

# AN ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF IN KATE ATKINSON'S *LIFE AFTER LIFE*<sup>1</sup>

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This piece of writing will deal with the manifestation of ethics along with trauma in the British contemporary historical novel and how these two elements affect to the construction of the self. My aim is not only to show the relevance of ethics or trauma in literature, but rather to demonstrate that the encounter with the other, especially under traumatic circumstances, is essential for the self to fully develop as a morally mature person.

I will first provide a brief approach to the history of ethics and its connection with literary studies; a very old and close relationship as Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods state: “literary and ethical questions have always been related, whether through the ethical nature of literary criticism, or through the use of literary texts to provide the basis for ethical thinking” (1999, 13).

In order to study the connection between the self and the other, I will explore the ideas of authors such as Emmanuel Lévinas, Zygmunt Bauman and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who explore the relationship with alterity in a way that is strongly connected to the ethical component. With their notions as a starting point, I will discuss what happens when the encounter between the self and the other takes place, how the self must overcome her/his own preconceptions about the other in order to understand her/him and consider the other as a person who is equally important as oneself. I will indicate how even when the self is able to overcome her/his prejudices, other barriers may appear that may problematise the encounter with the other, for instance, a traumatic event. In this way, other concepts will be also relevant under these said situations, such as empathy, emotion, indifference or identity.

Once I provide the theoretical framework, I will apply it to the novel under

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1. The research carried out for this article has been funded by the Spanish MECED (ref. FPU16/04163).

analysis: *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson (2013), which, as I hope to demonstrate, can be used as a good example of how contemporary historical fiction can be read as an ethical reflection. This novel, regardless the fact that won the Costa Novel Award in 2013, has not received much critical attention regarding its ethical and psychological complexities, which is why I believe it is worth exploring from an ethical viewpoint. The novel focuses on a recent historical past: the two World Wars and the in-between years, with special attention to particular events such as the Dunkirk retreat or the London Blitz. The author places the characters in those moments that, as we know, were crucial for history, but also, Atkinson shows how the characters' choices have important moral repercussions on their relationship with others. Ursula Todd, the main character, will be crucial for the analysis given that, by observing her behaviour, the encounter between self and other can be identified, its consequences and the self's development from that moment onwards.

Finally, after the analysis of the text has been carried out, I will move into the conclusions of my study. I will stress the idea of the other as a necessary element for the self's ethical development. Following the analysis of the text, the reader will be able to observe that the encounter with the other has direct consequences on the self's personality. By making a parallelism between literature and our world, I will also re-examine the role of contemporary historical fiction, reconsidering what authors do when they create stories within this genre and the effect this has upon readers from an ethical viewpoint. The conclusions will briefly reflect on the role ethics is having in contemporary literary studies.

### Ethics of the other

Although ethics has had a presence in history as a branch of philosophy since more than two centuries ago, the appearance of ethics as an independent field of study that is applied to literature is relatively new. The reasons to explain its origins are very different: it could be said that ethics appeared because of the rise of some political parties, or that ethics has always existed, but that it was forgotten during a long period of time. However, the most feasible option is understanding ethics as a reaction

against the formalism of other critical theories like Structuralism, Poststructuralism and especially Postmodernism that were predominant in Europe during the late 70s and early 80s. In this way, there was a clear division in countries like Britain at that time between those critics who still preferred a more linguistic analysis of the text and those who were starting to move towards a more humanistic approach (Hadfield, Rainsford and Woods 1999, 1).

Whichever the reasons for its appearance might have been, the result is that nowadays ethics is a rich area of study with its own specific characteristics, or as “a quasi-autonomous discipline possessing its own conceptual and applied challenges, a conceptual vocabulary, a ‘thick’ sense of how moral beings function or might function in social environments, and a belief in the centrality of ethical discourse to all forms of social descriptions” (Freadman, 1999, 17). Thus, ethics is opening up a new way to study literature from the point of view of a human side that had been almost overlooked, exploring areas such as emotion, morality or empathy among others and expanding into many other fields of contemporary studies. This is why we can find many different types of ethics specialised in concrete areas such as feminist ethics, political ethics, racial ethics or bioethics, to name a few. In fact, the field of ethics is so popular now that authors like Steven Connor speak of a “current ubiquity of ethical debates in literary studies” (qtd. in Hadfield, Rainsford and Woods, 1999, 1), that is, a constant presence of ethics in many contemporary critical discourses.

Although ethics has become a wide area of knowledge that includes many sub-branches, among all the topics that different authors of ethics have been studying, my aim to focus on a group of concepts that I found useful for the later analysis of the text together with particular authors whose studies are key for the purpose of this project. The main idea to be used is the connection between the self and the other. Also, concepts like identity, the recognition of the other, solipsism or empathy will acquire importance.

It is difficult to speak about the self and the other dynamics without mentioning Emmanuel Lévinas, whose works about the encounter with alterity have been crucial for any later research on the area. In his work “The Trace of the Other” (1986) Lévinas explores how the self or “the same” sees the other, how they meet and

how a connection or at least, a change in the self can occur. In this work, Lévinas brings ethics and literature together when he defines how the other is seen by the self. He makes a comparison by saying that the other is influenced by the world around her/him “like a text by its context” (351), that is, that no other is just an independent other, but that s/he carries a whole personal background that is necessary to acknowledge if we try to understand her/his full alterity.

