursive structures.

Recursive structures in Heti’s novel underline its cyclical form. The circle, and implicitly any cyclical formation, undercuts the sense of linearity that we, as humans, have been born into. It traditionally represents eternity, whether we look at its allegorical representations, such as the Ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail; the mathematical symbol of infinity, the mandalas; Celtic knots; the Möbius strip; or the wheel of Dharma, to name just a few. Recursive structures are one of the ancient art forms that can simulate infinity. Their building principle is a pattern, a motif, a single operation that is revisited again and again, always on a new level (McHale, 1987/ 2003, p. 112). If Kristeva says that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (1980, p. 66) in the context of Heti’s novel I would extend: any part of the text is the absorption and transformation of another part of the text. It often takes the form of discourses implemented in the novel’s thematic structure, which are revisited again, in new circumstances, and recontextualized.

The period of the narrative stretches around three years of the narrator’s life that coincide with her final childbearing years. The narrated time reconfigures the time of the narration, and with the recurring motifs the novel acquires a cyclical form. In Heti’s novel art facilitates the sense of eternity, however, the narrator’s perception is bending “backwards through time... to one’s ancestors” (Rooney, 2019, p.120).

On 8 October 2022, The New York Times published a guest essay by Sheila Heti. It was the week when Annie Ernaux was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, and Heti, also known for her autofiction writing, framed Ernaux and her achievement in the massive continuity of time.

“In ‘The Years’ — [Ernaux’s] most celebrated book, published in 2008 — the main character is no longer her or her family but time itself”, Heti asserts – at the same time making an implicit reference to her own writing. While Ernaux uses a “collective I” to represent a generation, Heti uses a “recursive I” to represent a lineage.

In the opening of the novel *Motherhood* published 10 years later than Ernaux’s *The Years*, Heti’s unnamed narrator says: “The phrase *the soul of time* has been with me since [...] I took that trip to New York... It was in my head shortly before that trip, too. I remember explaining it to [Erica] in detail... the soul of time, about how either we as individuals have no souls, but experience a sort

of collective soul that either belongs to time or is time, or that our lives—*we*—are the time’s soul” (2018, p. 8). In the opinion on Ernaux’s book Sheila Heti further contends: “Ms. Ernaux is radically attuned to what it means to look backward. History will always resist our desire to lay our greedy hand on it” (Heti, 2022). While Heti makes it clear that though her as well as Ernaux’s reference when speaking about history is the past, one can also pause, and ask: What is history? Is it not also the now in the process of making? Is not history the ordering of the past, present, and future in time so that one would not collapse under the burden of the “soul of time”?

Whereas Ernaux’s novel in Heti’s perspective reads as a “book about mortality, about how everything is being lost to time, often without our even noticing it”, on the contrary Heti’s own novel *Motherhood*, in my reading, is preoccupied with the concept of eternity, as opposed to the tentativeness and randomness of human efforts and desires. “If my desire is to write... that is no less viable a human aspiration than having a child with your mind set on eternity. Art is eternity backwards” (2018, p. 120). Heti frames art as a temporal practice of return and inscription rather than linearity. This revelation is important because it reconfigures the central theme of the novel. Heti resists the cultural hierarchy by reversing the often unspoken assumption that children extend one towards the future, and as a writer and creator she considers writing a viable option to establish the backward facing eternity. In addition, she makes an implicit claim that both are equally constructed fantasies of permanence. In the narrator’s story these claims take the form of her preoccupation with understanding her lineage. She reinterprets her matrilineal line and repositions her mother, and grandmother. By finding the way to “read” their personal stories she finds the way to make her own decisions. Recursion is the method that allows Heti to achieve eternity backwards. Through the constant revisiting of the same motifs, memories, and questions, Heti does not just look into the past, she inscribes them into the space of the novel.

Writing as a healing process

“I didn’t feel there was something wrong with my mother, I felt there was something wrong with the word ‘mother’”, said Heti in an interview (Dey, 2018). Hitting on established cultural norms, the narrator brings forward conflicting understandings of motherhood. As Fahlgren and Williams explain, Heti is aware of the “cultural script she wishes to challenge” (2023, p. 142). By telling her mother’s story, Heti extends the boundaries of the concept in a patriarchal society. The opening lines of the novel say: “My mother cried for forty days and forty nights. As long as I have known her, I have known her to cry. I used to think that I would grow up to be a different sort of woman, that I would not cry, and that I would solve the problem of her crying” (2018, p. 15). The narrator’s mother found a professional career rewarding and invested a lot of passion into it; however, she could not

overcome her grief over her mother's untimely death, therefore the responsibility for their two children fell onto her husband.

