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Agota Kristof's *The Notebook*: Child Evil and Trauma

Constanza Contreras Ruiz¹

The paper gives a reading of Agota Kristof's novel *The Notebook* regarding its treatment of evil and child trauma in the light of Sigmund Freud's ideas, the concepts of Martin Stringer on urban violence and children, and child response to trauma as seen by Jesse Harris and Jon A. Shawn. Its aim is to pose the extremely rational and cruel actions of the novel's protagonists as a defense mechanism against the traumatic experiences experimented in wartime. In order to do so, the paper analyses the Victorian archetype of the inherently innocent child, and how this conception is challenged in Kristof's narrative by the possibility of the children being either intrinsically mean or deeply traumatized by the horrors of wartime; the paper also deals with the concepts of evil as a social construction and with the objectiveness of the narrative as a way of portraying rationality.

KEYWORDS: CHILD TRAUMA, KRISTOF, FREUD, EVIL, WAR TRAUMA

Quite a myriad of images come into mind when one speaks about evil. For many, evil is represented by means of a symbol of oppression: by a swastika, by a flag, a face or an all-seeing eye; for others, evil is represented through snapshots of collective memory and events, through pieces of writing or melodious voices; for some others, evil is an unknown force, mystified and ungraspable, menacing and omniscient. Representations have been numerous in our society, being literature often the chosen medium to materialise evil into something other than its metaphysical horror.

One such example of the representation of evil, and moreover, children's evil, is Agota Kristof's *The Notebook*. In the novel, a pair of twin brothers is left by their mother under the care of an unloving grandmother to experience the vicissitudes and agony of wartime in a nameless land; their constant exposure to traumatic events seems to trigger in them the most curious and mechanized of responses: radical rationality, cruelty and inhumanity. In the following essay, I propose an analysis of this extreme response by means of understanding cruelty and inhumanity not as a characteristic of the children's intrinsic evil, but as a rational reaction arising as a defence mechanism to the traumatic situation they find themselves in. In order to so, I will deal with the

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matter of children and evil, as well as that of working through trauma proposed firstly by Sigmund Freud.

There is one certain recurrent theme in the conception of evil which has, in a way, changed its meaning in the flow of literary representation: the motif of the evil child, of the cherubim-dressed devil. According to Martin D. Stringer in his article “Celebrating the Massacre of Innocence,” this motif has seen an evolution from its inception within the world of fairy tales to that of modern narratives: in the midst of the Victorian era, the child is no longer conceived as a source of pure evil to arise and is regarded as the impersonation of innocence (150). This last thought is presented to us with a change from the archetypal construction of the evil child as expressed in the narratives of popular folkloric and fairy tales, such as those of the Grimm Brothers; in them, the children seem to be intrinsically evil as they, for example, throw a witch into the fire (Hansel and Gretel); in the Victorian era, on the other hand, the concept of innocence was seen as inherent to the child, a quality which “must be... lost in the growth into adulthood” (150). Stringer argues that for the Victorian mind situated in the verge of the industrial revolution, “sin came from the outside, from the adult world, and sin corrupted the innocence of the child” (150). Thus, it can be stated that evil arises from a corruption of innocence. Nevertheless, as the author reaffirms later in his chapter, apart from being an evolving concept, innocence is above all a social construction and a negotiated idea; therefore, an act and its agents—especially if these be children—will be considered evil as long as they trespass and defy the limit of that social construction, that is to say, the limits of what is moral (Stringer 152).

If analysed under such a scope, it is possible to see that the corruption of innocence in *The Notebook* is the very first stage of a series of traumatic experiences that change the narrators’ world, impeding them from having a normal and expected emotional response to what surrounds them. They are, in many ways, emotionally impaired by a first attack from the outside against their reality. This idea, however, is not made explicit in the book: the reader knows the children have been left by their mother, as she is no longer able to feed or protect them where they live. The reader knows in the first twenty pages how wicked is the treatment given by their grandmother, knows the appalling living conditions, but within the lines there is not one personal, striking confession of how horrible the experience is; the narration is thus as if made by an automaton.