It is a “contradictory operation, since I ought both to distinguish him from myself, and therefore place him in the world of objects, and think of him as a consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, 349), given that because each of us is our own self, we have a limited experience of the world and we are bound to ignore what otherness is. In the encounter between the self and the other that Lévinas explains is where this “contradictory operation” resides, in trying to move from our own experience to somebody else’s, in trying to see the other as equally real as the self.

This opposition is not as simple as the fact that the self does not understand the other, the self also has her/his own ideas or preconceptions about the other, making even more difficult the approach between the two of them. Thus the question would be how the self is able to overcome this contradictory operation. According to Lévinas, this is possible because the other appears through what he calls “a face” (1986, 351). Lévinas makes clear that thinking about the face as a simple representation of the other would be a mistake (1986, 352). Instead, also using Lévinas’s words, “the face is the way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the Other in me” (1961, 50), that is, the face overcomes any kind of prejudice that the self may have about the other before that moment, it goes beyond the self’s preconceptions and it triggers the beginning of the approach between self and other.

When this happens, when the face of the other appears and the self begins to see the other beyond her/his preconceptions is when the self must make a moral decision. At this point, Zygmunt Bauman’s understanding of the Levinasian encounter with the other is quite revealing, as he develops the concept of the “primal moral scene” (1995, 64): the moment in which the self, having seen the other’s face, stands at a crossroads where s/he must choose between two moral extremes. These

two poles are what Bauman calls “being-for the Other” and “being-with the Other” (1995, 62). The former can be defined as an ethical responsibility towards the other that precedes the moral decision between good or bad, whereas the latter is a rejection of that responsibility, resulting in a form of egotism.

Bauman places emotion as the bridge that connects both states together, as the element that can help the self to move from unconcern to responsibility. Emotion fulfills three essential stages in the ethical encounter:

Emotion marks the exit from the state of *indifference* lived among thing-like others [...], pulls the Other from the world of finitude and stereotyped certainty, and casts her/him into the universe of under-determination, questioning and openness. Third, emotion extricates the Other from the world of convention, routine and normatively engendered monotony, and transmits her/him into a world in which no universal rules apply” (Bauman, 1995, 62, emphasis in original).

These three achievements of emotion open up a possibility for the self to answer to the other’s moral call. Emotion enables the self to see the other as equally real as her/himself and what connects the self with a sense of responsibility in relation to the other. On the contrary, the lack of this emotion produces indifference and problematises the ethical encounter.

The implications of this process have not only direct consequences on the other, but also in the construction of oneself. In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Lévinas explores what he calls the “asymmetry of the interpersonal” (215), which years later he clarifies in an interview with Kearney. Lévinas explains that for him, reciprocity does not exist in the ethical encounter, it is always “asymmetrical in that it subordinates my existence to the other” (1986, 24). Therefore, the self is bound to protect, to save the other even when her/his own life is at risk: “my duty to respond to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival, *le droit vitale*. My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness.” (Lévinas and Kearney 1986, 24). He goes back to this idea in a later work, adding:

I am in reality responsible for the other even when he or she commits crimes, even when others commit crimes [...] I also think that it is the essence of the

human conscience: All men are responsible for one another, and "I more than anyone else." One of the most important things for me is that asymmetry and that formula: All men are responsible for one another and I more than anyone else. (1995, 107)

Lévinas's understanding of the ethical encounter as one in which reciprocity does not exist makes the self responsible towards the other regardless the other's behaviour or choices, not expecting anything in return. The self's responsibility towards the other, is thus, unavoidable. Even not choosing at the primal moral scene means choosing indifference over emotion. Therefore, all the decisions the self makes have an impact upon others and upon her/his own personality. This is why we should bear in mind that every action we do and every decision we make will have consequences for us and for others, not only as a result, but also, as the cause that shapes our own personalities.

It could be discussed, though, if this process is always constant or on the contrary, if particular circumstances may modify the ethical encounter. Given that the novel under analysis can be considered as a piece of contemporary historical fiction, we could wonder how extreme situations, such as those lived in a world war, affect the self and other relationship. If we depart from the idea that each person is different from another in "normal" situations, how different would they be in a war? How can their decisions be influenced by such a conflict? How the other's face changes when s/he is part of the self's opposite political or social side? We could be talking about a new concept that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been defined yet and that I propose to call *meta-otherness*. If we take the definition of the prefix "meta" that the Oxford English Dictionary describes as "beyond, above or at a higher level" then, meta-otherness will be the existence of an other who is part of a wider group considered an other as a whole; or what is the same, an other who loses her/his uniqueness to acquire the characteristics of a group in the self's eyes, problematising in this way, the ethical encounter. Thus, if nowadays, a British meets a German in, for instance, a journey to Berlin, the former would see the latter in a completely different way that if the same British had met the same German in the II World War.