It happened so often during my childhood that our family would be sitting at the kitchen table, eating dinner. Then without any warning, my mother would suddenly be crying, and she would get up and hurry off to the bedroom, in tears. Many times I followed her, but she would not open the door, ... After a while, I stopped following her. We would remain at the table, and just continue talking as though *nothing* had happened. (2018, p. 255, emphasis mine)

The crying mother – as opposed to a loving, caring mother who sacrifices her own time for the wellbeing of her children, lies at the centre of Heti's novel. Though there is no place for mourning and grief in our culture, tears are a fundamental, recurrent motif in the novel. They represent the intergenerational trauma that the narrator has a chance to process. The narrator links the book-writing process with a healing process, in which she sees her role in redeeming the grief that her mother carried. As a child, she believed that it was her fault her mother cried; as an adult she looks for the ways to see through her mother's grief, and her own sadness: "I'm a writer. The change I have undergone... gives me powers— ... if I am a good enough writer, perhaps I can stop her from crying. Perhaps I can figure out why she is crying, and why I cry, too, and I can heal us both with my words". (ibid. p. 16)

This is not a knife

Writing, as it has been elucidated above, is not only the process of creation, but it is also understood as a healing process. In this case, the story-telling often steps outside of the realm of traditional literary discourse. Photographs are an integral part of the narrative. Some of them are images whose authors are credited at the beginning of a book on the page with the bibliographical information. Some of them are reproductions of well-known paintings, illustrating stories narrated in the novel. There are also pictures of tarot cards that the protagonist sees during a visit to a psychic. But the book also contains photographs that the author took herself, in the process of the book-making. They are metafictional strategies, in many respects reminiscent of contemporary pop cultural phenomena that social networks have internalized in everyday life. Posting pictures of oneself, food, pets, babies, memories from vacation, or just random pictures of the environment in which people find themselves have been integrated into the contemporary perception of the world. They circulate on social networks, they receive "likes", they become not only visual diaries of mundane things but also recordings of the human desire to be seen, to be distinguished – to become someone – as facilitated

by the approval system of likes. The photographs in Heti's novel are the anchors of the "real" in an otherwise highly symbolic text.

Heti's narrative is fragmented and discontinuous in terms of a linear narrative flow; however, the fragments, or recursive structures, as building principles of the narrative intensify through the recurrence of motifs, stories, and ideas. The ruptures are sometimes very abrupt. The fifth picture used in the novel is a snapshot of a knife, the "inanimate object" (ibid. p. 57). In a dialogue with the coins, the narrator learns that she is cursed by a demon, "sort of randomly" (ibid. p. 56), that she should fight him, and personify him as a knife. The idea of a family curse came to her from the psychic in New York (ibid. p. 49), and it emerges in a new context. While looking for a proper place where to situate the knife in her bedroom she takes four pictures of the knife, its position, and even herself in a headless shot with the "demon" knife reflected in the mirror. In it the "I" is literally fragmented, and dissected. The headless mirror reflection manifests the fragility and decentering of the self.

The knife, as a surrealist prop, occurs several times in the novel, and in the symbolic realm of language it can represent the idea of dissection, and separation. Incorporating a prop such as the knife, which performatively and discursively disrupts the flow of the novel, Heti finds the form to tell her mother's life story, and at the same time to place it within her own personal narrative (the book). The knife as a tool of dissection stands first metonymically for her mother's job – she is a doctor; second, as a metaphor it works with their life stories since it suggests the process of separation from its mother a child undergoes (Shirm, 2022, p. 309, p. 311). The writing process is, however, also a process of reconciliation, and even though upon its occurrence the narrator says: "I'd like to know more about this demon... since it wants to cut away what is hopeful and optimistic in me" (Heti, 2018, p. 60), it turns out at the end of the novel that the knife, and for reader the picture of the knife, plays a significant role. The *inanimate object* and its photographic image become the point of suture where the narrator's life, her mother's life, and her grandmother's life converge. Just as the narrator "places" the knife in the bedroom, and documents it, she "places" her mother's history into the novel writing. The photograph is the physical evidence of this placement and sews back the image of the "demon" knife within the text of the biography.