The question therefore lies: are these two little children intrinsically evil, or are we, as readers, facing the results of exposition to war trauma, to events too painful and distressing for a young mind to understand? There is no doubt that a certain degree of wickedness seems to lie within the practices and decisions of the two brothers in the novel; the notion of evil as a changing construction in society opens up the possibility for the children to be merely adapting to their aggressive environment. Thus, acts such as that of putting a bomb for the priest’s housekeeper (because she acted cruelly according to their standards) (Kristof 117) or refusing to help their neighbour Harelip when she is being bullied by other children (55) seem a logical response in their mind: the boys, in order to protect themselves from their ruthless reality, have shielded themselves within rational thinking. They bomb the housekeeper because she denies bread and mocks the war

captives (107), and even though they allow her to approach them sexually in exchange for clean clothes and a bath, once she has trespassed their limit of right and wrong she is no longer useful or worth it, and therefore must be punished. The example of Harelip, moreover, illustrates once more their logical and empiric mind:

She asks us:

“Why didn’t you help me right away?”

“We wanted to see how you defended yourself.”

“What would I have been able to do against three big boys?”

“Throw your bucket at their heads, scratch their faces, and kick them in the balls, shout and yell. Or run away and come back later.” (55)

The children refuse to come to her aid immediately and stay observing instead, waiting for her reaction and intervening at the last minute as they see she is unable to defend herself.

This utterly scientific process of observation and understanding – which is repeated throughout the narrative as an effort to understand human behaviour in passages such as the illustrative “Exercise in Begging” (33), where the children spend their days as beggars—is, as it was stated before, a way of protecting themselves and seizing control of reality. This idea of adaptation by children is expressed in Harris and Shaw’s article “Children of War and Children at War,” which explains that the “cognitive immaturity, plasticity, and adaptive capacities of the child have often veiled the effect of war with a certain obscurity” and that it is “surprising how often children and adolescents are reported to adapt to the conditions of war with little evidence of manifest distress” (288). Nevertheless, in this little evidence of manifest distress is where the actual trauma or wound lies hidden.

It appears that, after all, it is not only in what the boys express that the true effects of trauma are shown; moreover, it seems that, more than in the content, it is in the form and the silences within it that the true symptoms of trauma are represented. If we consider Freud’s approach on trauma in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that of an experience occurring in early childhood without being fully understood at the time by the time of the experience (149), it is possible to state that this incident leaves its traces in the particular construction of the narrative and its language; that is to say, it is by means of the repetition of a certain pattern of unconventional structuring that the symptoms of trauma perspire.

Thus, Kristof’s novel is a sequence of compositions with titles such as “Arrival at Grandmother’s,” “Grandmother’s Apples” and “The Interrogation,” where the blunt and at the same time seemingly innocent titles are the starting point for the traumatic event of the two boys writing the notebook to be expressed. Hence, the constant enactments and rehearsal exercises the boys go through voluntarily are nothing but the construction of a shield by means of repetition; that is to say, it is a screening memory or mental barrier that separates the unbearable experience from the self, to the point of dissociating the self-perception of the two brothers and presenting them as

a single-working unit against the outside: “We are lying in the corner seat in the kitchen. Our heads are touching. We aren’t asleep yet, but our eyes are shut. Someone pushes at the door. We open our eyes.”(19).

In the same train of thought, the two most pivotal examples of these shielding practices are the chapters “Exercise to toughen the Mind” and “Our Studies.” In the first section, the narrators explain that, just as other adults insult them constantly, they practice these insults against each other, in order not to blush or tremble anymore as they wish to get used to abuse and hurtful words (20); at the same time, they echo the loving words their mother used to give them in order to forget them, as “the memory of them is too heavy a burden to bear” and they repeat so that words “gradually lose their meaning and the pain carried in them is assuaged” (21). Moreover, in “Our studies,” the children reinforce their rational way of thinking and seeing the world by stating that their criterion for regarding a composition either good or bad is its veracity (29); thus, they avoid the use of the word *love*, for its lack of reliability, precision and objectivity.

The final goal of this narrative, of the exercises and the rationality, would seem to be, as it has been previously stated, to protect their narrators from the pain of reality. Therefore, that which one would regard as purely evil acts –bombing a woman, denying help, killing their father– is nothing but a rational reaction arising as a defence method against the exterior. They kill their father because it is the only way to cross the frontier (183), and they assist their grandmother in her suicide because she has asked them to do so (177), both acts of murdering led by rational thinking. Finally, these last two acts reinforce the thesis that pure evil is not what leads them, neither is it complete lunacy; it is their self-defence mechanism triggered by a tacit trauma (that of war) and represented masterly by Kristof not only in the actions and the sayings of the little children, but even more truthfully in the *form*, in the language in which the narration is presented. The trauma, in the end, lies in what the two narrators hide and edit from their compositions, and it is the reader’s duty to put the puzzle together.

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