As we will see later in the analysis of the text, this idea, as simple as it seems, can be crucial to understand human behavior and our approach towards the other. It can imply that the self will not be able to find that “face” in certain situations, so the “primal moral scene” never occurs and if so, emotion is more likely to be ignored. In fact, Bauman also defines “being-with the other” in a way that is close to my understanding of *meta-otherness*: “pointing my finger at the rules, re-presenting my bond with the Other as an item in the set of similar bonds, a specimen of a category, a case of a general rule” (1995, 63). That is, seeing the other as an ordinary part of a group that is alien to the self for some particular reason.

I do not imply that the ethical encounter is impossible in cases like the British of the previous example, but I believe that in situations of *meta-otherness* the choice of emotion over indifference is less likely to occur, given that the self must overcome two “othernesses” (that of the individual, and the group’s). Then what is likely to happen is that the self’s prejudices are stronger than anything else, so that the other’s face can be easily ignored. This would explain Lévinas’s idea of how sometimes, the self can reach certain extremes of indifference towards the other, something that he explains going back to the idea of the face:

[T]here is, consequently, in the Face of the Other always the death of the Other and thus, in some way, an incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other—and at the same time (and this is the paradoxical thing) the Face is also the “Thou Shalt not Kill.” A Thou-Shalt-not-Kill that can also be explicated much further: it is the fact that I cannot let the other die alone, it is like a calling out to me. (1998, 104).

These two apparently contradictory ideas actually support Zygmunt Bauman’s “primal moral scene” that we commented above: the idea that when the self encounters the face of the other s/he must choose between the two completely different options we mentioned before. What Lévinas adds here is another level, a wider view of this encounter that can happen in specific conditions. On the one hand, Lévinas explains that in certain situations the self is able to go to the extreme by completely ignoring the other’s face, totally annulling the other’s uniqueness, so s/he is able to kill the other, a level that we could only get by choosing the path of indifference. On the other hand, the self can be moved by emotion and compassion and not “let the other die alone”.

David K. O'Hara, who has also studied Bauman's and Lévinas's works within the frame of the ethical encounter, mentions an idea that I think is close to my understanding of *meta-otherness* in extreme situations by saying: "war, however, as an exercise in killing, endorses a certain dichotomy, dividing *Us* from *Them*. Other minds must necessarily be cheapened, and the problem of the Other is alleviated by means of generalization: he/she is merely one of the enemy" (2011, 82, emphasis in original). That is, what the self may do in a situation like the war against the enemy is simplifying the figure of the other to her/his role in a specific moment, to the color of her/his flag or her/his uniform. This simplification is what enables people to go to the extreme, to kill or completely ignore others: the belief that a justification of any kind is more important than a face. This reduces the other to their religion, their race, their country or their political ideals and makes the road of indifference easier to be taken. On the contrary, following Lévinas's previous idea of "not let the other die alone" we could think of other examples in historical fiction where we find soldiers fighting on the same side, helping each other, trying to survive together. In fact, this notion of "not let the other die alone" is central to the novel that is going to be analysed, because it speaks about the importance of staying with people until the end, or even beyond the end.

Up to this point, I have been discussing *meta-otherness* as external to the self, that is, traumatic or extreme situations that affect the relationship towards the other, but we could also argue if the otherness may be found within the self. As Suzanne Keene says: "just because we may be predisposed to care about others...however, does not mean that we will choose to act on another's behalf when our feelings are aroused" (2007, 15). That is, the self must overcome her/his own personal emotions as well, in order to look at the other as a real person and have an active response towards the other. Therefore, external circumstances can reshape one's character, reconstructing the self in a person closer or farther from the other. In this way, characters that are portrayed as traumatised after the war, like shell-shocked soldiers, can be understood as characters with a fragmented sense of themselves, emphasised by the sense of trauma, which can lead them towards further emotion or a deeper indifference towards the other.

At this point, I would suggest another element that I consider crucial for the

self to achieve that ethical encounter, even under the traumatic fragmentation of oneself, which is empathy. In his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra indicates: “empathy marks the point at which the other is indeed recognized and respected as other, and one does not feel compelled or authorized to speak in the other’s voice or take the other’s place” (2001, 27). Here LaCapra gives an important role to empathy in the self-other dynamics, given that his definition of empathy is very close to that of Lévinas’s face. We could argue that empathy is necessary to get to reach the other’s face. That is, as a domino effect, without empathy there is no face of the other, nor the primal moral scene and therefore, the self could never get to the possibility to choose between responsibility and indifference.

If empathy plays a key role in the self and other dichotomy, we may wonder why. According to Diana Tietjens Meyers, the reason is that morality is not possible if people are unable to feel how others feel, if people do not consider the possible consequences that their actions may have on others (1994, 29); and she adds: “without empathic understanding of others, one would be left in the dark as to whether one’s actions have proven effective as measured by one’s own values and goals” (1994, 29). We could consider empathy as an intrinsic human characteristic, to the point that the lack of it has been usually considered to be a mental pathology or at least, not a normal, socially accepted behaviour. Empathy is what makes us see others as people who have feelings and realities as important as our own, rather than objects useful to our own aims.