When my mother first saw a dead body, she was in medical school in Hungary. It was lying open on a table before her, and glancing over it, she felt a kind of vertigo. She hadn't expected there would be anything more there than blood and bones and viscera, yet some part of her kept looking. Even though she had been raised without God, she was troubled to find nothing there—no soul. (ibid. p. 76)

Although the knife in the extract quoted above is only implicit, as a uniting motif across the novel it signifies the interconnectedness of the matrilineal line. What one woman could not accomplish in her life is accomplished by another. The narrator's [Heti's] mother studied to become a doctor, and completes her mother's dream to build a professional career in postwar Hungary. "After finishing high school, Magda attended university... She was the only woman in class... My mother remembers her mother studying long into the night. She finished the law school, and nearly graduated, but at the last moment the school did not let her, for George had done something illegal...Magda was furious. ... Now she would never be a lawyer. She would sell sweaters the rest of her life" (ibid. p. 71). The school's refusal to let Magda complete her education formally was a legal and political consequence of her husband's actions which did not conform to the post-war Hungarian regime. Not only did Magda, the narrator's grandmother, never become a lawyer, but having survived a concentration camp, she lost her faith in God, and brought up the narrator's mother in a secular family. The external history interrupted the personal dreams of permanence, e.g. her graduation. She died early, shortly after the narrator's parents got married, and never saw her grandchildren. At that point, the narrator's mother already lived in Canada, had learned a new language, and repeated her medical training to practice medicine in a new country. But along with the "terrible grief my mother felt so guilty, as though by abandoning her mother she was the murderer. Around this time, her nightmares about her mother began" (ibid. p. 73).

The recursivity can be observed not only at the formal level, as a repetition of certain motifs, but also at a deeper level, when the situations of the most important players in the novel – the narrator, her mother, and her grandmother – replicate. In that sense again, the narrator's self is in the process of change as those new circumstances resurface, and as she repositions herself against the past in the context of new readings.

This is not *I Ching*

The system of *I Ching* is the ultimate recursive structure in the book. It is a "simple operation" (flipping coins) that is "revisited again and again on a new level" (McHale). Each flip does not just provide the answer; it forces the narrator to project a meaning onto a random result, which is where the "creative response" takes place. Heti implements the principle of its open-ended causality and adopts the ancient divination technique *I Ching*, which she uses for her own purposes: "Flipping three coins on a desk. Two or three heads—yes. Two or three tails—no" (2018, p. 7). Its randomness principle allows her to recontextualise the discursive fragments that build the narrative. The complex system of the *I Ching* is simplified in the book, and even contradicted, since in *The Book of Changes* it is advised to avoid yes/no questions. However, the method helps the narrator "where her own

thinking stalls” (Khawaja, 2022, p. 137). The unpredictability and randomness are integral qualities of the dialogue with the unknown entity. If the hexagrams in the *I Ching* become symbols for fathoming the cosmos and ordering the world then the fragmentary dialogues where answers are the result of flipping coins are Heti’s way to structure the novel’s narrative. The aspects of open-ended causality the book functions on correspond with the changeability and impermanence of life. Not only are they central to the understanding of the *I Ching*, they give the novel the fluctuating rhythm of recursive structures, and no matter how randomly the system operates, it gives the narrator the opportunity to respond to the circumstances of the dialogue creatively.

... I’m projecting onto you, coins, the wisdom of the universe. But it’s useful this, as a way of interrupting my habits of thought... I feel like my brain is becoming more flexible as I use these coins. ... It’s an interruption of my complacency — or at least that’s what it feels like, to have to dig a little deeper to be thrown off. My thoughts don’t just end where they normally would, says the narrator. (Heti, 2018, p. 77)

In the part called *Home* (pp.100-108) the narrator is preoccupied with finding an answer to why she has had recurrent nightmares since her childhood. In a search for the interpretation of the situation, she asks three coins, and uses the method that recurs throughout the book. She flips coins to get answers to her yes/no questions and receives guidance over the decisions she is going to make. They can be very instructional, such as where exactly she needs to place the knife in her bedroom:

Do you want me to go take a picture of it by the windows, to see if that’s even better?

yes. (ibid., p. 65)

or they are closely connected to the book-writing process:

Is this book a good idea?

yes (ibid., p. 5)

or they touch upon symbolic interpretations of the narrator’s life events, such as:

Is a situation like ‘Jacob Wrestling the Angel’?

yes (ibid., p. 58)

Dix, following Doubrovsky, claims that for the depiction of “verifiable, empirical experience” in autofiction various strategies are invoked, including “loose and open-ended causality” (2019, p. 3). The system of *I Ching* originated in China more than 3,000 years ago, and has given “inquirers illuminating guidance to cope with the unknown and uncertainty” (Hon, 2016, p. xv). The important word in the book’s name is *yi* [different spelling: *I*], referring among other things to ‘change’, change that can be perceived as an integral part of human life, but also change as a painful intrusion into one’s life revealing human limitations (Ritsema, Sabbadini, [2005] 2018). The 64 hexagrams

included in *The Book of Changes* represent a “practical tool to help people ride the waves of change and harness their energy: a tool to deal with *yi*, with critical times of change” (ibid.).

The Hegelian form of dialectical thinking seeks “synthesis”, and resolution. Heti, by using the Chinese system of thought based on the complementary principles of yin and yang, embraces the paradox and does not necessarily need to resolve the contradictions; she however, reveals, and revels in their coexistence.

This is not a demon

Embodiment as the idea of personification and identification reappears in Heti’s novel. As the knife embodies the demon, the demon works in the novel as an empty sign, “the static face..., on which we confer meaning, images and story” (2018, p. 59). Similarly, the word “mother” functions in the text as an empty/broken sign the narrator has to fill in with a new meaning; “Demon” is a sign she must fill with her creative powers. The biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel materializes the demon in the novel. While the narrator retells the ancient story, she confers the significance upon it that corresponds with her own fight: “... instead of fear or anger toward the demon-angel, he [Jacob] asks to be blessed. I think that is the most moving part. That opens up something inside me. Does the demon-angel want to be loved?” (ibid. p. 61). The biblical story can be exemplified as another recurrent motif in the novel. It works as an interpretative tool for the narrator. She interprets the story as a moment of struggle, personal growth, and divine blessing. She relates to it and attributes it with an allegorical meaning. The dilemma the narrator explores is analogical to the moment of struggle represented by the parable. At the same time the writing process is looked at as the process of her personal growth. Moreover, the divine blessing is derived from the resources that are both “logical and systematic...[and] random and magical” (ibid. 56), referring to diverse strategies which Heti, as the narrator/protagonist, uses to approach the question. On one hand, a thorough “method of deliberation” (Khawaja, 2022, p. 137) based on the Western dialectic, on the other hand, magical powers, as such card reading, consulting a psychic, interpreting dreams, and taking guidance from her own divination method.

The biblical story reconnects the protagonist with her matrilineal heritage, and opens up the discourse on Jewish identity and consequently on the Holocaust. The story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel is one of the fundamental stories of the book of Genesis. It highlights the idea that Jewish people are metaphorically descendants of Jacob, carrying his name, Israel, as their own identity, and continuing the covenant with God that was established with Abraham and his descendants. Similarly, the narrator is a descendant of Jewish parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, whose lives had been marked by financial and social struggle, atrocities, unequal opportunities, and ultimately,

genocide. She realizes that after three generations of women whose lives were measured more by historical circumstances than by their personal effort and drive, she is the first in the line that has a choice; she can have a degree of control over her life.

If it is true what the fortune teller said — that three generations of women in my family were cursed — then my great-grandmother was surely more cursed than me. She was so poor that she lived in a house with dirt floors, and she and her husband died young of the flu, because they could not afford the medicine or care, leaving behind four children. It was she whose orphaned children were taken to Auschwitz, and one of them killed in the camps. How exactly have I been cursed? I haven't been. I have always had luck at my feet... (Heti, 2018, p. 275)

Or elsewhere: “Here is where I saw a God face-to-face, and yet my life was spared” (ibid. p. 61).

The “luck” she speaks about is the life she lives, not constricted by historical or social turmoil, a life of creative opportunities. The book project she is working on completes the circle. The last photograph in the text is the picture of her mother at medical school (ibid. p. 174). A scalpel is in her hand, and she stands there with three other women doctors over a corpse that lies on the table before her.