In a society where people are simplified into a pre-established category reduced to be customers, patients, voters, employees, users...rather than people in all their complex spheres, empathy becomes more and more valuable and more and more necessary. When we act out of empathy, we treat other people having in mind the other’s reality, so our relationship with the other is personal, whereas if we choose to act following exclusively our own needs or desires regardless the other’s reality, our relationship with the other is what can be called utilitarian, using people as tools for our own purposes. If we remember the previous distinction of emotion and indifference and their respective results, that is, responsibility and indifference, we can see that they can also be easily and respectively connected to these personal and utilitarian relationships.

After having seen all the elements that appear in this self-other dynamics, how the process is, how it can change depending on the situation or the subjects' identities and the role that empathy plays; now we could wonder: what is the importance of all this? In *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, Ricoeur, David Carr and Charles Taylor say:

This was Emmanuel Lévinas's message, that for us to be there is, in a certain way, to usurp a place. It may also be said that every event, by the fact that it has been realised, has usurped the place of impeded possibilities. It is fiction that can save these impeded possibilities and, at the same time, turn them back on history; this reverse-face of history, which has not taken place, but which had been able to take place, in a certain way *has been*, only however in a potential mode. (1991, 187).

Thus, according to Lévinas and Ricoeur, the fact that we are in a precise place at a specific moment means that we are preventing others from occupying our place. By the fact of doing what we do, we are restricting others' possibilities. We had said above that every decision we make has a repercussion on others and here the authors go further saying that what we do is "to usurp a place". Although it can sound a bit extreme, if we think about it, the fact that we choose means that we take one option and we leave others behind, so other people, mainly people around us, will be influenced by our decisions as well as we all are conditioned by others' choices. This is why what may seem like a trifle or an irrelevant choice, for example, whether you buy a dress or not, as we can see in *Life After Life*, may have huge consequences, results that could have been totally different if we had made a different decision. But we do not have access to those alternative results, to the consequences of our undone actions. Here it is where Ricoeur adds that fiction is what enables us to create those possibilities that were "usurped" by the course of history.

Literature has the power of rewriting those lost possibilities in real life and recreating them on the pages of a book and in the imaginations of countless readers. In real life, however, as we do not have access to our other possible choices, to those events that do not take place because we choose something different, it is usually only in retrospect when we realise of the importance of our actions or when a decision was crucial for us and for others. This is a repeated fact in the novel I am going to analyse, given that different characters recognise key moments of their pasts and they

wish they had acted otherwise only when it is too late to change their present.

Then, going back to our question of why this matter is relevant, we could argue that what is important is whether the self learns something from the encounter with the other, whether s/he is conscious of having usurped a place. This notion is going to be explored in the analysis of the text, where the consequences of one's decisions are very clear. In *Life After Life*, we can infer that the self learns something from her experiences with the other every time the self, Ursula, "usurps a place". That is, every time the self makes a decision. Tietjens Meyers also states something along these lines:

Posing the question of what sort of person would choose a particular option spurs people to think about who they are and who they aspire to be. This approach to moral reflection presupposes that one has a moral identity and that one should try not to betray one's moral identity...By focusing attention on one's moral identity and on how it can be enacted (or how it would be betrayed), asking whether one wants to be the sort of person who would act in a certain way makes self-recognition central to moral reflection (1994, 17)

Therefore, the act of making choices in our lives makes us move to a more transcendental level where there is room to think about who and how we are, where our identity is in connection with morality and ethics. The decisions we make, how we treat others and our own personalities interweave in real life and they are portrayed in literature through stories like Atkinson's. Literature helps us see different human behaviours more clearly and makes us reflect about our own decisions in life. In fact, we could argue if the act of reading and empathising with characters that are purely fictional helps us to be more empathic towards others in real life.

Along these lines, Paul Ricoeur explores the connection between what he calls "narrative identity", that could be understood as literature and "ethics identity", what we have been discussing above, saying:

The pleasure we take in following the fate of the characters implies, to be sure, that we suspend all real moral judgement at the same time that we suspend action itself. But in the unreal sphere of fiction we never tire of exploring new ways of evaluating actions and characters. The thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imaginary are also explorations in the realm of good and evil (1992, 164).

This is another way of saying that while we read any literary work, we are making judgements, evaluating characters and situations, that is: ethics and literature go hand in hand, regardless the fact that these two identities belong one to the real world and the other one to fiction. If we follow Herbert Grabes's idea, we could think of literature as a rehearsal area for ethics, where human theories are explored through narrative works and can make people think about all kind of possible moralities and relationships among humans, or as he puts it: "a field of demonstration and testing ground for responsible and rewarding human behavior [...] even superior to the abstract argumentation of the ethical discourse of philosophy" (2008, 1). Thus, literature is a very useful tool to bring ethics closer to everybody; or what is the same, it invites people to ask themselves about their role in the world, how they see and treat other people, how relationships are established, how they feel and behave.

Following this notion of how literature and ethics interact, authors like Kate Atkinson manage to create a connection that goes beyond the pages of the book; through literature, authors can also create another level of the self-other relationship. They include the reader as part of this dynamics, being the self, the one who is given a story and who has the power to decide whether to choose emotion or indifference and be with or for the other, towards those characters presented as "others". In the same way that specific circumstances like the war can change the way the self sees the other, authors can modify readers' views on the characters and can influence them at the "primal moral scene" that we commented above. This is why literature has the power of producing feelings in readers, because it has the power of provoking emotion which will produce if not responsibility –given that we are talking primarily about fiction–, at least, empathy towards the characters and the events in the story they read.

I think it is important to underline the crucial role that literature —and historical fiction in particular— have nowadays from an ethical point of view. Literature can serve us to reflect on forgotten episodes of history, on people who were ignored, on the reasons why certain things happened the way they did. I am referring to events such as the World Wars, or the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks that traumatised half of the world, but also to more recent events, that unfortunately keep happening:

bombings, shootings, those terrorists attacks in Niza, Manchester, Brussels, London or Barcelona, political radical changes and social problems that hide millions of personal stories with “others” in need of moral connection, but that are forgotten after a considerable period of mourning behind our rhythm of routines. Literature has the power of breaking in that routine, making readers to be witnesses of those stories. Literature creates new levels of the self-other dynamics, involving the reader in a process of empathy and reflection about the world s/he inhabits, that hopefully, can serve to transform our reality in a more friendly atmosphere.

### Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life*.

If we understand a war novel as a literary work that takes place where an armed conflict is happening or in a domestic sphere where characters are very concerned about that conflict, Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* (2013) could be labeled as such. In fact, the novel under analysis combines the recollection of the two World Wars with family matters happening in an English country house. However, *Life After Life* offers a narrative complexity and a psychological deep approach to the main characters that make the novel being worth analysing from an ethical point of view in the terms I have been commenting above. Kate Atkinson plays with the characters in this novel by placing them in crucial situations where they must make decisions that will determine their future. It is in these crossroads where it is easier to observe the characters’ identities and their degree of responsibility towards the other. This is why I will focus on specific moments of the novel for a better ethical analysis of this literary work.

Kate Atkinson presents in *Life After Life* a wealthy, traditional English family living in a beautiful house called Fox Corner. The novel opens in 1930 but covers previous and later years going from 1910 up to 1967, including a detailed depiction of both World Wars and the effects they have on the characters that are introduced in the book. The story in *Life After Life* is built around the Todd family and the character of Ursula in particular, one of the four children of the house. Atkinson imagines the different lives Ursula could have depending on the decisions she makes at different points of these possible lives. Sometimes her decisions lead her to different deaths,

and when that happens, the narrative goes back to Ursula's birth in a snowy night of 1910 or to the moment when she decided doing something that turned out to be crucial for her fate. This pattern is repeated throughout the novel once and again. By relying on Ursula's experiences, the story moves back and forth so that "the novel interweaves the personal affairs of the Todd family, particularly, those related to Ursula, with historical occurrences, thus neatly interlocking the private and the public" (Arias-Doblas 2015, 126). In that interlocking, Atkinson also shows the close relationship between the individual and the community, through Ursula's choices and the effect they have on others.

One of the most powerful parts of the books is devoted to the constant bombing of London during the Blitz, more than two hundred pages that have been considered as "the best fictional depiction of life in the Blitz" (Lakeland, 2014, 25). In one of her lives, Ursula works as a warden of the Air Raid Precautions services during the Blitz, and during this time she is in contact with all kinds of human suffering. This part of the novel is particularly explicit in the descriptions of the physical torture that the Blitz caused. Ursula has to undertake every type of job which leads her to get used to physical pain and death: "Ursula splinted a broken arm, bandaged a head wound, patched an eye and strapped up Mr Simm's ankle [...] she labelled two unconscious survivors (head injuries, broken femur, broken collarbone, broken ribs, what was probably a crushed pelvis) and several dead" (Atkinson 2013, 461). She is present when a friend and partner, Mr. Palmer, breaks in two parts "as a Christmas cracker" (Atkinson 2013, 485) and when her neighbour Lavinia's dress is hanging with her arms and hands but nothing else of the woman's body (Atkinson 2013, 502), just to name a few of the images she witnesses.

These traumatic images, along with the fact that she experiences, in different lives, the bombing of the same cellar in Argyll Road, leave a traumatic mark on Ursula's character that affects the way she interacts with those around her. The harsh images she witnesses in London become the unspeakable when she talks with her sister Pamela, whom she wants to protect: "she didn't mention wading in effluent from ruptured pipes, certainly didn't mention drowning in that same effluent. Nor did she mention the gruesome sensation of putting your hand on a man's chest and finding that your hand had somehow slipped *inside* that chest" (Atkinson 2013, 468,

emphasis in original).

However, what this brutality causes in Ursula is not horror, but rather a tremendous love for the human race and a new understanding of the war: not as good and evil people fighting, but as normal men and women who are doing what their countries have asked them to do: “it was war itself that was evil, not men” (Atkinson 2013, 481). Thus, empathy is also presented to Ursula through the other’s physical pain and this enables her to have a better understanding of human relations and to be more open to emotion. In this way, she is able to stand outside the *meta-otherness* that the war creates and to see the face of the other in everyone, with only one exception: Hitler, because “that man is quite, quite mad” (Atkinson 2013, 481).