“They seem to be having such a good time. I can't believe my mother is wearing her watch, and her green-and-gold ring” (ibid. p. 274). The knife that had sat in front of the mirror the whole time she was writing the book is now a part of both the diegetic level and hypodiegetic level, and those levels interlace. Again, the metonymical and metaphorical layers meet: “Taking the knife to slice it all open, what have I found in my autopsy of a body laid upon the page?” (ibid.).

The book comes full circle with the writer's (narrator's) recognition that she has all the power to remove the “family curse”, and that she has done it by writing the narrative. She can carry on the legacy of women in her family because they actually had never been separated: “My mother gave me the middle name Magdalen. She put her name inside me” (ibid. p. 275), a replication that echoes the implementation of her (grandmother's) story, and the story of her daughter (the narrator's mother) in the narrative of the book. As in the allegorical representation, the Ouroboros is eating its own tail; the stories of birth, death, and rebirth have often worked at the symbolic level in fiction. It is impossible to undo the linearity of human life; however, art has always looked for ways to simulate and represent eternity.

Conclusion

Isabelle Grell asserts that autofiction “... is writing the self in the sense that even in inscribing the subject in the world, it does not seek to, cannot, categorically refuses to flout the exteriority by which the 'I' is systematically unmade” (2018, p. vii). Sheila Heti's focus on the primacy of the narrative,

and her preoccupation with its form, expressed by intricate textual strategies, proves that while writing the self the exteriority, i.e. the narratives of the other – her family biography, and the dominant cultural narratives – cannot be excluded. By incorporating the stories of matrilineal tradition in the writing process of her narrator, Heti creates the narrative that enables the critical recognition of subjectivity as fluid and continually in the process of transformation and change. The mother’s story is represented both in the story line but also metonymically through images that accompany the literary text. The item represented (the knife) acquires symbolical meaning in the novel, as it can be viewed as a tool facilitating the opening of old wounds, or simply opening the body that stores memories. At the same time its symbolism brings into the narrative the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel that becomes the suture between the narrator’s personal struggle and life stories of her mother and grandmother. As the Jacob story connects the narrator to her family, it also links the past and the present together in weaving an ancient system of thought (I Ching/the Bible) to the contemporary (autofiction, photography).

The most significant system of thought that is incorporated in the novel is the divination system the narrator uses to answer her questions. Based on the Ancient Chinese tradition of *I Ching* it is an order of thought that systematically unmakes any stability, or “complacency”, the narrator might have. Its operating principle is randomness, similarly to constant changes and serendipity in the human world. Heti constitutes the divination system that is the narrator’s interlocutor in the discourse of the novel, undercutting not only her own assumptions, and prejudices, but splicing the systems of thought dominant in the patriarchal cultural world. She subjects the word “mother” to meticulous scrutiny, and as Rooney in her review of the book says she opens up “seemingly individual experiences into a general inquiry about ways of being” (2018).

As Rooney (2018) further extrapolates: “children represent ‘eternity forwards’; Heti’s narrator wants to find eternity ‘backwards through time’”. Consequently, both the form and thematic concern of the novel are preoccupied with the abstract notion of immortality, as it is implicitly expressed in the desire to procreate. While *Motherhood* has been praised for its raw exploration of remaining childless, Rooney accentuates “giving birth is not the only creative act of which women are capable” (ibid.). In the prologue, the narrator is confronted with the “brute force of youthfulness” embodied by her partner’s daughter, a figure that represents the “soul of time”. Recognizing that she had been “naturally surpassed” (Heti, 2018, p. 1), the narrator’s only hope is to “transform the greyish and muddy landscape of [her] mind into a solid, and concrete thing, utterly apart from [her]...” (ibid.). This “concrete thing” is the “powerful monster” (ibid. p. 2) the narrator decides to create. By engaging with the culturally loaded concept of the monster (Cohen, 1996) and utilizing recursive structures Heti constructs the protagonist who remains in a state of constant flux – fluid, flexible, and resistant

to static definition. This fluidity allows her to rewrite culturally embedded scripts, reclaiming power from patriarchal expectations of motherhood. Rather than adopting the traditional role of “woman-as-mother”, the protagonist exerts a creative courage to reassemble her own social and artistic role. In this sense, Heti’s novel is essentially forward-looking, focused on the “now” in the process of making; that such an exploration inevitably remains “attuned” to the past is a profound testament to the recursive nature of the self.

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