Nevertheless, it is true that Ursula has a gift: she has the power of living multiple lives, of dying and being born again and again, and what is more important, of learning from her past lives. Although this is not explicitly said in the book, there are some hints that enable the reader to fill in the blanks of Ursula’s narrative with information of previous lives that she does not fully remember. This includes slight changes in Ursula’s perception of the war or in her own personality. For example, at a certain point, Miss Woolf, the senior warden in the ARP team, and Herr Zimmerman, a German refugee, are speaking about how terrible the situation is also in Germany during the Second World War. Ursula says that she knows that, regardless the fact that she does not have any friends there, but that “sometimes one just *knows*” (Atkinson 2013, 497, emphasis in original). However, as readers, we do know the reason: in a previous life, Ursula has studied in Munich, got along with Hitler sympathisers, has been friends with Eva Braun and met Hitler, she has married a German man and had a daughter, Frieda, with whom she suffered the battle of Berlin that led her to kill her own daughter and commit suicide. Her German life is one of the most terrible in the book because she also suffers the despair provoked for not being able to protect her own daughter. However, it is one of the most useful for my point, given that only when she has empathised with the enemy, as one of them, becoming “the other”, she is able to overcome the *meta-otherness* that the war creates and is able to emotionally connect with those in the opponent side in her next lives.

According to Adam Mars-Jones what happens to Ursula is that “her behaviour is being shaped by residual trauma. She has a secondary vulnerability, like a passive smoker’s, that is real nevertheless” (2013). In fact, Atkinson’s depiction of Ursula’s constant sense of *déjà vu* is close to LaCapra’s understanding of trauma: “a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (2001, 41). Ursula is forced to reconstruct once and again her sense of self in protection of her own life and others’. She uses this “residual trauma”, along with her power of dying and re-living her life, to physically put herself in somebody else’s place, in fact, in some lives she *is* the other, one of the enemy. In this sense, Ursula does what Ricoeur quoting Lévinas referred to as “to usurp a place” (1991, 187), given that her choices lead her to feel directly what the other feels. Even Atkinson, in an interview with Martha Shulman, states: “I had to have her have a life there. In Germany, Ursula goes through the looking glass, and it changes her. I wanted her to feel different after she’s been in Germany; throughout the book she’s becoming less passive, and I knew when she came back from Germany she’d be more vigorous” (2013). Thus, Ursula’s ability helps her to be more inclined to emotion rather than to indifference, because after each life, she integrates what she has felt being the other into her own personality as the self. What Atkinson calls “less passive and vigorous” is what Bauman called “being-for the other” and “responsibility” as I mentioned above.

What seems significant as well is that the images that Ursula witnesses during the Blitz seem not to have an alternative version. Other parts of the novel are rewritten with different results, in fact, the exploration of “what ifs” is a constant idea in the book: the novel “explores the ‘what ifs?’ of a life” (Lakeland, 2014, 24). Every new life is an examination of a what if: what if Ursula had not been strangled with her umbilical cord, what if she had not been drowned in the sea, what if she had not studied in Germany, what if she had not been raped by her brother Maurice’s friend, and so on. According to Rachel Hore, the literary purpose behind the fact that the war always appear in Ursula’s lives is that “the war should not have been allowed to happen” (2013). Although I agree, I also believe that the war is portrayed as an opportunity that enables Ursula to experience in trauma in a way that make her feel

emotion in first hand towards the other, she empathises with those she encounters and she decides to be responsible towards them.

This assumption of her moral responsibility towards the other is what makes her live and die once and again, re-shaping her own self with everything she learns from past lives and from her ethical encounters with those around her. Readers can discover this almost at the end of the book, when we can infer that Ursula is at last, totally aware of having multiple lives and the power to re-birth after death. Once she knows this, she is determined to use her power to die for a bigger cause, that is: helping others, and climbing to her attic window, she thinks:

She thought of Teddy and Miss Woolf, of Roland and little Angela, of Nancy and Sylvie. She thought of Dr. Kellet and Pindar. *Become such as you are, having learned what that is.* She knew what that was now. She was Ursula Beresford Todd and she was a witness. She opened her arms to the black bat and they flew to each other, embracing in the air like long-lost souls. This is love, Ursula thought. And the practice of it makes it perfect (Atkinson 2013, 592, emphasis in original).

This passage encapsulates my main arguments in these pages. Ursula's encounters with the other in her previous lives make her choose emotion over indifference towards the other, make her able to empathise with the communal trauma that the war is. Finally, thinking about her beloved ones, who died in several ways because of the war, she throws herself out of her attic bedroom in order to start her new opportunity to make things right for them again. This is the only way that serves her to fully become a morally mature person, to finally reconstruct her own sense of self, to the point that she verbalises who she is by saying her full name. Ursula's taking on full responsibility towards other, of being-for others, is ultimately, as she expresses, an act of love that she hopes to repeat and repeat until no mistakes are made.

To avoid mistakes, her ultimate plan is killing Hitler, an act of revenge according to a critic: "in previous lives, Ursula has died in the Blitz, lost a brother to an ill-fated Royal Air Force mission and starved in a Munich apartment during the brutal final days of World War II. Ursula doesn't have a score to settle with der Führer—she has several" (Arnold-Ratliff, 2013); although this is true, I think Ursula's aim goes further. When she makes her resolution, she does not mention Hitler, but remembers her beloved ones instead, so I am more inclined to believe that Ursula's

final aim is based on being-for the other, is to protect those that she loves, has loved or will love in future lives.

Yet, it is true that she never fully achieves it, or at least, the novel is structured in a way that makes readers think that we only get to observe one small part of the continuum that Ursula's existence is. But Ursula's failure is no essential for her self-construction, quite the opposite. It could be argued that her multiple lives are connected to Julián Mariás's understanding of what he calls "trajectories": the different lives that you may have depending on the decisions you make. For him, the trajectories that are not realised in the end are as real and valuable as the final path that is chosen, and the combination of both is what constitutes human life (1995, 77). Thus, the fact that Ursula cannot get it right does not mean that her efforts are useless: each of these unsuccessful trajectories helps her to become who she is and to accept life as it comes, which is also related to another repeated idea throughout the book: "amor fati". This concept is first introduced in the novel by Dr. Kellet, the psychiatric Ursula is forced to visit because of her constant feeling of "déjà vu" (Atkinson, 2013, 151). Ursula defines it as: "acceptance. Whenever happens to you, embrace it, the good and the bad equally. Death is just one more thing to be embraced" (Atkinson, 2013, 551).

However, it could be argued that if the self must maintain a stoic attitude towards life, as the Dr. Kellet proposes, the role of ethics loses its importance, as the subject may consider good and bad as equally acceptable, but one example from the novel may help to observe that the contrary occurs. At one point, Ursula's mother, Sylvie, declares: "well, we all get on [...] one way or another. And in the end we all arrive at the same place. I hardly see that it matters how we get there" (Atkinson, 2013, 300), whereas Ursula thinks in a different way: "it seemed to Ursula that *how* you got there was the whole point" (Atkinson, 2013, 300, emphasis in original). These two characters embody in different ways, the two moral extremes that have been commented on these pages. Almost at the end of the book, the narrative goes back to the day Ursula was born, when she is almost choked with her own umbilical cord, the same death we see at the very beginning of the book, only that this time Sylvie has kept a pair of surgical scissors in her bedside table: 'One must be prepared', she muttered. 'Hold the baby close to the lamp so I can see. Quickly,

Bridget. There's not time to waste.' Snip, snip. Practice makes perfect." (Atkinson, 2013, 602). The parallelism of this quote with the one mentioned before regarding Ursula's suicide and Sylvie's apparent knowledge of a previous life seem to indicate that Sylvie has the same ability Ursula has. However, whereas Ursula chooses emotion and being-with the other as we have already discussed, Sylvie embodies indifference towards the other, the being-with. In fact, she stands out for her lack of morality in the novel: she thinks of another man while she is in bed with her husband (Atkinson, 2013, 74), blames Ursula for being raped (Atkinson, 2013, 240) and prefers one of her children (Atkinson, 2013, 538), just to mention a few examples. It is not surprising then, that for Sylvie, how to get on in life does not matter, as she is indifferent towards any significant encounter with others.

On the contrary, Ursula's understanding of life and the moral of the novel seem to be the opposite: how you behave along the way and the decisions you make will be key for your life as well as for others'. As, to our knowledge, we do not share Ursula's ability, what is left to us is Miss Woolf's statement that leaves a mark on Ursula forever:

'We cannot turn away', Miss Woolf told her 'we must get on with our job and we must bear witness.' What did that mean, Ursula wondered. 'It means, Miss Woolf said, 'that we must remember these people [people who are suffering or dying in the war] when we are safely in the future.' 'And if we are killed?' 'Then others must remember *us*.' (Atkinson, 2013, 457-8)

This is what Ursula tries to accomplish at the end: to do justice to those who were ignored. Ursula keeps dying and living to try to amend all the suffering that the war caused to innocent people. We can observe that in the end, she achieves to *be-for the other* in different ways and that she is open to emotion, open to personal relations, open to the encounter with *the face of the other*. In other words, we must pay justice to those who do no longer have a voice. We must encounter the other, look at her/his face and choose emotion rather than indifference and be-for her/him. Not only because of others, but because this is how we can be able to re-construct our attachment to reality as social individuals, our own sense of selves and our ethical responsibility.

## Conclusions

Having discussed the novel, we can conclude that ethics is one key aspect in Atkinson's literary work. I hope to have proved the goal of this study: showing that the encounter with the other is essential to the self's development. This can be observed more clearly by paying attention to the moments in which Ursula takes a decision that changes her life (or lives) after encountering with the other: when she decides to use her power to save others' lives. Thus a conclusion can be drawn from this: the encounter with the other is sometimes a revelation to the self, it is an inflection point where the self must decide whether to behave ethically or not. As we have seen, this decision is equally relevant as the fact that the self is able to learn from that choice, regardless the consequences. In the case of this novel, the protagonist learns from what she does and the decisions she makes and acts in consequence.

Nevertheless, we have seen that the encounter with the other is not always easy. The self must overcome her/his own prejudices or ideas, and in some cases, s/he must also overcome a situation of what I called *meta-otherness*. I hope this concept can help us to understand the self's behaviour under specific circumstances, given that it is an element that adds another layer of complexity in the ethical encounter. We have seen that the war can serve as a good example of a scenario that provides conditions of meta-otherness quite easily, dividing sides within sides and creating new others. As suggested in the previous sections, the meta-otherness requires a strong sense of self to be able to see the other's face and act accordingly.

In the analysis of *Life After Life*, it can be observed that the decisions the characters make and what they do following those decisions have a direct impact on other characters, but also on their own lives and their own personalities. This shows that our decisions will lead to concrete feelings: regret, pain, happiness, etc. and the way we live our life afterwards may be different depending on our previous choices. In my view, this leads to two important conclusions: firstly, that every decision we make has personal experiences as consequences, and as all our experiences are part of our lives, they are also part of what we are. In other words, our decisions will shape our identity. Therefore, the encounter with the other is also an encounter with oneself; it is an exploration of what we are and how we behave. The way we treat others is going to determine how we are in the long term. Then, when one chooses how to

behave towards the other, one is also choosing how to be. Secondly, that we are all relevant in this world. If we think that our choices, for small or insignificant they may seem can determine ours and others' future, then, we are an essential part of this world. It is true that in the novel under study, the choices may determine big events such as somebody's death or the beginning of the Second World War. However, this idea can be easily brought from literature to real life and we can reflect on how little actions in our everyday lives can have direct impact upon others: a call, a hug or the right word can make somebody happy in a specific moment and vice versa, which goes back to the previous distinction between personal and utilitarian relationships. As one critic has considered, *Life After Life* is "a story about the creation of self" (Kellogg, 2015, 2), and that creation is made through Ursula's commitment to her ethical responsibility towards the other.

Modern societies have make us learn how to dehumanise the other; we are masters at ignoring her/his face. By saying this, I do not mean to imply that we are intentionally evil, but I think that a parallel could be established between our first-world and Ursula's reaction to the invasion of Norway in one of her solipsistic lives, previous to her self-realisation: when she says "poor Norway" and then keeps drinking tea (Atkinson, 2013, 364), as if an invasion of a country was as important as the weather. A reaction that does not distance much from the contemporary superficially empathic tweet or Facebook post, before continuing with normal, comfortable lives. I believe that to some extent, we have substituted emotion for pity, which is another way of ignoring the other, of being-with the other, as Bauman would say.

We are so used to see the others' suffering every time we watch the news or read the newspaper that I believe that we have lost at least a part of our ability to see that the other is as real as we are, the same that happened to Ursula at the beginning of the novel. The proof to this is that we only start to empathise with the other when the problem s/he has (an illness, a war) touches the ones that are at the other side, it touches *us*, as it happened not long ago with the Ebola virus in Europe, the Ukraine conflict or diverse terrorist attacks.

Having this in mind, the role of ethics in literature seems to be clear: to take us

back to the encounter with the other and to remind us of the importance of the other in our lives and in our development as individuals. In fact, the ethical moral of the novel analysed in this piece of work can be open to misunderstanding: The story deals with the idea that we only have one life and that it can change completely in the blink of an eye, thus it could be argued that the message is “carpe diem”. However, I would say that their moral is *choose wisely*. Its intention is, in my view, to offer a warning to revise our behaviour, to make us reflect about our future and past decisions and see if they are correct; and to invite us to make amends if we should do it, “until we finally make it right” as Ursula states. Furthermore, it is my contention that *Life After Life* implies that the way in which we behave is important but that there is always a possibility to change what we do not like about ourselves, given that “there is room for individual variation in the selection and the weighting of value, and there is room for change as one discovers new values or reassesses the importance of familiar ones” (Tietjens-Meyer 1994, 17). I think that the encounter with the other is also an opportunity to rediscover the values to which Tietjens-Meyer refers to.

Historical fiction works in the same way and that this is the reason why sometimes the reader feels deeply touched by the narrative. Writers bring together historical events that can make the living consider why things happened in history in the way they did and why they let those things happen; as well as they present personal, emotional relationships among characters that involve the reader in a kind of encounter with the other through literature. Writers have the power to create a midpoint that is neither fictional nor real that enables the reader to encounter with the other even if s/he is not able to do it in real life. This process is connected to Herbert Grabes’s metaphor of literature, as a rehearsal area as I commented before. For him, literature is a space that enables readers to be in touch with ethical matters with which they can identify even if those matters are fictional. Thus, I believe that through narrative, writers create a kind of fictional face of the other with which the reader may empathise.

I would like to conclude my argument with a quote from the novel *Miss Webster and Chérif* by Patricia Duncker: “We are, after all, each other’s keepers” (2006, 115). I believe that this quote summarises the idea that I hope to have made clear here: the assumption of our responsibility towards the other, because that

responsibility is not only possible, but necessary for the self and for society as a whole. Historical novels, like the one examined here, revise the role that an individual has had in History, and by doing so, they invite the reader to observe the consequences it has for the collective. This process transforms the reader into an inheritor of the consequences of someone's decisions in the past, and creates a continuum of ethical interaction among past, present and future; between the individual and society and between literature and real life. I think that this continuum is opening up new debates in contemporary criticism, in which the ethical component still plays a fundamental part.

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